

# A THEOLOGICAL BASIS FOR REACHING THE UNIVERSITY

World Assembly 2023 Conversatorio: The University: Our Mission Field

## INTRODUCTION

At the 2019 IFES World Assembly, we asked a vital question: What is the purpose of a university? There were also sub-questions: Is it to prepare students to serve society or to make money? Is it to transmit knowledge that is universal or local? Does it have a moral or even a spiritual purpose? How can worshippers of the God who creates and restores the world contribute to university life? Others have asked similar questions in the past. In 1981, Charles Malik, a Lebanese Christian thinker, and former President of the United Nations General Assembly, posed this question in his 1981 Pascal Lectures: 'What Does Jesus Christ think of the University?'<sup>1</sup> Long before this, an early Christian Father, Tertullian of Carthage, once asked a rhetorical question, "what indeed has Athens to do with Jerusalem?"<sup>2</sup> While Athens was the nexus of philosophical inquiry, Jerusalem was at that time the centre of Christian faith. However, Tertullian viewed philosophical thought as the foundation of heresies in early Christianity and therefore to be avoided. While he did not reject questioning or seeking within the boundaries of apostolic rule of faith, he nevertheless maintained that Greek philosophy should have nothing to do with Christian theology. Tertullian's view continues to be variously replicated by aspects of the sacred/secular divide which sees no relationship between theology and universities.

These questions remain with us today as we contemplate the theological basis for reaching the university. Our response is important, not only for our understanding of the university, but also for how we engage with it – and learning centres in general – actively and relevantly. If theology is "faith seeking understanding,"<sup>3</sup> we cannot exclude these areas of society from an understanding of God's self-revelation as creator, as well as his sovereignty over all aspects of creation. Theology, as faith seeking understanding of God's purposes in and over all spheres of engagement, does not ignore the field of intellectual engagement.

## BIBLICAL ANTECEDENTS FOR REACHING THE UNIVERSITY

Our reflection on the theological basis for reaching the universities has some foundation in the Scriptures. The Bible provides a basis for intellectual engagement in student ministry and global missions:

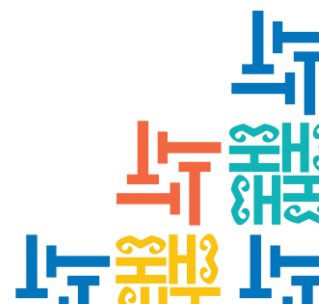
*My purpose is that they may be encouraged in heart and united in love, so that they may have the full riches of complete understanding, in order that they may know the mystery of God, namely, Christ, in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge. Colossians 2:2-3*

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<sup>1</sup> Charles Malik, *A Christian Critique of the University*, (North Waterloo academic Press, 1990) Deuteronomy 6:5; Mark 12:30.

<sup>2</sup> See Gerald Lewis Bray, *Holiness and the Will of God: Perspectives on the Theology of Tertullian* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1979).

<sup>3</sup> Donald K. McKim, *The Westminster Dictionary of Theological Terms* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2014) 547.



If indeed all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge are hidden in Christ, then the engagement of learning centres, colleges, and universities is a way of bringing students and faculty to love God 'with all their hearts and souls, their minds and their strength.'<sup>2</sup> This is what student ministries and other university-based movements have tried to do for generations. The battle for the souls not only of men, but of nations are often won or lost in colleges and universities.

We also have the biblical antecedents of students who are committed to the virtue of witness in their academic contexts. The earliest account of international student witness is recorded in Daniel 1:1-8 – an account of Daniel and his three friends in one the ancient world's greatest powers: Babylon. The transformation of Daniel, Shadrach, Meshack, and Abednego from refugee students to effective witnesses in a 'pagan' context, marked them out as pioneers of Christian student ministry.

Of the Apostle Paul, more is known about his experience on the road to Damascus and subsequent missionary journeys through the Holy Spirit's power, than is known about his early beginning as a man called Saul of Tarsus. By God's sovereign foundation, long before Saul encountered the Lord on the way to Damascus, God caused him to be raised in a centre of learning. Tarsus, the place where Paul began life as Saul, is a university city in eastern Asia Minor. According to him, "*I am a Jew, from Tarsus in Cilicia, a citizen of no ordinary city. Please let me speak to the people*" (Acts 21:39). As the ancient provincial capital of Cilicia, Tarsus was a great centre of trade and stood at the convergence of trade between the Mediterranean and the hinterland of Asia Minor. Significantly, it was also a 'university town,' famous for various philosophers. The famous Greek geographer Strabo considered the university in Tarsus to be better than the academic centres in Athens and Alexandria. Furthermore, under God's sovereignty Saul studied at the feet of Gamaliel. Hence, Paul declared to his audience in Jerusalem.

*I am a Jew, born in Tarsus in Cilicia, but brought up in this city, educated at the feet of Gamaliel according to the strict manner of the law of our fathers, being zealous for God as all of you are this day. (Acts 22:3)*

Gamaliel was one of the most revered teachers of his time and taught some of the best young scholars. He knew Jewish law and prophecy, both of which were enhanced by his wisdom. He is called a "Pharisee" and a "doctor of the law" much honoured by the people. His teaching was so broad that he even insisted on his pupils studying the Greek poets. This was the same Gamaliel, referred to in Acts 5:38-39 as speaking in favour of the disciples of Jesus, who were being threatened with death (vv 38-39). As a scholar of scholars, Gamaliel must have been a significant influence on Saul! With relevance for you today, although Paul was later filled with the Holy Spirit following his conversion, there is evidence that he was also a diligent student! Perhaps this is why he could say, *educated at the feet of Gamaliel according to the strict manner of the law of our fathers*. As Paul, he quoted Greek poets in his sermon to the philosophers at Mars Hill, declaring: "*For in him we live, and move, and have our being; as certain also of your own poets have said, 'For we are also his offspring.'*" The first part of this quote is thought to be from the Cretan poet, Epimenides. The second part is from one of Greece's most renowned third century poets,



Aratus of Soli, also from Cilicia, who is thought to have said “We are his offspring.” Paul applied these quotes to his new master, the Lord Jesus Christ and constantly brought his intellectual gifts to bear on various aspects of his ministry!

His desire for learning and passion for ministry demonstrate that there is no disconnect between intellectual engagement and Christian service. From his example, and those of others, we can deduce that the purpose of a university is not just to make money, but to develop the minds of students so they are equipped for the common good of both the university and society at large. Paul passed on the need for diligent study to his young friend, Timothy (1 Timothy 4:11-16), challenging him to be diligent and an example to believers in word, conduct, love, spirit, faith, and purity.

## CONTEMPORARY THEOLOGICAL BASIS FOR REACHING THE UNIVERSITY

Our reflection on the theological basis for reaching the university assumes a biblical Christian faith, undergirded by belief in what the Holy Scriptures reveal about God as creator, the world he has created, and the stewardship of our minds. Such reflection calls us to remain faithful to a theological understanding of universities, including that which made Ivy League universities embrace a firm doctrinal basis of faith, as reflected in mottos like Harvard University's *Christo et Ecclesiae* (For Christ and for the Church) or Freiburg University's *Die Wahrheit wird euch frei machen* (The Truth shall make you free).

The values embraced by such institutions are reflected in Andrew Walls' assertion that 'one task of Christian scholars in the academic arena, whether in a Christian university or a public institution, is to consider how to “bring every thought captive to Jesus Christ” (see 2 Cor 10: 4-5). This is not simply a personal or private matter but is a consequence of our participation in a shared universe that needs to be brought under Christ and in conformity to him.'<sup>4</sup>

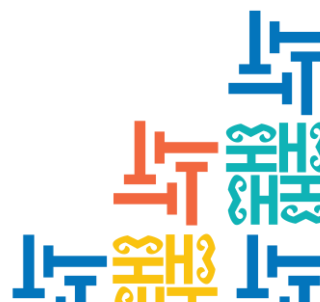
The emphases made by George Higton, in *A Theology of Higher Education*, remains relevant for us today.<sup>5</sup> There, he traced the historical background and the intellectual contributions of three historic European universities: Paris, Berlin, and Oxford. Beyond the historical background, and as a theologian, he responds to three major questions. First, what is good about universities? Second, what can those who share similar theological commitments do to help universities achieve their noble ends? Third, what openness, if any, exists in the universities for a theological voice?

In his response, Higton argues that the secular and religiously plural university can be a school for intellectual and moral virtue, illustrating that “a Christian may know, for instance, that she is called to honesty—but that does not mean that she knows what the

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<sup>4</sup> Andrew F. Walls, “Scholarship Under the Cross: Thinking Greek and Thinking Christian” in *Journal of African Christian Thought*, Vol. 9, No. 2, (December 2006), 6-22; 16.

<sup>5</sup> Mike Higton, *A Theology of Higher Education* (Oxford University Press: Oxford, 2012).



exercise of the virtue of honesty looks like in all contexts.”<sup>6</sup> In that context, universities have a role in forming students and staff in intellectual virtue, in sustaining vibrant communities of inquiry, and in serving the public good.

Higton further suggests that modern secular universities can be a proper context for Christians to pursue their calling as disciples to learn and teach, indicating that true learning requires what he calls “free sociality—an economy of gift and reception that resembles what Christian theology knows as the life of the Body of Christ.”<sup>7</sup> Based on this, Christians can commit themselves fully to engaging and improving the common life of the university even as they learn from it. Higton further sees the ideal of a good university as a context in which people develop intellectual virtue and sociality “for the flourishing life of all God’s creatures together,” or the “common good.”<sup>8</sup> We can therefore challenge our students and graduates to actively participate and contribute to the flourishing of such universities as institutions devoted to learning for the common good.

Charles Malik also helps us to integrate faith and learning. Before his 1980 Pascal Lectures, he had given a talk in September 1980 on the need for evangelicals to reclaim the mind, on the one hand, and reclaim the universities, on the other. In this talk, “The Two Tasks,” given at the dedication of the Billy Graham Center at Wheaton College, Malik warned the evangelical community that, in their passion to win souls, they must not neglect the life of the mind. He cautioned them against the sin of anti-intellectualism and argued that the “imperative for the Christian thinker is to integrate being a Christian with living and working in the academic world.”<sup>9</sup> As an Arab intellectual and committed Christian (Greek Orthodox), Charles Malik understood the crucial role of the universities in shaping the beliefs and assumptions of generations of leaders in many sectors of society: education, politics, media, entertainment, the sciences, arts, and religion.

Related to the idea of Christian faith seeking understanding, Malik also published *A Christian Critique of the University*, where he asserts that “everything depends on this fundamental personal-theological position. A Christian does not seek proof of God’s existence; rather, like Pascal, a Christian already believes in the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, who is identically the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. He believes in God through Jesus Christ himself, as he receives him in the living church and in the Bible. He is originally, inextricably integrated into the living church and the Word of God which is the Bible.”<sup>10</sup>

## CONCLUSION

In our response, we can therefore affirm two related bases for reaching universities and colleges. On the one hand, these are places we can go to acquire significant knowledge. It

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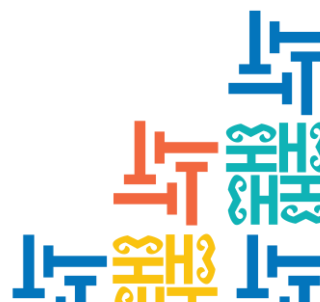
<sup>6</sup> Mike Higton, *A Theology of Higher Education*, 174.

<sup>7</sup> Mike Higton, *A Theology of Higher Education*, 201.

<sup>8</sup> Mike Higton, *A Theology of Higher Education*, 216.

<sup>9</sup> Charles Malik, *The Two Tasks* (Crossway Books edition, December 1980).

<sup>10</sup> Charles Habib Malik, *A Christian Critique of the University Pascal lectures on Christianity and the University* (InterVarsity Press, 1982).



is important that our students are committed to excellence in their academic pursuit, as well as to the glory of God. On the other hand, we affirm that we are not only called to such learning centres for the sake of acquiring knowledge, but to engage meaningfully in the full life of any campus while bearing effective and relevant witness.

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