

“The Idea of a Christian University”
A Lecture Celebrating the Inauguration of Andrew K. Benton
As the Seventh President of Pepperdine University
Tuesday, September 19, 2000

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Shortly before he left office, David Davenport, the sixth president of Pepperdine University, led the entire Pepperdine community in the creation of a mission statement that affirms the following:

Pepperdine is a Christian university committed to the highest standards of academic excellence and Christian values, where students are strengthened for lives of purpose, service, and leadership.

Now, as we celebrate the inauguration of Andrew K. Benton as the seventh president of this institution, we must ask the question, “What does it *mean* when we say that Pepperdine is a Christian university?” And we must ask as well a second question that follows closely on the heels of the first: “How can we insure that Pepperdine remains a vibrant Christian university for as long as this institution shall survive?”

These are serious questions that we dare not ignore, for there are many powerful critics who argue that the idea of a Christian university is an oxymoron, a virtual contradiction in terms. In their judgment, Christianity is restrictive, dogmatic, and exclusive, while the university, at its best, celebrates openness, diversity, and an unrelenting search for truth. How, then, can one combine the ideals of Christianity and the ideals of the academy and do so successfully?

The truth is, there are many outstanding institutions of higher learning in the United States that at one time embraced a commitment to their Christian moorings, but slowly abandoned that commitment as their academic stature improved. While Harvard, Yale, and Princeton head that list, we could point to scores of other institutions, all of them founded as Christian colleges and universities, that finally abandoned their experiment in Christian higher education.

Today, there are precious few institutions that have matured into first-rate centers of scholarship and learning while maintaining a strong institutional commitment to the Christian faith. The critics of Pepperdine's vision, then, could easily point to the impressive list of failures in the field of Christian higher education as proof that Pepperdine will likely fail as well.

It would be all too easy to ignore those critics as false prophets who simply don't understand what Pepperdine is all about. But we will make a grave mistake if we choose to believe that, somehow, we stand above the powerful forces that hastened the collapse of Christian higher education at so many other worthy institutions.

After all, we cannot escape the question that our critics persistently raise, namely, "How is it possible to combine the ideals of the Christian faith with the ideals of the academy, and to do so successfully?" If scores of other institutions have failed to combine these ideals in a meaningful way, what makes us think we will be an exception to the rule?

In terms of academic quality, Pepperdine already walks in the footprints of many distinguished institutions of higher learning in the United States. Indeed, in September, 2000, *U. S. News and World Report* ranked Pepperdine among the top fifty centers of learning in the United States.¹ For a university that is slightly more than fifty years old, that is cause for considerable pride.

At the same time, we must recall that many of those institutions whose academic stature we now seek to emulate finally determined that an institutional commitment to the Christian faith was simply incompatible with the level of academic quality to which they aspired.

In light of this fact, therefore, the Pepperdine ranking by *U. S. News and World Report* is also a cause for sober reflection on how we hope to maintain, and even enhance, the Christian character of this institution in the years to come. We can make good and noble resolutions all we want, and we can protest vehemently that Pepperdine will never abandon its institutional commitment to the Christian faith. But mere talk will not get the job done. What we need is a strategy that grows from the very heart of this community.

A Strategy of Community-wide Conversation

The word “strategy,” however, is in some ways misleading, for I am not suggesting that there is some “quick fix” or some gimmick that, if properly employed, will keep Pepperdine on course. Instead, the strategy I have in mind is a strategy of continual theological reflection as, together, week after week and year after year, all of us in this community undertake the task of exploring what it

¹ *U. S. News and World Report*, September 11, 2000.

might mean for Pepperdine to thrive as a Christian university. This means that we must think long and hard on the question that inevitably stands at the very heart of this institution: “How can we combine the ideals of the Christian faith with the ideals of the academy, and do so successfully?” This is the question that must frame our thinking and our conversation, not just today and not just tomorrow, but for as long as this institution shall survive.

And if we hope that Pepperdine will succeed in this experiment in Christian higher education, the conversation on this issue must not be confined to a handful of faculty or a core group of administrators who have a particular interest in this issue. Instead, the conversation must reach out and embrace each and every person in our community—every member of the faculty, every person in the administration, every person who serves on the Board of Regents, every student, and every person who works on the staff of this University.

If the Pepperdine community were to undertake this kind of sustained conversation, we just might have a chance to take our place among that handful of universities that have matured into first-rate centers of scholarship and learning while maintaining a strong institutional commitment to the Christian faith.

With this sort of conversation in mind, the Pepperdine administration established in October of 1999 the Pepperdine University Center for Faith and Learning. The administration charged the Center with providing various venues for members of this community to think creatively on the meaning of Christian higher education. How, for example, can Christian faith sustain the life of the mind? What does it mean to engage in Christian scholarship or to teach from a

Christian perspective? How can responsible Christian scholars connect their Christian convictions with their teaching and their scholarship in ways that respect the integrity of the academic enterprise, the integrity of their disciplines, the integrity of their students, and the integrity of the Christian faith? Or, to put all these questions in the most succinct possible form, how can we combine the ideals of the Christian faith and the ideals of the university and do so successfully?

To fulfill its mandate, the Center is hard at work convening seminars and discussion groups where faculty from all five schools that make up this University can reflect on these kinds of questions. In fact, since May of 1999, a total of 75 Pepperdine faculty have participated in these seminars. We now seek to extend the work of the Center by offering seminars where faculty can interact not just with other faculty, but also with students, staff, and members of the administration on precisely these kinds of issues.

In time, and with adequate levels of funding, we hope to offer grants for some of our very finest scholars who have a vision for top-flight, faith-based scholarship. And we hope as well to bring to this campus visiting scholars who can model the meaning of academic work that is grounded in a Christian frame of reference, but work that is done so well that it compels consideration by the finest scholars in that particular field.

In my judgment, there is no more important work at Pepperdine University today than the work of the Center for Faith and Learning. I say this because the Center's work is an investment in the future of this institution. It is not an

investment in brick and mortar, though clearly without brick and mortar we cannot survive. Instead, the work of the Center is an investment in the hearts and minds of the people who make up this university. This is the only sort of investment that can help insure that Pepperdine will move into the future as a Christian university of the very highest order.

I want now to make some suggestions that will perhaps contribute to the quality of the conversation that the Center seeks to facilitate in every corner of this University. Indeed, the themes I now wish to explore are themes that those 75 faculty who have participated in faith/learning seminars since May of 1999 have explored in considerable detail.

Christian Faith and the Life of the Mind

In the first place, scholars at institutions like Pepperdine commonly commit themselves both to Christian faith and to the life of the mind, but often imagine that these two commitments somehow stand in radical tension with one another. They know the academy invites openness and diversity, but they also know that the Christian faith demands a highly particularistic faith commitment. And so, in spite of their loyalty to the Christian faith on the one hand and their loyalty to the academic enterprise on the other, they find themselves unable to connect their Christian faith with their academic work in any meaningful way.

This all-too-common notion that Christian faith stands in tension with the academic calling, however, virtually invites the collapse of the Christian character of institutions like Pepperdine. After all, a Christian university is first and

foremost an institution of higher learning. There can be no doubt about that. And if we imagine that faith and learning stand in radical tension with one another, the academic side of the equation will almost inevitably prevail when that tension becomes too great. And when the academic side of the equation prevails, the faith side of the equation can easily disappear.

In my judgment, it is simply a mistake to assume that tension must inevitably characterize the relationship between Christian faith and the life of the mind. The fact is, the values of the Christian faith are eminently compatible with the values of the academy at every crucial point.

Diversity

We know, for example, that the academy affirms diversity as one of its most cherished commodities. But I would suggest that the Christian faith affirms diversity as one of its most cherished commodities as well.

Consider Jesus, for example, who consistently reached out to the powerful and to the marginalized, to Jews and to Greeks, to men and to women, to slaves and to free Roman citizens, to prostitutes, to tax collectors, and to thieves. Today, His compassionate concern extends to every man and woman in this multicultural world in which we live: Asians and Africans, Hispanics and Native Americans, Buddhists and Hindus, Jews and Christians. When it comes to compassionate concern, Jesus leaves no one out.

This means that if we ask Jesus to define for us the meaning of diversity, we must be prepared for an answer that is absolutely inclusive. In Jesus' world,

all human beings are infinitely valuable. From the rich young ruler to the woman caught in adultery, Jesus took everyone He encountered with complete and radical seriousness.

And so we are left with the question, Can we serve Jesus and celebrate diversity at one and the same time? If we understand anything at all about Jesus, the question answers itself. The truth is, we cannot serve Jesus *without* serving the diversity of peoples and cultures that abound in our world.

But there is more, for on the question of diversity, Christian faith goes far beyond the intellectual tradition that sustains diversity in the modern, secular academy. That tradition simply holds that “all men are created equal and are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights.” This is a marvelous beginning, but Christian faith moves beyond equality and rights to love and compassion.

Christians are told, for example, to love not only our friends but also our enemies—those whom we are inclined not to like, or those whose folkways or religious traditions may cause us considerable discomfort. The Apostle Paul, for example, writes, “There is no longer Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave and free; but Christ is all and in all!” (Col. 3:11). Regarding this passage, Richard Foster comments,

I especially like this listing because Paul includes the Scythian in it. The Scythians were the barbarian’s barbarians—Josephus called them “wild

beasts.” But in Jesus even the Scythian is my neighbor, whom I am to love as myself.²

Or again, Jesus tells us to extend compassion to those we might be most likely to shun. Thus,

When you give a luncheon or dinner, do not invite your friends, your brothers or relatives, or your rich neighbors; if you do, they may invite you back and so you will be repaid. But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, [and] the blind. (Luke 14:12-13)

Over the years this tradition of Christian compassion has played itself out in some important ways. For example, in spite of the fact that America’s most notable revolutionary leaders affirmed the proposition that “all men are created equal,” not one of them took steps to free his slaves. In contrast, the Quakers, driven by the biblical tradition of love and compassion for all human beings, had freed their slaves by the time America declared its independence from Great Britain.³

In our own tradition of Churches of Christ, this same biblical tradition inspired Barton Stone and his followers who lived in the vicinity of Cane Ridge, Kentucky to free their slaves as well. And they took this action long before most white people in the American South had even considered emancipation of slaves as an option. Thus, Joseph Thomas, a preacher in the Christian movement in the early nineteenth century, reported in 1810-11 that

² Richard Foster, *Streams of Living Water: Celebrating the Great Traditions of Christian Faith* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1998), p. 167.

³ Richard Foster tells this story in detail in *Streams of Living Water*, pp. 137-144.

The christian companies in this settlement and about Cane Ridge have been large; but within a few years, many of them, who held black people as slaves, emancipated them, and have moved to the state of Ohio. I will observe that the christians of these parts *abhor* the idea of *slavery*, and some of them have almost tho't that they who hold to slavery cannot be a christian.⁴

It is undeniably true that many Christians across the centuries have failed to live out the Christian mandate for love and compassion for all human beings. But the fact that so many Christians have failed in this regard in no way invalidates the vision itself. The teachings of our Lord still stand, whether Christians implement those teachings or not.

It must be clear by now that while the modern secular academy values diversity, so does the Christian faith. And yet, the Christian scholar must always bear in mind that when we compare the Christian university with the modern secular academy, the grounds for the commitment to diversity are not the same. The secular academy prizes diversity because it affirms the democratic faith that “all men are created equal.” On the other hand, Christians prize diversity simply because they affirm the life and teachings of Jesus the Christ.

I understand that this particularity—this radical commitment to this very particular person called Jesus the Christ—I understand that this particularity is precisely what scandalizes the critics of Christian higher education. But the critics fail to see that Christians can affirm diversity in radical and far-reaching

⁴ Joseph Thomas, *The Travels and Gospel Labors of Joseph Thomas* (Winchester, Va., 1812), p. 56.

ways, not *in spite of* their commitment to the Christian particularity, but precisely *because of* that commitment.

Make no mistake: this is a particular commitment. For it was Jesus who said, “I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father but by me.” And yet, it was this very same Jesus who also taught,

You have heard that it was said, “Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.” But I tell you: Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be sons of your Father in heaven. He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous. If you love those who love you, what reward will you get? Are not even the tax collectors doing that? And if you greet only your brothers, what are you doing more than others? Do not even pagans do that? Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect. (Matt. 5:43-48)

Let’s face it. We’re dealing here with the paradox of the Christian faith, a paradox that begins with the incarnation—the notion that God took on human flesh—and goes on to manifest itself in a myriad of other ways. In the Christian tradition, for example, life always springs from death, leadership always grows from servanthood, and an affirmation of diversity always springs from an affirmation of the Christian particularity. If, therefore, we wish to understand how Christian faith, in all its particularity, can sustain an affirmation of radical diversity, then we must come to terms with the thoroughly paradoxical qualities of the Christian tradition.

Academic Freedom

I want now to ask about a second value the academy holds dear, the notion of academic freedom.

Critics argue that Christian institutions of higher learning can't extend academic freedom in truly meaningful ways because of their highly particularistic religious commitments. I grant you, there are many Christian colleges and universities that refuse to embrace genuine academic freedom for their faculties. But institutions like these simply don't reflect the genius of the Christian faith.

I want to suggest that there are no institutions anywhere in the world better prepared to extend academic freedom than Christian institutions of higher learning. I say this because of the nature of the Christian gospel. Let me explain.

The Christian gospel begins with the affirmation that no human being is God. To the contrary, every human being is finite, fundamentally flawed, and inescapably sinful. No one, therefore, can possibly perform enough good works or muster up enough righteousness to earn a seat in the kingdom of God. Instead, justification or forgiveness comes to us only through the grace of God which we receive through faith and not by works. As Paul wrote in Galatians 2:15-16,

We who are Jews by birth and not "Gentile sinners" know that a man is not justified by observing the law, but by faith in Jesus Christ. So we, too, have put our faith in Christ Jesus that we may be justified by faith in Christ

and not by observing the law, because by observing the law no one will be justified.

This is the core of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Martin Luther often used a Latin phrase to capture the genius of the Christian gospel: “*simul justus et peccator*” or, in English, “simultaneously justified *and* a sinner.” I can perhaps best explain the meaning of that phrase by contrasting Luther’s vision with my own childhood misunderstandings.

When I was in the fifth grade, growing up in San Angelo, Texas, I always walked to school and had to cross a very busy street before I reached my final destination. I vividly recall reminding myself on many occasions that if per chance I were struck by a car and killed on the way to school, I must remember to ask God for forgiveness for all the sins I had committed since my most recent prayers. If I managed to get that prayer in before I expired, I had a chance at going to heaven. If not, I knew I would be doomed to eternal damnation. You might think this a morbid thought for a ten-year old kid, but that’s the way it was in my West Texas world in the 1950s.

Many years later, in a class on the book of Romans at Harding College, I learned that the gospel of Jesus Christ completely undermined those childish misunderstandings. My epiphany came when the professor unpacked Paul’s assertion in Romans 8:1: “There is therefore now *no* [italics mine] condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.” *No condemnation*. What a magnificent concept! This passage means that my salvation does not depend on the

frequency of my prayers or the quality of my works, but solely and entirely on the grace of a loving God.

And yet, the fact that we are not condemned does not mean that we are no longer sinners. This is the crucial point that we must grasp and the point that Luther sought to make when he used the phrase, “*simul justus et peccator*” or, “simultaneously justified *and* a sinner.” As a Christian, I am perpetually redeemed. But as a human being, I never cease to be a sinner. *Simul justus et peccator!*

Luther found this doctrine enormously liberating because it freed him to take seriously his finitude, his frailties, and his inescapably sinful nature. He never took the gospel as a license to sin. But the gospel did mean that he no longer had to pretend to be a saint. For that reason, he sometimes advised his followers to “sin boldly.”

The implications this notion holds for the life of the mind—and for academic freedom in the context of a Christian university—are staggering. While our finitude means that the Christian scholar *may well* misunderstand, miscalculate, or draw erroneous conclusions, the Christian paradox, *simul justus et peccator*, means that the Christian scholar *is freed* to do all these things.

Don’t misunderstand. The Christian gospel is not a license for sloppy scholarship. But it does free us to take our finitude seriously, to recognize up front that we will make mistakes and that, indeed, we may well be wrong. This recognition enables the Christian scholar to approach his or her work with humility, to confess mistakes quickly and forthrightly, and to pursue the search

for truth with zeal and determination, knowing that complete and final truth lies always beyond our grasp.

Or again, the depth of our humanity has determined that no human being—not even a Christian scholar—can finally escape the most radical doubts and the most radical kinds of questions. But the Christian paradox—*simul justus et peccator*—means that the Christian scholar is freed to confront those questions honestly. No longer must we repress those doubts or pretend that we have perfect faith and perfect tranquility. Instead, we are freed to confess with the father of the boy with the evil spirit in Mark 9, “Lord I believe; help thou mine unbelief.”

Put another way, the Christian gospel enables us to be real. I cannot imagine a stronger foundation for responsible academic freedom than this.

Finally, we must be clear on one more crucial point. In the previous section, we saw that for the Christian, an affirmation of diversity finally rests on the foundation of Christian particularity. So it is with academic freedom. The Christian scholar claims academic freedom precisely because that scholar takes seriously the particularity of Jesus the Christ. Here we encounter once again that amazing paradox that is so central to the Christian faith. We are freed to question because we affirm, and we are freed to doubt because we believe. Those who fail to discern the paradox of the Christian gospel will never understand how Christian faith can sustain academic freedom and the life of the mind. But those who have eyes to see will find in the Christian gospel an

incredibly powerful support for the kinds of radical questions which every serious scholar must raise.

I hope by now that the kinds of questions the Pepperdine Center for Faith and Learning hopes to foster are apparent. Chief among those questions are these: How can Christian faith sustain a commitment to diversity? And how can Christian faith enhance the quality of academic freedom?

On Taking Seriously our Relationship to the Churches of Christ

But there is one more question that is vital to the work of Pepperdine, and it is this: how can we put to productive and meaningful use the relationship this University sustains to the Churches of Christ?

We commonly say that apart from our relationship with the Churches of Christ, Pepperdine would cease to be a Christian university altogether. And that is very likely true, for the Church of Christ is our mooring, our anchor, our very tangible connection to the world of Christian tradition and Christian faith.

But is this the only rationale we can offer for maintaining our relation with Churches of Christ? If so, then we have sold this tradition very short indeed.

The far more pressing questions are these. How can the heritage of Churches of Christ *sustain us* in the work of higher education? Are there resources in the heritage of Churches of Christ to which we can appeal as we seek to enhance diversity and academic freedom? Or again, how can the heritage of Churches of Christ help sustain the life of the mind?

These are questions we must address. For if we ignore these questions, the day may come when faculty at this institution will judge our relationship with Churches of Christ as irrelevant at best and, at worst, as a hindrance to the life of the mind and the work of higher education. If the faculty eventually make that judgment, then we can rest assured that Pepperdine's relationship with Churches of Christ will have become an empty formality, lacking both substance and content.

So what might we say about this tradition? Does it possess resources that can sustain us in the work of scholarship, teaching, and learning? The answer to that question must be a resounding "yes."

Before I proceed with this line of thought, I want to acknowledge up front that I am not naïve about the history of this tradition. I am painfully aware that there is much in the history of Churches of Christ that works against diversity, that undermines freedom of thought and freedom of expression, and that offers little support for the life of the mind.

But having said that, we must also confess that there is much in this tradition to which we *can* appeal on behalf of the work in which we are engaged.

First, Churches of Christ emerged in the early nineteenth century as a unity movement. The founders of this tradition—Alexander Campbell and Barton W. Stone—lamented the fact that so many Christian churches on the American frontier viewed other denominations with such hostility. Campbell and Stone, therefore, gave birth to a movement that aimed for unity in diversity. Stone, for example, admonished his followers in 1830,

Be careful not to wound the feelings of the least christian of any name.

View all the children of God as your brethren, whatever name they may bear. What if they have received wrong opinions of truth? This is no reason why you should despise or reject them.

This is a powerful model for an institution like Pepperdine that seeks to enhance a diversity of peoples and perspectives.

Second, Churches of Christ emerged in the early nineteenth century as a freedom movement. If they had any hope of uniting Christians while respecting a diversity of perspectives, then Campbell and Stone knew they had to grant to all men and women the freedom and the right to search for truth for themselves.

This was no mere strategy, but a conviction that grew from their awareness of their own sinfulness and their own limitations. Stone therefore wrote in 1829,

I have too much evidence of my liability to err to make my present opinions a test by which to judge the hearts of my fellow Christians.

Further, Stone and Campbell knew how easy it is for religious people—indeed, for any people—to succumb to traditions that stifle the mind and cut off fresh and creative thinking. Accordingly, Campbell wrote,

I have endeavored to read the scriptures as though no one had read them before me; and I am as much on my guard against reading them to-day, through the medium of my own views yesterday, or a week ago, as I am against being influenced by any foreign name, authority, or system, whatever.

But perhaps the strongest statement one can find in the annals of Churches of Christ on behalf of intellectual and spiritual freedom is a statement from John Rogers, the preacher for the Church of Christ in Carlisle, Kentucky in the early nineteenth century. In 1830, Rogers penned these simple but powerful words:

The fatal error of all reformers has been that they have too hastily concluded that they knew the whole truth, and have settled back upon the same principles of proscription, intolerance and persecution, against which they so strongly remonstrated. . . . Having, then, full in our view, this fatal rock, on which so many reformers have split, may we studiously avoid it. We have no reason to conclude, we know all the truth. . . . We have nothing to lose in this inquiry after truth. We have no system to bind us to human opinions.

These are not isolated statements that reflect a minority voice in Churches of Christ in the founding years, but statements that have reflected the genius of this tradition for two full centuries. And it is precisely this genius—this “heart of the tradition”—that allows us to build a truly great university on the foundation offered to us by the heritage of the Churches of Christ.

But if we hope that the heritage of Churches of Christ can really provide a foundation for the life of the mind, then we must make certain that all the people who work and study at this institution have some familiarity with the meaning of this tradition. This is why the Center for Faith and Learning devotes a segment of each and every seminar to helping faculty, staff, students, and administration

to understand more fully how the heritage of Churches of Christ can, indeed, help sustain the life of the mind.

Conclusions

So now, we return to the question with which we began. In light of Pepperdine's mission statement that plainly asserts that "Pepperdine is a Christian university," what does it mean when we make that affirmation?

It means, first of all, that Pepperdine as an institution takes its stand on the Christian faith. But second, it means that precisely because of its commitment to the Christian faith, Pepperdine seeks to enhance diversity, maintain academic freedom, and nurture the life of the mind. And finally, it means that Pepperdine seeks to strengthen its relationship with Churches of Christ, not only because we know that apart from that relationship, the Christian character of this institution would likely collapse, but also because we know that the Churches of Christ can provide us with invaluable supports for the work in which we are engaged.

We therefore press ahead in our attempt to make of Pepperdine University a truly great center of teaching, learning, and scholarship. And we are confident that we will succeed in this task, not in spite of our commitment to the Christian faith, but because of that commitment. This is why we confess in our mission statement that "Pepperdine is a Christian university committed to the highest standards of academic excellence and Christian values." When we make that confession, we affirm once again the paradox of the Christian faith that we are

freed to question because we affirm, and we are freed to doubt because we believe.