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Making Higher Education Christian: The History and Mission of Evangelical Colleges in America Joel A. Carpenter and Kenneth W. Shippo

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JOEL A. CARPENTER and KENNETH W. SHIPPS. *Making Higher Education Christian: The History and Mission of Evangelical Colleges in America*. Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans, 1987. xvi; 304 pp. \$16.95 paperback.

Reviewed by Neil J. Flinders, assistant professor of secondary education at Brigham Young University.

The editors of this anthology use twenty-one contributors to explore the heritage, vision, and mission of evangelical colleges in the United States. A majority of the essays were originally presented as part of a conference on "The Task of Evangelical Higher Education." The book is timely in that evangelical Protestants have in recent years assumed a significant role in American politics, as evidenced, for example, in the contributions of the Christian coalition identified as the "Moral Majority" to the election of Ronald Reagan, and in the attention given to candidates Jesse Jackson and Pat Robertson—both ordained ministers—during the 1988 presidential campaign.

Evangelicalism is often equated with fundamentalism, but the terms are not synonymous. As used among Protestants, *evangelicalism* refers to preaching the gospel of Christ as found in the Bible for the purpose of inviting personal conversion; *fundamentalism* is the belief that the Bible is infallible because every word in it is the word of God. Not all evangelicals are fundamentalists, and not all fundamentalists are evangelicals. Evangelical colleges, as defined by Carpenter and Shipps, are "committed to engender *a distinctly Christian worldview* in their students and communities" (*italics added*). This theistic, supernatural worldview (holding that there is both a natural and a supernatural world) stands in stark contrast to the modern non-theistic worldview that maintains the natural world is all that exists; there is no supernatural. The choice between these comprehensive, contradictory, and permanently irreconcilable worldviews may constitute the central problem of intellectual history.

It is well documented that between about 1880 and 1920 the Western academic world turned away from the traditional metaphysical dualism of Christianity in favor of the secular metaphysical monism of modern physics. Insofar as this view dominates the academy, there is no place for transcendent or supernatural influences. Hence the difficulty that scholars in evangelical colleges have had in achieving credibility. By definition, evangelicals are not restricted to naturalism. They utilize assumptions that contradict the prevailing modern view. This conflict between

worldviews helps to account for the “several generations of second-class academic citizenship” mentioned in the book. According to Carpenter and Shipps, however, evangelical scholars are now feeling an increasing confidence that their “thoughts about seeking, imparting, and living the truth may be of interest to the larger world of higher learning” (xiii). It is this belief that underlies the basic message of *Making Higher Education Christian*.

The content of the book is divided into three areas. The first section traces the heritage of evangelical higher education from the scholastic period (c. A.D. 1150), noting the emergence of the university from within Christianity, and discusses the educational ideals of the Reformers and the Puritans, which saw social responsibility as an outcome of classical, liberal education. The common assumption was that knowledge was grounded in a shared theology and a shared acceptance of the authority of the Bible. Before the American Revolution, education was grounded in special revelation; after the Revolution, educational leaders allowed the didactics of the Enlightenment “to lay out the shape, purposes, and structures of knowledge, within which they were delighted to find a place for Christianity” (64). Between the Civil War and the Second World War, however, the commitment of American higher education to “a worldview in which first principles were God-ordained laws and the human capacity to work with such laws” was replaced by the secular, skeptical, naturalistic science of the modern worldview that was ushered in with “the academic revolution” (68). The authors note in retrospect that Christian colleges and Bible schools largely lost their scholarly credibility in the new secular perspective. But they did, it seems, retain a holistic curricular stance that emphasized the character development and morality that increasingly seems to be looked upon as a “new” vital resource. The resurgence of expressed conservatism during the final quarter of this century has placed evangelical “colleges among the fastest growing in America” (137).

With this recent growth has come a “new faculty”:

They are sophisticated on epistemological and methodological issues, and they are committed to meaningful participation in the life of their discipline beyond their teaching responsibilities and even beyond the confines of the campus. They tend to be cosmopolitan and have a broad view of Christianity, one that appreciates the various traditions that are represented in the church. Because of heavy teaching loads, only a few may achieve national prominence for their publications and innovations; yet most of them do not seek it either. Much more than their predecessors ever did, they measure their own worth and achievement by meaningful, not necessarily prominent, participation within the discipline. (147)

In discussing the vision now needed for evangelical colleges, the authors acknowledge the dangerous “influence of intellectuals in church life” and cite historical evidence indicating that the “vitality of churches” has been “inversely proportional to the influence of intellectuals in church life” (155). They cite William Buckley’s observation that “he would sooner be governed by a church whose bishops were chosen by the first five hundred names of the Chicago phone directory than by a church whose bishops were a bunch of university professors” (155). In contrast to this recognized danger that the intellect can be an enemy to the spirit is the expressed need among evangelicals within higher education to focus their intellectuality on developing Christian thinking, closing the gap between spirituality and thinking. Christian scholars, the book maintains, can contribute to this end, but it will necessitate “bringing Christian criteria to bear on academic work” (187). The evangelical vision in higher education is that scholarship is more than the nineteenth-century practice of adding Christianity “onto neutral secular learning.” It demands the integration of “Christian faith with learning.” But integration alone does not meet the goal of Christian higher education. “Christian scholars must try to integrate faith with learning so as to produce *Christian* learning” (201).

The third section of the book reveals the major weakness of the collection. In exploring how to advance the mission of evangelicals in higher education, the sound of the trumpet is very unclear. Parts 1 and 2, which focus on reviewing history and defining problems, are generally stimulating, reasonably informative, and insightful. Part 3 lacks the energy and excitement a reader is led to expect in a finale that is titled “Advancing the Mission.” The essays do not create a vision that could unify or bond those who must join forces to solve the challenges previously identified. They lament administrative difficulties associated with law and governance, pose curricular shortcomings related to minorities and women, and bemoan the lack of “a first-level research university” for evangelicals (295). The book is long on description and very short on solution.

While the book is aimed primarily at those directly involved in the evangelical movement, it may also be helpful to those who are interested in the role evangelicals are playing in the larger social milieu of our times. Latter-day Saints may find the discussion interesting because it focuses on concerns and conflicts similar to those faced by academicians in our own intellectual community. Latter-day Saint scholars have also struggled with the challenge of compromising or compartmentalizing their worldview in order to

retain professional credibility. Our faculty and students sense this tension in our own educational institutions. Similarly, there is an expressed lament in some circles at the lack of “a first-level research university,” and in other circles at the failure to sufficiently close the gap between “Christian faith and learning . . . so as to produce Christian learning.” It would be interesting to see how the academic intellect of Mormondom would explicitly propose “bringing Christian criteria to bear on academic work” as a means of “advancing the Mission.” It can be discomfoting to honestly face any form of the ancient question: To what extent should Christians compromise their convictions in order to obtain or retain professional credibility?