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# Pro Rege

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Volume 40 | Number 4

Article 1

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June 2012

## Academia Coram Deo

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### Recommended Citation

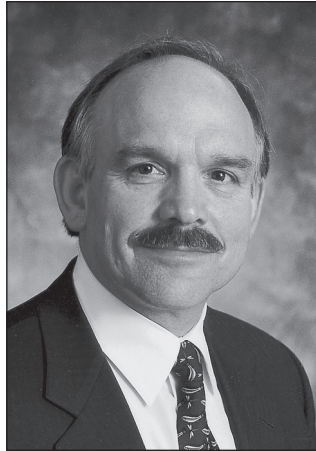
Byker, Gaylen J. (2012) "Academia Coram Deo," *Pro Rege*: Vol. 40: No. 4, 1 - 6.

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# *Academia Coram Deo*

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by Gaylen J. Byker

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Dr. Gaylen J. Byker has been president of Calvin College since 1995. He announced plans to retire following the 2011-12 academic year, in May of 2011. Raised in Hudsonville, Michigan, Byker earned a bachelor's degree from Calvin in interdisciplinary communications, both a master's degree in world politics and a law degree from the University of Michigan, and a doctoral degree in international relations from the University of Pennsylvania. At the age of 19, Byker interrupted his career at Calvin to earn a commission in the United States Army and serve as an artillery officer in Washington State and Vietnam, where he supervised 90 enlisted men in combat situations and was repeatedly decorated. Discharged with the rank of captain, he resumed his studies at Calvin, graduating in 1973. During that time, he and Susan (Lemmen) Byker, a 1971 Calvin graduate, served as resident directors. It was while at Calvin, Byker says, that he became interested in the Middle East, and he explored that interest more deeply at the University of Pennsylvania. While working on his Ph.D., Byker lived and taught in Beirut, Lebanon. Prior to returning to his alma mater as president, Byker worked as a lawyer in Philadelphia, an investment banker in New York, and a partner in a natural gas firm in Houston. Gaylen and Susan Byker have two daughters, Tanya and Gayle, and three grandchildren, Bastian, Eva and Johannes.

In my first Convocation Speech at Calvin College in 1995, I described eight “Habits of the Mind” that should characterize a Christian college. In the following eight years, Dean of the Chapel Dr. Neal Plantinga and I alternated Convocation speeches on these eight habits.

Our primary text was Romans 12:1-3, in which the Apostle Paul challenges us to be transformed by the renewing of our minds—the cultivation, with God’s help, of Christian habits of the mind. The series included the following topics:

- “Intellectual Love”—Loving God with all our minds
- “Sober Self Esteem”—Developing the proper attitude towards oneself
- “Ordinary Love”—Loving and respecting our neighbors
- “Duty: A Light to Guide and a Rod to Check”—Doing our duty by connecting our practice with our principles
- “On Truthfulness”—Being honest
- “What is a Christian Worldview For?”—Developing and practicing a Christian Worldview
- “The Habit of Reflection”—Being thoughtful, reflective People
- “Intellectual Courage”—Courageously following our convictions

These habits of the mind are vital features of a Christian college community. They are habits that are at the core of our efforts to build an institution of Christ-centered higher education—habits that we need to remind ourselves of frequently and work on consistently. The habit of loving God with all our minds, the habit of humility, the habit of

loving our neighbors as we do ourselves, the habits of being truthful, and the habit of demonstrating intellectual courage: all are vital characteristics of a Christian college community. And the habitual development and practice of a Christian worldview is one of the primary missions of a Christian college.

However, I have become more and more convinced that Dr. Plantinga and I did not really finish our task. There remains an important group of interrelated habits of the mind and the heart that need to be added to the list if we are to adequately deal with the habits required to build *and sustain* a thoroughly Christ-centered college.

Dr. Plantinga and I drew upon the writings of John Henry Newman, a Christian educator who lectured in the 1850s at the founding of a distinctively Christian university in Ireland. Newman believed that a thoroughly Christian university was necessary to counter what he called the “godless colleges” of his era and the “ironically dilapidated ethos” of Oxford and Cambridge universities.<sup>1</sup> Newman’s lectures, collected in a volume entitled *The Idea of a University*, have been described by a prominent philosopher as, “the most important treatise on the idea of a university ever written in any language.”<sup>2</sup> But, despite Newman’s powerful description of the ideal Christian liberal arts education and the habits of the mind that should characterize a Christian university, his new university lasted only 28 years.

In the 1880s, about the same time that Newman’s ill-fated Christian university was being merged with the Royal University of Ireland, Abraham Kuyper led the founding of a distinctively Christian university in the Netherlands. As you know, it was named the Free University of Amsterdam because it was free of control or financial support from either a church or the government. Kuyper’s inaugural address at the founding of the Free University contains some of his most profound thought and oratory. The address speaks eloquently of the purposes and character of a Reformed Christian university in much the same terms that we use at Calvin College and Dordt.<sup>3</sup> And, yet, by the 1970s the Free University had ceased to be a Christian institution in any meaningful sense, though some Christian scholars carry on aspects of the original vision.

I want to draw upon the histories of Newman’s and Kuyper’s failed efforts to create and sustain

Christian institutions. And, I want to propose that conducting “*Academia Coram Deo*”—that doing our teaching and learning, our research and scholarship and our communal living before the face of God— involves three interrelated habits of the mind and the heart: three essential ways of believing, thinking, acting and relating that can sustain a distinctively Christian and academically excellent college.

Conducting all aspects of academic life *coram deo*, before the face of God, has been a Calvinist rallying cry in higher education in this country since the founding of what were at their beginnings explicitly and staunchly Reformed colleges: Harvard, Yale, and Princeton. The founders of these institutions, like Newman and Kuyper, claimed *every domain on earth* for Christ and believed that *every moment* should be lived *coram deo*, before the face of God. Kuyper stated this conviction most eloquently in his Free University inaugural lecture:

No single piece of our mental world is to be hermetically sealed off from the rest, and there is not a square inch in the whole domain of our human existence over which Christ, who is Sovereign over all, does not cry: “Mine!”<sup>4</sup>

And, yet, as James Bratt, history professor at Calvin, has observed, these Calvinists “also set loose one of the most efficient engines of secularization the modern world has seen.”<sup>5</sup>

So, what went wrong? Why were the noble founding principles, purposes and character of these—and many other Christian colleges—not sustained? My proposal today is based on the belief that the people who constituted these institutions failed, both individually and collectively, to embrace and balance three, sometimes contending, habits of the mind and the heart, three habits that are all necessary to sustain the conduct of academic life *coram deo*, higher education before the face of God.

These habits of the mind and heart are, first, the consistent practice of piety, that is, a personal and a collective engagement with God and his Word; second, engagement with God’s world in recognition of the common grace that God grants to all of his creation; and third, a constant awareness of and response to the antithesis—the ever-present conflict between sin and evil, on one hand, and God’s will and kingdom, on the other. Conducting

and sustaining academic life *coram deo*, then, requires constantly embracing and balancing piety, common grace, and the antithesis.

The wonderful but daunting task of living *coram deo*, of doing all of our thinking, acting and relating in the conscious awareness that we are in God's presence, is the other side of the coin of our belief in the sovereignty of God. The Apostle Paul makes this clear in the powerful passage read from Colossians 1. All three of the habits of mind and heart that I am suggesting as necessary for sustain-

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ing a truly Christian college are beautifully tied together in this passage. Paul says that we are rescued from the power of darkness and made members of God's kingdom through Christ's sacrifice, and that our reconciliation with God, and the world that he created and sustains through Christ, is the basis of our faith.

Our faith is established and held firm through the hope we have in the gospel. To continue in this faith and make it fully operative in our lives, we need to nurture our relationship with God. Individual faculty, staff, students, and the college itself need to be regularly engaged with God and his Word. This is the essence of true piety. It involves personal and institutional commitment and allegiance to the triune God, not mere assent to abstract concepts like creation and transformation. In his book on the essential characteristics of Christian colleges, Duane Litfin describes the need to know, worship, and have allegiance to Christ as the creator, redeemer, sustainer, and judge of the universe.<sup>6</sup> This piety is very different from Newman's abstract assent to the existence of a "Supreme Being" as the basis for a natural theology. Intellectual assent to theism is a far cry from piety.

Unless we, individually and collectively, grapple with the Scriptures, pray, and worship with passion and commitment, we will not have the faith, the spiritual resources, to actually engage in the "integration of faith and learning." To love God with our minds, to have intellectual allegiance to him, we obviously need to know and love him. This love does not have to become an otherworldly pietism that distorts faith and leads to withdrawal. As historian Mark Noll has observed, piety is the realization that "Christianity is a way of life as well as a set of beliefs,"<sup>7</sup> and there is no inherent conflict between "warm piety and hard thinking."<sup>8</sup> In fact they need each other.

Abraham Kuyper himself had a passion for the life of the spirit that he constantly sought to balance with intellectual integrity, social and political activism, and a strong concern for justice. He loved the idea of living *coram deo*, and, in addition to his voluminous writings on theology, philosophy, social policy, and politics, he wrote devotional meditations, the best-known collection of which is entitled *Near Unto God*. In his devotionals as in his others writings, Kuyper "sensibly worked the line between spiritual and earthly concerns."<sup>9</sup> He sought to be deeply engaged with God and deeply engaged with God's world. But!, in part because of the religious and political context in which the Free University was founded, Kuyper built in an unfortunately rigid separation between the university and the church. In practice, he also kept the spiritual and the intellectual spheres far too distinct. As a result, the Free University had no chapel and no connection to a church. This lack was not of as much consequence when all of the faculty and administrators were Reformed Christians, committed to Kuyper's cause. But, when Kuyper's successors felt the pressure for academic respectability and diversity, the drive for specialization, and the desire for government funding, the lack of an intentional, institutionalized emphasis on and commitment to piety proved disastrous.

The key lesson here is that a robust piety, a fully-orbed engagement with God and his Word, is the basis for conducting and sustaining academic life *coram deo*. The great 18<sup>th</sup>-century Calvinist theologian and educator Jonathan Edwards put it this way:

Only the heart changed by God's grace will understand itself, God, the world of nature, and the proper potential of human existence."<sup>10</sup>

This perspective is world-affirming and world-engaging, and it privileges the biblical account of God's creation, redemption, and restoration through Christ. It makes this account the touchstone of our teaching and learning, our research and scholarship, and our life as a community. And this is the starting point of the connection between the habit of piety and the second, interrelated habit, the habit of living as agents of God's common grace.

What is God's common grace, and what does it mean to live as agents of that common grace? God created the world good. He delights in all aspects of it—its beauty, its marvelous processes—and he desires the shalom, the flourishing, of all his creatures, even those who are not recipients of special or saving grace. And even though sin entered the world through the Fall and affected every aspect of creation, the world is still God's handiwork. As part of God's common grace, Christ came to "reconcile all things," as Colossians 1 puts it. As part of God's common grace, all things hold together in Christ, and Christians have the privilege and obligation to be engaged with all intellectual and practical aspects of God's world, to work for the redemption of God's creation. That is why at Calvin and Dordt we teach, learn, and write about politics and science, education and social work, philosophy and foreign languages as part of the "cultural mandate." And it is why we take delight in seeing our graduates go out as agents of transformation in law and medicine, teaching and engineering, government and business, science and recreation.<sup>11</sup>

Recognizing and living as agents of God's common grace is one of the great strengths of the Calvinist tradition and one that we take seriously. Reformed Christians have frequently heeded the command passed on by Jeremiah to "seek the welfare (or shalom) of the city [where you have been sent], and pray to the Lord on its behalf."<sup>12</sup> Our concerns for justice and the restoration of people and structures distorted by sin and evil—for the building of shalom—are central to what we are as Reformed colleges and how we perceive our mission. The key for Christians who would conduct

academic life *coram deo*, however, is that we recognize and act as agents of God's common grace, that we engage with God's world, in response to and in keeping with our engagement with God himself. We need to see ourselves as agents of God's unfolding purposes—not our own purposes—in this current age.

The concept and work of common grace have been great strengths of the Reformed tradition in higher education. However, they have also been among the tradition's greatest weaknesses. This is what James Bratt was referring to when he noted that the Reformed tradition in higher education has "set loose one of the greatest engines of secularization [and I would add secularism] the modern world has seen."<sup>13</sup> It is a common trend for many individuals and institutions to move from the concept and practice that "everything is sacred" to the concept and practice that "nothing is sacred" or has *any* spiritual significance. In one manifestation of this trend, "The progressivism of liberal Christianity succeeded so thoroughly that it obliterated the Christianity."<sup>14</sup> Such people believe that they can carry out God's purposes in this world without being committed Christians. This process often involves, as Richard Mouw describes it, the granting of an "across-the-board upgrade" to all aspects of culture, with a nod to God's common grace. The result is that institutions often focus on the positive aspects of culture and work for the common good but cease to be Christian.

This misunderstanding and misuse of common grace frequently results from two interrelated tendencies. The first I have already cautioned about: loss of the connection between common grace and piety, the loss of the connection between engagement with God's world and engagement with God and his Word. The second tendency is to ignore or deny the existence of the ever-present conflict in this world between sin and evil, on one hand, and God's will and kingdom, on the other. This tendency to ignore or deny the Antithesis is at the root of what Lesslie Newbigin calls our failure to engage in a "missionary confrontation" with our culture.<sup>15</sup>

As Henry Stob states, "The good creation is God's thesis...[.]the fall of our first parents [initiated] humanity's antithesis to God's thesis."<sup>16</sup> The results, as Augustine saw them, are two spiritual

kingdoms arrayed against each other in the world, and their mutual opposition is central to the historical process. This conflict exists within each of us because of sin. And this conflict exists between the worldview and life system based on Christ and the worldviews and life systems of fallen cultures. In referring to the field of education, Kuyper described this antithesis as a fundamental confrontation between the worldviews and life systems of “normalists” and “abnormalists,” between those who believe and act as if the world is normal and those who believe and act as if all of life is distorted by sin and evil.

Nicholas Wolterstorff offers two reasons that we often miss this conflict. He says that we “scarcely see the world as Christians” because our “patterns of thought are not those of Christianity” but those of our time and place in history. And second, many Christians, including many Christian scholars, lack a deep understanding of the Christian faith: “We see only pieces and snatches and miss the full relevance of our Christian commitment.”<sup>17</sup> This limited view contrasts sharply with the Apostle Paul’s call in our text, Romans 12, not to be conformed to this world but to be transformed by the renewing of our minds.

We are called to combat the materialism and hedonism of our culture—to be in opposition to its worship of individual autonomy, its glorification of violence, and its sexual mores: to challenge unjust domestic and international policies. Christians need to stand over-against the scientific naturalism, rampant relativism, and post-modern cynicism of our day. Miroslav Volf reminds us that such non-conformity takes considerable courage but is needed to “preserve the identity of the Christian faith and insure its lasting social relevance.” He says,

In contemporary de-Christianized, pluralistic and rapidly changing Western cultures, only those religious groups that make no apology about their “difference” will be able to survive and thrive. The strategy of conformation is socially ineffective in the short run (because you cannot shape by parroting) and self-destructive in the long run (because you conform to what you have not helped to shape).<sup>18</sup>

In the Irish university case, Newman failed at the outset to present such a Christian challenge to the rationalism and scientific naturalism of his day. At the Free University, the recognition and opposition to the Antithesis fell away with the decline in the faith commitments and piety of its faculty. Neither institution sustained a “missionary confrontation” with its surrounding culture.

We have, then, these three interrelated habits of mind and heart that combined, make possible the sustained conduct of academia *coram deo*. Three ways of believing, acting, and relating that can sustain a distinctively Christian and academically excellent college: the consistent practice of piety—that

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is, personal and collective engagement with God and his Word; engagement with God’s world as agents of the common grace God grants to all of his creation; and the constant awareness of and response to the antithesis—the ever-present conflict between sin and evil on one hand, and God’s will and kingdom on the other. Embracing and balancing piety, common grace, and the antithesis in our teaching and learning, our research and scholarship, and our communal living is no easy task; few colleges or universities have been able to sustain higher education before the face of God in the long run. I have learned over the years, especially from my Kuyperian mentor, Richard Mouw, that piety provides the spiritual resources needed to embrace and balance common grace and the antithesis. And, I believe that consistently conducting academia *coram deo* is the worthy and wonderful calling of a Reformed Christian college.

#### Endnotes

- 1 David N. Livingstone, “The Idea of a University: Interventions from Ireland,” *Christian Scholar’s Review*, 30, no. 2 (Winter 2000): 186.
- 2 Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Idea of the University: A*



- Reexamination* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), 9.
- 3 “Sphere Sovereignty”, in *Abraham Kuyper: A Centennial Reader*, ed. James D. Bratt (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1998), 461-90.
  - 4 *Ibid.*, 488.
  - 5 James D. Bratt, “What Can the Reformed Tradition Contribute to Christian Higher Education?” in *Models for Christian Higher Education: Strategies for Success in the Twenty-First Century*, eds. Richard T. Hughes and William B. Adrian (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1997), 125.
  - 6 Duane Litfin, *Conceiving the Christian College* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2004), 38-44. I am indebted to Litfin for his citation of several of the sources used in this speech.
  - 7 Mark A. Noll, “Christian World Views and Some Lessons of History,” in *The Making of a Christian Mind – A Christian World View & the Academic Enterprise*, ed. Arthur Holmes (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1985), 42.
  - 8 *Ibid.*, 43.
  - 9 James C. Schaap, introduction to *Near Unto God*, by Abraham Kuyper, translated and adapted by James C. Schaap (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1997), 12.
  - 10 Noll, “Christian World Views and Some Lessons of History,” 44.
  - 11 Richard J. Mouw, *He Shines In All That’s Fair: Culture and Common Grace*, (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2001), and “Common Grace” in *Abraham Kuyper: A Centennial Reader*, ed. James D. Bratt (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1998), 165-201.
  - 12 Jeremiah 29:7 (NRSV).
  - 13 Bratt, “What Can the Reformed Tradition Contribute to Christian Higher Education?” 125.
  - 14 Mark A. Noll, “The Future of the Religious College: Looking Ahead by Looking Back,” in *The Future of Religious Colleges*, ed. Paul J. Dovre (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2002), 75, citing George M. Marsden, *The Soul of the American University: From Protestant Establishment to Established Unbelief* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994).
  - 15 Lesslie Newbigin, *Foolishness to the Greeks: The Gospel and Western Culture* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1986).
  - 16 Henry Stob, “Observations on the Concept of the Antithesis,” in *Perspectives on the Christian Reformed Church: Studies in Its History, Theology and Ecumenicity*, ed. Peter DeKlerk and Richard R. DeRidder (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1983), 241-58.
  - 17 Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Reason Within the Bounds of Religion* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1976), 103-4.
  - 18 Miroslav Volf, “Theology, Meaning and Power,” in *The Future of Theology: Essays in Honor of Jürgen Moltmann* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1996), 100.