

# THE CRESSSET

*A review of literature, the arts, and public affairs*

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Easter 2008

## books



John Marson Dunaway, ed. *Gladly Learn, Gladly Teach: Living Out One's Calling in the Twenty-First Century Academy*. Macon, Georgia: Mercer University Press, 2005.

Is there a distinctly Baptist view of Christian higher education? Samford University theologian William E. Hull ponders this question in his essay in *Gladly Teach, Gladly Learn: Living Out One's Calling in the Twenty-First Century Academy*. While Baptists in America have a long history of defending the separation of church and state, spreading the gospel through evangelism, and promoting Christian piety, they have never been major players, despite their many colleges and universities, in shaping the course of higher education.

Hull argues that whatever intellectual firepower Baptist institutions possess today has been borrowed from other Christian intellectual traditions. For example, Baylor University has drawn from the traditions of the established churches of Europe—Catholic, Lutheran, and Reformed. Other Baptist schools, such as Union University in Jackson, Tennessee, have relied on northern evangelicals and their commitment to a Reformed model of Christian education centered on the “integration of faith and learning.”

The administration and faculty of Mercer University, a Baptist school in Macon, Georgia, has tried to walk a different path. During the 2003–2004 academic year the college's Center for Faith, Learning, and Vocation sponsored a campus-wide conversation on teaching and the academic vocation. Mercer professor John Marson Dunaway has gathered essays written by six of the participants in this colloquium and has supplemented them with writings from seven authors who are not affiliated with Mercer.

*Gladly Learn, Gladly Teach* is not concerned with how Baptists might get a seat at the academic table or turn their institutions into top-flight research universities. Nor does the book address the best way to integrate Christian worldview thinking into the curriculum. Instead the spotlight is on the classroom and the curriculum. Despite Hull's revealing essay about Baptist higher education, and the fact that six of the authors teach at a Baptist university, there is little that is distinctively Baptist about this book. We should thus treat *Gladly Learn, Gladly Teach* for what it is: an excellent and inspiring series of essays about Christian teaching.

One theme that runs throughout these essays is the belief that true education must transcend careerism. R. Kirk Godsby, Mercer's president, argues that a good teacher brings students to the “intersection of who they are and what they do” (3). If a curriculum becomes too wedded to professional disciplines or too focused on preparing students for careers, Godsby writes, “there is nothing

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left to center our lives”(3). Gordon Johnston echoes this sentiment, challenging Christian teachers to cultivate the intellectual, moral, and spiritual dimensions of their students. This is a difficult task—one that most professors do not learn how to perform in graduate school.

There is also an indirect affirmation of the humanities in this kind of thinking about the curriculum of a college or university. True education comes when students—regardless of their major—see themselves as part of a larger human story. As Charlotte Thomas notes, the study of texts is the best medicine for society’s collective narcissism. Literature, history, religion, and philosophy have a humbling effect on students as they learn that even their best ideas often rest upon the works of those who came before them. This is a lesson that faculty and administrators need to learn as well.

The Christian academic is also called to community. But as David Lyle Jeffrey reminds us, academics are not always wired in such a way to engage in relationships outside of the office or study. This, however, is no excuse for living a life of scholarly quarantine. Christians in the academy must balance their *general* calling to love their neighbors and to be salt and light in the wider world with their *specific* calling to the solitude often necessary to sustain an intellectual life. Such balance, Jeffrey exhorts, ultimately will invigorate a faculty member’s scholarship, teaching, and spiritual life.

Engagement with the wider world, as Andrew Silver makes clear in his essay on pluralism, means that Christian professors have an obligation to introduce their students to a variety of new ideas and cultures—even if such exposure makes them uncomfortable. Understanding the “Other” is a means by which students can see the diversity of human creation and strengthen commitments to their own communities of faith and belief. Richard Hughes adds to this conversation about pluralism by suggesting that Christian pedagogy should be based upon the radical teachings of Jesus and the Lutheran theology of human finitude. Such an approach demands that students and faculty explore the views of those with whom they differ, resulting in a college community defined by diversity and academic freedom.

Christian teachers must also be committed to spiritual formation in their own lives. Jeanne Heffernan encourages professors to pray for and with their students and make every effort to integrate spiritual and theological truths into one’s subject matter. This, of course, requires that the professor has a spiritual life to draw upon when he or she enters the classroom. Mary S. Poplin asks us to consider how the ancient practice of *lectio divina* might inform our academic work. A quote she uses from John of the Cross is worth repeating here: “It is by means of faith that the intellect is united with God... Faith darkens and empties the intellect of all its natural understanding and thereby prepares it for union with divine wisdom.”

In the end, *Gladly Learn, Gladly Teach* is one of those books that all serious Christian academics need to read, contemplate, and discuss. Though it may not fit Hull’s call for a distinctly Baptist contribution to Christian higher education, it should encourage college teachers to bring faith to bear on their academic vocation.

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