

The Gospel and the Idolatrous Spirit of Secular Science

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The Gospel: The Starting Point for Understanding Education

As followers of Jesus Christ our thinking about any subject, including the education, must begin with the gospel. When Jesus emerged onto the stage of world history he proclaimed the good news that the healing power of God's kingdom had broken into the creation. The power of God to renew the entire creation was now present in Jesus by the Spirit. In his life this healing, renewing, and liberating power was demonstrated in Jesus' life and deeds, and explained by his words. At the cross he battled the power of evil and gained the decisive victory. In his resurrection he entered as the firstborn into the resurrection life of the new creation. Before his ascension he commissioned his followers to continue his mission of making the gospel known until he returned. He now reigns at the right hand of God over all creation and by His Spirit is making known his liberating and comprehensive rule through His people as they embody and proclaim the good news. One day every knee will bow and every tongue will confess that Jesus is Creator, Redeemer, and Lord. But until then the church has been taken up into the Spirit's work of making the good news of the kingdom known.

For the purposes of this paper four observations can be made on this brief summary of the gospel. First, the gospel is a redirecting *power*. It is not first of all religious doctrine or theology but the renewing power of God unto salvation. The gospel has become the instrument of God's Spirit to renew all the creation.

Second, the gospel is *restorative*, that is, it restores the creation. The most basic categories present in the gospel are creation, fall, and redemption. The gospel is about the restoration and renewal of the creation from sin. In the history of the Western church redemption has often been misunderstood to be salvation *from* the creation rather than salvation *of* the creation. As the British New Testament scholar N. T. Wright has put it: 'Very often people have come to the New Testament with the presumption that "going to heaven when you die" is the implicit point of it all. . . . They acquire that viewpoint from somewhere, but not from the New Testament' (Quoted in Lawrence 1995:16). Bound up in the proclamation of the gospel of Jesus Christ is the understanding that Christ is restoring and renewing the good creation that has been infected by

sin.

Third, the gospel is *comprehensive* in its scope. The gospel Jesus announced was a gospel of the kingdom. Surprisingly even though this was the central category of Jesus' proclamation and ministry it has often disappeared into obscurity. The result has been a greatly reduced scope of salvation, limited to humanity,¹ even human souls.² Scripturally, the kingdom is about God's reign over his entire creation. In other words, the kingdom stresses the all-encompassing nature of the salvation Jesus embodied, announced, and accomplished. The gospel which forms the lens through which we look at the academy is the *power* of God through which the exalted Christ by the Spirit *restores all of life* to again live under His authority and Word.

There is a fourth observation: the church is essential to the gospel. That is, Jesus did not make provision for the communication of the good news through history and in every culture by writing a book as did Mohammed. Rather he formed a community to be the bearer of this good news. Their identity is bound up in the words: 'As the Father has sent me, I am sending you' (John 20:21). A mission to make known the good news of the kingdom defines this community. And since the gospel is a gospel of the kingdom, that mission is as wide as creation. The Contemporary Testimony of the Christian Reformed Church in North America entitled *Our World Belongs to God* confesses this eloquently:

The Spirit thrusts God's people into worldwide mission.
He impels young and old, men and women,
to go next door and far away
into science and art, media and marketplace
with the good news of God's grace. . . . (32)

Following the apostles, the church is sent –

¹ G.C. Berkouwer speaks of an understanding of salvation that has been reduced to the salvation of humanity apart from the cosmic context as 'soteriological self-centredness' (1972:211).

² Richard Tarnas, an unbeliever, has noted this reduction in his book on worldview: 'The early Christian belief [i.e., Scriptural belief] that the Fall and Redemption pertained not just to man, but to the entire cosmos, a doctrine already fading after the Reformation, now [under secularism of 19th c.] disappeared altogether: the process of salvation, if it had any meaning at all, pertained solely to the personal relation between God and man (1991:306f.).

sent with the gospel of the kingdom . . .
In a world estranged from God,
where millions face confusing choices,
this mission is central to our being . . . (44)

The rule of Jesus Christ covers the whole world.
To follow this Lord is to serve him everywhere,
without fitting in,
as light in the darkness, as salt in a spoiling world. (45)

Continuing Christ's Mission in the School

From this then we can draw some starting conclusions about the gospel and education. Education is a part of God's good creation. It has been twisted and distorted by human rebellion and idolatry. But the announcement of the good news of the kingdom includes the school within its scope. That is, part of the good news is that God is renewing that part of human life to again live under His liberating rule. Bound up in our kingdom mission is the call to witness to this gospel in the school. If we are to be faithful to the gospel in our educational endeavours the gospel will be the renewing power that animates, directs, and liberates from the constricting and debilitating power of idols that plague education in our culture.

Indeed *every part* of the educational enterprise is to be renewed by the gospel – the purpose of education, curriculum, pedagogy, classroom arrangement, structures, leadership, and the content of each discipline. This article is concerned primarily with the last issue – the content of each discipline. More specifically this article analyses the cultural activity we call 'scholarship,' carried out in the university, that precedes and shapes the way teachers approach the various subjects they teach in the classroom. Teachers are shaped in their university education and carry the approach to scholarship gained there into the classroom. Understanding scholarship in our culture is a pressing issue in the church's mission today and essential if the Christian school is to carry out its task faithfully.

But it might be objected that in light of escalating global crises, it is irresponsible to give such attention to this aspect of the church's mission. Brian Walsh and Richard Middleton succinctly

press this question: “Some might argue that in the face of such human tragedies as starvation, political oppression, and the threat of nuclear holocaust, it is unconscionable for Christians to engage in the frivolity of scholarship. Why engage in studies when the whole of culture is in such a crisis?” (Walsh and Middleton 1984:163).

Beyond the answer that we must witness to the gospel in all of life, there are at least two important reasons for this attention. The first is the power of the academy and ideas in culture. Charles Malik has stated this strongly:

This great Western institution, the university, dominates the world today more than any other institution: more than the church, more than the government, more than all other institutions. All the leaders of government are graduates of universities, or at least of secondary schools or colleges whose administrators and teachers are themselves graduates of universities. The same applies to all church leaders. . . . The professionals – doctors, engineers, lawyers, etc. – have all passed through the mill of secondary school, the college and the university. And the men of the media are university trained. . . . The universities, then, directly and indirectly dominate the world; their influence is so pervasive and total that whatever problem afflicts them is bound to have far-reaching repercussions throughout the entire fabric of Western civilization. No task is more crucial and urgent today than to examine the state of mind and spirit of the Western university (Malik 1982:19-20).

Al Wolters has given us a helpful picture of the power of scholarship in his article *Ideas Have Legs*. He says: “Ideas have legs in the sense that they are not the disembodied abstractions of some ivory-tower academic, but are real spiritual forces that go somewhere, that are on the march in someone’s army, and that have a widespread effect on our practical, everyday lives” (Wolters 1987:1). He goes on to quote the influential 20th century economist John Maynard Keynes: “The ideas of economists and political philosophers, both when they are right and when they are wrong, are more powerful than is commonly understood. Indeed, the world is ruled by little else. Practical men, who believe themselves to be quite exempt from any intellectual

influences are usually the slaves of some defunct economists” (*ibid*). Wolters gives examples of distinctions that have made their way into common life and now unconsciously direct peoples’ lives. Ideas *are* important in the spiritual battle for creation. Ideas will march in the battle for God’s creation either in the kingdom of God or the kingdom of darkness. Christian scholarship and education will play a big part in our Christian witness and in equipping Christian young people for faithful witness in all of life.

The second reason that this task is essential and strategic in the mission of God’s people is the tremendous power and influence of *secularized*³ scholarship and science in our culture. In other words, secular science has become a religious power that functions at the core of our culture shaping much more than the university and sweeping even Christian schools into its current. The Dutch philosopher Herman Dooyeweerd has stated this quite strongly: “. . . science, secularized and isolated, has become a satanic power, an idol which dominates all of culture” (Dooyeweerd 1954:2). This is, to use the language again of Malik, the spirit, the idolatrous spirit of the Western academy.

The Idolatrous Spirit of Secular Science

It would be good, then, to examine the nature and roots of this idolatrous force. The assumption for much of our history has been that scholarship must be free of personal belief because its objectivity would be threatened by any presuppositions that issue from religion. For much of our history the gospel has been excluded as an animating and directing power. In his essay *What is Enlightenment?* Immanuel Kant states that knowledge based on God’s revelation was “dangerous to human adulthood.” The dependence of reason and science on religion, he said, was “most damaging and most humiliating.” Scholarship must be free from dogma and faith commitment. When this is accepted the gospel is seriously truncated. It no longer functions as a restoring and directing power in the area of scholarship. In fact, precisely this is strenuously

³ I want to avoid three misunderstandings in my use of the word secular. By secular I do not mean, first, that science has been removed from the authority of the church. This was the original meaning of the word as many spheres of life were removed from the authority of the institutional church. Neither do I mean the emancipation of reason and science from theology. Moreover I do not mean growing interest in this world that arose in the high middle ages. In all these cases I can affirm the development that took place. What I do mean is *the development and practice of scholarship apart from the authority of God’s word in Scripture and creation*. I use this almost as a synonym of the autonomy of human reason, that is reason ‘liberated’ from all revelational authority.

opposed in the name of good science and intellectual maturity. The gospel is considered an optional religious extra for the spiritual dimension of life. The gospel is accommodated to a more ultimate worldview and its area of influence is vastly reduced.

In fact, the ideal of dogma-free scholarship is an illusion. What has happened is not that scholarship has been liberated from dogma; rather one dogma has replaced another as the formative power. Science has not been released from faith commitments; rather another set of faith commitments has formed the framework for the educational enterprise. In the clash of comprehensive beliefs, the gospel has been domesticated. But more, this dogma of dogma-free scholarship is not simply a matter of philosophical or theoretical presuppositions, although that is included. At the deepest level these foundational beliefs are a religious power directing and animating our culture including scholarship.

The Historical Roots of Secular Science

How did this dogma become so widely established in our culture? We need to return to the remarkable synthesis of Thomas Aquinas – a synthesis that has shaped the subsequent course of western history. In his *Summa* Aquinas combined the medieval tradition of Platonic Christianity with the insights of the more recently discovered Aristotle. Augustine had been the architect of the medieval tradition of Platonic Christianity. He had fused together two incompatible worldviews: pagan neoplatonism and the gospel.⁴ Neoplatonism advocated an ontological dualism between a material realm and a spiritual realm. The material realm was decidedly inferior, even evil, while the spiritual realm was good. Thus neoplatonism depreciated this world in favour of some spiritual reality. Augustine imported this dualism and much of this otherworldliness into his own thought. Grace, instead of being the power of God to renew the

⁴ Jonathan Chaplin notes that there are two strands within Augustine's writings -- an antidualist Christian strand and dualist strand that compromises the gospel with neoplatonism. It is not my intention to undermine the tremendous contribution of Augustine to the Christian faith in his more consistently Christian emphasis. However, I agree with Chaplin when he goes on to say that the Christian strand 'remained undeveloped' and that the dualistic strand was 'more prominent' (Chaplin 1986:104-105). Herman Dooyeweerd says that the 'orthodox direction of Christian thought reached a high point in Augustine' and that the religious root of his thought was 'undoubtedly scriptural.' This does not prevent him from offering a penetrating critique of the pagan Greek thought in Augustine, after which he says: 'The example of Augustine clearly demonstrates how even in a great father of the church the spiritual power of the Greek ground motive worked as a dangerous counterforce to the ground motive of revelation. It is not right to conceal this out of love and respect for Augustine. Insight into matters where Augustine should not be followed need not detract from our love and respect for him' (Dooyeweerd 1979:113-115).

whole creation, was confined to a spiritual realm and dispensed by the human institution that properly belonged to that realm – the church. The task of reason was not to examine the creation in the light of faith but to explicate and defend the revealed truths of Christian dogma by means of rational analysis.

Aristotle made his way back into the mainstream of European culture in the 12th century and this precipitated a crisis.⁵ Reason in the medieval tradition had been primarily formally correct logical thinking put to use in the service of theology. In Aristotle one encountered a different kind of reason that included logic but also empirical observation and examination of the natural world. How could this kind of reason be harmonized with the long tradition that had depreciated the empirical world? Aquinas= synthesis was an answer to this problem.

Aquinas is able to accommodate Aristotle's empirical rationality with an Augustinian otherworldly emphasis by positing two realms – the upper realm of grace and lower realm of nature. Knowledge of the realm of grace is theological; this comes as faith embraces God's revelation. This accommodated the medieval Augustinian tradition. Knowledge of the realm of nature is philosophical or scientific; this comes as reason examines the natural laws of creation. Here Aristotle is given a place. Important for our considerations is the fact that in this scheme faith and revelation are separated from the scientific examination of creation. Unaided reason is capable of understanding the natural world apart from the light of the gospel. Now Aquinas never advocated the total autonomy of human reason. Yet his acceptance of the pagan Greek worldview – a worldview that granted significant autonomy to the creation and humankind – plagued his synthesis. Neither the full effects of sin nor the renewing power of the gospel was brought to bear on human rationality. It would be left for later historical developments to draw out the logic of this fateful union between the gospel and pagan Greek thought.

The full autonomy of scientific thought was effected under the power of post-Renaissance humanism. The humanism of the Renaissance reacted against the otherworldly preoccupation of the Middle Ages that seemed to miss major dimensions of what it meant to be human. Scholarship in the Middle Ages was preoccupied with logic, metaphysics, law, and theology. A

⁵ Aristotle's works on logic were already well-known having been passed along by Boethius. However his *Metaphysics*, *Physics*, and *De Anima* along with other works of Greek Science (e.g., Ptolemy) were reintroduced to Europe.

new interest in the study of this world, already evident in the high middle ages, emerged. This development in itself may be considered good. However, in an attempt to break the shackles of tradition, superstition, otherworldly religion, and ecclesiastical authority, there was a turn to the humanism shaped in Greece and Rome. Renaissance thinkers not only recovered the art and literature of the classical era, they also absorbed the pagan religious spirit that exalted the autonomy and independence of humankind and the created order. Here we find the seeds of a later full-grown autonomy of reason and scientific thought. In Francis Schaeffer's words, the realm of nature began to 'eat up' the realm of grace (1968:13).

The humanism of the Renaissance was primarily a rationalistic humanism. That is, it was through reason that human beings could achieve their autonomy, freedom, and redemption. The scientific revolution aided the development of this rationalistic humanism by furnishing a method that would enable autonomous humankind to realize its purposes. The scientific method seemed to supply autonomous reason with a tool to arrive at objective and indubitable truth. Rationalistic humanism had become scientific humanism. The degree to which the scientific method had stepped beyond its proper bounds in creation and had achieved an idolatrous status can be seen in the words of Alexander Pope: 'Nature and nature's laws lay hid in night; God said "Let Newton be" and all was light.' The scientific method had become the light of the world. Scriptural revelation and faith remained confined to the spiritual, ecclesiastical, and theological realm as evidenced by the words of Galileo: 'The Bible tells us how to go to heaven not how the heavens go.'⁶

⁶ Of course, the Bible does not tell us 'how the heavens go.' And while Copernicus' statement about going to heaven reflects an otherworldly Platonism, he is essentially correct that the Bible is concerned about redemption. However, the remaining dualism did not allow him to see how the Bible impacts scholarship. Sidney Greidanus has offered a helpful perspective beyond dualism and biblicism. He suggests that the Bible properly interpreted in a redemptive-historical manner provides a biblical framework, and scriptural norms and themes that can give direction to scholarship (1982).

At first this development of autonomous reason was limited to a growing number of intellectuals beginning in Northern Italy and spreading out over Europe. But in the 18th century Enlightenment⁷ this belief in scientific humanism became widespread and the driving religious impulse of European society. This was occasioned by at least three factors. First, the clash between science and the church greatly weakened the church and drove a wedge between the Christian faith and scientific work. The church was obscurantist; it was unable to distinguish between the gospel and the mistaken Ptolemaic form it had taken. Free enquiry appeared to lie in the direction of a reason liberated from the Christian faith. The other two factors converged with fateful consequences for Christian scholarship. On the one hand, the Newtonian paradigm of science proved to be enormously fruitful. The tremendous success of Newtonian physics seemed to lead to an agreement based in a common commitment to reason liberated from the Christian faith. At the same time, the fragmentation of the church in the Reformation spawned the religious wars of the 16th and 17th centuries. These religious wars led to an increasing skepticism about the ability of the Christian faith to provide a centre for unity. The convergence of these two historical currents seemed to shout ‘The Christian faith divides; scientific reason unites’ (Pannenberg 1989:11-19). Europe experienced a collective conversion to the directing centre of scientific rationality. Secular science became far more than the object of study within the academy.

Descartes and Autonomous Rationality

Rene Descartes has been called ‘the father of modernity.’ He exemplified a commitment to autonomous rationality as the final arbiter of truth. Descartes was in his early twenties when the famous Thirty Years War broke out in 1618. He would die two years after it concluded in 1648.

⁷ The profound religious significance indicated by labels such as ‘Renaissance’ and ‘Enlightenment’ is a clue to the religious status of reason and science in Western culture. Renaissance describes a change so significant that it can only be described in terms of new birth. Enlightenment designates a moment when one believes that they have found the one thing in the light of which everything else can be understood. Lesslie Newbigin comments: “‘Enlightenment’ is a word with profound religious overtones. It is the word to describe the decisive experience of Buddha. It is the word used in the Johannine writings to describe the coming of Jesus . . . The leading thinkers of the mid-eighteenth century felt themselves to be at such a moment of enlightenment . . .” This feeling of exhilaration at finding the light that marked this period ‘came from the conviction that things which had been previously obscure were now being “explained.” In place of “dogmatic” or “unscientific” explanations which no longer satisfied the mind, the true explanation of things was now coming to light’ (1983:7-8).

So he lived his adult life under the shadow of this bitter religious war. Descartes' attempt to articulate a method that would afford autonomous reason the freedom to pursue truth in a disinterested fashion was born, at least partly, of his revulsion occasioned by a blood-soaked Christian Europe.

Descartes is a glowing example of the growing confidence in autonomous reason that developed in the modern period. What was *relatively* autonomous for Aquinas became *absolutely* autonomous in Descartes. In the context of profound uncertainty (the ecclesiastical and scientific tradition had recently proved unreliable – what authority could be trusted?) and disillusionment (the religious wars), Descartes sought a new foundation for knowledge. His foundation is rooted in the autonomous rationality of the knowing subject. He made a rigorous distinction between the knowing subject and the object to be known. If there is to be true and reliable knowledge, we must engage in intellectual purification through the process of methodological doubt. This methodological doubt enables the knower to transcend all subjective factors and achieve total objectivity. One builds a solid edifice of true knowledge by following a rational method and subjecting all truth claims to reason alone. Method allows reason to rise above all tradition, prejudice, opinion, authority, historical contingency, and perception. In this way, the gospel is one of those subjective distorting factors filtered out by a rigorous employment of method.

What is important about Descartes is not the specific method he employed. Descartes would be quickly and ruthlessly critiqued. Others would seek better methods and foundations. The reason Descartes has been called the father of modernity is the legacy he bequeathed to the Western world. His foundational belief in the ability of autonomous reason to achieve objectivity and certainty through a method that enables one to transcend all subjective factors, including religion, would continue to function as a faith commitment, a dogma throughout the development of the European worldview.

The Fact-Value Dichotomy

This faith commitment to autonomous reason as the sole arbiter of truth has become widespread following the Enlightenment. It has issued in a pernicious fact-value dichotomy that lies at the foundation of our culture and permeates our theoretical work. Any truth claim that can

be proven by scientific rationality occupies the high ground of public facts to be accepted as truth by everyone in society. Truth claims that cannot justify themselves before the bar of scientific reason are relegated to the lesser sphere of private values that can be held as personal opinions by members of society but must not play a role in the public life of culture, including education and scholarship.

When this dogma is operative, the gospel is considered to be a matter of private belief but can play no role in the public life we share together. Our scholarship and educational practice must proceed on the basis of a shared, universal rationality in which all our subjectivities, including our Christian faith, are filtered out by the scientific method. Science shares in the public and factual domain of life while the gospel is banished to the private realm of values. It is a confusion of categories to speak of the light of revelation in scholarship. This, of course, is devastating for Christian scholarship. The gospel is methodologically excluded from the inner workings of scholarship. The gospel can no longer function as a directing power that restores the academy. In the clash of dogmas the gospel has been domesticated by secular science.

Our Postmodern Context: Objectivism vs. Relativism

Today in our postmodern context we hear voices that proclaim the failure of scientific reason to find objectivity and certainty. Studies in anthropology, sociology, history, linguistics, and philosophy have underscored the historical context and relativity of human knowledge. Knowledge is no more than a social construction. Our rationality is shaped by a host of social factors (tradition, community, language, culture, collective subconscious, history, faith) and personal factors (feelings, imagination, personal subconscious, gender, class, race). There is no universal truth. The widespread recognition of Kuhn's paradigm theory underscores the growing awareness of reason's fundamentally interpretive nature shaped as it necessarily is by our context. Method, designed to raise us above our context, is itself shaped by context and worldview. Our earlier confidence in the capacity of autonomous reason to secure certain knowledge has given way, in some sectors, to a debilitating sense of uncertainty, relativism, and fragmenting pluralism.

This does not mean that our confidence in scientific reason has been destroyed. Rather a cultural tension exists at the heart of scholarship produced by this commitment to autonomous

reason as the sole arbiter of truth. This is a tension between a continuing, albeit chastened, objectivism offered to us by the scientific method and a relativism that appears to be the only legitimate option when one takes into account all the subjective factors shaping knowledge.

An initial evaluation of this tension in the light of the gospel would recognize both the insight and the idolatrous twisting in both objectivism and relativism. Objectivism points to the fact that there is a creational order that cannot be avoided in human life. However, it does not recognize clearly that concept formation, as a responsible human activity, is shaped by numerous subjective factors that cannot be filtered out by method. But more importantly, it does not acknowledge that there is a religious root to all human activity. Method cannot transcend our subjectivity; nor can it rise above the religious impulse that shapes all cultural activity including scholarship. Either the gospel or an idolatrous power will be the directing power that shapes the academy. Relativism, on the other hand, rightly points to the subjective factors that shape knowledge. Unfortunately, it does not acknowledge that the deepest factor shaping our knowledge is religious. Worldviews and paradigms are not only a matter of theoretical perspective shaped by historical, social, and cultural factors. Rather the deepest formative beliefs are religious. Religion is not one aspect of human culture alongside of others but a fundamental directing power that shapes all of human life. Further relativism does not recognize that there is a given order of creation that can be known and that there is a true Light in which this creation can be known.

Testing the Idolatrous Spirit of Secular Science by the Spirit's Sure Word

As followers of Jesus Christ, who refuse to allow the gospel to be reduced to doctrinal tenets limited to a spiritual, theological, or ecclesiastical realm, how are we to witness to the directing power of the gospel in academic life? The third paragraph of the Contemporary Testimony 'Our World Belongs to God' captures our call:

But rebel cries sound through the world:
some, crushed by failure
or hardened by pain,
give up on life and hope and God;

others, shaken,
but still hoping for human triumph,
work feverishly to realize their dreams.
As believers in God
we join this struggle of the spirits,
testing our times by the Spirit's sure Word.

We join the religious struggle of the spirits that shape the academy testing those spirits by the Spirit's sure word. Certainly this will involve a testing of the idolatrous spirit of secular science.

The Christian Academy: Participation and Opposition

One way to describe the stance of the Christian school toward secular science, in the words of Lesslie Newbigin, is as a missionary encounter. A missionary encounter includes *both* a positive relation *and* a critical approach to the tradition of secular science. Since Christ is the creator, sustainer and redeemer of the world, including its cultural formation, we are called to love and cherish all its created goodness. As members of a cultural community we are called to participate in its ongoing development cherishing all the good things that are uncovered. As members of the body of Christ we witness to the reality that Christ is Lord of all culture including scholarship. Looking to the past we recognize much in the history of western scholarship that is good and needs to be cherished and preserved. Looking at the present we acknowledge our responsibility to participate in and encounter the ongoing academic tradition within our culture. We join the struggle of the spirits. Christian scholarship is part of a lengthy academic tradition within Western culture that stretches back to the Greeks. Our task is not to create an academic ghetto that isolates our endeavours from the broader scholarly community. Stuart Fowler has put it well:

... we are not called to establish closed Christian communities in the world, but to penetrate as salt into the world. Our Christian communities deserve the label 'Christian' only so far as they facilitate penetrating this world in keeping with Jesus' words to his father concerning his disciples in all ages: 'As you have sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world' (John 17:18).

It is valid to maintain Christian schools and colleges as manifestations of our community in Christ. They are not valid if they function within a closed Christian educational network. To be authentic they must be open to other educational communities in the world around us. We do not maintain our Christian integrity by isolating ourselves from the world around. Rather, such isolation denies our calling and falsifies our witness (Fowler 1993:24).

It is my sense that smaller private Christian educational institutions need this reminder. We should not, and in any case cannot, isolate ourselves from the questions, problems, theories, institutions and traditions that are part of the academic development of our culture. *How* the participation takes place is a matter of discussion; *that* it should and will take place is given.

Participation is not the only word that needs to be heard; opposition is equally important. Since Christ has died to take away the sin of the world the church is called to oppose the evil and idolatry that twists and distorts all cultural cultivation. Engagement in cultural development demands a counter-cultural stance that resists the currents of death in our culture. If, as Dooyeweerd has suggested, secular science is not simply mistaken, but a satanic power, an idol that dominates our culture, the Christian academic community's task is to resist and embody the victory of the cross over this power.

Lesslie Newbigin speaks here of an 'painful tension.' The deeper we realize the apostate and idolatrous roots of our culture, and how those roots nourish each aspect of academy, the more we will recognize the need for a kind of countercultural stance. Hendrik Kraemer has rightfully suggested that our faithfulness – also in scholarship and the academy – is dependant upon it: 'The deeper the consciousness of the tension and the urge to take this yoke upon itself are felt, the healthier the church is. The more oblivious of this tension the Church is, the more well established and at home in the world it feels, the more it is in deadly danger of being the salt that lost its savour' (1956:36). A deep sense of the wariness of what Dooyeweerd describes as the demonic and idolatrous power of secular science must inform our scholarly activities. I often wonder how much this 'painful tension' functions fruitfully within the Christian academic community in Western culture.

If we are to be faithful in making known the gospel in our educational endeavours we will

necessarily find that these two stances toward the western academy are necessary: affirmation and rejection, solidarity and separation, participation and opposition. In fact these will be two sides of the one coin. To preserve the great gains and insights of science demands opposition to the idols that would destroy those achievements.

Subversion: Recognizing Creational Insight and Idolatrous Twisting

How does the Christian academy live out both participation and opposition? I offer here a general approach⁸ to the task of the Christian community in its cultural efforts that I describe as ‘subversion.’ I take as my model the way John dealt with Greek philosophy and culture. John freely uses the language and thought forms of classical religion and culture that form the world of his hearers – light and darkness, body and soul, heaven and earth, flesh and spirit, and more. Since these words are not neutral but shaped by the religious idolatry of classical culture, John uses this language and thought-forms in such a way as to confront them with a fundamental question and indeed a contradiction. John begins with the announcement ‘In the beginning was the *logos*.’ As he continues it becomes apparent that *logos* is not the impersonal law of rationality that permeates the universe giving it order but rather the man Jesus Christ. The *logos* became *sarx*. John begins by identifying with the classical longing for the source of order expressed in the term *logos*, but subverts, challenges, and contradicts the idolatrous understanding that had developed in the classical world. He recognizes the insight but challenges the way that insight is expressed. In this way John is both intimately involved in the cultural tradition yet standing in opposition to the idolatrous twisting. Wim Visser ‘t Hooft has stated this approach succinctly: ‘The uncritical introduction of such words into Christian terminology can only lead to that syncretism that denies the uniqueness and specific character of the different religions and creates a grey relativism. What is needed is to re-interpret the traditional concepts, to set them in a new context, to fill them with biblical content. . . . Words from the traditional culture and religion must be used, but they must be converted in the way in which Paul and John converted Greek philosophical and religious concepts’ (1967:13).

⁸ I only describe here a general approach. The task of subversion applies to all areas of the Christian academy. More specifically in the area of scholarship, this general approach will require further reflection on foundational issues such as the use of Scripture, the role of worldview and philosophy, the differences among the various kinds of disciplines, different modes of integration, etc. I cannot enter these questions here.

This approach to all cultural forms offers a way to deal with non-Christian scholarship. The neo-Calvinist or reformational tradition issuing from the Netherlands has used the term ‘the inner reformation of the sciences.’ Al Wolters describes this in the following way: ‘. . . we must begin with what is historically given. No one can start in history with a clean slate. . . . Reformation is working along the grain of history, respecting what is good in the tradition and bending it around to move in another direction’ (1975: 15). Henk Hart describes it in the following way: ‘Christian scholars should work in science for continuing reformation, changing science radically from within, pulling its roots out of its traditionally idolatrous soil and transplanting them in the soil of the gospel’ (1988:14). Wolters suggests that the way theories and concepts can be reformed or subverted from within is by asking, what is the insight into the structure of creation and how has this insight become misdirected by religious idolatry (1978:12-13). As a matter of fact, it can be precisely at the point of idolatry that the insight into the creation comes. He demonstrates how this might take place in philosophy.

Plato’s distinction between perception and analysis (not made by his predecessors) . . . is a real and valuable one . . . The neo-Platonic hierarchy of being, though identified with the good-evil distinction, nevertheless points out many real creational distinctions between e.g. space, physicality, vitality, perception, and analysis. Kant can teach us much about the distinction between morality and legality, and between the language of faith and the language of science and ordinary experience. There is a great deal we can learn from Hegel about the nature of history and the cohesiveness of cultures, and from Jaspers about the committed nature of philosophy. In a paradoxical way, a great philosopher’s contribution tends to lie precisely in the area of his idolatry. . . . Marx’s discovery of the correlation between class and culture, although he inflated it to become the basis of a new gospel for mankind, nevertheless unearths a distinction and a relationship which cannot be ignored (*ibid*).

Theories (and institutions and educational practices) uprooted from idolatrous soil and replanted in the soil of the gospel, respecting the good in theories and bending it around from an

idolatrous direction to move toward Christ, filling the insight or longing with new content from the gospel – all of these images offer a way toward a Christian scholarship that both participates in the ongoing tradition of Western scholarship and yet opposes the idolatrous directing power that is operative there.

What About the Christian School Teacher?

This spirit of secular science in both its modern and postmodern forms permeates the university, unfortunately including Christian universities. Since Christian school teachers have received their academic training in this context we should expect that this spirit is alive and well in Christian schools. The question is, then, what can Christian schools do? No doubt many Christian school teachers will feel overwhelmed with a sense of both intellectual and spiritual inadequacy to tackle such a complex and powerful cultural spirit. Indeed the task is immense yet faithfulness to the gospel and the mission Jesus has given us demands we encounter this idol even if secular scholarship evidences Goliath power. There are no easy answers but God calls us to take baby steps toward faithfulness in a spirit of joy and liberating forgiveness. What baby steps can we take?

The first thing is to acknowledge and deepen our understanding of the idolatrous power of secular scholarship and its powerful effect on the Christian school. Perhaps the biggest obstacle to engaging secular scholarship with the gospel is our unawareness of the reality, the idolatrous power, and the destructive results of secular scholarship.

Furthermore it is essential to tackle this as an educational community. God does not expect us to tackle this idol as individuals. It is necessary that there be a dialogue within Christian schools about this issue. But it is also important to recognise there are many gifts in the body of Christ: God has gifted scholars within the Christian community to struggle with these issues. The importance of reading books and ongoing teacher training to develop discernment is vital for a Christian school.

Dooyeweerd offers us another important insight in ‘our vocation to war against the spirit of apostasy. . .’ That is we cannot ‘battle this spirit in our own power. The warfare to which I refer is one of faith, a struggle even with ourselves, in the power of the Holy Spirit, a struggle which finds its dynamic in a life of prayer’ (1954:4). If I am correct in suggesting that our mission in

the Christian school is, at the deepest level, a struggle of the spirits then prayer, indeed all the spiritual weapons offered the believer for spiritual warfare, will be essential equipment for the work of the academy. After all the God's kingdom is first of all the work of His Spirit.

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