

*What Can the
Evangelical/Interdenominational
Tradition Contribute to Christian
Higher Education?*

Harold Heie

I hope to initiate a conversation. My overarching proposal is that Christians working out of different Christian traditions in the context of higher education need to create forums for conversation that will enable us to talk to each other so that we can learn from the strengths and distinctive emphases of each tradition. I will challenge the evangelical/interdenominational tradition to begin this conversation. Such a conversation will require, however, that we be honest about the limitations of our respective traditions and open to the possibility that other Christian traditions can help us address these limitations.

My call for conversation will emerge from some preliminary reflections. After clarifying what I take to be the three distinctive emphases of evangelical expressions of the Christian faith, I will summarize what I understand to be the strengths and weaknesses of each of these distinctives as they pertain to the task of Christian higher education. I will then speak on behalf of several Christian traditions often not designated "evangelical," exploring the ways they have enriched my own evangelical faith, leading me to embrace what I will call "chastened" forms of the evangelical distinctives. I will then explore ways in which a chastened evangelicalism might improve existing expressions of evangelical Christian higher education.

After this fragmentary simulated "conversation," I will conclude this essay with reflections on why an evangelical Christian college that is interdenominational in nature may be an ideal setting in theory, if not yet in practice, for continuing this conversation and for creating further forums for conversation

that will enable us all to learn from the distinctive emphases of each Christian tradition.

Who Is an Evangelical Christian?

My task is considerably complicated by lack of agreement as to what it means to be an "evangelical Christian." As William Abraham has pointed out, the term "evangelical" is a "contested concept," the "proper use of which inevitably involves endless disputes about their proper uses on the part of their users."¹ But one may even consider the meaning of the word "Christian" to be contestable. I am using the word "Christian" to refer to any person whose beliefs, attitudes, and practices are rooted in the "Christian story," with its major motifs of creation, fall, redemption, church as witness, and consummation.²

But, then, which Christians are "evangelicals"? Various attempts at defining "evangelical" are fraught with shortcomings. One approach is to go back to the etymology of the word, and propose that an evangelical is one who is committed to the "evangel" (the "gospel" or "good news"), which can be stated as follows: God has manifested unconditional love and grace in and through Jesus Christ to reconcile humanity to God's self and to redeem all of the created order. But commitment to the "evangel" is not peculiar to "evangelical" Christians; commitment to the redemption kernel of the Christian story is embraced by all Christians.

Donald Dayton takes an historical approach to defining the word. He points out that the term "evangelical" has been applied to any religious tradition rooted in one of the following three movements: (1) the sixteenth-century Protestant Reformation; (2) the revivalist movements in America in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, which were in turn rooted in English Puritanism and Continental Lutheran Pietism; and (3) the twentieth-century postfundamentalist, neo-evangelical movement emerging after the modernist-fundamentalist controversy.³

1. William J. Abraham, quoting W. B. Gallie, in *The Coming Great Revival: Recovering the Full Evangelical Tradition* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1984), p. 73.

2. I have argued elsewhere that our articulations of these motifs need to capture "first-order beliefs" that all Christians can share, while allowing for diversity in related "second-order beliefs." For example, the belief that "God created the world" is first-order. The question of "how" God created the world is a second-order issue. See Harold Heie, "Wanted: Christian Colleges for a Dynamic Evangelicalism," *Christian Scholar's Review* 21 (March 1992): 264-268.

3. See Donald W. Dayton and Robert K. Johnston, *The Variety of American Evangelicalism* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1991), pp. 47, 48, and 245; and Stanley J. Grenz, *Reversing Evangelical Theology* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1993), pp. 22-27.

Harold Heie

But when many in the Dutch Reformed tradition learn that Dayton's definition would classify them as "evangelical," they are uncomfortable with that designation, at best. For many Dutch Reformed, the word "evangelical" conjures up the idea of the necessity of a "crisis conversion," which is contrary to their emphasis on the baptism of children who are then nurtured to grow gradually into maturity as Christians. And there is good reason for that concern, since a distinctive emphasis in the evangelical tradition has been on a "conversion experience."

In light of this example, the best approach for understanding the word "evangelical," at least for purposes of this essay, may be sociological. I therefore will attempt to identify certain "distinctive emphases" that are typically associated with the word "evangelical" at the present time.

I draw here on a proposal made by David Bebbington that three distinctive emphases of evangelicalism are biblicism, conversionism, and evangelistic activism.⁴ I will argue that a Christian is evangelical if his or her beliefs, attitudes, and practices emphasize some version of these distinctives (albeit, possibly in some "chastened" form, as in my case). I am using the word "evangelical," therefore, to apply to a Christian institution of higher education when that institution expects (explicitly or implicitly) all or most of its faculty and administrators to emphasize some version of these distinctives.

Biblicism

Bebbington uses the word *biblicism* to refer to "a particular regard for the Bible" or, as Mark Noll has stated, "a reliance on the Bible as ultimate religious authority."⁵ This distinctive points to the centrality that evangelicals accord to the biblical record. Evangelicals do not view the Bible as just one great book among many. Rather, they view it as the primary vehicle for God's revelation of the nature of Christian faith and practice. This seems most appropriate since it is the biblical narrative that unfolds the "Christian story" that is central to all Christian traditions. Although we as Christians often disagree in our interpretations of the biblical record, it remains the primary source for helping

4. David Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain: A History from the 1730s to the 1980s* (London: Unwin Hyman, 1989), pp. 2-14. Bebbington actually proposes a fourth distinctive of cricidcentrism which emphasizes that the reconciliation of humanity to God is "achieved by Christ on the cross" (p. 14). I do not include this in my analysis since, based on my judgment, many Christians besides evangelicals share this focus since it is the redemption kernel of the Christian story.

5. Bebbington, *Evangelicalism*, p. 3; and Mark Noll, *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), p. 8.

us to understand the Christian faith. Evangelicals serve all of Christendom well by emphasizing this point.

Evangelical Christian colleges typically express in a programmatic way this emphasis on the authority and centrality of the biblical record by including study of the biblical text in the undergraduate curriculum. Most if not all evangelical Christian colleges require biblical studies as a part of their general education requirements,⁶ and most make attempts to uncover ways in which biblical understanding can illumine and enrich understandings gained from study in the various academic disciplines.

However, there are some tendencies of biblicism that place limitations on the Christian faith and on Christian higher education. One is a tendency to undervalue sources of knowledge about Christian faith and living other than the Bible, sometimes to the point of extending the insight that the Bible is the ultimate authority and primary source for our understanding to the questionable view that the Bible is the "sole" source for our understanding. This tendency is sometimes aggravated by a questionable intuitionist epistemology which holds that the Bible is self-interpreting and, therefore, Christian believers can always directly apprehend the spiritual truths to be found in the biblical text. This view of the Bible as the "sole" source of understanding can at times manifest itself in a lack of commitment to serious study in the academic disciplines within the humanities, fine arts, social sciences, and natural sciences. In addition, the intuitionist epistemology that sometimes accompanies this view can lead to devaluation of the serious study of theology that ought to complement biblical studies, and to the neglect of the contributions that tradition, pronouncements of the church, experience, and reason can make as we seek to interpret the Bible adequately.

A second limitation of biblicism is a tendency toward too narrow a view of the meaning and significance of the biblical record. As Mark Noll points out, "Evangelicals have . . . been distinctive for the shape of their belief in the Bible adequately."⁷

6. With some exceptions, the magnitude of this biblical studies requirement has generally decreased over the past quarter of a century, as a result of the intense academic departmental competition for those precious general education credits (which also seem to be shrinking due to the perceived need for students to accumulate more credits in their academic specializations). Whereas the biblical studies requirement at a number of evangelical Christian colleges used to comprise as much as a full "second major" or at least a "minor" (approximately 18 semester credits), the present requirement is more likely to fall in the range of four to twelve semester credits. There are some good reasons for this reduction in specific biblical studies requirements (see n. 9), but it is also ironic in light of the fact that the level of biblical literacy on the part of students enrolling in such colleges is generally on the decline. Nevertheless, some level of biblical studies is still considered important at evangelical Christian colleges.

Bible — that is, for a literal hermeneutic, for a 'scientific' approach to the verses of Scripture that was molded by the eighteenth-century Enlightenment, for keen preoccupation with the doctrine of biblical inerrancy, and for fascination with details of the apocalypse."⁷ Making a crucial distinction between what is "distinctive" to evangelicalism and what is "essential to Christianity" Noll points to a larger meaning of a proper emphasis on the Bible: "What is essential to Christianity . . . is a profound trust in the Bible as pointing us to the Savior and for orienting our entire existence to the service of God." Noll notes that even the classic internal witness of 2 Timothy³ "emphasizes the saving and orienting purposes of the Bible much more than the Bible's potential to serve as an immediate source of detailed knowledge."⁸

The Reformed tradition has helped me understand how one might overcome the limitations of excessive manifestations of biblicism and intuitionism. It has instilled in me a comprehensive view of God's sovereignty that makes the intended rule of Jesus Christ extend to all aspects of creation. Therefore, the intended work in the academic disciplines is an important area of investigation of God's activity; for God has been active, not only redemptively in the history of Israel and the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, but also in nature, human life, and history.

As central as the biblical record is, it is not the only source of my understanding about Christian faith and practice.⁹ I have also learned correctives to an extreme form of biblicism from Christian believers who speak of pronouncements of the church as important sources of Christian understanding (as in Roman Catholicism or Eastern Orthodoxy), or of reason and experience as sources of understanding that complement the Bible and tradition (as in Methodism's Wesleyan quadrilateral). As I come to the task of interpreting the Bible, I need to benefit from these other sources of Christian understanding, and I can do so without compromising my belief that the Bible is my primary source and ultimate authority.

In light of what we can learn from these other Christian voices, evangelicals might do well to embrace a "chastened" form of biblicism that I call "biblical centrality."

7. Noll, *Scandal*, pp. 243, 244.

8. Noll, *Scandal*, p. 244.

9. It is fortunate for evangelical colleges that over the years they have attracted faculty committed to this Reformed emphasis. The positive curricular result has been an increase in general education requirements in the various academic disciplines and, sometimes, in theology, as a complement to biblical studies. Of course, in light of the increasing biblical illiteracy of students noted in n. 6, this broadening of general education expectations creates some strong faculty disagreements regarding the appropriate balance between these various areas of study.

THE EVANGELICAL/INTERDENOMINATIONAL TRADITION

Biblical Centrality: The biblical record is the primary source and ultimate authority for our understanding of the Christian faith and the implications of that faith for our lives. Such biblical understanding needs to be complemented and enriched by theological reflection and by understanding gained from study in other academic disciplines, and from the gifts of Christian tradition, reason, and experience.

This view of biblical centrality has important implications for current expressions of evangelical Christian higher education. Foremost, it calls us to greater seriousness about the "integration of knowledge" rhetoric typically presented in the first few pages of our evangelical college catalogs. Our rhetoric has far outdistanced our actual practice of integrating knowledge.

In brief, it is not sufficient to separately value two important spheres of knowledge that empirically overlap: the sphere of biblical and theological understanding and the sphere of knowledge claims in other academic disciplines. To try to separate these into two side-by-side spheres is co-existence, a form of intellectual dualism, not integration. Such dualism is commonplace among evangelical Christians. As an antidote to this dualism, a fundamental assumption of evangelical Christian higher education should be that the interaction of these two spheres of knowledge must be intentionally explored. Fully recognizing the tensions that can exist between knowledge claims in these two spheres, the evangelical Christian scholar must nevertheless seek for interrelationships between the two spheres, and for ways in which knowledge claims in each sphere can illumine, enrich, and complement claims in the others. Whereas evangelicals generally embrace the view that biblical and theological understanding can inform knowledge in other academic disciplines, they need more fully to embrace the "second direction" for integration of knowledge: knowledge in other academic disciplines can inform our biblical and theological understanding. Based on the assumption that there is unity of truth, the goal is to develop a unifying conceptual framework informed by Christian ideas for interpreting and acting in the world.

This "biblical centrality" thesis also points to the need for evangelical institutions of higher education to reaffirm the importance of both biblical studies and theological reflection. But how is that practically possible, given the meager level of basic biblical literacy that many of our students bring to college? It is foolish for us to think that we can adequately compensate for years of pre-college neglect by providing comprehensive instruction in biblical studies. We need to be much more creative.

Our rhetoric about the integration of the sphere of biblical and theological understanding with the knowledge claims in other academic disciplines suggests the possibility of an "across the curriculum" approach to biblical and theological understanding, rather than viewing such understanding as the

Harold Heie

primary responsibility of the "Biblical and Religious Studies Department." Of course, students need to gain some significant knowledge in the two spheres before they can effectively begin integration. Therefore, there remains a significant need for biblical studies during the undergrad years, but possibly more emphasis could be placed on developing a "thematic framework" and then establishing expectations for students to take more responsibility for their own biblical learning within that framework.

But the greatest changes may need to occur in the upper-class years, when students have the maturity needed seriously to pursue the integrative quest. Students need some introduction to theological reflection in the upper-class years. But again, that should not be viewed as the responsibility of one department. A more integrative strategy would be to increase the offering of integrative seminars in the various academic disciplines during the upper-class years (not a new idea), but with a greater intentional focus on integrating relevant aspects of biblical studies and theological reflection. However, it cannot be assumed that all faculty are well prepared for such an intentional focus on integrating biblical and theological understanding. More attention must therefore be given to faculty development programs that provide faculty with adequate resources and time to pursue their own integrative quest.

Conversionism

Bebbington uses the word *conversionism* to refer to the "belief that lives need to be changed," that persons need to "turn away from their sins in repentance and to Christ in faith."¹⁰ Some evangelicals emphasize the "deep feeling" that is experienced when such a conversion takes place. Some evangelicals also emphasize the view that the tell-tale signs that such a transformation has taken place are a deep desire to immerse oneself in the spiritual disciplines, such as personal prayer and Bible study, and a renunciation of certain lifestyle habits deemed incompatible with the Christian faith.

These emphases have made some very positive contributions to the church and to Christian higher education. They point to the truth that being a Christian is not just a matter of giving intellectual assent to a set of beliefs. Rather, it involves a commitment of the whole person that should be life changing. And although there have surely been some excesses of emotionalism in evangelicalism, it is important for all Christians to be reminded of the truth that to "feel deeply" is an indispensable aspect of our humanness.

These emphases are expressed in a variety of ways at evangelical Christian colleges. First, although evangelical Christian colleges are not churches, they

10. Bebbington, *Evangelicalism*, pp. 3, 5.

do typically conduct regular chapel services for students and faculty, with attendance often required of students. Although chapel programming is varied, it will generally include themes related to spiritual transformation and growth, even including, at times, evangelistic efforts aimed toward the conversion of students. Although it is difficult to generalize, it may be fair to say that such chapel programs often reinforce the importance of deeply felt religious experience.

The evangelical emphasis on the spiritual disciplines also finds healthy expression at evangelical Christian colleges through such means as residence hall Bible studies and prayer groups. The evangelical emphasis on personal lifestyle habits consistent with Christian commitment is also expressed at our colleges. Many evangelical Christian colleges have tended toward an *in loco parentis* model, accompanied by attempts to define meaningful limits for student behavior. A positive contribution of this concern has been a general avoidance of campus student behavior that is judged to be inimical to the Christian faith (e.g., fraternity binge drinking, although what goes on off campus could be a different matter).

The evangelical emphasis on spiritual transformation and growth is related to an emphasis on "holistic" student development at evangelical Christian colleges. Students are not disembodied intellects. Rather, they are persons who think, feel, act, worship, play, relate to others, and have bodies that need caring for. Our colleges typically believe that each student should learn about and develop each of these aspects of his or her being, and we often provide extensive student development programming toward that end.

Yet, there is also a dark side to some of these conversionist emphases. The emphasis on feeling can degenerate into a mindless emotionalism that denigrates the importance of adequately reflecting on the meaning of what one is feeling. By failing to recognize that our feelings are not self-interpreting and that they gain meaning as we interpret them in the light of our current framework of thought, such anti-intellectualism enslaves us to our emotions. And in those collegiate settings where there is an overemphasis on deeply-felt religious experience, the intellectual task of "integrating knowledge" takes a back seat, despite our common college catalog claim that this is Christian higher education's most fundamental distinctive.

One limitation of the view that the transformed life brought about by conversion finds expression primarily in terms of the spiritual disciplines and sanctified lifestyle habits is a tendency toward privatization of one's religious commitment. In its most extreme form, this becomes a subjective individualism bordering on a "spiritual narcissism" in which a person is so concerned about "personal holiness" and "feeling good about oneself" that he or she is of no earthly good to anyone. Surely the meaning of a "transformed life" must be big enough to capture the corporate nature of the Body of Christ and to

Harold Heide

embrace our Christian responsibilities to other human beings and the rest of God's created order.

A related liability of legitimate concern for student lifestyle habits occurs when this concern is manifested in an extreme *in loco parentis* model that suffocates students by making too many choices for them, thereby robbing them of the development of "ethical discernment" that should be a major goal of Christian higher education. Of course, this issue immerses us in the perennial tension between law and Christian liberty. It is appropriate for evangelical Christian colleges to proscribe student behavior (at least on campus) that is inimical to the Christian faith (recognizing legitimate disagreements as to what behaviors fall into this category). At the same time, evangelical Christian colleges have too often erred on the side of being too prescriptive, thereby stunting the development of discernment that is essential to growth toward Christian maturity.

Once again, Christians from other traditions have had much to say about overcoming the liabilities of excessive conversionist emphases. The Reformed and Lutheran traditions can teach us that the gradual coming to Christian maturity experienced by baptized children is fully as redemptive as is crisis conversion experience. It is one thing to say that a crisis conversion experience is one way to come to Christian faith. But it is surely going too far to say that it is the only path to faith. We need to allow for a diversity of personal stories in this regard. Here again, Mark Noll provides us with a "larger meaning" when he contrasts evangelical distinctives with distinctives that are essential to Christianity: "Evangelicals have been distinctive in featuring the crisis conversion. But what is essential to Christianity is the whole life committed to God, from the beginning of faith until death. Some individuals may report being drawn to faith through a crisis conversion; other believers may have a different story to tell."¹¹

The Reformed tradition especially can provide us with a corrective to an excessive preoccupation with "feeling" through its commitment to the life of the mind as an expression of worship of God. Of course, it may at times be necessary to remind some Reformed Christians that an arid, lifeless intellectualism is as unworthy as a mindless emotionalism. The ideal is both to feel deeply and think deeply.

Finally, Christians in the Lutheran, Reformed, Episcopal, Catholic, and Eastern Orthodox traditions can help evangelicals to see that an excessive preoccupation with "private spirituality" (which often mimics the extremes of individualism in American culture) can cause one to lose sight of the corporate nature of the church and of worship. As one Episcopal friend recalls, he was uncomfortable with "an evangelical spirituality which seemed to set the self

11. Noll, *Scandal*, p. 244.

center-stage," where "an act of individual or corporate devotion seemed to depend on the fervor we brought to it as individuals."¹² Instead, he found himself attracted to a "liturgical worship in which one enters into an act larger than oneself, prior to oneself, and not experientially dependent on oneself and the fervor one brings to it" where he could "forget [himself] . . . in a corporate action not contingent on [his] . . . own feelings at the moment for its efficacy."¹³

In light of these correctives provided by other Christian voices, evangelicals might do well to embrace a "chastened" form of conversionism best captured by the word "commitment."

Commitment: A Christian personally appropriates the "good news" of the Gospel through a commitment of her or his entire being, whatever the means of that commitment may be. Such commitment should be celebrated with other Christian believers and should be expressed in a personal integration of one's thinking, feeling, and acting.

This focus on commitment expressed through personal integration has an important implication for current expressions of evangelical Christian higher education. Despite our stated emphasis on the holistic development of students, there is still an insidious tendency toward bifurcation, where an emphasis on the life of the mind and an emphasis on deeply felt religious experience and other "non-intellectual" aspects of personal growth coexist at best, or at worst create considerable tensions between "teaching faculty" and student development staff. Such tensions may be due to an excessive "student services" model for student development that places meager emphasis on learning, as if a college were a health spa, a church, or a counseling center.

Since colleges exist primarily for learning, a corrective to excessive preoccupation with student services is a model that places the focus for both "teaching faculty" and student development staff on student learning. The only difference should be that "teaching faculty" foster student learning inside the classroom, while student development staff foster student learning outside the classroom.

It is unfortunate that student development staffs generally have not attained parity with "teaching faculty" as educators at evangelical Christian colleges. A partial explanation for this situation may be an overemphasis on "student services" by some student development staff. But some "teaching

faculty" also contribute to this disparity by their belief that all student learning takes place inside the classroom, including related out-of-class assignments, despite considerable empirical evidence to the contrary. A true partnership between "teaching faculty" and student development staff will be possible only if both groups commit themselves to being "educators," helping students to learn whatever will foster holistic development.

This focus on commitment also suggests that some evangelical institutions of higher education could do more to encourage students to examine their fundamental "worldview" commitments which often are tacit and inarticulate. It is not unusual for students to come to our colleges having been deeply immersed in evangelical institutions since childhood, sometimes leading to their adoption of a set of "hand-me-down" beliefs that they have never critically examined toward the goal of appropriating their own set of beliefs. Some evangelical Christian colleges could do more to create a supportive environment where Christian students are encouraged to examine and potentially refine their beliefs, in conversation with other Christian believers and those students who have other faith commitments.

The suggestion that a student's faith commitment needs to be expressed in actions, not just in thinking and feeling, leads to consideration of a third evangelical distinctive.

Evangalistic Activism

Bebbington uses the word *activism* to refer to "the expression of the gospel in effort," with such effort focused on the conversion of others.¹⁴ Evangelicals are activist in their concern for sharing the Christian faith and for passionately communicating the gospel. As a result of this evangalistic activism, there is a strong tendency to emphasize immediacy of results: the gospel must be spread as soon as possible throughout the world so that many may be "saved" before the consummation.

This evangalistic activism has made some valuable contributions to the church and to Christian higher education. Because "good news" ought to be shared, it is commendable to have a sense of urgency about sharing the gospel with others. Furthermore, the biblical concept of "truth" points to a need for some activism, for it embraces the Hebraic rather than Hellenistic view that "knowing" and "doing" ought to be two sides of the same coin. The "truth" is not something strictly cognitive to "carry around in one's head." Rather, the "truth" is something to be acted on, to be lived out. This important insight has often found expression at evangelical colleges through co-curricular pro-

12. John Edward Skillen, "Religious Crisis During My College Years: Notes for a Spiritual Autobiography" in Bruce G. Webb, ed., *Christianity, Character and Liberal Arts* (Acon: Tapestry Press, 1994), p. 103.

13. Skillen, "Religious Crisis," p. 104.

14. Bebbington, *Evangelicalism*, pp. 3, 10.

THE EVANGELICAL/INTERDENOMINATIONAL TRADITION

Harold Heie

grams that provide students and faculty the opportunity to "share the gospel" with others.

Yet, an emphasis on evangelistic activism also has its limitations. First is the tendency of many evangelicals to define appropriate activism almost exclusively in terms of outreach geared toward the redemption of individual people. But the biblical record suggests that all of the created order needs redemption. The political structures also calls Christians to work toward the redemption of social and pockets of evangelicalism have adequately embraced this larger view of creation and redemption, but we still have a long way to go. And as we travel that path, other Christian traditions have much to teach us.

Once again, the Reformed tradition, with its comprehensive view of God as sovereign over all aspects of creation and its commitment to the transformation of all creation, can help us better to understand the nature of our creation-wide responsibilities. We can also learn from Christians in the Anabaptist/Mennonite tradition. Evangelicals would do well to emulate their commitment to serving all the needs of people, not just those labeled "spiritual;" their social concern for justice for the poor and disenfranchised of this world; and their commitment to "peacemaking" in a world torn apart by conflict.

Another limitation of evangelistic activism results from its pragmatic emphasis on immediate results. This emphasis does not create an environment conducive to rigorous Christian scholarship on evangelical Christian college campuses, for the results of serious scholarship are not necessarily immediate. What is lost in this preoccupation with immediate results is the flourishing of Christian thinking about the nature of all of God's creation. In turn, this loss cripples dissemination of "Christian voices" within the larger academy and within a culture that needs to hear Christian perspectives. This latter task of doing and disseminating Christian scholarship is often long-term arduous work without immediacy of results. But, as so many Christians from the Reformed tradition have emphasized, doing Christian scholarship is a vital Christian calling. If Christian academics do not energetically pursue that calling, we will abandon our culture to non-Christian ways of thinking.

This tendency to undervalue Christian scholarship because it often lacks immediate results is further aggravated by the self designation of most evangelical Christian colleges as "teaching institutions," where faculty are hired primarily to teach students, not to do research. In theory, scholarship — integrative or otherwise — is *said* to be important, but scholarly work is clearly a secondary responsibility relative to the primary responsibility of teaching. And because teaching loads are typically high at such institutions, there simply isn't much time left for serious scholarly work during the academic year.

In light of these reflections on some limitations of activism and some correctives provided by other Christian voices, evangelicals might do well to

embrace a "hastened" form of activism that I call "comprehensive gospel activism."

Comprehensive Gospel Activism: The gospel message that needs to be communicated passionately is that all aspects of the creation of God and humans need redemption, including the natural world and social structures. The work of Jesus Christ is decisive for that full scope of redemption, and Christians are called to act as faithful agents for that redemption.

This focus on the comprehensive nature of Christian activism has some major implications for refining current expressions of evangelical Christian higher education. First, evangelical Christian colleges need to exhibit greater commitment to public expressions of service that reflect a broad view of redemption, including the quest for peace and justice for all people.

Although there are promising signs that some programs involving students at some evangelical Christian colleges have embraced this broader scope of redemption, much more needs to be done in the area of faculty scholarship. In brief, there needs to be greater emphasis on praxis-oriented scholarship, wherein faculty members do research related to solving pressing human problems, particularly those evident in the communities in which these Christian colleges are located, without succumbing to the truncated view that all praxis-oriented scholarship should lead to immediate results. Here we can learn from colleges in the Anabaptist/Mennonite tradition, for these colleges have generally embraced the view that service and reconciliation should be central to the collegiate mission.

A related implication is that evangelical Christian colleges need to evidence a much greater commitment to faculty scholarship informed by Christian perspectives. A particular task of Christians called to the academy is to bring Christian perspectives to bear on scholarship about all of God's creation, as carried out in the various academic disciplines. Part of the "witness" of the Christian scholar called to be "salt and light" in the world is to share scholarship informed by Christian perspectives with other scholars who do not share those perspectives. The work of Christian scholars is to penetrate the highest levels of cultural thought with Christian thinking.

To make this possible, evangelical Christian colleges must modify their typical self-designation as "teaching institutions," where scholarly work is generally a secondary responsibility relative to the primary responsibility of teaching. This is not to deny that within the broad spectrum of American higher education, an emphasis on effective teaching is exemplary and ought to be emulated, up to a point, by those research universities where an extraordinary focus on teaching is a sure road to academic oblivion, since scholarly results are what lead to faculty advancement. But "teaching institutions" may

Harold Heie

invite their own form of abuse. In the past thirty-plus years, I have seen a number of potential Christian scholars "dry up" because they came to work at Christian colleges. The insidious bifurcation between teaching and scholarship needs to be demolished. It must be "both/and," not "either/or." To view as "only" a teacher truncates the calling of a Christian academic. Because integrative Christian scholarship is central to the task of being a Christian college teacher, administrators and board members at Christian colleges make a serious mistake if they treat scholarship as an "add-on" if a given faculty member can find the time after heavy teaching responsibilities. It will be a formidable challenge for evangelical Christian colleges to create structures for effective teachers and productive Christian scholars.

A third implication is that evangelical Christian colleges need to face squarely the sensitive issue of academic freedom. As we encourage our faculty toward higher levels of scholarship dealing with the whole range of disciplines, what limits, if any, should be placed on scholarly inquiry and expression?

Because evangelicalism is largely a populist movement, evangelical Christian colleges are very sensitive to the theological boundaries that appear operative among their church and alumni constituencies, especially those constituencies who send their sons and daughters — along with their tuition dollars — to study at these colleges. Because an increasing number of students come from a very conservative Christian constituency, many evangelical colleges feel pressure to define theological boundaries in terms of a detailed doctrinal statement to which all faculty must agree. This pressure needs to be resisted, for these kinds of detailed statements leave minimal room for doctrinal differences among equally committed Christians, and therefore provide little motivation or space for serious conversation about theological issues and their implications for the academic disciplines and for all of life.

I am not arguing that an evangelical Christian college should take no doctrinal position regarding the "essentials" of the Christian faith, for without some agreed-upon understanding of these "essentials," there is little that will distinguish Christian colleges from other institutions of higher education. But as already suggested, these "essentials" should be defined broadly in terms of the major motifs of the Christian story — creation, fall, redemption, church as witness, and consummation — while leaving considerable room for doctrinal differences in elaboration of these grand themes.¹⁵

15. See Heie, "Wanted," p. 267, for my related proposal for appropriate "theological boundaries."

Conclusion: Evangelical/Interdenominational Christian Colleges as Communities of Conversation

By now, the reader should detect my gratitude to various Christian traditions that have helped me to refine my understanding of what I mean when I profess to be an evangelical Christian. But for the most part, I have limited myself in this essay to those few Christian traditions that I have had the good fortune to be immersed in at various times in my career as an educator. There are many other Christian traditions from which I still need to learn. The entire contents of this book should provide further grit for a more extended conversation between Christian educators from many traditions, one that will enable all conversants to learn from the distinctive emphases and limitations of each tradition.

This brings me, at long last, to the distinctive contribution to Christian higher education of the evangelical Christian college that is intentionally interdenominational (in contrast to evangelical colleges whose identity is primarily tied to one Christian tradition or denomination). The empirical reality about evangelicalism is that it is interdenominational. There are believers in many Christian traditions and denominations who embrace various forms of the three evangelical distinctives I have elaborated in this essay. Therefore, an interdenominational evangelical Christian college has a unique opportunity to gather together for conversation faculty and students who are evangelical representatives of many Christian traditions or denominations. But that conversation is still too narrowly defined. In the spirit of this book, that conversation should be opened up to include Christians from all traditions, evangelical or otherwise. I therefore pose a challenge to evangelical/interdenominational Christian colleges to create such communities of conversation.

Of course, my call for conversation is easier said than done in an era when civil discourse in on the decline, even within — or especially across — different Christian sub-cultures. One would think that the conversation for which I call is already in place at evangelical/interdenominational Christian colleges, given their interdenominational nature, but that has not been my experience. In my eighteen years at two evangelical/interdenominational Christian colleges, I have seen very few conversations across a broad spectrum of faith traditions regarding theological differences and the implications of those differences for the academic disciplines and for living well.

I've often wondered why this has been the case. It may partially reflect the fact that our own theological sophistication as faculty members outside the field of theology often does not exceed the advanced Sunday school level. But I think there are two deeper reasons: a fear of where such "controversial" conversation may lead (will the results cross agreed-upon theological boundaries?), and the fact that Christians, not to mention others, have not learned

how to disagree with each other with kindness, sharing our differing partial glimpses of God's truth in love. This fact reinforces the need for a *broad* definition of "theological boundaries," as well as a need for the humility and charity necessary for authentic human conversation to flourish. The humility of which I speak is open to the possibility that some of my present beliefs are false, and I can correct a false belief by listening to someone who disagrees with me. The charity of which I speak means I should put the best construction on what another person says by trying to see things from his or her perspective. And I should always express disagreement with kindness. Possibly the reason we experience such meager authentic conversation is that we often lack these qualities.

If my analysis of our tendencies toward non-conversation are correct, then it will be a formidable challenge to create communities of conversation like those called for in this essay. Such communities will not emerge by themselves; intentional strategies must be implemented. I have argued elsewhere that such strategies must include broad, community-wide commitment to aspire to conversational ideals including humility and charity, the intentional orchestration of a plurality of differing "Christian voices" regarding the issue at hand, and curricular and co-curricular means for "teaching disagreements" rather than ignoring or camouflaging them.¹⁶

If interdenominational evangelical Christian colleges can create and maintain such communities of conversation across Christian theological traditions, then these colleges can make a profound contribution to Christian higher education and, then, to all of higher education by inviting all scholars to "join the conversation." That ideal is the ultimate educational challenge as we move toward the end of this century.

Faith and Learning at Wheaton College

Michael S. Hamilton
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Wheaton College, located in Chicago's western suburb of Wheaton, dates its origin to 1860, although it existed previously as the Illinois Institute. For the first half of its history, Wheaton had only two presidents, the father and son team of Jonathan and Charles Blanchard, who provided remarkably stable leadership. By the time of Charles Blanchard's death in 1925, Wheaton had emerged as a leader among fundamentalist colleges with a student body of about 300. Today it remains a quality, primarily undergraduate Christian liberal arts college, while offering several graduate programs. Wheaton consistently attracts a highly motivated student body from diverse, although generally conservative Protestant, backgrounds who also seek to relate their faith commitments to their educational experiences in a setting intended to enhance both their faith and their learning.

Are religion and education natural antagonists? "Faith is belief without reason," wrote essayist Roger Rosenblatt in *Time* magazine a few years ago. "Fundamentally, religions oppose rational processes."¹ The American version of this idea traces back to Andrew Dickson White, the founding president of Cornell University, whose *A History of the Warfare of Science with Theology in Christendom* first appeared in 1869 and is still in print today. White's conceptual world was moralistic, even melodramatic, peopled with courageous heroes of science struggling against the base villains of Christian dogmatism. Today

16. For further elaboration, see Harold Kiehl, "The Postmodern Opportunity: Christians in the Academy," *Christian Scholar's Review*, forthcoming.

1. Roger Rosenblatt, "Defenders of the Faith," *Time* (November 12, 1984): 112.