

Southern Baptists and Higher Education: Rediscovering the “Christian” in Christian Higher Education

Bob R. Agee

Bob R. Agee has been the president of Oklahoma Baptist University, Shawnee, Oklahoma since 1982. Under his leadership, OBU has been rated one of the top ten liberal arts colleges in the Southwest by *U.S. News and World Report*. Agee has been active on regional accreditation teams and Southern Baptist education committees. He is a much sought-after speaker on educational issues and a consultant on long-range educational planning. He is also the author of several scholarly articles.

Introduction

The Southern Baptist higher education family is going through a tremendous period of transition and upheaval. Historic relationships between colleges and universities and their sponsoring state conventions are being put to the test with several of our oldest and finest schools choosing to sever or dramatically alter the nature of their relationship with their convention family. The decisions by boards have certainly not come easily nor are they always with evil intent. Because the Baptist papers seem to carry stories of these departures far too regularly these days it is inevitable that pastors, members of local Southern Baptist churches, and other denominational leaders wonder about what the ultimate shape of Southern Baptist involvement in college and university education will be.

A careful analysis of church-related colleges and universities across the U. S. reveals a variety of approaches as to how to understand the relationship between the various colleges and universities and the church bodies to which they do now or have at some time related. There are those institutions, for example, which can be categorized as “formerly church-related,” i.e., at some point in their history they were started by or had a formal relationship with some church body and for a period of time operated with a close tie to that religious constituency. Early in

their pilgrimage they operated with a strong commitment to teaching the Bible as sacred literature and to the centrality of Christian thought as they dealt with the various academic disciplines. Their catalogs and other promotional material conveyed strong ties with some facet of the Christian family and they boasted of approaching education with strong emphases on Christian values. They gave the training of ministers prominence in their programming and actively involved themselves in supporting and promoting the mission and ministry of the church to which they were related.

At some juncture in their history, however, and for a variety of reasons those schools severed their formal ties with the founding church-constituency. It may have been because they wanted their trustees to be self-perpetuating to minimize church involvement in control. It may have been because a major donor set stipulations for a gift that involved severing ties with the denomination. It may have been part of a calculated strategy to appeal to a larger universe of students and prospective donors. It may have been because of a breakdown in communication and understanding between the college and its founding or sponsoring church body. For whatever reasons those schools categorized as “formerly church-related” broke away from their church ties and no longer operate with any formal connec-

tion between the institution and the church body that brought them into being or to which they formerly related.

Further analysis points to another category of institutions—the “formally church-related colleges and universities.” Careful analysis demonstrates that there are a number of colleges and universities which maintain a formal connection with a church body, either a denomination or some other group of churches but the relationship is purely formal and it is often difficult to find evidence of active efforts of promoting their Christian heritage or of maintaining close ties to the church’s agenda. That formal tie may express itself by the church body being involved to some extent in the selection of trustees and churches or the denomination may even contribute financially to the support of the school. Mission statements may make some reference to a Christian dimension of the school’s mission and promotional literature may refer to the institution’s connection to a church constituency. Quite often, however, among institutions where the tie is merely formal or historic in nature it is very difficult to find much in the way of serious effort being undertaken to demonstrate that the college or university takes seriously its church connection or its Christian mission. In administrative design and program priorities it is difficult to find evidence that the institution is attempting to think through the relationship between faith and learning or evidence that the school gives any sense of prominence to an emphasis on spiritual growth and development or religious activities in its planning or institutional operation. There is still a connection between the church and the school but little evidence that the tie is taken very seriously in the ongoing life of the institution. Reli-

gious emphasis normally consists of a required course on the Bible and a church-connected student organization whose program and emphases have little connection with overall institutional planning efforts. In reality there is often little discernible difference between the “formally church-related” college or university and a purely secular institution.

As one analyzes the history and nature of church-related institutions a third category of colleges and universities emerges. Evidence suggests there are those institutions among the 3,800+ colleges and universities operating on the American scene today which could be referred to as “distinctively Christian” colleges and universities. These are the schools which were not only brought into being by a church body but are institutions where the tie and the relationship between the school and the churches are taken very seriously and are highly valued. The church bodies elect the trustees or are meaningfully involved in some manner in the approval process. In these institutions the trustees are chosen from among the church constituency and are regularly reminded that they are accountable to and responsible to the church body that elected them for the Christian mission of the institution. The administration and faculty are comfortable with acknowledging that the institution is either owned and operated by the sponsoring church body or the sponsoring church body feels a deep kinship to the mission and purpose of the college or university. Administration, faculty, trustees, and the sponsoring church body work hard to find ways to articulate that relationship. Trustees seek to hire faculty and administrators who are committed to the core values of the Christian community which sponsors the institution. The approach to educa-

tional programming and administrative design give prominence to planning for spiritual growth emphases and promote activities that affirm and support the values and emphases of the churches. In a distinctively Christian college or university it is not unusual to find a strong emphasis on ministerial training and on missionary involvement, but the institution's overall commitment is to provide quality higher education in all the disciplines and professions in a distinctively Christian environment. In these institutions it is also not unusual to find a strong ongoing dialogue within the disciplines regarding the relationship of the essence of the Christian faith to the various academic disciplines.

Many church-related colleges and universities in America are struggling with an identity crisis today. Trustees and administrators of colleges and universities of most religious bodies are wrestling with how to relate and what the nature and future of their institutions ought to be. Even among Southern Baptists, administrators and trustees are called upon to answer questions frequently about what they see as the future of their institutions and their relationship to the state conventions to which they have historically related.

The Distinctive Culture of Christian Higher Education

There are a number of factors which influence the personality and corporate culture of a Christian institution of higher education. Decisions which are survival decisions can deeply affect the atmosphere and nature of a college or university. The decision, for example, to place a strong emphasis on adult education in non-traditional time-frames and settings sometimes makes it difficult to articulate as overt an approach to fleshing out the

institution's Christian mission as administrators and faculty might prefer. Institutions located in metropolitan areas which find themselves attracting a largely commuter population may have a difficult time generating as Christian an atmosphere as the administration and faculty would like. Institutions which choose to offer significant graduate degree programs in a wide variety of disciplines may find that they are attracting more students who choose the institution not because it is Christian, but because it offers a degree in an area of emphasis that they desire to pursue. Issues such as size, percentage of student body which come from the sponsoring church body, and ratio of residential undergraduate students to commuter students, all affect the atmosphere on a campus. By choosing to offer quality higher education in all the disciplines and to venture beyond serving the needs of the traditional-aged residential student, a Christian college or university accepts the reality that it will have to think more creatively and intentionally to create a campus culture and atmosphere in which the Christian nature of the institution is obvious. Difficult as it may be, however, it is possible to be seriously Christian and still be a world-class academic institution offering degree programs in all the disciplines. It just requires more thought and more conscious effort on the part of trustees, administrators, and faculty.

In addition to these issues there are numerous external demands facing university administrators and trustees today. Private church-related institutions often face more pressures than purely secular or public tax-supported institutions. Presidents of colleges or universities which have historic connection with Southern Baptists tend to be people with a deep sense of stew-

ardship about the position of being president, who want very badly to do a good job at providing quality education and being responsible to their institution's mission. Consider a few of those inescapable and difficult issues that presidents of Christian colleges and universities face.

Every president and board of trustees among Southern Baptist institutions of higher education known to this writer face the difficulty of finding enough financial support to undergird a quality educational program, compete successfully for top-notch faculty, equip the labs and libraries with the latest technologies and learning resources, and still offer education at a price affordable to the rank and file Southern Baptist family. Thanks to the Cooperative Program, Southern Baptists have provided a higher level of financial support for their colleges and universities than most denominations have done. Yet, while Cooperative Program support within the state conventions has shown stable amounts or modest increases for their schools over the past decade, the budgets of the schools have grown at a far more rapid pace due to dramatic increases in costs of technologies, paper supplies, utilities, construction, maintenance, etc. Most institutions have watched with considerable sadness as the percentage of institutional budget coming from the state conventions have shrunk. College presidents today find a growing portion of their time being given to fund-raising to try to keep from passing all of these increasing costs of operation on to students. Escalating costs and an increasingly competitive marketplace for fund-raising make institutions vulnerable to struggling with what it will take to attract support from major donors.

Presidents and institutional boards also

face the difficulty of responding to governmental regulations and to expectations of regional and program accrediting agencies while maintaining meaningful control of curriculum and the prerogatives necessary to staff the institution with people who are committed to shared values. Tracking legislation at the state and national levels becomes an increasing concern for leaders within higher education to keep federal and state governments from adding to the burden of regulations already in place. Presidents and boards have fought major battles in recent years to prevent state and federal governments from being overly intrusive in the affairs of our schools. Informed presidents and board members have worked diligently to address pressures and stated agendas from government officials who want to make higher education a regulated industry, with them being the regulators. Determining to be serious about being a Christian institution calls for a willingness to stand firm on a number of key principles in the face of threats from governmental regulatory agencies in order to maintain control of hiring practices and behavioral expectations of students, faculty and staff.

Most regional accrediting agencies avoid being overly intrusive in affecting an institution's philosophy or purposes. They do, on the other hand, expect a high degree of professionalism and expect colleges and universities to define mission and purpose, set meaningful standards, verify that they do what they say they do, and in general operate with integrity both internally and with their external constituencies. That means that an institution cannot operate in a knee-jerk or whimsical approach to changing mission, program, philosophy, or procedures. Going through the process of providing evidence that the institution

complies with the expectations of the profession is often a costly and time-consuming event. Quite often, administrators and faculty have claimed that they could not be more intentionally religious in their approach to education because the accrediting agency would not permit it. That is a complete misrepresentation of the role and function of the regional accrediting bodies and of the role and function of most program accrediting bodies. They do set standards and expect institutions to operate with high levels of professionalism and with integrity toward all their publics, and that puts pressure on administration and faculty to develop and communicate appropriate policy, avoid arbitrary and capricious decision-making, and honor due process in dealing with personnel.

One of the most difficult tasks is that of carving out a set of core values which define those non-negotiable unchanging philosophical presuppositions which deeply affect the way education is offered within an institution. Usually administrators and faculty come from a wide variety of undergraduate and graduate degree programs and from a wide variety of institutions. There are very few, if any, doctoral programs available in the disciplines, including religion, which engage the doctoral students in any consideration of or dialogue about the implications of the essence of the Christian faith to the issues and dimensions of the various disciplines. That results in a void within the thought processes of administrators and faculty members that does not lend itself to addressing core values and applying those to the way a faculty member will deal with the multiple issues and values within the academic discipline. It becomes increasingly difficult to find faculty with terminal degrees who are deeply committed believers, who have

already begun to think through the implications of the Christian faith to the various dimensions of their academic disciplines, and who are able to articulate the points of tension between biblical faith and their field of specialty. The end result has been a lack of serious informed dialogue within the academy about what is involved in offering higher education from a distinctively Christian perspective. Far too often church-related colleges or universities end up being small imitations of state universities with a few assorted religious activities. It is a challenge often left unmet to lead faculty and administrators to think about and define core values that will undergird the life and work of a college or university that is serious about being Christian.

Another difficulty has been that of finding faculty who are serious scholars in their disciplines who understand the importance of finding a healthy balance between academic freedom and a strong sense of accountability to the core values of the sponsoring church body. An institution that is serious about remaining true to its heritage as a Christian institution of higher education has made a strong commitment to offer education in a manner that does not sacrifice academic integrity and at the same time affirms and challenges a student's faith perspective. There has to be some reasonable degree of freedom to inquire and to probe the depth issues of life if the education is to have any substance at all. High standards of academic and professional excellence should characterize all that the institution does. At the same time the administration and faculty should feel enough compatibility with the values and philosophical presuppositions of the sponsoring church body that they do not mind some sense of accountability and responsibility to the church family for the way

they treat students and offer education. Academic freedom without the balance of spiritual and professional accountability often results in an irresponsible treatment of students and content.

Elements of a Distinctly Christian College

How then does one go about leading a college or university to be a “distinctively Christian” institution? Does it really follow that if one takes faith seriously he or she cannot be a serious scholar or if a college or university takes its faith connections too seriously it cannot offer quality higher education? In my judgment, education is not really complete if it does not address the serious faith issues which undergird all of learning and becoming. Below are some suggestions about how to go about being a “distinctively Christian” college or university.

1. *Determine to build your university around a strong, positive, visionary Kingdom agenda.* Jesus’ admonition to “seek first the Kingdom of God and His righteousness. . .” (Mt 6:33) really does apply to a college or university just as it does to any church, any business, any family, or any individual. Every institutional leader and the board which oversees the work of the institution defines an agenda for the life and work of the institution. Somewhere within the set of purposes defined for the academic program, the campus atmosphere, the support programs developed, there must be some Kingdom intent. Institutional leaders cannot assume that something Christian is going on simply because the college or university has some historic connection with a church group. A college or university becomes serious about being Christian because its leadership approaches their responsibilities with a

specific intent that all they do will be Christian in substance and in appearance. If a president and a board allow God’s spirit to capture them individually and corporately with a heartbeat for a mission driven by a passion for impacting this world for Christ it will affect everything the institution attempts to be and do. When we come to recognize that God’s concern encompasses all knowledge and all learning processes and that He wants us to be about the task of turning out men and women who will feel the call to be Kingdom outposts in their world—in business, medicine, law, the classroom, or wherever God plants them—it will make a tremendous difference in the way we feel about and do education.

2. *Think through and have a clear understanding of the core values that form the philosophical underpinnings of being a distinctively Christian university.* For Baptists and others who have been or are a part of the Protestant evangelical stream of Christian history there are two essential values that serve as organizing principles for all of the rest of what we think and do. First, being serious about being Christian hinges on our genuine, personal, heart-felt commitment to Jesus Christ as the final and complete revelation of God to mankind and as Lord of every area of life. Second, that commitment must be coupled with a devotion to the Bible as the accurate, authentic, authoritative, eternal Word of God. Many a church-related university has drifted into the malaise of ambiguity about mission and purpose by allowing the treatment of the essence of the Christian faith and the accuracy and authenticity of the Bible lightly or with lack of reverence and respect. When you compromise those two essential elements of your philosophical presuppositions then the content and substance of all you do will be compromised. For Southern Baptists a strong view

of Holy Scripture is essential to everything else they do. Virtually every confession of faith ever adopted by Baptists begins with a statement which defines the Holy Bible as the sole rule of faith and practice. In order for that to be a meaningful cornerstone doctrine it is imperative that the Bible be viewed and revered as accurate, authentic, and authoritative. To approach education and its multiple disciplines with a conflicting set of convictions about the Bible makes it difficult if not impossible to offer education that is “distinctively Christian.” There are certainly other important core values which undergird a Christian philosophy of higher education, but the two stated above should be seriously considered in the process of formulating foundational core values for the institution.

3. *Understand that any definition of academic freedom without appropriate accountability to the mission and purpose of the institution is not appropriate for a Christian college or university.* When a church body or denomination elects trustees those trustees are expected to approve the mission and purpose and programs of the university in behalf of those who elected them. Even when a board elects its own members but claims affiliation with a church body or receives financial support from a church body there should be a sense of accountability to those who are providing that support. The Board of Trustees participates in and ultimately approves the institution’s statement of mission and purpose. All who are hired and who work for the university have a responsibility to live and work consistently with that Board-approved statement of mission and purpose. The prevailing values which guide the operation and content of what takes place at a “distinctively Christian” college or university are not defined solely by the academic community at large. Administration and faculty in a Christian in-

stitution must understand that the institution has a distinctive reason for existing beyond that of any other type of college or university— it has a mission to perform that is deeply rooted in the role of the church in the world. When faculty and staff are hired, administrators have a responsibility to be sure they discuss those core values and offer contracts only to those who share and are committed to those core values and who are willing to conduct their classes and themselves in a manner that affirms the Christian commitment of the institution. Otherwise the integrity of the institution can and will be compromised.

4. *Determine to offer the best education available in your part of the world.* Institutions which are serious about offering a distinctive kind of education do not offer education out of some remote noble human motivation. We do what we do because we are a part of the larger work of the Kingdom of God in the world. We are not just serving the needs of humanity— we are serving a living God who deserves nothing less than the best we can be and do. Expect faculty to strive for excellence in their disciplines. Expect faculty and staff to strive for the highest credentials in their professional arenas. Push each other hard to be impact players and serious participants in the larger world of higher education. Project your mission into the regional and national scene, determined to be a witness that Christian excellence has something to say to that larger world and has not been translated into isolationism or a fortress mentality. Engage the academy in thinking through the implications of the Christian faith to intellectual and professional development. Do not be afraid to measure yourself by the benchmarks in the disciplines and the profession and establish the reputation for being a leader and a

pace-setter at the regional and national level. That is the assigned field of Christian witness and the sphere of influence God has granted to those who will dare to be “distinctively Christian” institutions of higher education.

5. *Call upon and plan for administrators, faculty, and students to engage in the never-ending, on-going dialogue about the implications and application of the essence of the Christian faith to the issues and assumptions of the various academic disciplines.* A Christian educator understands that God is the origin and author of all knowledge. God is not intimidated by the pursuit of knowledge in any discipline. The Christian professor works from the vantage point that all truth ultimately points to and exalts the one and only true and living God. He or she also has accepted the reality that there is much more to be learned than what we have yet learned, and that God is honored when we probe the depths, wrestle with questions, challenge previous understandings, and cause the human spirit to value the pilgrimage of growing and becoming. There is tremendous value to a Christian university environment where diversity of opinion is allowed and appreciated and where there is the romance of openness on the part of faculty, students, and administrators to learn something new and come to appreciate old understandings with new depth. Christian education takes place best where there is a relationship of academic, professional, and spiritual trust among administrators, faculty, and trustees that allows for open dialogue about the implications of issues within the disciplines to the Christian faith and open discussion of the application of the principles, concepts, and essence of biblical faith to the issues within the disciplines. Far too little substantive conversation takes place within the academy today

regarding in-depth faith issues and the connectedness of all knowledge. If an institution plans to be serious about being a distinctively Christian college or university such conversation must take place.

6. *Aggressively search for ways that the college or university can demonstrate its desire to form a working partnership with local churches within the denomination and/or with associations and/or state conventions.* When members of the academic community find pleasure in being unduly critical of the life, work, mission, and efforts of the local church they should not be surprised when the pastor in the pulpit and the people in the pews become suspicious and critical of the academic community. Relationships between Christian colleges and universities and their sponsoring church bodies can and do become strained, and distance between the two grows, when the predominate pattern of the relationship is one of criticism or cynicism. Distinctively Christian institutions tend to be those where trustees, administrators, and faculty work at forming relationships of mutual appreciation and respect for each other. The academic community can work at affirming the best of what the church is and does, which makes the atmosphere on campus more wholesome and mutually encouraging. Administrators and faculty can play an important role by acknowledging the importance of spiritual growth and development as part of the overall educational experience, which will help the churches come to have a deeper respect for what the institution is trying to do. There are so many opportunities in which the denomination and their related colleges and universities can work together to strengthen, serve, and otherwise benefit each other. Leadership of the institutions and of the denomination must be willing to maintain

close friendship and very open conversation in order for ideas to flow that result in mutual benefit.

7. *Find ways to involve students and faculty in global missions, starting with service at home and reaching around the world.* There is no emphasis which ties a Christian college or university to its church family quite like active participation in intentional efforts at making a Christian impact through missions involvement. Denominations, local churches, associations, and state conventions will take great pride in knowing that their colleges or universities are taking the initiative to find opportunities for students and faculty to be involved in some type of missionary activity. Summer missions opportunities are available throughout the U.S. and across the world. There are phenomenal opportunities currently available for students and faculty to use foreign study and travel for educational purposes as the context or platform for Christian witness. The Consortium for Global Education (formerly the Cooperative Services International Education Consortium) came into existence approximately ten years ago at the initiative of several presidents of Southern Baptist colleges and universities for the specific purpose of promoting missions impact through international education experiences. Thousands of Southern Baptist college students, faculty and staff devote summers, semesters, and years immediately following graduation to the effort to impact their world for Christ through intentional missionary activity. When a Christian college or university is aggressive in promoting missions and mission involvement as part of its institutional strategic plan, the sponsoring church body will take great pride in pointing to that institution as theirs and in supporting its efforts. At the very time when all of higher

education is emphasizing the globalization of the university education, Christian colleges and universities have a golden opportunity to globalize the educational experience and at the same time make a significant contribution to advancing the cause of the Kingdom of God in the world. An institution which aspires to be distinctively Christian should be a major player in promoting the involvement of students and faculty in the missionary enterprise.

Conclusion

It takes more than the nature of the structural relationship between a college and its sponsoring church body to make an institution “distinctively Christian.” There are those outstanding institutions of higher learning which have no formal relationship to any church body. Colleges like Wheaton College, Taylor University, and a number of others have demonstrated that it is possible to be very serious about being Christian without direct denominational ties or involvement. It takes more than the denomination electing trustees to make a college or university distinctively Christian. It takes more than required religion courses, required chapel, and a few students attending the campus ministry activities to make a distinctively Christian university. It does require a serious intentional commitment on the part of trustees, administrative leadership, and faculty who are willing to address the component parts of what it means to be Christian.

There has never been a time when it was more important to American society for a serious effort to be made at offering higher education which places equal priority on nurturing spiritual development and academic excellence. There is no question that young adults between ages 18

and 24 are in their most formative years and are facing some of the most critical decisions of their lives. During those critical years values are shaped, affirmed, and strengthened; mates are chosen; preparations are made for the first venture into the job market; career decision-making skills are formed; and faith begins to emerge in more adult forms. Non-traditional aged students are often more open and responsive to conscious efforts to make the education experience Christian value-centered than their younger counterparts. All of us who have felt a call to minister in the arena of Christian higher education need to hear afresh the call to take more seriously the task of being distinctively Christian in what we do—intentionally, thoughtfully, purposefully, substantively Christian. Our nation's future may well depend on our willingness to do that.