Chapter 3

The "Christian College" As Heresy

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A MEDITATION ON THE "FALL"

The proverbs of Solomon, son of David, king of Israel:

That men may know wisdom and instruction, understand
words of insight,
receive instruction in wise dealing, righteousness, justice, and
equity;
that prudence may be given to the simple, knowledge and
discretion to the youth—
the wise man also may hear and increase in learning, and the
man of understanding acquire skill,
to understand a proverb and a figure, the words of the wise
and their riddles.
The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge; fools
despise wisdom and instruction. (Proverbs 1:1-7, RSV)

Priests, prophets, and sages were the teachers in ancient Israel.
Christian colleges also try to be priestly, and they sometimes claim
to be prophetic. As institutions, however, they most nearly fit into
the wisdom tradition. Therefore, it is appropriate to begin with the
writings of the biblical sages.

But what has the fear of the Lord to do with "crying out for in-
sight . . . [and seeking] it like silver?" "For the Lord gives wisdom;
from his mouth come knowledge and understanding.” This is Proverbs 2:6, and it also is linked by the preceding verse to understanding the fear of the Lord. It is a good thing to seek knowledge and wisdom. Even the skeptical Preacher agreed. “Then I saw that wisdom excels folly as light excels darkness.” Wisdom “makes [one’s] face shine,” “helps one to succeed,” and “is better than might.” Granted. But all such claims are surrounded by doubt that one can find it and that, if found, it amounts to much more than “a striving after wind. For in much wisdom is much vexation, and he who increases knowledge increases sorrow.” After all, “much study is a weariness of the flesh.” But the conclusion remains: “Fear God, and keep his commandments.” (Ecclesiastes 2: 13; 8:1; 10:10; 9: 16; 1:17-18; 12:12-13.) Our warrant for seeking knowledge and understanding is real. It is also disquieting. It is good. It is also doubtful and dangerous. But at least we have an opening to think about our educational mission.

The wisdom teachers of Israel provided a meditation on this paradox in the story of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. It is a story that has a great deal to say about Christian colleges and those of us who presume to teach in them. In that story the serpent stands for the teaching power of our world. The serpent was more subtle than any other wild creature that the Lord God had made. He said to the woman, “Did God say, ‘You shall not eat of any tree of the garden?’” (Genesis 3:1)

The serpent is not Satan. At least, not yet. Nor does wild connote the savage and undisciplined. This is Eden, after all. The serpent is an astute teacher subtly guiding student Eve to think about her situation. This animal is astonishingly clever, no doubt, but the question is appropriate even for the innocent. To eat is to assimilate. What may and what may not be eaten? This is all quite natural and quite important, though economy and mythic verisimilitude expresses it better through the invention of the serpent.

The question is pedagogically sound. To convince yourself of this, ask it of someone and demand a “yes or “no” answer. A heuristic confusion necessarily follows, as Brevard Childs argued in his Old Testament course at Yale Divinity School. “Yes” implied that God may have demanded that the fruit of all trees be avoided. “No” implied that there was no prohibition at all. The shape of the question required a thoughtful explanation.

For the first time, Eve was forced to think about God, as Childs also pointed out. She became the first theologian!
And the woman said to the serpent, "We may eat of the fruit of the trees of the garden; but God said, You shall not eat of the fruit of the tree which is in the midst of the garden, neither shall you touch it, lest you die." (Genesis 3:2-3)

The last clause reveals her new state of mind. God had not told Adam that he could not touch it (2:16-17). Eve added that. The question had opened an abyss beneath her feet. Until now she had walked and worked and conversed in innocence with God and with her mate. She had lived physically and spiritually within the garden. Now she had to step outside it. Instead of interacting directly with God and Adam and the creatures, she had to think about what God had said and about her relation to that part of her environment. In her sudden anxiety, she strengthened the prohibition. She pushed the prohibited object even farther away, showing that she had accepted the possibility of eating its fruit. Now that God had become an object of thought and God's prohibition had become a datum to be pondered, a space for the very human freedom to think and to choose had been opened up. She had lost her innocence. Eve had not yet sinned, but now she had better think very hard indeed.

But the serpent said to the woman, "You will not die. For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil." So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate; and she also gave some to her husband, and he ate. (3:4-6)

The sages who shaped this story must have known that Eve did not need the serpent's encouragement to take and eat. There were compelling enough reasons to draw near the tree. For one, she was not accustomed to unanswered questions. She had had no opportunity to grow accustomed to anxiety. Having lost the security of the unquestioned verities of the garden, she needed the certainty that could come from impersonal "truth." Had she been willing to live with doubt, she would not have sinned, at least not yet. But she had not yet had occasion to learn to live in trust that God would answer troubling questions at the right times. And so there was unaccustomed pressure to do something to resolve the anxiety.

There was an even better reason to eat. She needed what the tree had to offer in order to know whether or not she should eat of the
tree. This was the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Its fruit was the ability to discern, to be wise (see 2 Sam. 14:17), even, presumably, to be moral. That was what she did not yet have, and was precisely what she now desperately needed.

The question alone was enough to drive Eve to eat. To eat of this tree was to become like God, or at least like the gods who made up the heavenly court. To eat was to learn how to discern truth from falsehood, wisdom from foolishness, good from evil, as God admitted in verse 22. To live with such power was not simply a "Fall." It was also a wonderful leap upward. In a single moment she would become a higher sort of human. At least in part she would become divine. And she was told that she would not die. "So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate; and she also gave some to her husband, and he ate." (3:6-7)

Eve saw this. There is little irony now. It is simply so. The fruit of this tree is physically, aesthetically, and intellectually good. None of us can wish to return to Eden. Even the power to frame a rational judgment that we should like to do so is the result of the very act that drove our parents and us from that primitive innocence. Every opening chapel in every Christian college campus should include a liturgy of thanks to the serpent for the gift we have received. But that liturgy must also include the next verses:

Then the eyes of both were opened and they knew that they were naked; and they sewed fig leaves together and made themselves aprons. And they heard the sound of the Lord God walking in the garden in the cool of the day, and the man and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the Lord God among the trees of the garden. But the Lord God called to the man, and said to him, "Where are you?" And he said, "I heard the sound of thee in the garden, and I was afraid, because I was naked; and I hid myself." He said, "Who told you that you were naked? Have you eaten of the tree of which I commanded you not to eat?" (3:7-11)

Had the serpent lied? It would be as appropriate to ask whether God had. In 2:17 God had told Adam that the same day he ate of the tree he would die. The serpent denied that and, so far, he seemed to have gotten it right. But it is certain that that is not how the sages want us to understand the text. As the quotation from Proverbs 1 notes, the wise speak in proverbs and figures and riddles. Perhaps neither has lied. Nor has either told the whole truth. The serpent's
truth is that eating this fruit is not in itself the cause of physical death (see verses 19 and 22-24).

God's truthfulness is saved by the recognition that there is more than one kind of death. Something did happen immediately. So drastic a kind of dying ensued that God in judgment and mercy insured that Adam and Eve—and we—would not have to live forever in the new condition, however ambiguously wonderful and elevating it was and continues to be. How are we to understand this?

The clue comes from two powerful "figures": eating and nakedness. Knowledge and thinking, in one of their modes, imply both violence and alienation against both the subject matter and oneself. To eat this fruit Eve had to yank it from the tree. Perhaps even a bit of branch came with it. To eat the fruit she had to tear it apart and crush it, destroying it to gain its virtues. The quest for understanding, in one of its modes, is as aggressive and destructive as eating. By an act of the will the self detaches itself from its living, concrete environment (the all-grown-togetherness of a greater organism within which one responds as a thou to thous) and constitutes itself as a knowing subject over against some aspect of the former whole from which it is detached. Having become an object, it is now reduced to a mere "it" for the sake of analysis, which itself is a process of "undressing" and of dissecting in order to examine the parts of which it is composed. This aspect of the dialectic of knowing is a form of killing. In the humanities, one analyzes the patterns, the strategies, and the devices of the composition chosen for analysis. During the length of that exercise, at least, one destroys the composition as a whole and exchanges enjoyment of it for the always somewhat vicious pleasure of critiquing it. In the social sciences, one performs the same operations on oneself and one's societies. In the life sciences, one literally kills the "specimen" to dismember it. The advanced quest for knowledge always involves separation and alienation. Thinking kills. It does so even when its intention is the appreciation and preservation of life.

Unfortunately, learners become what they do. Having eaten, Adam and Eve turn their new powers upon themselves. For the first time they cease simply to be themselves for each other and before God. Each of them now becomes a knowing subject that turns upon itself, seeing themselves and each other as "mere" objects. "Then the eyes of both were opened and they knew that they were naked." Having "undressed," they sewed fig leaves to make aprons for themselves.
Sex is hardly the main point here, as if the "apple" signified the first act of intercourse as many early Christians and others have thought. But the connection is understandable, for sexual "knowing" can also alternate swiftly between loving desire and aggressive possessiveness. In any case, the text does not say that they did this out of shame. It may be inferred, of course, from the last verse in chapter 2 and shame will often be appropriate. But now, in the first place, it makes more sense to notice that their inspection of their now alienated bodies focused on those funny-looking parts that also figure in the paradox of knowledge. They are the organs that expel that which is rejected from that which has been torn from nature. Simultaneously they are the organs that restore the ecstasy of union and create new life from all this dying. What they felt, according to the text, was a new anxiety that Adam confessed to God: "I heard the sound of thee in the garden, and I was afraid, because I was naked." The act that separated Adam from God alienated him from himself by objectifying both.

Then God told them what would be the result of their grasp for knowledge. There was a curse on the bringer of the dubious good thing. The serpent must crawl upon the ground and be hated by humans. The ground, another symbol for the two-sided blessings of a good world, was also cursed. Adam and Eve (and we) were not cursed. They were informed what would be the result of their premature grasp for the fruit of the tree of good and evil. They would be alienated from each other and from the earth. They would be expelled from Eden. But God would make clothes for them and help them to bring new life into the world (Genesis 3:1). A history would result from this that leads toward a new heaven and earth. Something better than Eden can follow from their expulsion from it. Meanwhile we continue to suffer the consequences of this "original" Fall. Each of us also continues to re-experience Eden, and the tree, and the ambiguous blessings of our loss of innocence. And a final word for those of us who toil in Christian colleges: "Let not many of you become teachers, my [brothers/sisters], for you know that we who teach shall be judged with greater strictness." (James 3:1)

But that is not a truly final word. There is a promise in Adam and Eve's fear. If it is not yet that "fear of the Lord" which leads to wisdom, it is at least that fear which leads to humility and repentance. From that place awe and wonder (which is also the Greek beginning of philosophy) can lead to another aspect of wisdom's dialectic. That is the upward movement from parts to the comprehension of wholes.
More must be said about this, but for now it is enough to note one of St. Paul's celebrations of the paradoxical possibility of wisdom.

For God has consigned all men to disobedience, that he may have mercy upon all. . . . O the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways! "For who has known the mind of the Lord, or who has been his counselor? "Or who has given a gift to him that he might be repaid?" For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be glory for ever. Amen. (1 Corinthians 11:32-36)

Then, in the verses that immediately follow, he appeals to his readers "to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship." Bodies are no longer the problem. So complete is the reversal that the body is no longer an "it." It is a living sacrifice—Paul's figure for the entire self. As belonging to the coming age, the old split is healed. Therefore, "Do not be conformed to this world but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that you may prove what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect." (12:1-2)

THE "FALL," CHRISTIAN COLLEGES, AND FRESCO PACIFIC COLLEGE

One cannot write of God's working to transcend the Fall without writing the story of Israel and, for that matter, of all other peoples. Christians must especially write of Jesus and the Church. Nor can one write about Fresno Pacific College without addressing the Mennonite Brethren Church and its efforts to build the Kingdom of God in its own small parts of the world.

The Mennonite Brethren as the context for Fresno Pacific College

I am sometimes confounded by the ability of children to project the attributes of "neighborhood" onto what appear to me to be the cold streets and the anomic individuals of our cities. So I may not be, as I imagine, among the last of those who have grown up in Eden. I shall, nonetheless, presume to explain what that was like.

Like Adam and Eve, I can remember what it was like to live in a small, concrete community bounded in a qualitatively pre-modern "time" and in a quantitatively limited "space." The word concrete defines its essentially Edenic character. The second part of that word refers to something living; the prefix con means "together with." Together they specify a community in which the material and the
social and the spiritual aspects of life are all grown together into a living organism that is *halig*. This Old English word names the quality of a good so holistic that it has not yet split apart—as the word itself did—into its material ("healthy") and spiritual ("holy") aspects.

My elders knew well enough that most of the dis-eases deriving from the Fall were well represented in the Eden I remember, but they would not have been surprised that I can claim the pre-Fall story. They had taken for granted that it was their Christian vocation to build small replicas of the Kingdom of Heaven on earth. Like the ancient Hebrews and the early Christians, my forebears instinctively understood the significance of the fact that when God decided to grow a *halig* people, he began by shaping a new kind of family with Abraham, a new kind of tribes with the twelve patriarchs, and a new kind of *ethnos* around the covenants that came through Moses and Jesus. Nor did they imagine a "docetic" Jesus forming an "invisible" church. For them the body of Christ was composed of communities made up of local clans that were, in turn, integral parts of tribes that spread out into other near and distant communities to form a people of God.

They could also understand that each of these units was more than the sum of its parts and that each had a character that was profoundly a part of each person's identity. From the point of view of these group *Geists* ("Spirits," even "Angels"), individuals were not primary. They were the "living stones" that comprised the larger "living temples," which united to form the concrete Body of Christ. The parts existed to serve the whole.

But when recognizing that the group existed for God's sake and not its own, our communities also knew that their collective aspiration to become a "holy ethnos" implied that all members had to have their own spirits claimed by God. To be a "good" member of the group was not enough. Then it became the will of the whole that each of them should respond to the Spirit's call to seek God beyond the group. Then it was true that the whole existed to serve the parts. The larger group process and the more personal individuating processes produced a particular kind of person, a particular kind of piety, and a particular kind of wisdom.

Each of us first entered the intimate space of a family before progressively "graduating" into the spaces of the clan, village, tribe, and people. In so doing we expanded to encompass the larger sets of natural and social and spiritual relations that were the vehicles of the spirits and Spirit of each. Each new level came with the bright
promise of a larger becoming and each, when mastered, pointed upward and outward to a larger space. In all this one was not a given self experiencing all these things. Rather, one was a nexus of expanding relationships and was becoming ever more able to encompass richer dimensions of life and spirit.

Perhaps few of them achieved the piety to which they aspired, but I think that they at least sought the beauty God intended for the world and the cosmos. It was a comprehending piety, the embrace of larger realities on the way to becoming joint-heirs of Jesus Christ who sat at the right hand of God. The repose they sought in God was the confidence that the tensions and contradictions of life were resolved in the intentions of God and could be partially understood through comprehending more encompassing realities. The wisdom they sought was simply to know the mind of Christ in and through their relationships with the earth, with each other, and with the God who had given them their own gardens to tend.

When they gathered on Sunday they brought with them all that was sheltered under the sacred canopy that hovered above and around them. They offered to God the concreteness of their lives. Here they gathered together all the rhythms of nature and life with its joys and griefs as confession and petition and praise. Thus, worship was elevation and contemplation of the way things worked together for halig. Through this we were allowed a glimpse of ourselves and our bit of would-be paradise from God's point of view. Then we saw that we were really very small and sinful. Sometimes we trembled under the burden of what we knew should be God's righteous wrath. But we also knew that we were wonderfully made and near to the heart of God.

Growing up under such a sacred canopy included the comprehension of the levels of reality that it contained as they revealed themselves to us. The goal was to become a mature leader with the "common sense" of its greater ecology and good judgment how to enhance its halig. This wisdom was less the result of eating of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil than of running around in the garden, learning to tend it, and "naming" its creatures. Our comprehension of what was real and of how things worked was expressed in pithy sayings, in old saws and proverbs. As in the ancient world, wisdom was less a function of memorizing these "truths" than it was of gaining the "spiritual" gift of divining which ones applied to a given situation and how they did so.

The Scriptures were their guides to the knowledge and wisdom most worth having. But for them the text was not primarily a source
of "facts" or even "truths." There was little thought of approaching it in the analytic spirit of the scientist. It was rather a story of the ways of God with human beings like themselves. The Hebrews also had been organized into families and clans and tribes. They too had mostly been farmers. They too had been exiles struggling to create a godly homeland.

The Bible was a window into a world that, like theirs, was more than the sum of its parts. Those who read it over and over lived themselves into that world. When they prayed, they could become David pleading for healing and forgiveness. When they worked, they became Adam struggling with ground that was more willing to bear weeds than wheat. When they had to make decisions about life and relationships, they moved naturally between Solomon's proverbs and their Low German ones. The world of the Bible was both real and ideal. The struggles and failures of the biblical saints might even be more sordid than their own. Yet the whole of that world was suffused with the brooding, sometimes dramatically active, presence of God. In one sense, it was not about the far past at all. It paralleled their own world, hovering above their world and intersecting with it. Its patterns could impress themselves upon their own world. They too could be God's chosen people, and so their imaginations could roam freely back and forth between that world and their own. In time, the patterns of their thinking could be molded by the biblical patterns. In the end, the most important thing they learned was not the ability to think biblical "truths." It was that they had learned to think about everything in ways corresponding to the biblical patterns. The best of them learned to think "in" the truth rather than simply "about" truths.

In part, I am trying to express what is implied in the words "common sense." Those with that gift are able to understand the whole of a thing or a process, apprehending it as if in a single picture. Some call this a "right-brained" way of perceiving; others speak of grasping a Gestalt. Recognizing the shape and intention of a given process, they can improve what they are given without needing a recipe.

The "thing" and the "process" that our saints were mainly about was the building of a life and a community. Through growing up in such a community and through growing their way into the vision of a people of God as presented in the Scriptures, they could comprehend its contours and shape its future. They could follow whatever guidelines were given them by the tradition and improvise where the guidelines were no longer applicable or when they conflicted in "hard cases." For difficult decisions they sat together before the
Scriptures and prayed their way into the recognition of which story or insight could best help them to solve their problem. None of this needed to have been systematically worked out. In so far as they theologized about this process, they said confidently with the early Christians, "It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us."

Of course, such communities do not need colleges until they reach the limits of the kind of knowledge and wisdom they "naturally" make possible. The systematic, analytic kind of thinking symbolized by the tree in Eden becomes necessary when success and growth create problems that traditional wisdom cannot answer. Inevitably, this creates a kind of systematized rationality, whether it is the bureaucratic hierarchies of Bronze Age kingdoms or the scientific, technological systems of Western modernity. Then colleges, or something like them, necessarily emerge.

The new kind of knowledge matches the nature of a new kind of society at the same time that it answers that society's needs. Its dissections match the abstractions that have emerged. In the new complexity, individuals abstract themselves (literally, they are "pulled out or away") from their concrete communities to join other abstracted persons. Together they form new kinds of societies dedicated to produce a specific product or service that has itself been abstracted from the all-grown-together round of concrete life. For the first time, progress becomes the goal of work and action. Instead of the common-weal, people can now aim at better products produced more efficiently for the sake of more money. Concomitantly, a third level of abstraction emerges: the discovery and rational ordering of the principles that underlie the new knowledge and technology. This rationalization speeds up the process of the discovery of more truths and the training of those who serve the new institutions of all this "progress."

Pacific Bible Institute

By the mid-1940s this new world had stealthily infiltrated the Mennonite Brethren Edens of the West Coast. The parents knew by then that their young people would have to become more educated. Many of them, however, distrusted the "Christian" colleges available to them as much or more than they did the secular ones. The Christian colleges promised to combine faith and knowledge, but the new mixture often seemed more at home in the new world than in the old Edens. Perhaps it would be wiser to expose their young people to secular institutions to satisfy their needs for secular
training, and to fashion a sacred educational setting for the training
they would need to become leaders in the sacred aspects of what
was left of the old Edens. So they created Pacific Bible Institute in
Fresno. What they failed to see was that this decision was already a
product of the loss of innocence. The serpent was almost as much
the institutional and intellectual father of PBI as of the University of
California and Tabor College (the Christian college built by their
Midwestern cousins and favored by some of their neighbors).

At PBI the Bible was the center of the curriculum. Such liberal arts
courses as existed were justified for their servant role. Would-be
ministers needed to practice the skills of speaking and writing.
Sunday school teachers needed courses in psychology and educa-
tion. Music was essential in worship. Basically, however, the school
taught the sacred content derived from sacred Scripture that would
be needed by those who would be engaged in full or part-time
sacred work. What they did not understand was that not even a
Bible institute could read the Bible as it had been read in the old
Edens. The Scriptures had simply become the trunk and the largest
limbs on the PBI tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Like other
educated fundamentalists, they had transformed the Bible into a
repository of abstracted facts and moral truths and doctrinal prin-
ciples that revealed the structures of the now abstracted sacred
sphere.

Unfortunately, students discovered that a purely sacred course of
study was not even adequate for sacred careers. Churches were
beginning to want pastors who would understand the kind of ab-
stractions learned by those who were returning from colleges and
universities. As a result, the more astute would-be ministers were
not enrolling. Influential leaders were growing uneasy about the
sacred/secular assumptions embodied in the curriculum. Those who
most seriously studied the Bible discovered that breakthroughs in
understanding it came from those who were also steeped in the
"secular" disciplines of archeology, history, literary analysis, and
linguistics. With enrollment skidding, it became clear that PBI could
not survive. It rightly became Pacific College.

*Pacific College*

Arthur Wiebe became President in 1960, and West Coast Mennon-
nite Brethren began coming to terms with the fact that they owned
a Christian college, with all the advantages and disadvantages
pertaining thereto. They also discovered that here was a Christian
college with a difference. President Wiebe did not staff it with an older generation of fundamentalist teachers who had come to terms with modernist abstractiveness by turning even the Scriptures into a source of abstractions (true ones of course). Instead, he hired a group of brash young teachers bright enough to have succeeded at some of America's best universities and sophisticated enough to question many assumptions of abstractive modernity. At the same time, these young teachers were so profoundly linked into the old Edens that they wished to help to restore their concrete beauties in a form that could flourish in the modern world. In other words, they were the “grandchildren” who were no longer as hostile toward the old “naïve” concreteness as were those “children” who were using fundamentalism to drag Mennonite Brethren into modernity.

They did not know how this could be done, but they were bold enough to launch a great experiment. That they slid into many mistakes enshrined in the model of the standard Christian college is not at all surprising. They did not have any good models to imitate. It is also true, I think, that they were willing to trust the wisdom and instincts that they had retained from our “pre-Fall” Edens. So they ended by shaping a college that was probably a good deal better than our more modernizing churches deserved. (I speak as one who came after the first great burst of creativeness had already shaped the content and spirit of much that we continue to enjoy.) To comment helpfully about Fresno Pacific College, I must first sketch some elements of the Christian college-model.

**The Christian College Heresy**

A particular kind of idolatry was the besetting sin of the communal Edens I have sketched. Their understanding could be guided by a sense of God's holy presence, but too often they followed through by asserting their own special goodness and denying God's presence in other sorts of communities. In so doing they tended to transform God into a custodian of their own ethos.

Instead of idolatry, heresy is the besetting sin of societies that have eaten deeply of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Heresy is especially the sin of the modern West. Christian colleges fully express the modern heresies even in the way they seek to counter the heretical spirit of the age.

The word “heresy” comes from a Greek word for a group that has abstracted itself from concreteness. It refers to a sect, or a party, or a school, as in “the hairesis of the Pharisees,” or “the Republican
party," or the "mercantilist school of economists." The characteristic truths of each of these secondary societies are not heresies because they are false. All really important heresies begin with genuine truths. The point is, simply, that they are partial. They abstract people, functions, truths, and points of view from what had once been a concrete whole. Individuals leave their primary communities sheltered under sacred canopies to join institutions structured around abstracted functions. In an almost fully abstracted society, the canopy shrinks to the family as the community's vestigial remnant. The former relational integrity of an integrated life in a concrete society is replaced by the series of more or less discrete roles the individual now plays in function-specific secondary societies.

Colleges are required by an abstracted world and mimic its structures. They are important places for thinking out and teaching the sets of specific procedures and principles that are foundational to each of the abstracted institutions and sciences. In doing this, colleges have themselves become organized into departments, each of which abstracts some aspect of knowledge for its specialized attention. Colleges, even Christian colleges, offer the fruit of the tree of good and evil and are pleased to offer tenure to the subtlest of their resident serpents.

Christian colleges even transformed biblical studies and theology into their own (departmental) abstraction. Instead of centering the curriculum around the content of the Bible, Christian colleges compensated by proclaiming Christ, as the Lord of all of life and truth, to be the center and goal of the curriculum. The "Pacific College Idea" took this step when it posited the "unity of all knowledge under God" and the correlate that there can be "no ultimate contradiction between the truth of revelation and of scholarly investigation."

That is, though hairesis is adopted in the institutional structure, it is denied in the Christian college's intentions. Just as the old sacred canopy enclosed all parts of the old Edens and as larger canopies arched over lesser ones until the entire world was comprehended as an ordered creation, so the foundational principles of the separate sciences were understood to be rationally comprehensible in a hierarchically structured Christian world-view.

This expectation clearly followed the Enlightenment program. The truths of each of the sciences could be derived from more basic foundational truths and their certainty could be either inherently recognized or empirically established. While the sense of the Edenic canopy was fading along with the demise of concrete communities,
Christian colleges claimed the reality of a sacred ideological canopy covering all truths. After all, in that other modernizing truism beloved by the justifiers of Christian colleges, “All truths are God’s truths.” Of course, it was always easier for faculty to confess their faith in God and in the possibility of a Christian world view than it was for them to show how their subject matter fit into the cohesive pattern that is God’s point of view.

No doubt the truisms I have cited from the FPC Idea and in the preceding lines became such because they are true. But we should be wary of how we have used them. For one thing, they are strikingly harmonious with the secular Enlightenment faith in a consistent rationalist or empirical world-view. For another thing, we late-moderns have been forced again to appreciate the wisdom of the Preacher, for whom the attempt to attain complete wisdom has led to the recognition that humans cannot find it. As the philosophers from Calvin College have been teaching us, foundationalism of the sort attempted is a pious but empty promise. That is a very important and even hopeful finding. Humans may find much knowledge and even attain a limited kind of wisdom. But the typical model of the “Christian college” has been so deeply shaped by the Enlightenment version of the tree of good and evil that only a very profound rebaptism can reestablish its Christian relevance in a post-modern world.

By now, Evangelical theologians can only agree that the Bible as source of foundational truths ought to yield a coherent interpretation and theology within the foundationalist rationalism they had accepted. Meanwhile, life has become so complex that, as James Davison Hunter has explained, many people cannot understand the basic patterns of our own culture. They get through the day and the week, applying sets of recipes that they have learned to apply to specific circumstances and that make it possible for them to more or less “get by.”

CHRISTIAN COLLEGES AND THE WANING HOPE OF HALIG

Edens are a prerequisite for a Christian (or any) college

Both the Greeks and the Hebrews agreed that something like wonder, or awe before God, was the beginning of wisdom. They also agreed that this evoked the clear-headed sense of our inability ever to know as God knows. But it was also the key to the search for enlarged comprehensions. An initial reflex of the intimation of the
beautiful and of *halig* is the rush of desire to make it one's own. For the Greeks this *eros* was the god who united heaven to earth across the chaos to engender life. To the Hebrews the Spirit of God was the power creating a living order out of the chaos. According to the Apostle Paul, this Spirit removes the veil that prevents us beholding the glory of the Lord and grants the power to metamorphose to ever higher levels of its image in us (II Corinthians 3:14-18). The second reflex of this urge to complete being is to seek the good of others. *Agape* flows from God through us as the power that fashions the City of God. True mastery is that rule which "seeketh not its own." Without the fundamental excellence of concrete love, mastery produces only a false order held briefly in place by force.

A second prerequisite is a sense of the concreteness of the realities studied and the increasingly comprehensive ability to relate abstract analyses of these realities back to the original concretions. Without the upward reach of comprehensions, the dialectical movement of wisdom is broken and we are left with the death implicit in analysis.

College teaching once made sense. When I began at Tabor in the early 1960s, students came to college from coherent neighborhoods or small towns or old-fashioned ghettos, and they had comprehended the concrete interrelatedness of several communal levels. They were ready for the abstractions that are our disciplines. They had a more than nodding acquaintance with a natural ecosystem that science classes helped to explain. They had confronted the verities of life and love and death that the humanities celebrate. When a historian or sociologist or political thinker expounded the theories that throw light on human institutions, they could apply those insights to the communities they had known. Curricula did not have to be coherent; insights could come in any order. The student's home-grown world-view furnished the spaces into which our jumble of puzzle-pieces could be fitted.

Unfortunately, colleges today—even Christian colleges—cannot assume that students arrive with either the fear of God (in the required sense) or with the ability to apprehend concrete totalities. In the past, we could take for granted that students came from small, primary communities and had direct experience of basic facets of the life of their communities and a "common sense" of their coherence. They came to college expecting to add new knowledge and insights to their common sense and to achieve an imaginative grasp of larger concretions. Though recognition of finitude might warn them of the impossibility of fully comprehending larger totalities, the ability to imagine what such a grasp would be like and the drive
to move toward it was, I believe, made possible by earlier experiences of more limited wholes. So long as there is at least an intuitive sense of that larger reality, abstractions can point to the truth they only partially engage.

Furthermore, colleges in the past offered a curriculum that at least seemed comprehensible. Even the entering student could envision its confines, apprehend it as a body of learning, and aspire to at least a conventional mastery of the whole. The remnants of the classical curriculum (from longer ago), with its quadrivium and trivium and its reading of selected biblical and Greek and Latin classics, provided a “General Education” that all shared and that furnished the basis for a civilizing discourse. It also allowed for the development of good judgment on the concerns of the commonwealth.

It is important to understand that a limited content can be a rich one. Narrowness comes in different packages. Small primary communities must contain the basic elements of life, must be a microcosm. On the other hand, the scattered functions of a complex city can prevent one from ever discovering some basic aspects of reality, and a comprehensive common sense may never emerge. The liberating power of a limited curriculum that features close readings of the classics of Western civilization should not be underestimated. Intelligent limitation is essential to the apprehension of the heights and depths of that which inevitably will exceed our total comprehension. Breadth of knowledge, except for the very gifted, easily correlates with a shallow mind.

It is also the case that a multi-dimensional experience and education (even if of limited breadth) was conducive to the development of good judgment. An unbounded curriculum, itself a contradiction in terms, leads to the amassing of facts and insights—but wisdom is lost. Wisdom and judgment depend upon knowing how bits of knowledge fit into the larger whole and how insights are applied so that the balanced tensions permitting health and creativity can be maintained. There is a wisdom that emerges from a sense of tradition. There is even a gift of discernment given to saints who have practiced the (apparently) narrowest sphere of all—the relation of the self to itself and to its God in prayer. Perhaps the greatest depth of comprehension is possible only within the “narrowest” of limits.

*West of Eden*

It may literally be impossible to make sense of knowledge (except as tools for the attainment of mundane and immediate ends) when
the sense of the appropriate concretions is lost. Every course and
department of even the largest university is based upon abstractions
from reality. One way to abstract is to isolate particular elements of
the larger whole ("In this course we deal with the physics of light.").
Another way is to study aspects of the whole ("In this department
we deal with the material basis of reality."). Another way is to study
the whole from a particular point of view ("In this university we
study everything in terms of the metaphysics of dialectical material-
ism."). Yet another way is to analyze the appropriate methodology
for the study of a given content ("In this course we analyze histori-
ographical techniques."). One can argue that the modern university
fails to teach mastery both because it knows too much and because
what it knows is parceled into the specialist domains of departments
and divisions, and then is taught from an often unrecognized ide-
ological bias.

In this context, "education" increasingly becomes a second-order
abstraction from sets of abstractions. So long as the original reality
has previously been apprehended, the abstractions can add to its
comprehension. But when the sense of the larger reality fades, the
sequences of analyses themselves become the quasi-concreteness
from which further analysis springs. Then contemplations are "of"
the process of contemplations—like movies about the making of
movies. We need not argue that this is illegitimate. But I do argue
that research universities organized for this purpose, or even small
liberal arts colleges cloned in their image, are not appropriate places
for undergraduates who intend mastery. Moreover, the extended
process can quickly become demonic. To paraphrase Reinhold
Niebuhr, since we can infinitely abstract from reality, we are
tempted to forget that we are neither infinite nor abstract.

Finally, we must note that fewer students (or faculty) have experi-
enced coherent primary communities. The world increasingly
presents itself in abstracted, functional, and incoherent fragments.
We are reduced to trying to center our lives in one or more such
fragments. As specialists we teach our fragments to students who
hope that at least one set of them will make them well-paid function-
aries in a bewildering world from which they will nightly flee to the
very small private life of the "nuclear" family, which the Greeks
thought "idiotic," which the Hebrews considered the foundation for
a larger communal identity, and which Jesus feared as a potentially
idolatrous barrier to the search for the Kingdom of God.

For many years American education has mirrored, even led, this
fragmentation. Its curricula have been "enriched" by an incredible
explosion of information and theories. More and more it has been left to the students to try to forge coherence out of the bewildering array of choices available to them. Meanwhile their teachers, freshly minted from graduate schools where they learned the complications of a single mode of abstraction or the complexities of several modes applied to one aspect of reality, have no inkling of educational statesmanship. Lacking a vision of what sort of coherence beginning collegians should be offered, they do the best they can by teaching ever more esoteric courses—reproducing for undergraduates what they learned in graduate research universities. In turn, the collegians go out to impose watered-down versions of that for high schoolers, while grade-school teachers try to compensate for the failure of the schools of education to show them the glorious opportunity to become master teachers by enrolling in programs that offer to make them specialists. Academic enrichment often turns out to mean the mere trick of learning more content at earlier ages. Libraries aspire to create collections so large that students are too intimidated to enter, since the chances of finding the "right" book are vanishingly small.

Worse yet, the Christian colleges themselves increasingly undermine the churches that send them their best youth so that they can become the leaders their communities need to flourish in a world becoming more complex, more promising, and more threatening. When it became clear that many of these youth would not return to their own communities, these colleges made this another reason for their existence. Here the youth would learn the abstracted skills needed for success in the larger world. Surely they would preach to that larger world the abstracted truths the home and college affirmed.

Thus abstraction, and hairesis, triumphs. Too few students return to their home churches and almost no one returns with the vision of making the church itself an ongoing "graduate school" for reflection and action in seeking first "the Kingdom of God and its righteousness." Nor is the kind of Bible study learned in abstracted Bible departments able to survive the journey back home. The best students may learn to dissect the text and to discover many wonderful truths in it. But the Scriptures have mostly ceased to be the entry to a dynamic tradition of communal wrestling with each other and with God. Having failed to show how the critical study of Scripture could free and enrich the community's own struggle toward halig, the initial shock induced by some findings of critical scholarship cannot be overcome, and biblical scholarship itself is seen as heresy.
Arthur F. Holmes, whom I take to be an able and typical spokesman for such colleges, has many wise things to say in *The Idea of a Christian College*. But I think it revelatory that despite his recognition that learning requires community and relationships, he betrays no apparent recognition that concreteness is an essential basis for both. So it is also relevant that nearly all of his approximately thirty references to "church" are mere "asides." Nowhere is there discussion of the direct service to its own welfare that a church has the right to expect from a Christian college and from its graduates. It may also be relevant that he writes from Wheaton, Illinois, quite probably the "para-church" capital of the world. So endemic is modern abstractionism that many of the leading Christian colleges are themselves "para-church." Even denominational colleges soft-pedal their affiliation while pointing their students toward para-church Christian service. All this is to be expected, of course, in a world in which churches, having ceased to be centers for a concrete ethos, have become congregations—abstracted secondary institutions servicing the abstracted "spiritual" aspect of people's lives.

*Fresno Pacific College as a "Mennonite" Christian college*

Adam and Eve were not allowed to return to Eden. They should not even have wanted to. The Kingdom of God lies beyond Eden, on the other side of the Fall. Its possibility requires a continuing, though chastened, eating from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Toward that goal, Abraham and Jacob-Israel and Moses were charged with the promise and the task of creating the kind of families, tribes, and people that could prepare for and model a nation of priests. The first Christians asserted that Jesus extended this promise and claim to all peoples. Even the heirs of the Anabaptists set busily to work to create concrete Edens, and then confronted their youth with the goal of comprehending and transcending them so that they could directly confront the God who judged all idolatries and heresies. Having been forgiven and healed, they could then choose freely to seek the *halig* of their own concrete communities or they could go outward in mission to create others.

Perhaps Fresno Pacific College has imbued so deeply of the models of the liberal arts and Christian college that it cannot recover from contemporary *haireses*. There is enough in the FPC Idea to warrant the claim that we have unthinkingly accepted the old clichés. Certainly the self-study prepared for the most recent accreditation visit (1994) can be used to argue that. (But that would be
unfair. The standards and forms insisted on by accrediting agencies force the appearance of heresy on every school.) There is little evidence that our churches are resisting the modern move to become mere congregations.

But there is another possibility. Our ethnic and rural heritage has given many of us a sense of the shape of concrete communities and an appreciation of the beauty of what is whole and holy. Our religious history grants to us the capacity to look critically at the spirit of our age. We have a genuine, if confused, conviction that the liberal arts are basic to an authentic education and that a limited curriculum may compensate in depth for what it lacks in breadth. We have attracted teachers from other traditions whose life experiences and/or intellectual development have taught them communal values and a contextual approach to education. Perhaps more importantly, students, staff, and faculty forge a communal style that is more concrete than some students have ever experienced. One side of our entrepreneurial style is the courage to discover (and rediscover?) what is educationally significant.

It may be, therefore, that we can reaffirm an older and truly Christian search for knowledge in a form that is viable for a distracted world. Perhaps we can affirm the profundity of the Hebrew tradition of wisdom (with its proverbs and figures and riddles) and begin with an upward-striving fear of the Lord that balances the downward-pulling analytics of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. With a salutary humility, we then will be able to celebrate with Paul:

Oh, the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments, and his ways past finding out! For who hath known the mind of the Lord? Or who hath been his counselor? Or who hath first given to him, and it shall be recompensed unto him again? For of him, and through him, and to him, are all things: to whom be glory forever. Amen. (Romans 11:33-36)

With this knowledge, we will be more aware of ourselves in place and in time. We are planted in an undistinguished section of a moderate-sized city as a small college belonging to a small part of a tiny Mennonite denomination with a short history and limited resources. Yet, whether from faith or need, we testify that it is with God that we have to do—as was true of others who have existed in other places and times.
Paul also knew the need for modesty (though he did not reckon with the need to be more modestly and deliberately gender inclusive). Two verses later, he writes:

For I say, through the grace given unto me, to every man that is among you, not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think, but to think soberly, according as God hath dealt to every man the measure of faith. For as we have many members in one body, and all members have not the same office, So we, being many, are one body in Christ, and every one members one of another. (Romans 12:3-5)

Without presuming to possess a text that automatically answers all our questions or a comprehensively true theology/philosophy that allows us to know as God knows, we may, nonetheless, explore reverently the dialogue called forth by God's creating, sustaining, and redeeming acts. Into this continuing dialogue with God and with all others we too are privileged to enter. For, as Paul then insists, this concrete unity that is the body of Christ is graced with the different gifts given to its members, which bring knowledge and all the other needed fruits to create a holy and healthy society.

That brings us to the most troubling paradox of all. A Christian college is a special creation of the church. It is designed to play a specific role in the larger mission of the church. But modern churches are becoming congregations. They too are succumbing to the abstracting, functionalizing spirit of the age. So those of us who are inspired by the call to serve the various levels of a concrete people of God are increasingly driven to create here the halig that no longer characterizes the congregations from which we come. But how can the abstraction that an abstracted church creates to do an abstracted job with young members who are abstracted from their abstracting communities for a brief four years abstracted from their lives become a concrete community? Until congregations again become churches that seek to become concrete parts of the Kingdom of God, we can hardly help them or their youth even if we "succeed" at our own mission. To the extent that we try to do so, we may even turn out to be at odds with the congregations we are supposed to serve.

Though this was not always articulated well, those who built Fresno Pacific College and many of us who now serve here, were the product of Christian communities and grew up with this "in our bones." An increasingly fragmented culture is driving many to a
new appreciation of the need for concrete communal structures. The least we can do is to analyze the "signs of the times," using the best insights offered by the tree of knowledge, and to bear witness to the gospel out of that fear of God which keeps us hopeful and honest—and which gives us the courage to renew not only our minds but also the structures by which they have been too much shaped.

I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that ye present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto God, which is your reasonable service. And be not conformed to this world, but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind, that ye may prove what is that good and acceptable, and perfect, will of God. (Romans 12:1-2)

NOTES

1. James Davison Hunter, American Evangelicalism: Conservative Religion and the Quandary of Modernity (New Brunswick, NJ.: Rutgers Univ. Press, 1983, 10. This book and Hunter's sequel, Evangelicalism: The Coming Generation (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1987) are extremely important analyses of Evangelicalism's "bargaining with modernity." In this latter book Hunter argues that students in the best of the Christian colleges are rapidly succumbing to the spirits of the age. The almost morbid fear of conservative Christians that their colleges "will go the way of Harvard, Yale, and Princeton" is justified. Having already adopted structural and epistemological haereses it is quite inevitable that other heresies will follow.