

For Such A Time As This: Reformed Campus Ministry and the Politics of Higher Education

Written By: Tyler Helfers
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“The truth is, the market for Greek philosophers has been very tight for 2,000 years.’ Rubio, speaking to about 200 people in Urbandale on Wednesday, was making the point that more opportunities for vocation-oriented higher education.”

“Clinton has spoken in favor of President Obama’s plan to make community college education free. She also wants to expand student loans and has said she is working on proposals to help graduates refinance their college debt. ‘We’ve got to refinance the debt and we’ve got to make college affordable again,’ she said.”

The above quotations come from an article written last Thursday by Kathie Obradovich in the *Des Moines Register* entitled, “Welders, philosophers and the politics of higher education”. In it, Obradovich recounts the narratives of two presidential hopefuls, Marco Rubio and Hillary Clinton, regarding the issue of higher education in America.

Both candidates see the importance of reaching out to, and resonating with, younger voters. Those at university, in colleges and high school are the future of our nation (not to mention the voting pool). So, tackling the increasingly important issue of higher education, student debt, and its relationship to the workforce and economy, is a good first step—especially in Iowa—where an ever-increasing number of students are continuing on to university and college.

And yet...

Both candidates’ responses make key mistakes in their analysis of higher education. On the right, Rubio rightly recognizes the need for more skilled workers in fields like welding, carpentry, and plumbing, yet sets these over and against such things as art, philosophy, and history. On the left, Clinton exalts the

traditional liberal arts education as the good and right cornerstone of our development and preparation for the future (not to mention that she makes seemingly contradictory statements on the need to both lessen debt for students, as well as increase their ability to access loans).

These errors are the fruit of two separate, yet related points:

- 1. A narrow (and deficient) definition of vocation**
- 2. An over-reliance/assumption that universities are both necessary, and adequately, preparing students for the future**

It just so happens that these are two points on which reformed theology has much to offer.

First is the issue of **vocation**. Whereas Rubio defines it as training/occupations in skilled trades, and approaches the issue very pragmatically, we (as reformed Christians) define vocation in a much more liberal way. Every person has been given a vocation—a call from God to a particular form of work or endeavor—not simply those who enter schools with *vocational* in the title. Vocation encompasses both the mechanic, as well as the musician, the electrician as well as the economist, everything, and everyone, in between.

A reformed view of vocation recognizes that all forms of work and service are good and necessary for the common good, as well for glorifying God and giving us a foretaste of the kingdom yet to come. Thus, people can enter trade schools without feeling like second class students, and those studying the arts, philosophy, and history at university can rest assured that these are important fields for the flourishing of our society, and not simply vain pursuits. As Roland Hoksbergen writes:

God's people have a general vocation to respond to God's Word, to be obedient to his call, and to do his will...and [each person] has a particular vocation or calling to discover and carry out God's will in the area of life in which he or she is especially involved and especially trained.

The second point has to do with current assumption of the role of universities in our day, and their failure to instill in students **a coherent world and life view**.

Obradovich cites this passage from a University of Maryland webpage:

Universities, of course, are not vocational schools. Their primary goals are to educate, to help students develop their critical faculties, and to broaden their intellectual horizons.

And, yet, because of the shift towards the relativistic, postmodern, and subjective, our universities are often guilty of failing in this task. Information dumping, and uncritical acceptance (defined as tolerance) of a plethora of perspectives, leave students without meaning/purpose (beliefs) to undergird their life/work (behavior), or, at the very least, the tools to link these two together at a future point in time.

I am not merely talking about religious faith, but the broader realms of truth, beauty, goodness, ethics, and morality. A great divide has been created between *private beliefs* and *public truths* despite the fact that, as Lesslie Newbigin explains in his book, *The Gospel in a Pluralistic Society*, all such public truths are built upon privately held presuppositions, or a priori commitments, about the nature of the universe. Thus, the two cannot be separated, but rather, must be meshed by way of critical thinking.

If the university is to truly educate and prepare students for future service as members of the workforce and community, there must be a recovery of what it means to truly educate students: to lead them in ways of knowing, discovering a world and life view, and synthesizing this to their lives as future members of the workforce, the community, and family units. Apart from this, we will continue leading students down what Steven Garber calls the “path of purposelessness”: a world of facts without value and a world of values which have no basis in facts.

It seems that Areopagus, and, more broadly speaking, reformed campus ministries, have been made for such a time as this. We recognize that worldview, vocation, and everyday life are inextricably linked. So, not only do we strive to promote the wonder and beauty of vocation, and consider how to bring about human flourishing through the callings God has given each of us, we also

instill a coherent world and life view in students grounded upon God's revealed Word. Truth, beauty, and goodness as expressed through a reformed world and life view provide a solid foundation for living out one's calling: contributing to the common good, as well as glorifying God, and reflecting his kingdom to the world around us.

Perhaps we can act as the leaven for bringing a true, holistic, and fruitful solution to the problems of higher education that extend well beyond issues of debt, job opportunities, and mere intellectual stimulation. *Soli deo gloria.*