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## Global Awareness and Engagement: New Opportunities for Christian Higher Education

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**Editor's Note:** Dr. David S. Dockery originally presented this paper as the spring convocation address at Dordt College, January 14, 2011.

# Global Awareness and Engagement: New Opportunities for Christian Higher Education

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by David S. Dockery

**W**e now live in a world characterized by global awareness, new understandings of terrorism, war, and the meaning of security. Around the world we observe a shift among the nations, including the rise of megacities, which will influence the twenty-first century. The recognition, by futurists—that China and India are being suggested as the countries to watch for future economic influence and that places like Nigeria, Brazil,

South Korea will be the sources of strength for a “new Christendom”—requires us to think strategically about a global and future-directed role for Christian higher education. In order to think carefully about the future, we turn to the past for guidance.

One person to whom we can look for guidance is William Carey. Carey is known as the father of modern missions. However, in 1792, when the twenty-five-year-old Carey began to talk about taking the gospel to the remotest parts of the earth, church leaders in England replied by saying, “Sit down young man. If God wants to reach the heathen, He will do it without you.” Most of us know at least aspects of this story. In response, Carey wrote a brilliant treatise, *An Enquiry into the Obligations of Christians to Use Means for the Conversion of the Heathen*. As it has been said, Carey’s emphasis exhorted his readers to join him in his efforts of expecting great things from God and attempting great things for God. Shortly thereafter, Carey set sail for India, where he invested the rest of his life.<sup>1</sup>

In India this shoemaker was used of God to translate the Scriptures into the language of the people, in order to establish schools, while bringing a Christian presence to that foreign land. In 1792, Carey and his colleagues formed the Particular Baptist Society for Propogating the Gospel Among the Heathen. This cooperative venture became the rallying point that pulled together both

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Calvinists and non-Calvinists in England, creating a collaborative effort that shaped the life of British Christians for many decades. In the same way, I would like to propose the work of Christian higher education as a unifying and cooperative agent for evangelical global efforts in the twenty-first century.

Even though, at some 220 years removed from the time of Carey, we face distinctively different tasks and different challenges, we can learn from the two primary lessons in William Carey's life. First, he believed that Christians need to proclaim the Lordship of Christ around the world. Second, he stressed that God uses human *means* to extend the kingdom on this earth.

You might be asking what these two lessons have to do with a vision for Christian higher education. After all, Dordt College is not a church, and Christian higher education has a different calling from mission organizations. Still, I believe the answer lies in several key aspects of our shared work.

I believe we must initially recognize that Christian higher education shares in the missional task of the church-at-large by participating with other Christ-followers in taking the gospel around the world. As it does, we must recognize that our unique role as educators is to use education as a means to accomplish these ends. Over 200 years ago, William Carey brilliantly argued that, somehow within the mystery and providence of God, it has been ordained that the kingdom of God be extended and advanced through *means*, which include the use of human instruments to accomplish God's purposes. This morning I would like to suggest that in the changing world of the twenty-first century, it has never been more important to recognize education, and particularly Christian higher education, as a unique agent to help extend the kingdom of God.<sup>2</sup>

Further, as noted earlier, we are living in an unprecedented period of time, in that never before has the world seemingly been so accessible to all of us. Since it is so accessible, we see the poverty, terrorism, revolution, despair, destruction, and environmental challenges around the world. We who are gathered here this morning live in the academic world, but our questions here today are not merely "academic ones" (in the negative sense

of that word)—we are here this morning not only as educators but also as Christ followers. We have eternity alive in our hearts, and we have been given the awesome privilege of being involved in the kingdom work of our Lord Jesus Christ, which includes both meeting the needs of people around the globe and sharing the promise of an eschatological hope. The two primary points of Carey's argument nearly 220 years ago thus remain relevant for us, even though the world in which we seek to apply those principles looks quite different from Carey's context.

In the eighteenth century, Carey's trip to India took almost twelve months. During those days, such a trip was racked by the uncertainty of travel—the possibility of disease and death resulting from the lack of proper nutrition en route was an inevitable aspect of the journey. Modern transportation has changed all of that for us. To borrow a phrase from James Sire, the universe is now "next door."<sup>3</sup>

In the eighteenth century, communication over long distances depended on transportation, particularly by boat. But in the nineteenth century, the first trans-Atlantic telecommunication cable was successfully laid along the ocean floor. That step in the communication revolution set our world on a course that seemingly will erase all distance. We now can send voice memos to hundreds of people simultaneously, and Skype allows us to participate visually in the process. Television networks now compete for a two- to four-second lead on breaking international stories. We talk long distance to our friends on the other side of the ocean to see what the weather is like and to make sure they are feeling well on that day. Thousands of phone calls, texts, and e-mails like these cross borders and oceans each day, filled with conversations about the latest event in the life of the kids, a new recipe that needed to be shared, and the latest athletic event, including the second-guessing of decisions by officials and coaches, as well as movies, politicians, pundits, and military operations. Distance certainly does not affect things the way it once did.

When I was growing up as a young boy in Alabama, I could never have imagined that I would one day walk across the pavement in Red Square in Moscow. My earliest vision of that part of the

world was Khrushchev banging on the platform, screaming, “We will bury you.” Since then, I have been to Russia for two lengthy trips. Moreover, Mikhail Gorbachev has spent a day on the Union campus, including almost two hours in my office. These kinds of things were almost unimaginable to us just a few years ago. In South America, people are reading the French magazine *Elle* as well as the U.S.-produced *Better Homes and Gardens*. A visit to Latin America might produce a meal of chicken chow mein, while a trip to Beijing will find Chinese youth wearing American designer jeans and eating

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French fries and Big Macs from McDonalds as they walk down the street. This is the diverse and changing world that many of us have personally observed and that Christian higher education has now been called to serve.<sup>4</sup>

Learning to adapt to this changing world in order to serve it is more than a good idea. We now live in a multi-racial, multi-colored, multi-ethnic context. We have the pleasure of seeing God’s creation in all of its variety. I believe this is a great gift from a good God.

As we contemplate our shrinking globe, we must recognize the growing opportunity that God has provided for advancing his kingdom. Every tribe created by the hand of God now lives within the reach of the Gospel, be it through business, healthcare, government service, or, most importantly for us, education. Indeed, our hour is unprecedented. Our opportunities are unmatched. We are called to be members of this global family as we step into the twenty-first century.

There is, however, another side to the story. The Christian voice is being discharged from its

formerly privileged role in our society. As this is happening, we are discovering how accommodated we have become to the assumptions of the culture around us. If, on the one hand, we are jarred and shaken by the shift in the shrinking globe and the changes in the social landscape around us, we are, on the other hand, faced with a rude awakening that those of us in the West live in what many call a post-Christian context.<sup>5</sup>

One of the roles that Christian higher education must play in that context, I believe, is that of helping the church live always between gospel and culture, recognizing, on the one hand, the cultural dynamics that shape us and hearing, on the other hand, the gospel that calls us to know and value things in a very different way.<sup>6</sup> One of the most important cultural issues with which we must wrestle if we are to take seriously the call to global awareness and engagement is the factor underlying the contemporary appeal of religious pluralism: globalization of culture. We must find ways simultaneously to model tolerance and to respond to the very real challenges raised by globalization.

In recent years, as much has been written on the subject of Christianity and world religions, it has become customary to distinguish three broad categories for understanding the relation of the Christian faith to other religions: particularism, inclusivism, and pluralism.<sup>7</sup>

In very broad terms, we can say that the traditional perspective of Christianity, both Roman Catholic and Protestant and certainly of those in the Confessional and Reformed tradition, has been what is often called *particularism*. Many Protestants and a large number of Roman Catholics following Vatican II have shifted away from *particularism* and moved toward a more open perspective that might be labeled *inclusivism*. *Inclusivism* is a rather ambiguous belief that even though there is a sense in which Jesus Christ is superior to other religious figures and that God’s grace and salvation is grounded in Jesus Christ, this grace might also be found in and through other religions. Such a perspective is different from *particularism*, which believes that Jesus Christ is the unique incarnation of God, fully God and fully human, and that only through the personal work of Jesus Christ is there the possibility of salvation. Within the last 30 years, a growing num-

ber of leading thinkers have found both *particularism and inclusivism* less than satisfying and thereby have fully embraced religious *pluralism*, a view that rejects the suggestion that there is anything significantly unique, normative, or superior about Jesus Christ and the Christian faith.<sup>8</sup>

Pluralists claim that salvation is somehow present in its own way in every religion. They say that no religion can claim to be fully normative and, thus, that none can claim to be superior to all others. According to pluralists, all that Christians can say is that Jesus Christ is good for them; they cannot claim that Jesus is unique in a true or universal sense.

One of the challenges, then, for those of us called to serve in Christian higher education is to maintain a distinctively Christian presence that stands without reservation on the uniqueness of the Gospel in contexts where the Gospel is not well received. We cannot be forced into a false either/or choice—either a supposed intolerant particularism or a supposed tolerant pluralism. We *must* maintain a commitment to Gospel particularity while addressing legitimate concerns for religious tolerance.<sup>9</sup> We must lead the way in modeling, simultaneously, a spirit of tolerance and an unapologetic commitment to the uniqueness of Jesus Christ and the Gospel message. In this way, Christian higher education can establish a credible Christian presence in places often hostile to the Gospel while it models, for other Christ-followers, a way to engage the global context in which we find ourselves.

What does all this have to do with the mission of Christian liberal-arts-based institutions like Dordt College? A great deal, I would suggest.

Our role in Christian higher education is not primarily an evangelistic one, or so it seems to me, but is an educational one. Yet that educational role may involve genuine pre-evangelism by providing a Christian presence in the world. Our role is primarily that of creating an environment for spiritual progress, engaging in persuasive and authentic interaction with people, and also demonstrating by our presence the credibility of the Christian faith.

Creating such an environment can connect the largely un-evangelized world with the God of the Bible who has revealed himself ultimately in Jesus Christ. Our role is not so much that of shining a

flood light as that of lighting a candle. If someone is sitting in a dark room and you flip a switch that floods the room with light, the person in the room will undoubtedly wince and turn away from the source of the light with eyes shut tightly. If, on the other hand, you walk into a dark room with a candle, the person in the darkness will be attracted and drawn to the light. Our calling is to light a candle in this twenty-first-century world.<sup>10</sup>

In order for these things to take place, we must seek opportunities not only to speak but also to listen. Listening is an art, and before we can articulate the truths of God's kingdom, we must learn to listen. As someone has well said, "How will they hear unless we learn to listen?"<sup>11</sup>

So where does this leave us? It leaves us, in 2011, in a world characterized by globalization and mega cities. It leaves us in a world in which Spanish, not English, is the language most frequently spoken by Christians around the world. It also leaves us in a context that points to the browning of Christianity and a movement of the Christian base toward Africa and South America. From a purely statistical point of view, Christianity in the twenty-first century will be a non-Western religion. Of course, the intervening work of God in another Great Awakening could change such directions, but the likely reality, according to current trajectories, is that the portrait of Christianity in days ahead will be quite different from a picture in the middle of the last century. For example, scholars in recent years have noted that in 1900, there were approximately 10 million Christians in Africa. By 2000 there were 360 million. By 2025 conservative estimates see that number rising to over 630 million. Those same estimates put the number of Christians in Latin America in 2025 at 640 million, and in Asia at 460 million. At that point, the typical Christian will be a woman living in a Nigerian village or a Brazilian town.

What then must North American Christian higher education do if it hopes to contribute to the future of a global Christianity? First and foremost, we must remain anchored to Jesus Christ while geared to the times.<sup>12</sup> Next, we must make it our pattern to defer to non-Western opinions and ideas whenever our most basic Christian convictions are not at stake. Western wealth and isolation have, at

times, kept us from understanding the real issues of the world at large.

Similarly, we must include the importance of social justice in our understanding the nature and work of God. One way of explaining the rise of liberation theology in third-world contexts is the church's failure to teach and practice justice. Our institutions need to engage in serious work that puts education, justice, and missions together as partners rather than competitors. Christian institutions of higher education that do not encourage students to wrestle with these shared issues are not preparing responsible Christ followers for the twenty-first century. The good news, however, is that young adults on our campuses easily accept the idea that Christians are to provide homes for the homeless and food for the hungry. They understand that they are to work for justice while simultaneously taking the good news of the gospel cross-culturally to new portions of the world. We must acknowledge, with thanksgiving, that the generation of students currently on our campuses articulate the holistic call of the kingdom of God much better than has almost any generation before them.<sup>13</sup>

As we move toward our conclusion this morning, we are reminded that expanding global opportunities will increase our exposure to people who call themselves Christ-followers but whose ideas and backgrounds are quite different from ours. We must recognize that what brings us together is not our homogeneous characteristics but our deep love for Jesus Christ, who has given us new life. Our lives then are to become an offering of thanks to Jesus Christ, best expressed in lifestyles of compassion toward the least of these in our world. Our guide is Scripture itself, inspired by God the Holy Spirit. We should assume our humble posture of listening to and learning from one another.

While recognizing the implications of these observations for global education, we must acknowledge how few of us will actually relocate cross-culturally for long periods of time. That being the case, we should perhaps think about the role of education, not only as an international work but as an intercultural work. Many areas of the United States are beginning to look as if the world has moved to our very doorstep. Poverty, home-

lessness, drug abuse, and violence are all around us. Our cities are multi-ethnic and intercultural. Our call then must be expanded to include not only an international component but also a growing intercultural component of efforts in this country. Thus, we must grapple with our insulation. Such grappling will require courageous decisions in days ahead, as we respond to the privilege of locally living out the global implications of our faith.<sup>14</sup>

The missional and educational task of Christian higher education, then, is to develop global Christians on our campuses. We can take the leadership in our own situations. And we can join with

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our friends and colleagues on other campuses to forge relevant ties for our global work in the twenty-first century. We must not shy away from the task. We need to be bold like William Carey over 200 years ago. Let us then expect great things from God, and let us attempt great things for God as together we wholeheartedly pursue new opportunities for Christian higher education. We need to ask for fresh eyes to see Christian higher education's potential role as the *means* for establishing a Christian presence in the world. Let us therefore go forth in wisdom, humility, and confidence, recognizing the unique calling that is ours, ready to provide an answer for the hope that is in us through



Jesus Christ, our Lord, celebrating the blessings of our heritage, and envisioning a bold and blessed future for the days ahead.<sup>15</sup>

### Endnotes

1. The section on William Carey is primarily drawn from Timothy George, *Faithful Witness: The Life and Times of William Carey* (Birmingham: Women's Missionary Union, 1991). See also Mike Tulley, "William Carey Revisited," in *Telling the Truth*, ed. D. A. Carson (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 336-42.
2. See Harold Netland, "Globalization and Theology Today," in *Globalizing Theology: Belief and Practice in an Era of World Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2002); also Tite Tienou, "Christian Theology in an Era of World Christianity," *Globalizing Theology*.
3. See, James W. Sire, *The Universe Next Door* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1997); and Harvie M. Conn, *Eternal Word and Changing Worlds: Theology, Anthropology, and Mission in Dialogue* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984); also Donald Posterski, *Reinventing Evangelism: New Strategies for Presenting Christ in Today's World* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1989).
4. See the various discussions of these points in George R. Hunsberger and Craig Van Gelder, *The Church Between Gospel and Culture* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996); also, Harold A. Netland, *Encountering Religious Pluralism: The Challenge to Christian Faith and Mission* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2001).
5. See Lamin Sanneh, *Whose Religion is Christianity: The Gospel beyond the West* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003).
6. See Philip Eaton, *Engaging the Culture: Changing the World* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2011).
7. See Harold A. Netland and Keith A. Johnson, "Why is Religious Pluralism Fun—and Dangerous?" in *Telling the Truth*, 47-67.
8. See Netland, *Encountering Religious Pluralism*.
9. See Stan D. Gaede, *When Tolerance Is No Virtue: Political Correctness, Multiculturalism and the Future of Truth and Justice* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1993).
10. See Tilley, "William Carey Revisited," 336-42.
11. See Ron Johnson, *How Will They Hear if We Don't Listen* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1994).
12. See Philip Jenkins, *The New Christendom: The Coming of Global Christianity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002); *idem*, *Believing the Bible in the Global South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006); also, Lamin Sanneh and Joel Carpenter, eds., *The Changing Face of Christianity: Africa, the West, and the World* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003).
13. See the discussions in Netland, *Encountering Religious Pluralism*; also Hunsberger and Van Gelder, *Church between Gospel and Culture*.
14. See Jonathan J. Bonk, *Between Past and Present: Evangelical Mission in the Twenty-first Century* (Pasadena: William Carey Library, 2003); Christopher J. Wright, *The Mission of God* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2006).
15. Portions of this address previously appeared in David S. Dockery, *Renewing Minds* (Nashville: B&H, 2008).