

Baptists and Higher Education

An integration of papers and final reflection

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In the last couple of days we have made our journey together through a great variety of contexts in the world, different places where Baptists have been involved in educational projects. The papers have also been concerned with a variety of institutions—as set out on the prospectus for this conference they have covered Baptist universities, liberal arts colleges, theological colleges and seminaries. Some have just hinted at another aspect of our subject—the involvement of Baptists in higher education which is not itself Baptist in affiliation; this is a situation our theme envisaged with its wording, “Baptists *and* Higher Education”. My own opening lecture *did* look at this area, and I want to return to it from time to time during this concluding paper. How, then, shall we bring all our wide-ranging discussion together?

1. The character of an institution of higher education: can it be redeemed?

In the first place, we should look at the basic character of any Baptist institution of higher education, whether university or seminary. Does the very nature of an institution make for an enhancement of life, or does it contribute to a narrowing of outlook and even oppression? We have heard differing testimonies about this.

(a) The institution as a tool of domination

To begin on the dark end of the spectrum, Felipe from his Brazilian context rightly points out that institutions can “guarantee the reproduction of both [a] colonialist and supremacist social structure”. He analyzes the way that Baptist missionaries in Brazil used education, alongside evangelism and literary production, to form a “totalizing complex of supremacist imaginations and racialized institutions.” He exposes dramatically the way that the founding of theological seminaries by Southern Baptist ministries was used to *encourage* the structural racism that was already endemic within Brazilian society, as a result of Portuguese colonization which had created a black slave class and had privileged whiteness. The case study he offers is that of the Southern Baptist management of the Baptist Theological Seminary of Southern Brazil, where there was a deliberate effort to suppress dissent against Southern Baptist missionaries by placing American scholars and leaders in the seminaries. In this power project native Brazilians were stigmatized and excluded

Fellipe insightfully draws on Foucault's idea of the *dispositif*, in which a network of multiple elements is created, including institutions, in order to reinforce existing structures of power. Fellipe applies this to the part that Baptist seminaries played within a prevailing ideology of racialization. There is not space in Fellipe's paper to explore whether the curriculum and programmes of the seminaries, as well as their leadership structure, bear out this analysis and to what extent. Clearly there is a project here for future research. We should also notice that Foucault has a generally negative assessment of all institutions; they all degenerate in time into tools of domination. Fellipe seems to incline to this view in his analysis that "school is the actualized machine of the abstract institution education, [while] the concrete institution Church is the actualized machine of the abstract institution God". In this analysis, it does not seem that the machine can be redeemed. But Fellipe is also arguing for the taking over of seminaries by native Brazilian scholars and leaders, and this implies that the machine *can* become something more life-enhancing, in fact a living organism. The hearer of Fellipe's paper wants to know what has been the recent history of the two major Baptist seminaries in Brazil. Does this bear out the Foucauldian analysis? Can the soul of an institution be saved?

Grace tells an almost parallel story of the Baptist seminary in Cuba, although this time we are concerned with the missionary history of the American Baptists rather than Southern Baptists. She also highlights a paternalistic attitude of Americans towards Cubans rather than structural racism. But she asserts that "education as a preparation for ministry became ... yet another tool of domination". By setting up a School of Theology at a tertiary level after a high school diploma received at the missionary *Colegios Internacionales* (1909) Vargas argues that the missionaries were imposing unrealistic expectations of certification on Cubans who wanted to be ordained as ministers. The bureaucracy involved in this route to qualification also, Grace suggests, led to logistical challenges for congregations. This demand became a "hindrance" to the ministry that Cuban pastors were already engaged in. Grace then celebrates the founding of the Baptist Theological Seminary of Eastern Cuba in 1946, conceived and financed by Cubans themselves, with initiative from women, and freed from American Baptist supervision. She is more explicit than Fellipe, then, about the redemption of an institution that had been a tool of oppression, when it emerged from the life of the people themselves. As with the Brazilian case, more research is needed on comparing the curriculums and methods of teaching in the earlier School of Theology and the later Theological Seminary.

(b) *The institution as giving “uplift” to a social group*

In seemingly stark contrast, Dumas, writing from within the context of African-American education, praises the impact of Baptist higher education for making a “huge uplift” in the life of those who had been formerly enslaved. He celebrates it as achieving “transformative change”. But this positive assessment, we notice, is of mainly of an institution, Morehouse College, that emerged from the life of the Black Church itself rather than being imposed on it. He also adds a warning at the end of his paper that “this education must carry the seeds of a full liberative overhaul of any and all vestiges of racist perspectives and include a critique of whiteness...”

Dumas addresses the situation both of Baptist universities and seminaries. His case studies are Morehouse College, Howard University and Crozer Theological Seminary—the first being African-American Baptist, and the latter two having strong Baptist connections, while also being interdenominational. His argument is that these institutions from the 1920s onwards carried in their teaching and ethos the idea of the “Beloved Community”, which was to become the key concept driving Martin Luther King Jr’s non-violent political engagement. This is a fascinating, though controversial thesis. Certainly, as he shows, W.E.B. Du Bois at Morehouse, and Alain Locke at Howard had both studied at Harvard with Josiah Royce, who first developed the idea, along with his “philosophy of loyalty”. The notable black theologian Howard Thurman studied at Morehouse and worked at Howard with these scholars, and “the beloved community” became a central theme in his thought. In turn he had a formative influence on Dr King, and there is evidence that King also became acquainted with the thought of “the beloved community” at both Crozer Seminary and later Boston University where he certainly read Royce’s *Problem of Christianity*.¹ Thurman himself links Howard and Boston Universities. So there is a cumulative case for the idea of “the beloved community” being sustained and communicated by a network of institutions connected with Baptists; but to establish the thesis, more research needs to be done on the content of the courses being run, especially at Morehouse College.

The “beloved community” is a vision of a community where love is realized in social relations, which are thus marked by equality, freedom and self-giving. This is not just human love; for Royce, Thurman and Dr King the sphere of the communal is indwelt by something transcendent – the love of God. Dumas’ argument is that an institution which communicates

¹ See Gary Herstein, “The Roycean Roots of the Beloved Community”, *The Pluralist* 4/2 (2009): 91–107 (92).

this vision *will* have a transformative effect on society, though he is keen to stress that black churches embodied—and embody—the “beloved community” in their life even without the concept, and so there is an essential partnership between church and institution.

(c) The institution as a place of community-based learning

From the perspective of digital learning in the present age, Kevin also paints a largely positive picture of an educational institution as a place of community-based learning. Writing out of a UK context, the universities he knows there are public and secular, while he makes the Baptist application of his argument to theological colleges. His thesis is that learning takes place in relationships, and that relational development has three “pillars” to it—accessibility, intimacy and accountability. Accessibility is being near others with whom relations can be formed; intimacy allows relational qualities like openness, honesty and vulnerability to be practised; accountability means taking a critical approach to relationship and community formation, each participant holding the other to their responsibility. These three pillars have equivalents in higher education, he maintains, and a purely digital form of education falls short of each, even the first, access, in which it seems that online learning excels. Chat-rooms can help to alleviate these deficiencies, but cannot make up for lack of conversation in one physical place. Notably, using Zoom people can hide their identities through switching off the camera, so avoiding all vulnerability.

Kevin argues that learning communities where people gather in one place, in what we may call institutions, provide all three pillars and so are indispensable to the formation of the learner. He does, however, recognize that institution-based learning also has its drawbacks: lectures can be impersonal and sacrifice quantity of equality of relation, there are economic barriers to people travelling and living in community, and people can mask their own selves and hide from others even in in-person encounters. Discussion following this paper explored these deficiencies further, and there was a widespread impression that colleges were failing to be communities. Kevin concludes by recommending a hybrid approach, mixing online learning with meeting in one place.

(d) The institution as encouraging either a one-dimensional or a fully-dimensional understanding of knowledge (epistemology)

In his paper, Perry shows both the dark and light side of a learning institution; he argues that it may act *either* to foster what the philosopher Maynard Adams calls a “deranged” culture, or it may promote a humanistic culture, creating well-being in society. The key, he suggests, is

in the epistemology with which the institution works. Following Adams, Perry diagnoses a mood of modernity in which scientific naturalism exalts fact-finding at the expense of looking for meaning and value. Value-statements are then reduced to expressions of emotion or group preferences, and meaning is seen as merely constructed, whether individually or collectively. There is thus no way to make any objective claims to moral knowledge (9). This naturalism is expressed in commitment to the ideals of power and wealth as facts that can be measured. Through the lens of capitalism, the only value is economic value. Moreover, Perry agrees with Maynard that scientific naturalism cannot generate a moral response to racism and white supremacy; it cannot establish the “ought” that follows from what it means to be a person. An educational institution which is based on this one-dimensional epistemology gives science and technology priority over the humanities, cultivates an education which does not form the person but provides training for employment, and is subject to chasing whatever policy seems to provide it with economic security from donors, fee-payers or the state. In making this critique, Perry has in mind universities and liberal arts colleges in the USA, including those that are Baptist-affiliated.

An institution develops its light side when it fosters an epistemology in which reality has three dimensions: fact, meaning and value. Then it will reconceptualize education towards the end of human growth, a true humanism. In terms of curriculum, this means giving the humanities a central place; indeed, Perry inclines towards giving them a *more* central place than the sciences. In the case of a Baptist or otherwise Christian university, he agrees with David Lyle Jeffrey of Baylor that there can be no truly Christian university that fails to put theology at the core of all that it does. But the need to develop a proper epistemology of three dimensions, together with the practical action of making the humanities central, can—he thinks—be extended to all universities whatever, without any need for religious commitment. Consistently, since theology is one of the humanities, this would mean giving theology a place in every university, but he does not explicitly draw this conclusion as I do in my opening lecture.

2. The nature of pastoral formation: in and beyond the institution

The papers by Dumas, Kevin and Perry place the formation of the person at the focus of any educational enterprise, and understand a stress on this as a Baptist approach. The exposures by Felipe and Grace of domination and racism in the educational projects of missionaries

show precisely the failure to take this personal development seriously. Two more papers consider specifically the formation of Christian *ministers* as persons in the context of the seminary or theological college, and this is surely appropriate since Baptist Higher education largely began with education of ministers. We need to note, however, that the authors of these papers each have a different relation in their teaching roles to the higher education of a university. In both cases this raises interesting questions.

(a) *Cultivating Emotional Intelligence*

In the context of Australia, Keith assumes the situation of a residential theological college which is separate from the secular university. Morling College where he teaches is a unit of the Australian College of Theology, so it is affiliated to a specialized theological academy with degree-granting powers given by government, and parallel to the university system. This situation has developed because in Australia it is very unusual for public universities to have theology faculties. A refinement of this arrangement has been for a similar theological academy with multiple units, the Melbourne College of Divinity, to become a *University of Divinity*, again parallel to the state university system, but only offering theology.

In this situation Keith criticizes theological institutions for simply aiming to copy the “critical thinking” of the secular university, and for aiming for the same kind of academic status through the research and publications of their staff, neglecting the task of formation. In his situation it is not possible for Keith to consider whether theological courses could actually mount a challenge to the habits of the university, such as I suggested in my opening lecture. Given the situation of a residential college, he recommends that much more serious attention to be given to supervised field study and the theological reflection that arises from practice. His emphasis in this paper is that this reflection should include emotional reflection and the deliberate development of emotional intelligence. He collects a good deal of empirical data and qualitative/quantitative analysis to demonstrate convincingly that in ministry emotional exhaustion is linked to depression, and leads to burn-out and eventual dropout. His remedy is the teaching of emotional intelligence, and not only in reflection on practice: countering the approach of the secular universities, EI should become a regular component in courses that are based on critical thinking – for example, biblical studies, church history and doctrine.

(b) *Persons in dialogue (multilogue)*

Sally is working within the framework of UK theological colleges, which are all affiliated to a public, secular university in order to be able to grant degrees which are reserved to

universities existing by Act of Parliament. In the case of the Baptist unit at St Hild in Yorkshire where Sally teaches, courses are validated by the Department of Theology and Religion in the University of Durham. In addition to its own internal Bachelor of Arts in Theology and Religion, the Department partners with the Church of England in running and validating a whole series of external courses for Theology, Ministry and Mission which have a certain common core but many variations. It is central to Sally's argument that a student for ministry should be able to "inhabit" the Gospel story by dwelling in the "space between" many voices, including those which come from the college, the church and wider society. She shows some frustration with the way that modules of study are arranged in the validated courses, which in her view fragment the whole subject of theology and make it difficult for a student to live in the story. Personal formation is therefore hindered.

Her problem is not, as with Kevin, the imitation of patterns of critical thinking in the secular university. Nor is the process of formation she is working with limited by the boundaries of a residential college. The place for formation is essentially a ministry placement, in a congregation or other local pastoral situation, perhaps a pioneering form of church. Coming together in the college community makes up only part of the week during the semester. As I read her, she is calling for a more radical form of the present process of formation, making the many dialogues (the *multilogue*, as she calls it) in which the student is involved even more formative than they are at present. She is not calling for the loss of the college entirely as an institution—the voices of the staff and fellow-students are a key part of the multilogue. In theory Sally could take her frustrations with "fragmenting the story" into the organizing body of the degree qualification and so—in principle—make a challenge to the academic structures and methods of the University as well as to the Church of England. She *can* make witness to the academy. How far it would get is another matter, but there is the possibility of a dynamic relation between theology and the secular university such as I proposed in my opening lecture.

Sally's main point is the nature of the multilogue, a whole complex of dialogues within which the student is being formed, and which she calls inhabiting "the space between". This has to be loosened from the institutional space. It is not enough to contextualize theology, however; theological thinking must be open to a whole spectrum of voices. It is here, however, that I find some ambiguity in what Sally is presenting. She believes that a minister must be formed to be a dissenter from the general mood of the surrounding culture, which she sees as being shaped by relativism and pluralism. She follows

Stanley Hauerwas in finding an absolute distinction between the story in which the church lives and the story which society tells. Discerning the mind of Christ is absolutely “counter-cultural”. The student dwells in the “space between” at the same time as dwelling within an exclusive Gospel story which is the truth about the world, the Word which is Christ. But Sally points out that some of the voices in the dialogue precisely come from the culture of the world around. While she maintains that a minister in formation should not be “shaped” by this culture, she also maintains that dialogue is a matter of “call and response”. It is hard to see how this is genuine dialogue if Christians are not open to being “shaped” to some extent by the others to whom they relate. This does not mean being determined or swamped, but it should surely mean learning from and being affected by the other. This is a matter of kenosis and vulnerability within the multilogue to which Sally draws attention. There is a theological question here of where God *is* in the dialogue, and whether we can hear the Word of Christ through the voices of those who are not part of Christian culture. My own presentation of “overlapping spaces” in a university presumes that we can.

3. A Baptist way forward

Having placed the papers in relation to each other, we should now gather up insights to discern a way forward in the relation of Baptists to Higher Education.

(1) Cultivating the spirit of dissent

Leading on from my comments on Sally’s impressive paper, there seems to be agreement that Baptist institutions should be places for cultivating a spirit of resistance to injustice and a spirit of dissent against de-humanizing trends in society. Dumas observes that the history of black institutions like Morehouse College shows a “willingness to address the more difficult and pressing issues of division on political and spiritual grounds”. Felipe’s paper maintains that the Southern Baptist missionaries were concerned for “dissent management” and this implies that dissent was being voiced within the seminary. Was the picture then a mixed one—an attempt to incorporate the seminary within a network of power and racism, but with resistance? We would need to know more about the relation of the “Radical Movement” and the insurgent “Brazilian Baptist Association” to the seminary, its staff and students, and again research seems to be needed.

Perry envisages the Baptist university as being called to resist economic trends towards a merely utilitarian education, and to dissent from a prevailing ideology of scientific

naturalism. Sally calls for a “new dissent”, no longer against the establishment of the church but against the relativist mood of post-colonial, post-Christendom, post-modern society. She sees this mood exemplified in the quest of young people for “authenticity”, which is understood as the priority of personal experience, locating authority in one’s own life-story. Dissent means locating authority in the word of Christ alone. In terms of formation, the Gospel is the only way of understanding interpersonal dynamics, so that formation is “a highly subversive activity”. I have already raised the question, however, about whether the word of Christ is only to be found in the church; in my opening lecture I suggested that there is a space to grow personally on the borders of overlapping cultures in a university, and this is by no means incompatible with the authority of Christ who, as Dietrich Bonhoeffer put it, takes form in the world.

Dissent, based in the sole lordship of Christ, is a traditional Baptist emphasis, and it is right to expect it to take new forms in higher education today. Perry suggests that the Baptist ideals that have played the most significant role in higher education are “soul competency” and religious liberty. We must observe that the first of these is a distinctively American formulation, and appeared in the early twentieth century. While intending to safeguard unhindered access of the human person to God, it does tend to preserve an individualism which places a premium on “my” own freedom. In considering dissent on behalf of justice, it is good to remember that Baptists in the eighteenth century grounded their convictions about religious freedom in a belief in natural rights granted to human beings by God. The language of rights was a key element of dissent in society, and Baptists were ahead of other religious groups in adopting it. When this takes the form of a determination to respect the rights of *others*, we are taken beyond individualism into the community. Dumas reminds us that the theology of the “beloved community” shaped the civil rights movement, with its conviction that all persons are made in the image of God and so have worth and deserve respect.

(b) *Creating a covenant community*

Another major theme for the future of Baptist higher education is identified by Kevin, when he is considering the second pillar of a relational community which is necessary for personal formation: the intentional act to establish intimacy, he observes “has been expressed for Baptists through an emphasis on covenant life together”. The principle of covenant, with its associated requirement for trust, is reflected—he suggests—“in all aspects of life”: in business, healthcare, church and of course in education. I had also taken the metaphor of covenant for the willingness to live vulnerably on the boundary where cultures intersect, and

suggested that it could embrace both the formation of persons in the educational process, and the interdisciplinarity between theology and other academic areas in the Baptist view of a university. Sally expresses something similar in what she calls “the space between”, in the criss-cross of many conversations in her vision of formation in the “multilogue.” Indeed, she appears to appeal to the Baptist practice of holding a church meeting for an analogy to listening to many voices, including those often overlooked: she writes both that “dialogue is consonant with our dynamic of congregational governance” and that Baptists are committed to “opening a space for voices that have been silent”.

Covenant in the bible belongs to God’s own engagement in the “Multilogue”, or the rich network of many dialogues in which persons are formed. Covenant is not restricted to one people—either Jews or Christians. One Hebrew theologian, or school of theologians, responsible for large parts of the book of Genesis has a vision of God’s covenantal relation to all created beings, and not only human beings. In Genesis 9 God makes a covenant not only with Noah and his family, but with “every living creature of all flesh that is open the earth”. In the covenant made with Abraham, “all the families of the earth will be blessed” (Gen. 12).² This does not mean that God’s covenantal relation with all peoples is of the same kind, or the same depth of disclosure, and the covenant of the church is uniquely sustained through telling the story of Christ and re-living it in the sacraments.³ This diversity of covenant is indeed the vision expressed by the concept of “the beloved community”. Dumas reminds us that for Thurman the scope of this community is universal, but that as he worked on the idea during his time at Howard University he came to see that “differences and diversity are placed in relation and in service to the common good”. Dumas also underlines that for Thurman the “beloved community” embraces both human and non-human others, the natural world as well as humankind. It is totally inclusive.

Dumas’ paper is, on one level, arguing that the concept of the “beloved community” was carried and developed within Baptist institutions before it emerged with such transformative force in the social movement inspired by Dr Martin Luther King Jr. But on another level, between the lines, he is surely suggesting that these institutions themselves were, ideally at least, themselves embodiments of the beloved community. There is also no

² See Mark Brett, “Permutations of Sovereignty in the Priestly Tradition”, *Vetus Testamentum* 63/3 (2013), 383–392.

³ See Paul S. Fiddes, “Covenant and Participation”, *Perspectives in Religious Studies* 44/1 (2017), 119–38.

reason why Baptists who work in secular universities should not have a Baptist idea of those universities in terms of their becoming beloved communities.

(c) *Fostering a way of knowing that makes for human flourishing (The “Beloved Community”)*

Perry in his paper has urged us to pay attention to the epistemology with which a college or university is working, even when it may not notice it. What does the programme and degree-offering of an institution tell us about the way that it thinks we *know* what is real? *What* we can know and *how* we can know it are at the foundation of any education. We need an epistemology that fosters human flourishing. So, following Maynard Adams, he believes that we must “address the pervasive influence of scientific naturalism across the curriculum and embedded in many central practices of higher education—even in a Christian university.” He is careful to add that he is not rejecting science as do fundamentalist Christians who dispute scientific views of human origins and the age of the earth. He is pleading for a more careful awareness of the *limits* of science, and particularly the contraction of knowledge to what can be empirically established, with the exclusion of meaning and value as objects of knowing. Humanistic education must be encouraged; economic policies that privilege the utilitarian uses of education must be exposed, and the place to begin—though not end—is in our own Baptist institutions.

Perry’s clarion call is surely to be heeded, even if we might take issue with the exact form of the critique that he advances. There are forms of scientific education that do indeed cultivate a sensitivity to value and meaning and are deeply humanist; perhaps the polarization between the humanities and the sciences as Perry presents it is too stark (though all academics can recognize the need to maintain the importance of their subject in the cut and thrust of faculty meetings). An alternative to mounting a campaign in the *specific* terms of the “three dimensions of knowledge” that Perry identifies is more generally to encourage dialogue and interdisciplinarity between the humanities and the sciences, always including theology which specializes in the dimensions of meaning and value in our perception of the world. And that theology, I have suggested, is clearly involved in the formation of persons when it is tied to ministerial formation.

In this process of inhabiting the “space between” cultures (Sally’s phrase), we should also be alert to the issue of emotional intelligence which Keith has been urging.

Epistemology, “how we know things”, cannot be restricted to critical thinking but must include the emotional and the affective, as philosophers are increasingly recognizing.⁴ Kevin is also right to ask us to examine what we may call the epistemology of cyberspace—how our very process of knowing what is real is shaped by the digital world. Here we should not be overcome by the sense of the dangers of de-personalization which lurk in the internet; as Kevin tells us at the beginning of his paper, there is also the potential for creating a new kind of learning community. From a theological point of view I would like to add, that there *are* these possibilities because God is present in cyberspace as well as in the other spaces of the world that overlap in a university.⁵ But the warnings from history of Felipe and Grace should be ringing in our ears: it is all too easy to use learning as a tool of domination, and the digital age offers new tools for this mis-use.

This brings us back finally to the vision of “the beloved community” which Dumas asserts was sustained by Baptist higher education, and which he implies can be *embodied* in such education. This is also a question of epistemology. As the philosopher Martha Nussbaum has been stressing, love is a form of knowing. It undermines the way that we tend to exercise domination over objects of our knowledge, subjecting them to our own minds.⁶ When love becomes the foundation of a scholarly community we cease to use knowledge as a means of manipulating others. Here there are two ways of fostering the beloved community. Josiah Royce sees any community as *already* embodying a higher, and ultimately divine, love which is powerful enough to transform the individual if only we become attuned to it. By contrast, Dr King saw a need for the individual to challenge and resist existing communities in the name of a love which demands freedom and equality. We should surely not regard these two approaches as mutually exclusive. An academy which has the ideal of being a “beloved community” needs the element of dissent. But it can also have confidence that divine love is already immanent, objectively there, in all the cultural spaces that intersect within it.

⁴ See Marguerite La Caze and Henry Martyn Lloyd. “Editors’ introduction: Philosophy and the ‘affective turn’.” *Parrhesia* 13.2 (2011): 1–13.

⁵ See Paul S. Fiddes, “Sacraments in a Virtual World: A Baptist Approach.” *Baptist Sacramentalism* 3, ed. (Eugene: 2020): 81.

⁶ Martha C. Nussbaum, *Upheavals of Thought. The Intelligence of Emotions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 3–4, 27. Cf. Nussbaum, *Love’s Knowledge. Essays on Philosophy and Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), 262–3, 280–4.

