

## WHAT IS A CHRIST-CENTERED COLLEGE OR UNIVERSITY?

David L. McKenna

If you want to start a vigorous debate ask the question, “What do we mean by a Christ-centered college or university?” Organizational psychologists, even those who are committed Christians, will differ. Some will say that an organization is an organization, whether secular or religious. Others will be equally firm in contending that the name is needed to define the distinctive character of faith-based colleges and universities. Both parties agree, however, that any institution carrying the name of “Christ” must meet the same high ethical standards, sound structure, and viable strategy that apply to any organization. But, once this common base is accepted, we must still answer the question, “What do we mean by a Christ-centered college or university?” A brief review of the nature of organizations will help us answer the question.

First, organizations have identities. Socrates gives us wise words for self-awareness when he says, “Know thyself.” Organizations also have identities based upon self-awareness. Like people, an organization gets its identity from its name. Watch the scramble for position in the marketplace as organizations try to establish the uniqueness of their name in the mush of marketing. The Mercedes’ grill, the Coke bottle, the Nike Swoosh, the bite out of the Apple, the AFLAC duck and the Golden Arches lead the way with instant recognition and responsibility anywhere in the world. A college or university that claims to be “Christ-centered” also takes on a name of instant recognition and world-wide responsibility. In First Peter, the Apostle tells us that we were once people without a name, but now we are the “people of God”—a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a

people belonging to God....” (I Peter 2:9-10) Why not, then, a “Christ-centered” college or university? Our name lets everyone know whose we are and what can be expected of us.

Second, organizations have DNA. Consultants and CEOs talk frequently and with ease about the DNA of their organization. The metaphor is borrowed from the field of genetics and refers to the blueprint of instructions for the development of personality and the explanation of functions for all living organisms. Booz and Company has centered its consulting practice around the theme of “organizational DNA” and its evidence in four factors: (a) structure, (b) decisions rights, (c) information, and (d) motivators. In the healthy and effective organization, the organizational DNA will be evident in each of these factors. With equal confidence we can speak about the Christ-centered organization as a living organism with a DNA imprint that permeates every cell. Paul identifies our DNA as “Christ in us” (Colossians 1:27). In Him we see structure that puts redemptive function over religious form, decision rights that are made in obedience to the will of God rather than self-interest, information that is shared by teaching, not by dictation, and motivators that are based on self-sacrifice rather than success. When we talk about the Christ-centered college or university, our singular aim is to see the blueprint of “Christ in us” instructing our purpose, policies, process, people and programs.

Third, organizations have personalities. Like human organisms, organizations develop personalities. Legal experts use the term “organizational personhood” when they speak about the rights and responsibilities, privileges and protections, assets and liabilities of an organization. Social psychologists read the personality of an organization by its Beliefs, Being and Behavior. In everyday language, we use metaphors to describe the personhood of organizations, such as faces to be seen, voices to be heard, arms to be

extended, and footsteps to be followed. All of these descriptors apply to the personality of the Christ-centered college or university. Take the qualities of Belief, Being and Behavior for example. They come together when Paul lifts our humanity to its highest level in the words, “For we are God’s workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to good works.” (Ephesians 2:10). Our Belief is in Christ Jesus, our Being is His creation, and our Behavior is His good works. The metaphor holds. In the personhood of the Christ-centered college or university, His face is seen, His voice is heard, His arms reach out, and His footsteps are followed.

Fourth, organizations have life-cycles. According to Adizes’ book, Corporate Life-cycles: How and Why Corporations Grow and Die and What to Do about It, corporations are subject to the same life-cycle as all living organisms. They are born, go through infancy, adolescence and early adulthood, reach their prime in middle age, and then go into the decline that eventually leads to death. Astute observers will readily identify the same stages of life in Christ-centered colleges and universities. We love to tell stories about institutions of miraculous birth, fast-growing infancy, adventuresome adolescence, powerful adulthood, and exemplary aging without death. But we must also remember Christian colleges and universities that went through the cycle of premature birth, precarious infancy, troubled adolescence, confused adulthood, resentful aging, and reluctant death. How do we account for the difference? The prophet Isaiah reminds us that the corrupt leaders of Zion were exposed when they took the interpretation and timing of history into their own hands (Isaiah 5:18-19). The sin of arrogance was their downfall. Boards and presidents of Christ-centered colleges and universities are attentive to God’s timing for the organizational life cycle. We will not start too soon, grow too fast, or hold too

long. Spirit-guided timing is an indispensable asset of leadership for Christ-centered colleges and universities. (See The Leader's Legacy, Chapter 3 by David McKenna)

Fifth, organizations have a driving force. Benjamin Tregoe (Top Management Strategy, 1983) authored the idea that all organizations have a “driving force” that focuses the strategy for their services and disciplines their marketing by determining what they will and will not do. Driving forces for business enterprises can be products, services, marketing, technology, growth, profit, etc. Christ-centered organizations also need rational, strategic and productive business plans. Caution, however, must be exercised in adopting a business plan without understanding its driving force. A secular business plan driven by “growth,” for instance, is spelled out in such terms as core values, product , branding, consumer tastes, market share, competitive advantage and measurable success. A Christ-centered cannot accept such a plan without asking the penetrating question, “Is our driving force the “Go” of the Great Commission rather than the “Growth” of organizational success?” Tougher questions follow:

- \*Are our core values the same as Biblical convictions?
- \*Is our organizational brand reflective of the image of Christ?
- \*Are our consumer tastes equal to spiritual needs?
- \*Is our market share consistent with the New Testament Church?
- \* Is our competitive advantage synonymous with total sacrifice?
- \*Does our measure of success include the reward for faithfulness?

Katherine Radeka, Whittier Consulting Group, Inc., says, “If the driving force is intentionally chosen and clear to everyone, it generates a magnetic force field around the company’s strategy that draws the operational activities into alignment and pulls them

toward the strategic goals.” Her description is almost spiritual. If an organization takes its authority as “Christ-given,” its identity as “Christ-centered,” and its driving force as “Christ-motivated,” there is a magnetism that draws all of its strategic objectives and tactical moves together toward the fulfillment of its redemptive mission as given in The Great Commission (Matthew 28:18-20).

Sixth, organizations are relational. A solitary person cannot be an organization. Interactive relationships among individuals and groups give the organization its special character. Because of human beings, no organization is perfect. Even if the core identity is clear and strong, there is always room for the messiness of conflict, the anxiety of change, the tension of creativity, and even the possibility of dysfunction within its ranks. It boggles our mind to think of Jesus choosing a bedraggled band of men for His disciples, but equally astounding is His decision to put the plan of redemption into the hands of an imperfect organization made up of flawed people and call it “My Church.” After Peter confessed Christ as Lord, Jesus said. “Upon this rock I will build my Church.” (Matthew 16:18). While interpretation of His words vary, one thing is clear. Our confession of Christ as Lord makes us One in an imperfect organization and the love of Christ” keeps us One in our flawed humanity. Christ-centered colleges and universities are not churches, but our educational mission requires the same confession of Christ by our members to make us One and the same love of Christ to keep us One. (John 17:11).

Seventh, organizations are living organisms. Peter Drucker used the metaphors of an amoeba, a computer, and a physical organism to describe different images for the nature of organizations. An amoeba is a fluid organism whose shape is determined exclusively by its reaction to stimuli from the external environment. A computer is just the opposite. As a

machine, its response is totally determined by pre-fed responses into a rigid internal system. The physical body, however, is a combination of bone, skin, flesh, blood responding, not just to its external environment or from its stored memory, but to instructions from the brain. Every part of the organization, therefore, must be functioning to achieve that goal. If any part fails to function or is demeaned by another part, the organization becomes divided and dysfunctional. For good reason, Paul chose the physical organism to describe the unified functioning for the Body of Jesus Christ. I Corinthians 12: 12-31 is a textbook description of an organization with many diverse parts functioning effectively as one body. Individual gifts are recognized, special offices are acknowledged, different operating styles are accepted, and higher gifts are desired, and because of the headship of Christ, the Body is healthy, effective, and whole. Is it not also the model for the Christ-centered college or university? Is Christ the head? Are individual gifts recognized, special offices acknowledged, and different operating styles accepted? Is love sought as the highest of gifts? Is grace the oil of operation? Is there mutual respect among all members? Is the body in balance? Is it effective in its functioning? Is God glorified in the results? Affirmative answers to these questions tell us that our Christ-centered college or university is functioning according to the sound operating principles given to us as instructions from the Word of God.

Eighth, organizations are accountable. Metrics on a dashboard are instruments of accountability for effective governance in higher education. Going another step in keeping with the legal definition of “organizational personhood,” organizations can be held accountable and liable on such wide-ranging issues as financial integrity, human rights, truth in advertising, fair employment practices, health and safety of employees, quality of

product, environment protection and a host of Federal and State regulations. Christ-centered colleges and universities are also liable to outside agencies on most of these counts, but there is no substitute for voluntary self-regulation, such as through the CCCU to work together setting standards, testing options, recommending improvement, and if necessary, disciplining members. Organizational accountability for Christ-centered colleges and universities is consistent with Revelation 2 and 3 when the Son of Man visits the seven churches of Asia and calls them into accountability for their faithfulness to His message and their mission. Contemporary Christ-centered colleges and universities are equally accountable to Christ for their faithfulness. Our boards should periodically stop and ask if we are still true to His message and our mission because every organization is subject to the slippage of time, changing circumstances, complacency, and the temptations of success.

Coming full circle, we again ask the question, “What do we mean by a Christ-centered college or university?” Our review leads us to this proposal: A Christ-centered college or university is:

- \*centered in the name of Christ for our identity;
- \*permeated by the DNA of Christ in our character;
- \*consistent with the image of Christ in our personhood;
- \*obedient to the timing of Christ in our life-cycle;
- \*motivated by the mind of Christ as our driving force;
- \*unified by the love of Christ in our relationships;
- \*integrated as the grace of Christ in our functions; and
- \* accountable to the judgment of Christ for our faithfulness.

Can we measure up? Of course not. Anything and everything we do to be “Christ-centered” will fail. Only the grand theme of Paul’s ministry can rescue us: *It is not what we can do for God; it is what He has already done for us.* In those terms and By His grace, our claim to be a Christ-centered college and university is a very present possibility.