



Christian witness in the university

Integrity, incarnation, and dialogue in today's universities

Vinoth Ramachandra

The risen Christ first revealed himself to a woman, Mary Magdalene, who was also commissioned to announce the good news of his resurrection to the rest of the apostolic community. Considering that a woman's eye-witness testimony was discounted in Jewish courts of law, and that the particular woman concerned had a low social status, this makes it very unlikely that the resurrection narratives were fabrications of the Jerusalem church. But it is also typical of the subversive, upside-down nature of the gospel itself: a crucified Saviour, God's power revealed in weakness, God's reign expressed through suffering servanthood, the outcasts uplifted, and the mighty humbled. This was

indeed “a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles.” (1 Corinthians 1:23, NIV)

Before his death, Jesus promised his disciples “the Spirit of truth” who would “bear witness to me; and you also are witnesses, because you have been with me from the beginning.” (John 15:26–27, RSV) The post-apostolic Church is built on the witness of the apostles to the crucified and risen Christ, the Lord of all creation. Our witness, in other words, is secondary; theirs is the *primary* witness. We bear witness not to ourselves and our religious experiences, but to the Christ whose story is told in the fourfold gospel narratives, foreshadowed in the Old Testament, and expounded in the rest of the New Testament.

Nevertheless, our own characters and stories are important. They are what give credibility to our spoken testimony. In a law-court, a witness who has a reputation for dishonesty, exaggeration, self-seeking, or inconsistency is hardly likely to be believed by judge or jury. This is why the New Testament language of “witness” to describe the Church’s relation to the good news of the kingdom of God is profoundly challenging. It draws attention to the inseparability of word and life, speech, and deed. What we *say* to the world must come out of what we *are* and be embodied in all that we *do*.

Witness as practising integrity

Jesus repeatedly taught his disciples that their love for each other would be the hallmark of their discipleship and the most powerful argument to a sceptical world (John 13:35; 17:20–23). Further, Pauline texts such as Galatians 3:27–29 and Ephesians 2:14–22 remind us that the death of Christ was a profoundly social and political event. The same act that reconciles me to God *simultaneously* grafts me into a new community where people find their identity in Jesus Christ rather than in their ethnicity, culture, social class, or sex, and are consequently reconciled to one another. Thus, membership in the body of Christ is not a question of likes or dislikes, but a question of incorporation into a society under the Lordship of Christ that is a sign and anticipation of redeemed humanity.

Thus, the visible unity of Christians is central to the gospel. The world needs to *see* as well as *hear* the gospel of reconciliation embodied in the life of the Christian Church. That is why the disunity of the Church is a denial of the gospel and a sign not of God’s grace but of God’s judgment. A fragmented, competitive, and divided church has no message for a fragmented and divided world. And, on university campuses, Christian student fellowships that are divided along ethnic,

class, or denominational lines can only preach an individualistic, sub-Christian “gospel”, and not the gospel of reconciliation to the university.

The South African theologian Charles Villa-Vicencio once observed that “the mention of the Christian God within the South African constitution has probably done more to alienate black people from the church than any secular or atheist state philosophy could ever have accomplished.”* In his magisterial *The secularization of the European mind in the nineteenth century*, the historian Owen Chadwick pointed out that the late 19th century critique of Christianity “owed its force... not at all to the science of the 19th century. Its basis was ethical... It attacked Christian churches not in the name of knowledge but of justice and freedom.”* In surveying the entire course of this period of British history, Chadwick could find only three scientists who had been led away from their earlier Christian faith by their growing scientific knowledge.

Witness as incarnational

The incarnation of the Word of God in human flesh speaks of identification, dependence, vulnerability, and weakness. It proclaims a Saviour who comes to us where we are, looks through our eyes, speaks with our tongue, wears our clothes, carries our infirmities, and suffers in solidarity with us. An **incarnational** engagement with the university implies that we are fully immersed in the life of the university. It means we are not only dropping in from the outside for classes or to conduct what are called “missions” without true dialogue and encounter with members of the university. We should also be committed to enabling it to become a means of God’s blessing to humanity.

Are we in IFES taking this calling to the university with sufficient intellectual seriousness? The dominant assumption among students and staff is that evangelism is about inviting non-Christians to come to *our* meetings, to listen to *our* views, to learn *our* language, to read our Scriptures. We are the majority at such meetings, and always in control.

However, a university is a place where conversations of many kinds are taking place, whether in the classrooms, the research labs, the tutorials, the senior common room (faculty club), the student union, or the host of student societies that sprout on campus. That is where Christians should be, humbly yet boldly joining those conversations (which, for the most part, they have not initiated) and taking them in a different direction. I believe it is possible to start with any subject, from the most ridiculous to the sublime, and if we ask sufficiently probing questions

we descend to the bedrock issues that the gospel addresses: What does it mean to be human? What is the nature of ultimate reality? What is it we truly value and why? Whence do we derive our notions of good and evil, reason, beauty, or justice? And so on.

Even if our efforts do not bring people to faith-commitment to Christ, they still witness to God's intention to gather up all human activities, whether in the sciences, business, government, and the arts, into Christ (cf. Col. 1:20). We do not take Christ into the university; it is he who goes ahead of us and leads us there. He is present, even though unacknowledged, in the biochemistry laboratory, the music class, the radio astronomy centre, the Student Union debates about global warming or student funding, and all the conversations that make up university life. We are called to discern his presence and activity and articulate it with courage and wisdom.

Witness as dialogical

Such an approach to witness is always **dialogical**. Indeed, dialogue is the central defining activity of any respectable university. It is what academic freedom is all about: the freedom to think and broadcast even the most outlandish views, provided one is willing to subject those views to rigorous scrutiny and debate by one's peers. Educational institutions that seek to stifle marginal or subversive voices, whether religious or secularist, forfeit their right to be called universities. Christians should be in the forefront of promoting such dialogue all over the university, starting as well as joining ongoing conversations on every topic that is of common interest.

Dialogue proceeds from the belief that, in the encounter with other peoples and their cultures (whether explicitly religious or not), we are not moving into a void, but we go expecting to meet the God who has preceded us and has been preparing people within the context of their own cultures and communities.

This is why the *other* is essential to our own pilgrimage. We do not know what we really believe, let alone how far our lives conform to what we claim to believe, until we engage in dialogue with others, especially those who are profoundly different from us. It is humility that enables me to see the ways in which I may be prone to use my Christianity to conceal inconvenient facts or to bolster my own ego. Authentic evangelism changes the bearers as well as the recipients of the gospel.

When I first began working with students in Sri Lanka in the early 1980s, I remember sitting with Marxist students in the University of Colombo and listening to all the questions they fired at me: What does the Bible say about revolution? What's wrong with using violence to overthrow a despotic regime? Why are Christians colonialists and capitalists? I had not reflected at any depth on these questions during my seven years as an active Christian student in the University of London. Since then, I have constantly sought to listen to the most thoughtful non-Christians, whether atheists, humanists, Buddhists, Muslims, or others, both through their writings as well as personal encounter and public dialogue. I have also actively cultivated friendships with Christians from all theological traditions and persuasions. I have found myself challenged, humbled, and deepened in my reading of Scripture and my discipleship to Christ through such experiences. I have had to repent of prejudices, stereotypes, and naiveté.

To be dialogical is to be in two-way conversation: allowing the academic disciplines of the university to speak into our faith and, at the same time, articulating our faith intelligently, humbly, relevantly, and boldly into those academic disciplines. In dialogue, unlike a monologue, we take risks. We expose ourselves, in all our vulnerability, to the full weight of alien or anti-Christian thought, as well as receiving new truths that enrich our understanding of God and God's world.

Whenever the gospel crosses a new frontier, new questions arise and the church is forced to rethink the gospel it proclaims and the nature of her obedience in the world. We see this in Paul's letters, all of which are written in response to a new missionary situation.* For instance, the Corinthian Christians ask him questions such as, "When our pagan friends invite us to their homes and serve us meat that has been offered up in temples, are we committing idolatry by partaking of it?" This is a question that Paul never had to face until now, because Jews like himself simply never entered pagan homes. It is at the cutting edge of missionary engagement with the world that theology is done, and the church grows in its understanding of Christ.

Likewise, when the gospel is translated into the various academic disciplines of the university, whether architecture, robotics, cosmology, or musical composition, new questions will arise that we have to wrestle with. If we do this with integrity, more of the splendor of Christ will be revealed to the Church.

Finally, speaking with a Christian voice is about knowing *how* to speak as well as what to say. Sometimes Christian students think that if they quote proof-texts from the Bible in a seminar or classroom, then they have witnessed to Christ. The result, however, is only embarrassment for other Christians and a hardening of the hearts of others towards Christians. Charity, respect for the other, and using language that is appropriate in the given context are indispensable virtues for academic life. The novelist Madeleine L'Engle once told a student who wished to become a “Christian writer” that “if she is truly and deeply a Christian, what she writes is going to be Christian, whether she mentions Jesus or not. And if she is not, in the most profound sense, Christian, then what she writes is not going to be Christian, no matter how many times she invokes the name of the Lord.”*

To be “in the most profound sense, Christian” is surely the challenge we need to be presenting before Christian university students and teachers.

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About the author

Vinoth Ramachandra is from Sri Lanka and lives with his Danish wife, Karin, in Colombo. He holds bachelor's and doctoral degrees in nuclear engineering from the University of London. Instead of pursuing an academic career, he returned to Sri Lanka to help pioneer a Christian university ministry there. He has served as IFES Regional Secretary for South Asia and since 2001 as the international Secretary for Dialogue and Social Engagement. Vinoth has authored several essays and books, including *Gods That Fail* (1996), *Subverting Global Myths* (2008), and *Church and Mission in the New Asia* (2009). He blogs occasionally on contemporary global issues at <http://vinothramachandra.wordpress.com>.

Discussion questions

Read Vinoth Ramachandra, “Christian witness in the university”, and John 15:26–27.

1. When we bear witness, to whom do we witness? Who does the witnessing?
2. What does it mean for you to practice integrity in your studies and work?
3. Does your student fellowship or church bear witness to the body of Christ as a community with no divisions based on sex, ethnicity, or social class?
4. Do you tend to think of bearing witness in the university as about hosting evangelistic events, about participating in events others organize, or both?
5. When have you taken part in dialogue in the university? How has that dialogue changed you? How has that dialogue changed those with whom you speak?

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Further reading

- Chong Yun Mei, Lisman Komaladi, and Esther Yap Yixuan, eds. *Engaging the Campus: Faith and Service in the Academy*. 2nd ed. Singapore: Fellowship of Evangelical Students, 2016.
- Lundin, Roger, ed. *Christ across the Disciplines: Past, Present, Future*. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2013.
- Malik, Charles Habib. *A Christian Critique of the University*. 2nd ed. Waterloo, Ont.: North Waterloo Academic Press, 1987.
- Peskett, Howard, and Vinoth Ramachandra. *The Message of Mission: The Glory of Christ in All Time and Space*. Bible Speaks Today. Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 2003.
- Ramachandra, Vinoth. *Gods That Fail: Modern Idolatry and Christian Mission*. Carlisle: Paternoster, 1996.
- Sloane, Andrew. *On Being a Christian in the Academy: Nicholas Wolterstorff and the Practice of Christian Scholarship*. Waynesboro, Ga.: Paternoster Press, 2009.