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The Idea of the Christian University, Part II: The Place Where World Change Begins

Opening Convocation
September 29, 2009

Philip W. Eaton, President

Good morning. And welcome to this official opening of the academic year at Seattle Pacific University. It's good to be launching another year, isn't it?

There is something in the air, some kind fresh excitement, something new perhaps. I've had lots of people telling me that over the last couple of weeks, and I feel it too. Dr. Newby came up to me after the Ames Scholars Luncheon last Wednesday and said "I feel something new is happening. Something amazing is going on here." God announced to the poet Isaiah, as I said last week, that "I am about to do something totally new. Watch for it. Be attentive. Don't miss it." That's the spirit in which we begin this new year.

And so I welcome all of you back to this new beginning in the life our university.

What is the meaning of the Christian university for our time? What is our driving purpose? Do we offer up any kind of alternative idea of the university in the larger mix of higher education? And how do we make the case for our value to a world that demands some answers these days?

America spends \$351 billion a year on higher education alone. That's a huge investment. And so it is critical that we ask: Are we getting our money's worth? Is this money well spent by our students and their families? Is our society getting a return on its investment in higher education? Lots of people are asking that question these days.

In *The New York Times Magazine* on Sunday, David Leonhardt brings us another one of those disturbing articles questioning whether a college education matters at all. To be sure, says this author, college graduates make twice as much as those who don't go to college, and maybe that's reason enough to argue the value. But isn't it true, he asks, that if you locked all of those college-bound students in a closet and then turned them loose after four years, they'd still earn twice as much? Perhaps they earn what they earn because they are bright and they have grown up with the advantages of privilege. *But has anything really happened in college?*

Charles Murray, in the same issue, makes these bold attacks on our work as universities: "Discredit the bachelor's degree as a job credential. . . . It does not even tell an employer that the graduate can put together a logical or syntactically correct argument. It serves as rough and unreliable evidence of a degree of intelligence and perseverance — that's it." "The B.A.," he goes on to say, "has become meaningless."

And so we are tested these days to say what it is we want to accomplish and to demonstrate that we are successful at the task. I suggest that we cannot afford to dismiss this kind of questioning of our value as irrelevant or marginal. It is rampant. Our public has grown restive and suspicious that we may not be worth the price. Can we actually defend, articulate, and measure what we claim we do? Is our idea of the university worth it?

I had a profound experience last June, right before our Commencement, an experience that sent me into a great deal of reflection and writing over the summer. You may have seen my blog post on this topic. I was sitting in a fundraising breakfast at a fine organization called PATH, then located right across the infamous bridge to Ballard. PATH is dedicated to clearing out all of the distractions and inefficiencies in order to bring the latest in medical technology into the poorest regions of the world. When you contribute to PATH, we were told that morning, you contribute directly to the needs of children who suffer from malnutrition and disease through absolutely no fault of their own.

And I thought PATH is changing the world, and I want to be part of that effort. Good for them, I thought, as I wrote out my small check to invest in this good work.

And then I began thinking, so what is it we are doing, on this campus, driven by our core meaning, driven by the idea of the Christian university, to change the world? Is it possible for us to witness and measure life giving answers to

the world's most intractable suffering? Is it possible for us to make the case that we are bringing a story of human flourishing into the world? If we are, if something like this is our purpose, then there is no possible way anyone can imagine that our bachelor's or graduate degrees are meaningless.

At the time of my fundraising breakfast at PATH we had banners flying all across our campus asking just this question: *Can a university change the world?* Can we make a difference, just as PATH or World Vision or Agros are making a difference? Should that be the purpose of the university? And here is another question for me: Does the Christian university have the ability to think about that question differently? Perhaps even more effectively?

Can a university change the world? There are a lot of dissenters who would answer emphatically "no" to those questions. The inimitable Stanley Fish has just written a provocative poke at our mission admonishing all educators to *Save The World On Your Own Time*. That's the title of his book. "Teachers," Fish says, and by implication universities themselves, "cannot, except for a serendipity that by definition cannot be counted on, fashion moral character, or inculcate respect for others, or produce citizens of a certain temper." Saving the world cannot be the purpose of the university, Fish contends. Just focus on intellectual formation and your job is done.

Even the great John Henry Newman lines up at times on Fish's side of this question. In 1852, in his seminal, foundational statement on the modern university, Newman contends that the sole function of the university is that "it educates the intellect to reason well in all matters." The job of the university is to create a "culture of the intellect." "A University," Newman says, "taken in its bare idea . . . is *intellectual culture*; here it may leave its scholars, and it has done its work when it has done as much as this."

Now there is no one in this room that believes more in intellectual formation than I do. That should be and must be at the heart of our educational enterprise. We must prepare our students with intellectual competencies that will allow them to enter into a complex world productively. And we must be able to measure these results and present this case to the world. That's in part what it means to be educated. That's part of making our case.

But is that all? One of our fine leaders in education in this region said to an audience recently: "it's all about smart people and innovative ideas. That's what drives a great university." I love working with all the smart people in this room. And the innovative ideas coming out of your work never fail to amaze me.

But is that enough? What happens to the notion of *good* people doing the work of our universities? What happens to the notion of ideas that are good and true and beautiful? What happens to the notions of honesty and integrity and courage? Are we required by our idea of the university to provide a moral universe within which our students make their choices about how to live? *Doesn't the world need these things just as much as it needs smart people and innovative ideas?*

Professor Rob Wall reminded me over the weekend about the incredible amount of outstanding scholarship and writing going on among our faculty. And I want to lift up and celebrate our faculty in their scholarly efforts this morning. But I want to celebrate this scholarship precisely because it is framed by a story of what is true and good and beautiful. We practice a different kind of scholarship. Our idea of scholarship is framed by a profound sense of calling that we can make the world a better place for all of God's children.

And so I have begun to say that this is the place, on this campus, through the scholarship and work of our faculty, this is the place where world change *begins*. And that brings an enormous difference to the value of our idea of the university.

A couple of weeks ago Professor Derek Wood invited me and the vice presidents to take a break from our day of planning to come down and listen to the presentations from several of our science students. These students had been doing research all summer and had been coached and mentored and taught in that process by our scientists: Professors Ben McFarland, Karissa Pierce, and Kevin Bartlett from Chemistry; Tim Nelson, Rick Ridgway, Ryan Ferrer, and Cara Wall Scheffler from Biology.

While I didn't understand much of the detail of the presentations, I can't tell you how thrilling it was to see our students demonstrate such competency in their work, such excitement about their conclusions, and to see them present that work with poise and confidence.

And I thought, yes, this is the place where world change *begins*, right here in this encounter between the faculty member and the students, right here with this exciting and joyful engagement with the material of their discipline, this digging deeply into new discovery.

And I thought, these are competencies that ultimately will make the world a better place for all of God's children. Indeed, this is the place where world change begins.

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

Where in the world does this kind of deep questioning about our purpose come from? If only Pelikan could know what goes on across this campus day in and day out, he would worry less about the danger of the university losing

its credibility. I am convinced of it. But clearly there is trouble and consternation in the land concerning the idea of the university for our day.

And here is part of the reason I want to propose this morning: "By the end of the nineteenth century," Stanley Fish says in another place, "human authority has been put in the place of revelation; or rather human authority, now identified with the *progressive illumination afforded by reason*, has become the vehicle of revelation and of a *religion that can do very nicely without any strong conception of personal deity*."

That just may be at the heart of all of this consternation about the purpose of the university. It is not that religion has been airbrushed out of the curricula of our modern university, though that is certainly true. It is that we have replaced the ancient Christian story, the soul of the university in its long history, with "a religion," as Fish calls it, "that can do very nicely without any strong conception of personal deity." This Enlightenment confidence in "progressive illumination afforded by reason" alone, this is the new religion of the university. This is the new orthodoxy of our day.

But we must certainly ask "are we really doing very nicely?" Have we really shaped a culture and a world that is doing very nicely?

Stanley Hauerwas says "if Christians are people with an alternative history of judgments about what is true and good they cannot help but produce an alternative university." And that's what we are trying to do in this place. We really do have an alternative, an option, precisely because we are guided by a story of what is true and good and beautiful. Precisely because we embrace a radically different kind of orthodoxy, a different kind of story.

And so how does our idea of the university shape a different kind of university, a different kind of scholarship, a different kind of value for our graduates? We must ground all of our work on a story of what is true and good and beautiful. Because we are *people of the Book*, as the great Lesslie Newbigin says: We are "*a people who know what it is to cross the Red Sea on dry land, to be fed with manna in the wilderness, to return with singing from Babylon, to stand before the cross, and to meet the risen Lord in the breaking of bread. This is our story, and it defines who we are*," says Newbigin.

And isn't this the radical difference for the work of the university. We embrace the Christian story at the very heart of what we do. And out of that story of God's love for his world, we are called to make the world a better place. Through all of the powerful tools of the university, we are called to speak our story of human flourishing into a world that is indeed not doing very nicely.

Think about the great story read to us this morning by Professor Cara Wall Scheffler. This is the story when two of the disciples are on the road out of Jerusalem, on their way to Emmaus, fleeing the turmoil and confusion immediately following the brutal crucifixion of Jesus. They had come to believe in a story of liberation. They had come to believe that Jesus was the long-awaited Messiah. And now he was gone. Their hopes and aspiration to change the world were shattered.

They were in despair. They were confused and frightened. How could they put their trust in any story of what is true and good and beautiful ever again? And then something remarkable and mysterious happens: As they argued and bickered along the road, Jesus, the resurrected Jesus, comes and walks alongside them and chats with them. Talk about God doing something new in the world.

And then what does he do? He begins to tell the stories of the Scriptures. He becomes a Bible teacher. He becomes a scholar. Just in this moment of crisis, when the world is coming apart at the seams, Jesus becomes a teacher of the Scriptures. Jesus anchors the crisis of the moment in the long, sweeping drama of God's story for his world.

And then suddenly, when they had arrived at their destination, and as Jesus breaks bread for them, suddenly, it all comes clear to them. Suddenly they discover the big story that gives meaning to it all. Suddenly they realized their hearts were burning with the new thing, an utterly new thing, that had just broken into their lives and into the world. They had a "conversion of the imagination," as Richard Hays calls it.

And then our text says something quite remarkable for our own idea of the Christian university: "without delay," the text says, they set off to tell the others in Jerusalem. *Without delay, they set off to change the world*. Utterly transformed by their encounter with Jesus; profoundly shaped by the whole sweep of God's story for his children; powerfully shaped by that story of what is true and good and beautiful, they are called, without delay, to change the world.

And so, what is our idea of the Christian university? As we anchor ourselves in this ancient story; as we learn more about our story all the time through our great Bible teachers among us; as we worship together in music and word in the light of this story every week; as we do our scholarship; as we equip our students with competencies that matter to the world — indeed this is the place where world change begins. That's our idea. That's our alternative.

And so may God bless each one of you in the year ahead. May God bless the work of this great university in the year ahead.

I am convinced, if we get this right, this can be the place where world change begins.

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