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The Idea of the Christian University: Embracing the Christian Story in a World of Colliding Maps

2008 Opening Convocation

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Philip W. Eaton, President

We have done an awful lot of welcoming over the last few days and weeks. Last Thursday and Friday, we spent time with our new students and their parents and families making sure they feel a strong sense of welcome into this special community. We've welcomed new faculty and staff. We've welcomed student leaders. And so now it is my privilege and delight to welcome our returning students back to campus. Here we go into a new academic year, and I think we are indeed ready.

I sense in all of this time we have spent together an extraordinarily positive spirit at the opening of this academic year. Even despite all of the turmoil in the world, to which we must very attentive, in my 13 years as president, I don't think I've ever felt better about the opening of a year.

After all of the planning retreats, and after all of the orientation events for new students, I woke up on Saturday morning with a tremendous sense of satisfaction, a genuine pride in our people, all of you, such pride and confidence in our great students, a sheer delight in the distinctive way we go about the work of our university. We welcomed some 900 new students and 2,000 parents and family members onto our campus Thursday evening. As I looked into the eyes of those parents and those students, I got this very clear sense that they were putting an enormous amount of trust in us. I could hear in their comments a strong sense of hope and expectation and yearning, and I kept thinking, *"We've got to get this thing right. We've got to do the work of the university right."*

And I thought, these people, our families and our students, come to us seeking bread, and we must give them bread. We cannot give them a stone. And as I think about all the things going on across this campus, who we are, what we stand for, *we are indeed getting some things right.*

There is a whole lot of thinking and writing and reflection these days on the purpose and meaning of the American university in our time. I have been reading a ton of this work for my own writing and reflections over the past year and more.

In a recent book, for example, called *The State of the University*, the ever-provocative Stanley Hauerwas, from Duke Divinity School, says "there are two questions seldom asked by the faculty and administrators of universities: 'What are universities for?' and 'Who[m] do [we] serve?'"

In other words, what is the meaning of the university for our day? What is *the idea of the university*, to used Cardinal Newman's famous language? And is our idea of the university an offering of bread, something life-giving, something healthy and whole and nurturing? Something full of hope?

Hauer was goes on to say "that the university as we know it is in deep trouble." He loves the university, as I do, but he expresses huge reservations about something missing, something absent, right at the heart of the university. Somehow the soul has gone numb.

In *The Idea of the University: A Reexamination*, a title that echoes of course the great 19th-century visionary John Henry Newman, Jaroslav Pelikan says that "a modern society is unthinkable without the university," and yet, like Hauerwas, he says "a critical reexamination of the idea of the university ... has become an urgent necessity." "The university is in a state of crisis," Pelikan concludes, "and is in danger of losing credibility."

C. John Sommerville, in a recent book called *The Decline of the Secular University*, a book not written, as far as I can tell, from a Christian perspective, talks about "the irrelevance of the secular university in America." Sadly, he says, we are beginning to discover that "universities are not really where we look for answers to our life questions. That is the sense in which they seem marginal."

Where in the world does this deep questioning come from? How did we get to this kind of consternation about the

purpose of the university? Where does this profound loss of confidence come from?

But my real question this morning is this: Given all of this deep questioning about the idea of the university, by the likes of Hauerwas and Pelikan and Summerville and so many others these days, how is it that I can get up on Saturday morning and feel such satisfaction about what we have to offer our parents and our incoming students. Where is the disconnect here?

Quite coincidentally, on Saturday morning as well, one of our trustees, Barry Rowan, a graduate of the Harvard Business School, sent me a broadcast email he had received from Drew Gilpin Faust, the President of Harvard. By the way, if you think I write long memos, you ought to see this one. President Faust was essentially sketching out the state of the university at Harvard, as they too begin a new year. And of course I was duly impressed with the programs they were launching, the research being conducted, the buildings they were building, the money they were raising, and the incredible sense of stature communicated about this great university, among the greatest universities in the world. And I confess I was slightly unchristian in my envy.

But some of the edge of my envy dissipated as I thought back on Harvard's general education reform a few years ago. The Harvard faculty spent some four years studying all of the requirements for undergraduates and issued the now-famous *Preliminary Report* in October 2006. As soon as the report was released, as many of you know, a huge controversy exploded into the open. How can that be? When Harvard talks about general education, the rest of the world listens.

The heart of the controversy was found in these sentences: "Religion is a fact of 21st-century life — around the world and right at home," the *Preliminary Report* states. "Ninety-four percent of Harvard's incoming students report that they discuss religion 'frequently' or 'occasionally,' and 71 percent say that they attend religious services." In addition, "wars are fought around the world in the name of religion."

And so the *Preliminary Report* concludes that while "Harvard is no longer an institution with a religious mission ... religion is a fact that Harvard's graduates will confront in their lives both in and after college. We therefore require students to take one course in a category titled Reason and Faith."

But what might seem so obvious, the need to examine reason and faith as a part of university learning, was the cause of sheer outrage. Stephen Pinker, a distinguished faculty member, a representative voice for those opposing the *Preliminary Report*, said that "universities are about reason, pure and simple. ... For us to magnify the significance of religion as a topic equivalent in scope to all of science, all of culture, or all of world history and current affairs, is to give it far too much prominence. [Religion] is an American anachronism," says Pinker with sweeping dismissal, "in an era in which the rest of the West is moving beyond it."

When the *Final Report* was issued in February 2007, Reason and Faith had vanished from this new set of requirements. Religion could find no place at the table of Harvard's curriculum.

I think this tastes like a stone. Something is missing here, something profoundly important. I have come to believe that the university must locate at its very core a story of what is true and good and beautiful. When we fail to gather around such a story, in community, right at the heart of university learning, we've got trouble. If we are going to give to our students bread instead of stone, we must be able to affirm, in community, a story of human flourishing.

The inimitable Stanley Fish, a writer I admire so much, a writer I love to hate, calls us all in the academy to a fierce neutrality on all things that truly matter. We must engage, he says, in "a continual pushing away of orthodoxies ... In the name of neutrality, religious propositions must ... be excluded." To settle in on a story of what is true and good and beautiful, to affirm a story of human flourishing, says Fish, "is a sign of cognitive and moral infirmity."

I've been thinking hard about how we might imagine the alternative to all of this. A fierce neutrality on all things that matter? "A continual pushing away of orthodoxies"? A silly notion that religion is an anachronism? An philosophical unwillingness to settle on a story of what is true and good and beautiful? Is this really what we ought to be offering our students? Surely this must be some of the source of the malaise so many are feeling about the soul of the university in our day.

And what is our alternative? What is it that got me up on Saturday morning with a tremendous sense of satisfaction about what we have to offer our students and the world?

Two things happened to me late last spring that may help tell this story. First, at the May meeting of Board of Trustees, I invited [Derek Wood](#), one of our professors of biology, to come to the meeting to talk to the trustees about the incredible work going on among our scientists. The key to this groundbreaking work is undergraduate research, where Derek and others come alongside our students to conduct original research.

And I began thinking about the critical importance of this encounter between the professor and the student. And right in the middle of this presentation, Derek said, with great enthusiasm, right there in our labs, working closely with our students, we are actually changing the world. He said it three times.

And then late last spring another thing happened. Right before Commencement, a group of about 10 of our students, all women, invited Sharon and me to have dinner with them at Bucca di Beppo. They wanted to talk. They wanted to share some of their journey at Seattle Pacific.

I have come to call this group my Bucca di Beppo girls. They were amazing. They talked all evening about their experiences. They had met as a group during their freshman year and they had met every week for four whole

years. They talked about their experiences with professors, lots of stories. They talked about times of worship, times of great fun, times of deep learning. It was clear to me that they embraced the Christian story with clarity and conviction.

Toward the end, one of them leaned forward toward me and said, "Dr. Eaton, we get it. We get the vision. We want to change the world. We want to bring the hope of the gospel into the world." And I thought, this is it. Something has happened. These lives have been shaped. We have given these bright young women the bread of life, something whole, something life-giving, and they want to use their lives to share that story.

Think about this extraordinary story we read from Luke this morning. Right in the midst of all the turmoil and disappointment and despair of the two disciples on the road to Emmaus, Jesus steps in. Here were these two disciples arguing and debating about the world, and Jesus enters into the discussion with a story of human flourishing and hope. And what does he do? He teaches the Scriptures. He anchors their world and their community in the Scriptures, in a careful reading of the text. He comes right alongside them, just as our faculty do, and leads them to discovery. And the text says they found their hearts on fire. And what did they do with their learning? They went out and changed the world, literally, dramatically, and forever. They took the story of Jesus, this story of what is true and good and beautiful, into the world and changed the world forever.

This is why I woke up on Saturday morning with such a sense of satisfaction about what we have to offer. We have a story to share with our students. We have a story of what is true and good and beautiful to share with the world. And that story anchors all of our learning. And that story is best learned in the special encounter between the professor and the student, an encounter that takes place over great material, in the lab, the studio, the performance hall, over a text, engaged with the stories of history, engaged with ideas. And the best of that kind of learning takes place in genuine Christian community.

I hope you share with me this sense of satisfaction and genuine pride with what we have to offer. Let us step into this new academic year with that kind of confidence and joy.
God bless you in the year ahead.

God bless each one of you.