

## THE IMPORTANCE OF THE CHRISTIAN TRADITION

### WE BENEFIT FROM THE IDEAS AND STRUGGLES OF THOSE WHO WENT BEFORE US

One of the tasks of Christians today, Stephen Russell suggests, is to become rooted in the theological reflection and history of the Christian tradition. Rootedness in the long inheritance of our faith helps us to identify and overcome the listless and fragmented ways of our contemporary world. Stephen teaches courses in history and theology at Faith Builders Training Institute.

We live in a world of fragmentation and hyper-individualism. Few, aside from Christians and other religious groups, are travelling the ancient paths or engaging ancient truths. Some movers and shakers of our contemporary world are consciously trying to erect a new morality based on personal subjective truth and desire, in order to replace the traditional morality that was based on God's revelation, the accumulated wisdom of mankind, and natural law. For contemporary believers, our present situation can seem dark and sometimes we may be tempted to despair, but it need not be so. We Christians need to keep our focus on God and how He has worked in the past. This will encourage us to expect God to bring new life out of the challenges of our times.

Since Creation God has been forming His people, His own possession. He gave us all we needed to flourish in a newly created world that was "very good" so that we could mature fully into what it meant to be in God's image. Unfortunately, we listened to Satan's lie, that first lie about secret knowledge that we thought offered us more than God's truth did. The resulting fall necessitated the ultimate act of love as the Father sent His Son to redeem us from death that we had brought upon ourselves.

The story that followed is one of God's infinite patience and the willingness to do whatever it took to bring us into the fullness of God's image. In our brokenness we humans resisted God at nearly every step. Yet God persevered, giving us a fresh start after the flood and then providing a new way of relating to us by forming a

nation out of Abraham's family. The nation of Israel sometimes shone out the light of God into the world. Even more often they neglected the task God had given them. Eventually Israel was wounded by God through the exile so that she could be healed by God in the dispersion throughout the nations and in the return of some Jews to the Promised Land. The faithful Jews in the dispersion prepared the way of the Messiah by shining the light of God's Word into the pagan world. Those in the Promised Land prepared the way of the Messiah by their lives and the renewed temple worship.

Then, two thousand years ago, "when the fullness of the time was come, God sent forth His Son, made of a woman, made under the Law." At just the right time, when God had prepared the world by establishing the stable rule of the Roman Empire in the Mediterranean basin, by providing a nearly universal language that was capable of clarity and precision in thinking about spiritual matters, and by revealing His truth in the Hebrew Scriptures, the long-awaited Redeemer and King came. He came into a world that was yearning for relief and release. Both pagans and Jews longed for a clear path to purpose and meaning in a world that felt empty to many.

God in Jesus came into the world, challenging the fallen approaches to living with hatred, suspicion, distrust, and violence. Jesus revealed God's face to mankind. Jesus gave mankind a way to become the perfect image of God. The path He gave mankind was the same path

He had trod. He lived a life of obedience to the Father, love of others, patience before a world in turmoil, and willingness to sacrifice to bring God's will to fruition. Jesus was truly man as man was meant to be and gave us our model for the perfect human life. He brought reconciliation between God and man through His death on the cross and His resurrection. However, just as man resisted God and His plan early on, so too, even after the coming of Jesus, many lost their way and corruption came into the church of God.

In the early church many tried to combine the Gospel story with their pagan world view by denying the Word come in the flesh or the triune Godhead. For the second time Satan tried to introduce a destructive lie of secret knowledge into the life of God's people. Not faith, but special knowledge available only to certain people brought salvation, according to the Gnostics. But God continued to work patiently with the church, and men and women loyal to the message of the Gospel were able to demonstrate clearly who God and Jesus are and how they acted in history to save mankind. It was not secret knowledge but committed faith that saves us. The church produced creeds that preserved the teaching of the Trinity and of the God-man, Jesus, and how God worked in Him to save us.

But Satan did not stop trying to destroy God's work in the world. As the church felt more secure in her position, fervency in faith declined. Being a Christian became not a commitment, but an inevitable part of living in Europe. Whereas Satan's earlier

attack on the faith had aimed at destroying the willingness to stand against the culture, now Satan used the apparently Christian culture to undermine what ought to have been a countercultural faith. Everyone was a baptized Christian; many fewer were truly Christians through a sound commitment to Jesus.

Then, five hundred years ago as God’s Word became more easily accessible to all through translation, the printing press, and active Gospel preaching by those who recognized the need, new life entered the church during the Reformation. Those who thought themselves Christians because they had been baptized as infants were now challenged to see that each one had to choose for himself whether he would turn to God through Jesus and worship Him. It may be difficult for us to conceive how hard such a call was in their setting. But, just as in the beginning of the Christian era when each person had to decide for himself who he would worship and dedicate his life to, five hundred years ago the call went out clearly again: “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.” Our forefathers led in the call for clear conversion and commitment to Jesus, and many of them lost their lives as they witnessed to their faith in Jesus and their love for God.

Now, five hundred years after that revival of faith we find ourselves once again in a world of declining faith and commitment. There is less certainty about just what the faith entails. We are, like some of those in

the early church, deeply influenced by the world views of those around us. A focus on hyper-individualism and self-actualization has seeped into the church from the world around us. Instead of holding to the communion of the saints and to the faith once delivered to the saints, many of us go for a “cafeteria-style” Christianity where we individually pick and choose what we will believe and how we will live. Satan is again assaulting the church with the lie of secret, individual knowledge. Sometimes this special knowledge is a revelation that only some have access to. Sometimes it is the belief that the solution to today’s problems lies not in the church, but in the social and political movements instigated by Nietzsche, Marx, Darwin, Freud, Foucault, and other materialistic movers and shakers in the modern world. They are the new Gnostics, and like the early church, we must learn to recognize the danger they pose to our faith and the best way to answer their challenges.

Often these new Gnostics, like the old ones, use nice, familiar sounding words that may lull us to sleep so that we do not see the threat to our faith. This is where an awareness of our tradition, history, and theology can play a foundational role in stabilizing our faith. By formulating clear, precise ways to tell our story and to answer the questions and objections that modern unbelievers have, we can reach out to those who do not share our basic doctrines. Rather than reinventing the wheel, we can benefit from the ideas and struggles of

those who have gone before us and dealt with the same or similar issues.

For this, we should know the Christian tradition in the broad sense. When thinking about our own part of the Christian tradition, we have a pearl of great price which we sometimes do not recognize but which many Christians, especially in our fragmented times, are looking for. Our Anabaptist forefathers rediscovered aspects of the early Christian belief and practice that had been lost or shoved into monasteries. The need for an adult, conscious commitment of faith in Jesus to form a believer’s church, and the resultant life of separation or holiness that expresses itself in nonconformity (faith), nonaccumulation (hope), and nonresistance (love) are foundational to a healthy church and desperately need to be heard today. May God give us the vision to see these truths and the courage to express them to others!



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## EDUCATION: A RADICALLY CHRISTIAN PRACTICE

*The COVID pandemic has jeopardized the future of numerous post-secondary schools. Josh Nisley, coordinator of the writing program at the Institute, probes for opportunities for Christian education to succeed where secular models fail.*

Academics tend to be a gloomy lot, perhaps confirming what the author of Ecclesiastes observed: "He who increases knowledge increases sorrow" (1:18). But a sampling of recent headlines might help explain why despair permeates the halls of the Ivory Tower.

"Here's How Higher Education Dies" (Adam Harris, *The Atlantic*, June 5, 2018)

"The End of the University" (Astra Taylor, *The New Republic*, September 8, 2020)

"The Economic Model of Higher Education Was Already Broken. Here's Why the Pandemic May Destroy It for Good." (Zachary Karabell, *TIME*, 27 August 2020)

As with so many other institutions, the COVID pandemic exposed and exacerbated the cracks already threatening the structure of higher education. Undergraduate enrollment had been falling steadily for nearly a decade, but the rate of decline more than doubled between 2019 and 2020, from 1.7% to 3.6%. Many would-be students are opting to take “gap years” or low-skilled employment rather than risk a less-than-ideal college experience.

Ultimately, the pandemic hastened what everybody knew for the better part of a decade: higher education as we know it is undergoing a seismic shift. Some would even say collapsing.

How higher education got to this point is enormously complex, widely debated, and beyond the scope of this article. In what follows, I attempt to sketch out some of these contours before suggesting some ways that conservative Anabaptists might respond.

**Factor 1:** Demographics. The large Millennial generation is now mostly out of college, and the national birth rate has been declining steadily for more than a decade.

To put it bluntly, as Derek Thompson does, "The college pipeline is drying up" because "[t]he United States is running out of teenagers."

**Factor 2:** Risky financial practices. Rather than face the reality of the "demographic cliff" (Factor 1), universities vied to outspend each other in what some have dubbed a "university recreation center arms race:" taking on large amounts of debt to build lavish recreation complexes to attract students from a dwindling pool of applicants.

**Factor 3:** Skyrocketing tuition and student debt. With public funding of higher education in steady decline, bloated administrative and operational costs are being passed along to students in the form of soaring tuition, manifold fees, and, by extension, student debt—currently at a record \$1.7 trillion. In the meantime, wages have been relatively stagnant, and degrees have lost market value.

That most of these factors are economic in nature suggests a failure underlying them all: the inability of the modern university to call students to a purpose higher than becoming producers and consumers in pursuit of their own happiness.

Conservative Anabaptists might be tempted to cheer the disintegration of higher education as indicative of our better sensibilities—a kind of snickering “told you so.” In reality, there is much to lament. At the same time, the failures of academia should temper and inform what seems to be a growing enthusiasm for higher education among conservative people.

Rather than scorning higher ed, or uncritically embracing it even as it falters, I would suggest two related responses, one oriented toward the past and one toward the future.

**Rehabilitate:** The shifting ground in higher ed—particularly the move away from a liberal arts model in favor of something more technical and skills-oriented—opens up a space for Christians to reinvigorate liberal arts education by reconnecting it to the practices and structures of Christian faith. Although it’s difficult to recognize now, the liberal arts model that structures

much of higher ed was profoundly shaped by Christian scholars who believed that all truth belongs to God and is therefore worth exploring and understanding. If “the earth is the Lord’s and all that is in it”—if “all things came into being” through the Word-made-flesh, “in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge”—then loving God with all of our mind means attending closely and lovingly to Creation.

**Innovate:** Even as we rehabilitate the roots of higher ed, we need to be working to develop 21st-century educational models and practices that are genuinely different from the mainstream—in both philosophy and method. Whatever form this ultimately takes, it needs to be more substantive than doing academics “from a Christian perspective:” that is, keeping the same basic structures and metrics of value (prestige, credentials, employment rates, cultural influence, etc.) while sprinkling a few apologetics courses and mandatory chapels on top. The disintegration of mainstream higher education is clearing ground for a radically Christian practice of education to emerge—one in which scholarship is just one facet of a whole life in love with Creation, devoted to the Church, and ordered after Christ.



“Current Term Enrollment Estimates: Fall 2020,” National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, December 17, 2020, [https://nscresearchcenter.org/wp-content/uploads/CTEE\\_Report\\_Fall\\_2020.pdf](https://nscresearchcenter.org/wp-content/uploads/CTEE_Report_Fall_2020.pdf).

Elissa Nadworny, “Losing A Generation’: Fall College Enrollment Plummets For 1st-Year Students,” December 17, 2020, <https://www.npr.org/2020/12/17/925831720/losing-a-generation-fall-college-enrollment-plummets-for-first-year-students>.

“Fertility Rate” (2018), Data Commons, <https://datacommons.org/place/country/USA>.

Derek Thompson, “This Is the Way the College ‘Bubble’ Ends,” *The Atlantic*, July 26, 2017, <https://www.theatlantic.com/business/archive/2017/07/college-bubble-ends/534915/>.

Courtney Rubin, “Making a Splash on Campus,” *New York Times*, September 19, 2014, <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/09/21/fashion/college-recreation-now-includes-pool-parties-and-river-rides.html>.

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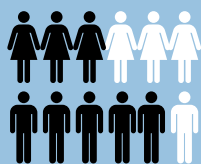
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