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Engaging the Culture, Changing the World: The Christian University in a Post-Christian World (Book Review)

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Philip W. Eaton. *Engaging the Culture, Changing the World: The Christian University in a Post-Christian World.* Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2011. 203 pp. \$18.00, ISBN 9780830839292.

Reviewed by David M. Johnstone, Student Life, George Fox University

In my beginning years in Christian higher education, I had the pleasure of meeting Phil Eaton, current president of Seattle Pacific University (SPU). His desire to shape more fully and deeply the lives of college students directed our conversation. He recounted the strategies his institution was pursuing to prompt students to reflect on their lives and begin to absorb the implications of their faith into the ways they act. *Engaging the Culture, Changing the World: The Christian University in a Post-Christian World* reminded me of those interactions and placed a framework on those thoughts of a decade ago. In some ways, this volume is a manifesto that outlines the vision that guides SPU. At the same time, his ideas have relevance for other Christian colleges with an evangelical ethos.

The essential premise of the book is that while suspicion, skepticism, and cynicism define Western higher education, Christian higher education has a core that is trustworthy. Suspicion, skepticism, and cynicism do not need to define such institutions. Because of this trustworthy story that permeates evangelical universities, they have the opportunity to change and transform the world by offering hope and working towards "what is true and good and beautiful" (8). Christian higher education can stand apart from secular peers, offering an alternative way to engage with the world. Eaton suggests that the Christian university is best poised as a change agent because of the "hope and joy" surrounding the biblical story which is "defined by reconciliation, peace, love and flourishing" (66).

He affirms "that the Christian university stands the best chance in our time to articulate and model a vision of human flourishing that will make the world a better place" (17). The world is in a bit of a mess and few would argue against this premise. Part of that mess has been due to our culture's move to remove any "center" or foundational core from our experience. This loss of foundation, core, or grounding has created a sense of spiritual,

emotional, psychological, and communal turmoil. Eaton suggests that this turmoil can be traced partially to Western culture's century-old move to discard any authority other than our own personal opinion. Restoring a sense of transcendence, foundation, and authority is imperative. This is where the Christian college is uniquely placed. Telling true and full stories of the gospel and the world begins to anchor our culture's need for transformation.

Eaton begins by surveying the state of evangelicalism, particularly within higher education. He observes that followers of Jesus should not shy away from telling their stories, even when questioned by their post-modern culture. In the midst of our culture's scrutiny of the purpose, direction and value of higher education, he asserts that when critiques are raised about the value and cost of Christian higher education, believers need to be honest and ready to address the concerns. Part of that honesty is explaining the transforming element of this education. Eaton particularly challenges Christian leaders and educators "to tell true stories about the meaning, purpose and practice of the university" (32). Unfortunately, often these stories fall short of illustrating the full depth of the Christian university's potential and impact. "People sense that something is missing. Somehow we are not addressing the deepest yearning of our students or, by extension, the deepest needs of our society" (36).

Yet this lack on the part of Christian educators is not unique; our culture is constantly making decisions about right and wrong, truth, and meaning regardless of any authority. Engaging thinkers from the past centuries, Eaton demonstrates that our culture no longer has an anchor; there is nothing solid on which to stand. With the assertion that God is dead, or at least irrelevant, our culture no longer has a core or central story. This is the reality in which Christian higher education functions. Western culture asserts that "[t]here is no coherence about which we can all agree, and we are floating free from any locus of authority that might determine, guide or inspire our assumptions about what is real and doable (45). This is where Christian higher education can stand in a unique place. Western culture's education by neglecting and denying a common story of what Eaton calls "human flourishing" (52), removes love from the picture. The Christian university, because of its adherence to a common story, has so much to offer in terms of hope, reconciliation, and love.

The essential core of the book illustrates that the nihilism and skepticism of the modern age has not served humans well. The fact that we have put aside any divine role in our story leaves us feeling tenuous. The Christian university offers not only a reminder of the anchor provided in Jesus, but also the transformative and hope-filled change that is offered through graduates from these faith institutions. Eaton provides a restrained challenge to peers – to begin seeing their graduates as powerful change agents for our culture and the world.

With keen realism, he writes that followers of Jesus must not separate themselves from the world. They must be intimately engaged and ready to address and grapple with all the evil, horror, uncertainty, and instability that surround them. At the same time, when engaging culture, Christian educators "must learn to speak not always out of confrontation but rather with a voice of hope and joy" (120). Along with hope and joy, the Christian university is particularly placed to demonstrate to the world what Eaton calls "a grace-filled community" (159). Not only are these communities marked by trust and grace, but within them "forgiveness and humility" are learned with "kindness and hospitality" practiced (160). Using medieval monastic communities as a way to identify the priorities that a university might consider in its development of a grace-filled community, he writes that they were internally focused by allowing Scripture to shape the character of their communities. At the same time they were externally aware of their world without fear and able to engage with the non-believing cultures that surrounded them. Eaton boldly states: "I submit that this is

the balance that must define the healthy Christian community for our time, and indeed a model for the Christian university" (164).

The university should stand not as an adversary to Western culture but as one willing to stand, in the face of its cynicism and suspicion, for kindness, trust, and redemption. It brings "love to a broken world. Such an announcement is guided by the trusting embrace of a story that gives coherence and meaning to the chaos we experience daily" (184). Then Eaton asks: "Should this be the purpose of the university? My answer is decidedly yes. Of course. We must organize our work as Christian universities around this story of healing and redemption, hope and joy" (184).

In spite of the motivational flavor of this book, Eaton sees the reality needed for Christian universities to train up their students to become change agents. Educators and students should not approach this goal in a facile manner. Diligence, attentiveness, and competency are required in a complex and often treacherous world. "The venture of learning must be profoundly connected and responsive to exactly the forces we witness in our world. We must know and understand what's going on in the world" (193). There is no naiveté in his exhortations.

Recently, Eaton announced his intent to retire from SPU. To me, this book took on the flavor of final reflections for a life invested in Christian higher education. He unpacks the elements of a Christian university from his vantage as a long-term educator, lacing his reflections with observations and insights from his administrative background and academic discipline – he has credibility and wisdom. His broad use of literature helped build his argument, demonstrating the need for the Christian university to engage with the world, yet he had me convinced fairly early. Knowing that SPU has pursued a vision similar to the book's title, I would have loved for him to expound on how *Engaging the Culture* looked at his university. How have students responded? What were the challenges? What were the joys? I would really have welcomed a deeper elaboration of his idea of a grace-filled community. How did he encourage this happening at his institution? How did he inspire his community to buy into this vision? There seemed to be uncut gems which would have been helpful to see more clearly.

However, this is not a lament; the book is worthwhile in that it provides a different vision for what the Christian university could be. Eaton does not try to fit Christian higher education into the mold of Western higher education. The transformative nature of the Christian story should stand out as a beacon of hope and reconciliation in a world of skepticism and cynicism. And the Christian university is best positioned to illuminate that hope. Philip Eaton presents a separate vision from the one in which higher education is often viewed. I would venture to suggest that this is reason enough to engage with his reflections.