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For Such a Time and Place as This: Christian Higher Education for the Common Good.

By Cynthia A. Wells

One might argue that this is not a wise time to raise queries of the common good for Christian higher education. Our in-boxes and newsfeeds provide persistent reminders of the crises facing higher education today, many of which uniquely impact Christian colleges and universities. A crisis of the humanities, as students turn away from areas of study traditionally associated with the liberal arts. A crisis of cost, as independent colleges wrestle with an unsustainable financial model and an increasingly skeptical constituency. An enrollment crisis amid declines in the number of high school graduates, especially in the northeast and midwest. Colleges are cutting programs and even closing their doors. How can we consider the lofty query of our contribution to the common good amid such urgent questions of institutional survival? The better question: How can we not? As we navigate this series of crises as they uniquely impact Christian higher education, we must attend to the greater questions. Otherwise, we may not recognize the version of ourselves that "survived." Toward this end, I offer three broad rationales for why attending to the common good is not only timely but also a deeply faithful question for the place in which we find ourselves.

One reason we should attend to questions of the common good is that every crisis moment in higher education requires adjusting the manner in which we advance our mission; the common good provides a generative vision for such a reorientation. One of the greatest challenges facing higher education, including Christian colleges and universities, is that our society has truncated the value of a college education to individual and largely economic benefits. The cultural narrative from parents and students is a cost-benefit, individual-level analysis of higher education. What major will make *my daughter* the most money? What major will justify the cost of *my* degree? We can bemoan that our culture has become too practical in its expectations for higher education, but without a larger orienting vision, our concerns land on untilled soil. Moreover, if our sole response is a cultural critique, we abdicate our responsibility in shaping the social imagination. We in Christian higher education are fighting a narrative that emerged on our watch. Moreover, in our efforts to survive these precarious times, we have perhaps been complicit in perpetuating this narrative in our marketing and recruitment messaging by focusing too narrowly on the very narrative of individual benefits that reduces our culture's perspective of what we offer.

The common good potentiates taking these expectations for individual well-being and placing them in a larger context without negating the importance of personal success. The language of common rather than public good is critical here and intentional in this special issue of the journal. Unlike the public good, which suggests an antithesis to the personal sphere, the language of the common good denotes a region where individual

and community goods overlap. Attending to the common good does not pit individual against social but rather recognizes the intersection of the two. If any one of us is thwarted in our flourishing as a result of social structures, then our common good is compromised. Individual flourishing, after all, both requires and contributes to a thriving society. The promise of Christian higher education is realized in the inextricable connection between individual and communal flourishing.

Another and more immediately pragmatic reason to attend to the common good is that it serves as an avenue to not only reorient the cultural narrative but also to respond directly to it. A clearer communication of our contribution to the common good *is* an institutional survival strategy. Higher learning and the larger purposes of society have been intertwined over the course of American higher education's history. Harvard's founding purposes were embedded in the needs of church and society, and the institution's ability to survive its precarious origins necessitated clear contributions to the common good. As Boyer and Hechinger ([[1](#)]) assert, "[w]ithout a deep commitment to serve God and man, Harvard could not have survived its lean and austere beginnings," as "public subsidy" provided for this institution that "clearly served the public good" (p. 9). In the mid 17th century, subsidy meant donated land from the Massachusetts General Court and tax levies for Harvard's benefit. Colleges in the 21st century depend on public investment in the form of tuition "subsidies," such as federal funds for low-income students associated with the PELL grant. Institutional survival has a social context.

A third and most vital reason for attending to the common good is that it is central to our calling as institutions of Christian higher education. The Council for Christian Colleges & Universities promotes its work as a shared endeavor to "advance faith and intellect for the common good" (CCCU, [[2](#)], par. 1). Reinhold Niebuhr (1932/1960) addresses tough questions of the common good in his seminal work, *Moral Man and Immoral Society*, asserting that "each century originates a new complexity and each generation faces a new vexation in addressing the problem of our 'aggregate existence'" (p. 1). If Christian higher education is to adequately respond to the "vexation" of our "aggregate existence" in the 21st century, we must articulate a sufficient theological and educational imagination for doing so.

Advancing the common good in Christian higher education requires a theological imagination. Our responsibility to "serve the common good is inscribed into the very character of Christianity as a prophetic religion; it is a consequence of the commitment to love both the one God and neighbors" (Volf, 2011, p. 78). The notion of the common good is indeed embedded in the Old Testament prophets. Jeremiah urged the Israelites in Babylonian captivity to "seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare" (Jeremiah 29:7, NRSV). Jeremiah invites the Israelites to care for the very place to which they have been displaced; they are in exile and yet beckoned to care for that place. Even more telling, Jeremiah implores the Jewish exiles to realize that their

"welfare" is bound together with the well-being of that place. Our well-being as a Christian community is tied to the welfare of the society in which we are embedded.

After the exiles return from Babylon to the destroyed city of Jerusalem, Nehemiah gathers them and asserts, "You see the trouble we are in, how Jerusalem lies in ruins with its gates burned. Come let us rebuild the wall of Jerusalem, so that we may no longer suffer disgrace" (Nehemiah 2: 17–18, NRSV). Nehemiah then reflects on the Israelites' response: "I told them that the hand of my God had been gracious to me, and also the words that the king had spoken to me. Then they said, 'Let us start building!' So they committed themselves to the common good" (Nehemiah 2: 17–18, NRSV). Recognizing what aspects of our society are in "ruins" is the first step; trusting the graciousness of our God must come alongside this recognition. At the intersection of seeing both social injustice and the hope of God, we find the source of our commitment to build toward the common good.

A theological case for the common good continues in the New Testament. Jesus' ministry embodies common good convictions; in pronouncing "woe to you who are rich...to you who are full" (Luke 6:24–25), he critiques those who look out for their own self-interests. Jesus also voices the greatest commandment to be loving God and neighbor, which fundamentally undergirds a theology of the common good. The early church depicts a commitment to the common good, including peaceful, harmonious, and common living (Acts 2: 42–47). Paul too evokes the ideal of the common good in addressing the church at Corinth, which displayed a tendency toward "factions" and "divisions" and sought spiritual gifts as a means of social status within the church hierarchy (Talbert, [7]). Paul summons the Corinthians to be motivated to a "more excellent way," asserting that the "same God" activates *all* of the gifts evident in the Church; "To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good" (1 Corinthians 12:4–7, NRSV). A Christian understanding of the common good reminds us that gifts are not provided for individual benefit in isolation but rather allotted and enacted within the context of community.

Advancing the common good in Christian higher education also requires an educational imagination. Gilbert Meilaender ([5]) describes the common good as the ultimate purpose of our callings. What is the ultimate purpose of our callings as Christian colleges and universities? This perspective of ultimacy is something we desperately need. Christian higher education is devoted to helping students discern and live out their callings, but do we recognize that our institutional calling is also to help students see their individual gifts in light of a greater commitment to advancing the reign of God? And thus to nurturing a more just and faithful social order? Contributing to the common good is central to our call as Christian colleges and universities.

The linguistic roots of the common good are instructive as we shape our educational imagination. The common good derives from two Greek words: *syn*, a preposition meaning "together, accompany" and *phero*, a verb meaning "to carry, to endure, to

uphold." *Symphero* translates as "to collect or contribute in order to help" (Strong's Lexicon) implying a sense of bearing, upholding, or enduring *with* another or *together* in community. *Symphero*'s etymological connection to symphony is instructive; individual talents must be nurtured, but ultimately these individual gifts must be used in concert with others and for a purpose beyond themselves. Conducting a symphony is no easy feat. Each artist has invested countless hours and a great deal of money in their musical training; reminding talented artists to place their instruments in service to the whole is difficult work. Similarly, helping students cultivate their individual gifts and talents is central to the work of Christian higher education, but we must not lose sight of the reality that fulfilling our mission involves more than a series of private lessons occurring in physical proximity. Our graduates must not only be prepared to contribute to the orchestra, but must also recognize that the orchestra itself is influencing an audience and a larger culture.

Pursuing the common good requires genuine dialogue and collective discernment. The "common good emerges from discussion and struggle; it is never settled definitively, but some idea of it is necessary to provide a vision of what is worth struggling for and to test the boundaries of possibility" (Dorrien, [4], p. 24). This special edition of *Christian Higher Education: An International Journal of Research, Theory, and Practice* aspires to advance such a worthy conversation. The framing of this special edition speaks to two interrelated tasks for advancing the common good in Christian higher education. The first task is developing a compelling theological and educational rationale for the common good. The notion of the common good is rich but also contested. As such, advancing this vision needs to be nurtured by shared understanding without necessitating uniform agreement. Part One of this special edition is devoted to advancing some common ideas and shared commitments, based on the intersection of the Christian narrative and educational purpose that together animate the purposes of Christian higher education.

The promise of Christian higher education in contributing to the common good is evident throughout the articles in this issue. In the first article, "On the Distinctive Function of Christian Higher Education and the Common Good," Christopher S. Collins and J. Caleb Clanton argue that Christian higher education's distinctive and proper function "predisposes the enterprise" to contribute to the common good. In doing so, they lay out a compelling argument for preserving that unique identity and distinctive function as well as intentionally framing our efforts in common good language. These authors ask us to consider the true telos of our efforts as Christian colleges and universities, including being mindful that college is a means to a goal beyond itself. They advocate expanding both public perception as well as internal self-perception of Christian higher education's social benefits. Knowledge production and dissemination, community outreach, meeting net demand for higher education, and cultural events are common good contributions of Christian colleges that are not exclusive to Christian higher education but may be enacted distinctively. The authors highlight three contributions that connect to the distinctive function of Christian higher education.

Christian higher education offers "a principled and persistent public witness," attends to the moral formation of students in ways that contributes to the "well-being of society as a whole," and equips students to discern and pursue the "most basic of human goods" so that they can become "better stewards of the common good" (p. 17).

Pursuing the common good in Christian higher education depends upon a distinctively Christian vision of the common good itself. David S. Guthrie, in his article "Revisiting a Christian View of the Common Good for Christian Higher Education," crafts an expressly Christian argument for contributing to the common good. Not only does he remind us that a commitment to the common good makes sense from a Christian point of view but also that bringing Scripture to bear on our public and social commitments is our "high calling from the Lord, both personally and corporately" (p. 21). He argues that Christian faith and a commitment to the common good are inextricably linked; that is to say, a commitment to the common good from a Christian perspective is not simply a theological view we may elect but rather one that is requisite to our faith. "Loving one's neighbor" is a commandment of the Christian faith that is central to embodying the common good and manifest in both interpersonal relationships and existing social structures. Guthrie invites us to consider anew our mission as Christian colleges and universities as "common good discipleship for Jesus' sake" (p. 20).

Laying out a vision for the common good also demands that we carefully examine the evidence regarding the outcomes of Christian higher education in order to discern avenues to more fully deliver on our common good commitments. Laurie A. Schreiner asks in her article "What Good is Christian Higher Education" whether Christian higher education students and alumni are distinctively different in light of three frames of the good: individual good, common good, and Kingdom good. Her analysis of data from national surveys provides both encouraging and disquieting news for Christian colleges and universities. Christian college graduates "shine" in spiritual development, including integrating Christian faith with their learning as well as service to their churches. At the same time, the news is disconcerting in that empirical data suggest that Christian college graduates are not engaging the world beyond the context of their churches. Schreiner concludes that there may be a misalignment between the stated mission of Christian higher education and some of the outcomes observed in students and alumni at Christian colleges and universities. Reminding us that the full value of a Christian college education includes individual, common, and Kingdom good, Schreiner recommends that leaders in Christian higher education more fully embody and communicate the full range of goods we offer. She reminds us that we must lean into our mission of being "salt and light" in our world, encourage deeper engagement with the needs of the world in our educational programs, and help students translate advancing the Kingdom into making a difference in society.

Part Two complements this broader vision for the common good by offering principles and practices toward advancing the common good in Christian higher education. Whereas Part One outlines a vision for the common good, Part Two articulates various

ways of implementing and moving toward a vision of the common good. In this second set of articles, we find several implications for faithfully living out our common good commitments, including orienting practices that help us embody this vision.

Enacting a commitment to the common good is a broad commitment that we share across institutions of Christian higher education but also one that must be embodied in particular institutional contexts. In their article, "Leading through Placemaking and Boundary Spanning: Rural Christian Higher Education for the Common Good," Jennifer S. Mobley, P. Jesse Rine, P.C. Kemeny, and H. Collin Messer illustrate that Christian higher education contributes to the common good by cultivating an "appreciation for what it means to be a neighbor" (p. 50) in particular contexts. Specifically, they argue that Christian colleges and universities situated in rural communities are uniquely positioned to bridge an ever-widening cultural, economic, and political divide in the United States. The authors lift up the place-based roles of stewarding and anchoring for their potential to allow Christian colleges and universities in rural areas fulfill their mission. The authors cast a vision for the common good in which Christian institutions of higher education partner together with their surrounding communities to co-create a shared perspective, shared knowledge, and shared places.

Cynthia Toms also speaks to "place" as she lifts up a vision for orienting global engagement programs toward the common good in her article, "From Homemaking to Solidarity: Global Engagement as Common Good in an Age of Global Populism." She argues the "merits of a participatory development approach" to local and global service (p. 77). Toms argues that an ethic of solidarity offers a way forward beyond the power dynamic associated with the notion of hospitality. In both of these analyses, she offers lenses for attending to the common good in local and global service. Toms' specifically affirms that "globalization pedagogies can serve as a model for ethical global engagement" (p. 77); she illustrates her argument by describing how a specific program on her campus, Westmont College, embodies global engagement for the common good.

Advancing the common good also requires tackling some of the most divisive issues of our time. In their article, "Racial Reconciliation and Inclusive Excellence at Church-Related Colleges and Universities," Todd Allen and Dan Custer address the issue of race relations that is divisive in both church and society. Allen and Custer point to the work of racial reconciliation as a space in which Christian higher education can make a compelling and faithful contribution to a public square that is broken and deeply divided along racial lines. They offer a biblical approach to reconciliation and inclusive excellence as a new voice to the conversation of racial inequity in higher education, one that "speaks to Christians who are called to be co-laborers with Christ in the building of the kingdom of God" (p. 92). Allen and Custer analyze the ideology of multiculturalism, evaluating its merits and weaknesses, and offer reconciliation theology as a more adequate lens because it "transcends" our differences. Moreover, they offer the framework of inclusive excellence as a way of moving toward reconciled institutions

and, as such, ultimately to address inequities in our society that harm the common good.

Christian higher education will not only need to respond to the call to contribute to the common good, but also to embrace a faithful way to pursue that call. This way is discussed by Jolyn E. Dahlvig in her article, "Flourishing for the Common Good: Positive Leadership in Christian Higher Education During Times of Change." Dahlvig argues not only that higher education broadly should return toward a greater commitment to the common good, but also that Christian higher education could lead the way. She frames a rationale for change in light of the broader needs for higher education to respond to the global economy, loss of public trust in colleges and universities, increasingly diverse societal demographics, as well as intensified internationalization. Dahlvig argues that the "best leadership for the common good will be rooted in positive approaches to imminent challenges" (p. 104), highlighting especially building psychological capital and fostering a growth mindset in and across higher education organizations. Her article recognizes the ways the higher education landscape has changed and suggests that "with intentional and positive investment in people, Christian higher education could be positioned well to model organizational flourishing during times of change" and "inspire a renewed sense of purpose marked by service" (p. 107)

Throughout these contributions, there is a particularly compelling thematic thread. A Christian vision of the common good is solidly grounded in the theological reality of living in the now on behalf of the not yet. A Christian perspective of the common good is motivated by advancing God's reign; this stance requires living in the what is with a perspective of what should be. We are required to identify current social realities but to view them from a "yet-to-come, wholly-holy kingdom" (Guthrie) vision. Attending to the common good requires a positive perspective even as we engage the reality that individuals and institutions are "not yet" where we aspire to be (Schreiner). There is genuine struggle as we seek to embody Kingdom values in this time and place while living in a world that falls short. It is my deep hope that this special issue can sustain us in our efforts to fulfill our shared calling to advance distinctively Christian vision of the common good in Christian higher education.

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