

**ACHEA's Christian Study Centre and
What we Confess When we Seek
a Re-formation of Academic Qualifications**
an occasional address delivered at the
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Sunshine Presbyterian Church

*But seek first God's kingdom and his righteousness,
and all these things will be given to you as well. **Matthew 6:33.***

*But it shall not be so among you; for whoever would be great
must be your servant **Matthew 10:43***

*For it is not the one commending himself who is accepted,
but the one whom the Lord commends **2 Corinthians 10:18***

1. ACHEA's practical goal – qualified Christian students trained in a CSC

ACHEA believes that a Christian university will one day come. It will not come through credentials and qualifications, but as a work of God's spirit in which God's people are invited to participate freely. This is our vision. But what is the purpose?

The purpose is that the Christian university student, the Christian graduate, will receive a diploma, a *testamur*, confirming that the recipient is a qualified *Christian student*. That is it. Imagine the formal graduation statement of our first Christian Studies Centre graduate. What will it say? How will s/he see the certificate? Merely as a piece of paper?

This qualification, from this Christian university, indicates that as a trained Christian student, I am henceforth qualified for the service of Jesus Christ as a graduate who will seek the benefit of his people. I will honour the student vocation, in whatever sphere I serve, striving with all the energy God gives me, to encourage wisdom and maturity among my neighbours so that they too may find the blessedness that comes from adhering to God's will for all of life (Col 1:28-29).

This is ACHEA's reformation vision for graduation, for the way academic credentials and qualifications have a place in God's kingdom.

2. ACHEA's social development agenda

From this confession certain organisational imperatives follow. Ours is a “free association” in which a constitution rules membership. And as members we encourage one another, even at this early stage. I have been reminded, this past year, how much I need my fellows in ACHEA and I wish to thank you for your support. Members are very important. God cares for us by giving us opportunity to depend upon each other.

In all this we find we sometimes disagree amongst ourselves and with others. But we are neither fundamentalist nor conservative. We are neither liberal nor socialist. We remind ourselves of what we are and what we are not because our constitution points in a direction which challenges us to dissent from the dominant world-view in which some of us have been more trained than others. But who gives ACHEA the right to advocate this free university, this Christ-honoring scholarship? When all is said and done, is it just a matter of ACHEA having some qualified people with university degrees who want to extend their status in the Christian community?

By no means, but this question is important because in our association we have to always strive to acknowledge that the first and final authority is God's word – not the reputations, the qualifications or the credentials we grant each other. We are bound to give due respect to scientists and scholars who seek to honour Christ in their every-day academic work of learning, teaching and research. And what advance we have made over four years has much to do with the way God continues to bless us with loyal members. So thank you and keep working!

3. Many voices

Many people like us, talk about Christian higher education these days, seeking to stake a Christian claim in tertiary education. Whatever the logistics, the goal, as outlined in the imagined graduation citation above, is also a call to reform our understanding of qualifications, reassessing the place they have assumed in our lives. We do this because the gospel calls for a total re-orientation of our entire life, including our intellectual life. We seek a Christian university believing the gospel to mean what it says. If anyone be in Christ a whole new creation opens up; the old has passed away; the new has come (2 Cor 5:17).

Some voices tell us it is unrealistic and make a large noise saying “No! Cannot be done!” When reformed Christian higher education is launched soon after the pious veto always seems to appear. There are historical reasons for this response that at times seems more psychological

than rational. But after a few years the same naysayers are scrambling about trying to justify their place in CHE. ACHEA has to listen to such voices and wisdom is needed to deal with all the various players in the field. ACHEA has to listen to such voices and wisdom is needed to deal with all the various players in the field. And the way of becoming wise about this is not to focus upon any splinters in the eyes of other groups but learning to take the forest out of our own eyes. We need God's Spirit to help us understand the apparent slowness in our own development and growth and to realise that this is a time when, small though we be, we yet have still much to learn.¹

4. An initial problem

Think for a minute about our goals. Is our aim too high? We are not building something on the grand scale, like a Christian intellectual Mega-mart. That would be absurd of course because the scale we might realistically aim for is that of an on-site workman's hut, located at the back of the car-park, ready to attend to plumbing and electrical problems. For many whom we would woo into membership the word "university" means "big institution". They imagine massive buildings and large campuses. Therefore when they confront ACHEA they think "grand project". But size is not the issue, unless of course we mean size of faith rather than size of building. In fact, Jesus taught us that mustard seed is the scale we should think about when we want to get involved in something which was high on God's agenda long before we appeared on the scene. He wants disciples for his Son. Ours is the honour of contributing to the training of future generations in the school of Jesus Christ.

5. Some of the voices

So how should we evaluate the various calls for CHE? Jesus gave us a rule by which our work can be measured – "By your fruit you shall be known!" We might conclude that there has not been much fruit. For 45 years Reformed Higher Education has been promoted in this country and we now start to wonder if a new generation will even be around to take over after we, the current torchbearers, leave the scene. But the scriptures do not leave us desolate. In the cosmic scale of black holes and seemingly endless space that goes on for billions of years, we are repeatedly reminded of how perfectly faithful God is to His promises. Remembering this we take heart. The covenantal promises of God pass from one generation to the next, Abraham to

¹ Let us not forget our true situation. We may have a sound constitution (road map) we do not have the means (wheels) to get around to our members and explain in detail why it is a better document than the constitutions of other CHE efforts on a reformed basis which have previously faltered. Just because other bodies might have poor "maps" does not mean they don't have "wheels".

Pentecost, Pentecost to the present, and are still valid and encourage us until the day when the City of God descends, fulfilling God's promise to dwell with His people forever. We may be tiny, but size of organisation, stature of membership and bank balances have never deflected the LORD GOD from accomplishing his purposes.

In the main we are a group whose age is about or over 40. We sense that a Christian Studies Centre is vitally important and some of us may pine for something sorely missed from our own educational experiences. We may even feel guilty about not doing enough for young Christian students. The needs of the next generation loom before us and we have to learn to be self-critical. Sometimes the voices we deal with, and try to answer, are there in our own hearts and minds. They are often the hardest to answer.

6. The muted blast on our reformation trumpet

So is the reformation of academic qualifications just about "blowing our own trumpet"? No. It is about learning accountability. Even at this early stage we are all busy learning to be accountable *before* we start dishing it out by degrees. It is not the one commending himself but the one whom THE LORD commends, and so we pray that our association may become transparently accountable. This is the time for digging foundations. When they are in then will come the time to erect walls and put on a roof. First things first. If we do this work in obedience God will bless it and one day it will stick with integrity to the parchment of our CSC diploma. That's the promise and we take Jesus to mean what he says when he announces "If the Son shall set you free you shall be free indeed!"

So we also heed this when we defend ourselves, as we will have to. What right do we have to exist and commend a "free university" among the different groups promoting CHE in Australia? Let us be ready to answer this question here and now.

7. The challenge of pragmatism

I recall a saying attributed to Martin Luther that if you are fighting Satan you do it in the front-line of God's Kingdom. If not then you are not really fighting Satan at all. Let me restate this for our current situation. Given pragmatism's dominance in public education over the last 50 years, either we thoroughly challenge pragmatism with a principled Christian approach or we might as well forget it and take up a hobby. CHE progress may have been slow. Let it no longer be because we are slow in challenging pragmatism.

The attainment of qualifications, good HSC results and gaining entrance into university courses, if not by ourselves then by our children and grandchildren, can lull us into a false security about this dominant world-view. We need to keep that in mind and not forget it. We want CHE to go forward and we are prepared to challenge this established educational religion where it hurts. Some of us may have inflated views about our own qualifications. And will we criticise pragmatism as it should be criticised, with an incisive Christian response, if we are still pragmatism's front-line troops! That would be fraudulent. So we have to learn to blow the CHE trumpet with a clear sound!

Sure, there have been advances in Christian schooling these past 50 years, but this simply adds weight to the urgency for a free Christian university. When the Christian battle against pragmatism was fought on the basis of the parent-controlled principle, then Christian schooling found sufficient reason for its existence.² And when students take up the struggle for a free university principle in science and scholarship they are refreshed by the insights blown in, as it were, on the cooling breeze of a Christian world-view.

² As a matter of historical fact the Reformed Churches of Australia clarified their *raison d'être* as a Calvinistic immigrant church in Australia when elders adopted Calvinistic principles to explain the need for parent-controlled Christian schools. They could also do this as confessional defenders of their own churches. They believed the reformed view requires schools to be 'free' to serve Christ without ecclesiastical mediation. If anyone wonders how the RCA, as a Calvinistic church, should resist the pragmatist direction, they might ponder the ongoing and decisive influence of 'congregational membership' in the constitution of the Association for Christian Tertiary Education. Whilst giving due regard to congregational responsibility for the training of ministers to serve the churches, this form of association membership has at times stood in the way when RCA Sessions should have unambiguously embraced the 'free university principle'. Such membership, when it pertains to matters outside of ministerial training, is a hurdle which ACHEA in its Calvinistic concern for a 'free university' needs to become much more wise about. One need only ask: Why is it that that educational principle, advocated by reformed sessions for many decades in respect to schooling, has been effectively suspended when we come to Christian higher education? See David Groenenboom ("Icons (1) [Sword defending]" *Trowel and Sword* September 1999 p.17). When reformed elders understand the Calvinistic principle they also know something about how to chart the educational 'boat' in the non-church waters of education. Elders who want to show Calvinistic leadership should insist that the church be ruled by a Calvinistic doctrine of self-limitation, with no transgressing (however pragmatic it may be to do so) of the God-given boundaries of church and education and thereby give due respect to school and university. This is why the 'reformed' genius promoting parent-controlled Christian schools finds a place in ACHEA's promotion of Christian education, unashamed of its God-serving character. This is not to say that schools sponsored by churches cannot be Christian schools or that even, as with post-communist Hungary today, that such church schools are not reformed in their intention or character. But in Australia, and with respect to CHE, the RCA as a denomination now has a peculiar challenge thrown out to it, which is not presented to other denominations in precisely the same form, nor with the same intensity. RCA churches were strongly involved in rejecting church-controlled schools as a matter of Calvinistic adherence to 'sphere sovereignty'. Parent-controlled (ie non-State, non-Church) schools resulted. Let there be no doubt. To opt for a form of CHE that will embrace a 'free Christian university' where Christian scholarship is unfettered by ecclesiastical mediation will be of immeasurable benefit to the reformed cause in this country. ACHEA has nothing to crow about in this. We need to promote a reformation of the way we promote reformation.

Some may ask: “What right does ACHEA have to exist?” If we whittle away our allegiance to Christ in subtle ways we lose our right to exist. If we advocate in theory or practice anything to take away from Jesus Christ’s full ownership over his entire creation – even by one nano-second or the width of one ultra-mini-micro-dot – then we have lost the plot.

One result of defining ourselves in terms of a “lucky country” or “she’ll be right, mate!” is the loss of perspective. For over 100 years humanism has been in crisis, also in Australia. To say that 100 years of federation represents 100 years of greatness, or 100 years of ‘Christian heritage’, is foolish nonsense. Humanism is a religion opposed at its root to faith in Jesus Christ.³ Many churches and schools in Australia and around the world fall prey to pragmatism. The reasons may be complex but many, it seems, lose sight of the principles for Christian education, including the reasons for the parent-controlled school and the free university. Educational institutions, starting out so well as Christian schools, fall prey to pragmatism. Why do they stumble? Do the scriptures tell us that we stumble when we set our sights by the faith that education is a process that has to honor Christ from alpha to omega? Is not this the way by which foundations will be strengthened? So how come foundations have weakened? Is there not an implicit support for a free university in attempts to honour parental responsibility by building parent-controlled Christian schools? ACHEA is not afraid of being known as “reformed” or “reformational” so long as we understand this to involve our challenge to the reigning pragmatism by bowing and humbly facing up to Jesus Christ’s rule over our entire lives, over the *entirety* of the education process.

ACHEA must be involved in developing educational diagnoses and therapies for those who have fallen prey to pragmatism. It may then even involve explosive situations and, yes, we do have much to learn lest it all blow up in our own faces. The only sure way to prepare is to undertake extensive self-critical study. We cannot get around this. Nor should we want to. We should not lay the blame on outside agents like ‘society’, or even ‘pragmatism’. To blame others will easily lead to a serious loss of perspective. The scriptures tell us that insight comes in the

³ When we consider the residues of Christian culture in this land, churches and schools, we notice they too are going through intense crises. Sunday by Sunday, school week by school week, these fragile communities experience turmoil as they try to maintain a Christian confession, keeping congregations or non-State school (paying) parental constituencies together. You might conclude in some cases that these residues of Christian culture are even epicentres of humanistic crisis. We have had over 100 years of pragmatism setting the agenda for public life and, in particular, for education. This is the case throughout the Western world and particularly in the English-speaking realm. Massive “macro-economic” changes in Europe, North America and the South Pacific of the last decade are not just a down-stream effects of “free market” economics. The “new global economic order” rides on the back of pragmatism. And that is also the case in Australia. Globalization means the global power of the world-view of pragmatism.

other direction – taking the log out of our own eye. We must avoid shallow self-criticism that only wants to move from diagnosis to action as quickly as possible. Ironically, that is the seed-bed of pragmatism – starting again before the diagnosis has been adequately made, building anew before the necessary remedy has been taken. “We have no time; we must move on” is the boring chorus of pragmatism.

So what is pragmatism?

Pragmatism is a dynamic world-view proposing to overcome the spiritual crises that emerged after western society migrated to humanism. The pragmatist goes forward to redefine the future at all costs. The past too easily “gets in the way” of the reorganization of the present and so to get beyond the past we have to reconstruct ourselves to make ourselves compatible with what we have decided are our own immediate needs. If we hit problems tomorrow we will deal with those tomorrow in the way we put yesterday’s problems behind us today. Now think about this. This world-view replaces disciplined historical knowledge with a sense of our own power in the present, a sense of our own present cosmic self-importance. Pragmatism assumes this to be merely common sense and pragmatists deal ruthlessly with dissenters who challenge “common sense”. Those standing in the way are viewed as hopeless idealists, spouting “academic” views of the past or the future for obscure self-interested reasons. We cannot afford to get “bogged down” in past problems they say.⁴

We have heard all this before. We all lived through the “reform” of higher education by Government reforms. Usually institutions were reconstructed bureaucratically by stitching up deals that in turn gave further weight to this intellectual orientation within those academies. Universities now must plan by following the path to the future. This raises a problem for the “authorities”: who will define the future? And who decides?

In the pragmatist world-view planning by “authorities” has to be blurry, and precision in specifics revives a danger of getting “bogged down in theory”. Authority is blurred with prevailing power. Will it be Government or University? Or something else? Probably the answer is “Yes!” on all sides, but a pragmatist cannot ponder this question for long. After all we must move on, we must accommodate the present to the future we have decided we are going to have. In this blur,

⁴ ACHEA also has to learn that a critical examination of the world-view of pragmatism is indispensable as we move forward. Some of us who helped found ACHEA were members of the ACTE Action Group (1993-1994) and our efforts in thinking through the problems of the pragmatist world-view applied to CHE have proved indispensable to us in our own ongoing education. We have begun to learn how important it is to reject this mentality, and not just its rotten fruit. But we have nothing at all to crow about.

a struggle in a fog between contending “authorities”, pragmatism usually comes down to allowing those with power and money to set the stage with blurry scenery.⁵

It is also the pragmatic world-view that leads universities to forget the earlier, just as pernicious, views. Previously, the nation as a whole was beholden to the university’s view of itself as an elite training institution. The university defined its own short-term future and trained the elite who then defined the long-term future for the rest of us. The irony is that the “baby boomer” elite, thoroughly schooled in that earlier phase of the religion of pragmatism, subsequently “moved on” to the next phase. By defining the university’s contribution in pragmatic terms, a seed was planted that has now overtaken the entire plant. The post-modern degree factory is the result. Post-modern may be the label but it is not post-pragmatist. When Jesus said, “By your fruits you shall be known” he pointed us to a generation-by-generation life before God, helping us to become wise about the structure of social life.⁶

Is pragmatism a Christian virtue?

So Christian schooling has not been untouched. We might also observe, given the way God creates human society, that Christian schools could not be left untouched by the major social trends and philosophies. We cannot assume that the mere building of a school with a Christian sign outside will prevent contact with non-Christian ideas, any more than the banning of Darwin’s theory, or anything that remotely looks like it, will eradicate the secular pragmatism implicit in creationism’s political pressure tactics.

These days it may be easier in some ways to promote Christian education – kinder, schooling, post-secondary - but is it not also widely assumed that Christian education means teaching young Christians to manipulate their own short-term futures? Is not this a common justification for Christian education? At this point we encounter something very perplexing for which parents

⁵ The spiritual haste of moving on, rather than addressing structural principles, is the cause of the mess that all universities, and much CHE endeavour, confront. Those of us who advocate the free university principle should resist pragmatism, and not “move on” when told to do so. This principle has immediate and decisive application to reforming higher education. Our situation cannot be understood if concepts of authority and power are blurred. Two pragmatic answers have emerged to move us (as a nation) on, and both are materialistic. The two approaches can be labeled **Labor** [(Dawkins) the line to the future as defined by industry, industrial relations and unions in the international market place] and **Liberal** [(Vanstone and Kemp with a little help from Roderick West) the line to the future as defined by contract, commercial competition and the needs of consumers]. Beyond higher education, pragmatism is also active destroying positive possibilities of moving this nation toward a republic.

⁶ I am assuming readers and listeners will apply this picture of pragmatism to difficulties they experience in their own lives with respect to the blurring of power and authority. Readers may see evidence of this pragmatist spirit in churches, schools, associations, federal and state politics and much more. And CHE is not excluded of course.

and older people will need to employ scholars and academics so that we can be jolted out of complacency, *but in a Christian way*. We need a Christian Studies Centre also for the “further education” of ourselves as ACHEA members. We need help in thinking through what organizing a Christian Studies Centre will involve. It can never just be a matter of sitting through a course so someone can receive a credential with a big gold embossed cross on it. The tests that a CSC must implement on its own contribution must be to evaluate whether there is evident growth in Christian understanding, by teachers and students and supporters.

Some CHE players seem to say that the primary thing is cash flow. Get the cash flowing and then something can be set up and students enrolled and diplomas printed. Then further income can be generated and we will be off. In this way the “deeper” questions are put off until later. Then a few “intellectuals” can help us devise sound arguments for Christian education. Some interpret ACHEA in this kind of way. ACHEA seeks financial support. The search for money and resources has its place but for us we seek money not to give a Christian gloss to our pragmatism. Being “up and running” is never a Christian virtue⁷.

8. Conclusion

Over against the myriad denominations of pragmatism, ACHEA develops its own rationale. We do not exist to enhance any member’s social status. Nor do we aim to be the moral guardian of Christian university students. Neither are we concerned primarily with developing one alternative life-style, promoting reformational gurus or an elite of reformed “public intellectuals”. We do not develop our programme to engineer nominal membership, yet we are not ashamed of being historically honest in our Reformed, non-Roman Catholic, Christian view of the bible. We align ourselves unashamedly with the reformational view of the scriptures that emerged in 16th century Europe, but we are not fundamentalists.⁸ We seek money but never at the cost of our principles. This list might be confusing until it is realised that these facets of what we are not constitute a coherent picture, a description of the world-view of pragmatism. [I hope to develop this in future papers.] It suffices for us to say that our principle is biblical and for that reason it cannot accommodate pragmatism.

⁷ Our Student Advisory Faculty may be “up and running” but we are not exactly run off our modems by it. But we take heart seeing it as a mustard seed endeavour that takes God’s time for germination to occur.

⁸ Our approach is not the “ecumenical” strategy of pragmatically advocating “strategic alliances” between powerful groups. “Reformed ecumenism” in higher education should always seek principled Christian co-operation. The political aim is not legal recognition won by pressure tactics from an agglomerated power bloc, but legitimate public rights on the basis of a bona fide contribution to higher education.

Let me conclude. Wherever diplomas are given they should be respected. Pragmatism thinks higher education is its own and assumes that to accept a diploma is to make a person a potential pragmatist. But we reject pragmatism's misplaced pride in the ability of educated people to "move on". A diploma is not just a "piece of paper" helping us to get what we want. We take issue with pragmatism. Qualifications are not levers, but we thank God for them. We are Christian. Getting the piece of paper can never be all-important. But in Jesus Christ, who is supreme for us, even the "piece of paper" makes sense. It is a necessary help to us as we further define ourselves in his service. Our qualifications challenge us; they are a symbol of our vocation to life-long thankfulness.