

Choosing a College

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Many young people are deciding, about this time of year, where to go to college. In the process of making this decision of where to go, many of you are going to have to face squarely the question of what type of institution you will attend: will it be a Christian college or a secular one. My preference is for the former, the Christian college, and the purpose of this article will be to demonstrate why.

To write an article addressing this question and have it apply to different groups of people in different places is a difficult charge, for several reasons. First, our churches are located in diverse settings—both rural and metropolitan—which means that access to college may be near, within commuting distance, or far, which may necessitate living on campus or in housing nearby. Second, our young people have diverse interests which means that depending on one's vocational and/or educational goals, choices of colleges may be limited to those who offer a specific program. Third, our parents have diverse expectations and requirements of higher education which means that some may take the attitude that the college down the road is good enough or it may mean that some will want “the best” for their sons or daughters.

Fact is, our young people have pursued higher education both at secular colleges and universities and Christian colleges. No one has insisted that one ought to have priority over the other. As noted above, many considerations come into play here, and they should. And parents and their sons and daughters will need to discuss these matters together and come to their individual conclusions. What I write here is based upon my own experience and is my own opinion. All I can hope for is that you consider what I have to say in making your decisions.

Parenthetically, may I say that I am somewhat perplexed by the lack of interest of our young people in higher education. My concern is for our young people as they pursue their life's work. Given the costs of raising a family and the costs of educating our children in Christian schools, our young people ought to aspire to good jobs so that they will be able to afford these costs. Society is such today that the need for some advanced training of some sort, whether that be technical or liberal arts or some sort of apprentice position, is almost mandatory if one is to get some job other than what are called “junk jobs.” That concern is deepened when I think that there is sometimes a downright disdain for education. What one gets in education, you see, is about God and His revelation, and when I see and hear attitudes expressed that disdain that, I get concerned. The Reformed person has always valued education. That was the theme of the great Reformers—Luther and Calvin to be sure—and that ought to characterize us as well. Perhaps we need some attitude adjustment here. We need people of discernment, people who can lead, people who can analyze, criticize, and deal with the issues of contemporary society. That has little to do, you see, with one's vocation (we get hung up many times, don't we, on going or not going to college because we think we need to know what we're going to be or do before we go.)

That we are supporters of Christian education there is no doubt. Our entire educational system is testimony of that. That commitment, however, has never been extended to higher education. There has been much talk about establishing a Protestant Reformed college, and that fact would help, no doubt, in one's decision about where to go to college. But that idea is not very practical today. To establish a teacher training program, for example, as some have suggested, is practically impossible to do. The State of Michigan, for example, has not approved any new teacher training programs in the last 15 years. And the one proposal it did have from an

already established institution was rejected. So what's left to consider are public institutions, private institutions which have become secular, or private institutions which still actively proclaim a Christian perspective. So, given the options, how's a person to decide?

In order to answer the question for myself, I was forced to go back to my own upbringing in an area of the country (yes, contrary to the thinking of many Michiganders, there are other legitimate states in the union) where my parents had to decide already at the elementary level where we were to go to school. There were two options: the local Christian school or the local public school. There was never any doubt (and that was confirmed again by my father in recent discussions) where we were to go. Public education was not an option as long as there was an existing Christian school. Why was this so? The most obvious reason was that one was Christian and the other was not. But even more, given the fact that this school was parental, my parents had the opportunity to say something about what went on in that school. And they exercised that option. Not always with good results, I might add, but voice their views they did anyway. I am convinced that, in my case, that voice did make a difference. The school administration and the faculty were aware of the fact that we were there and some things were different because we were. I can recall vividly, for example, the removal of a history teacher because he taught evolution. I can recall also that some of us were recruitment targets for dramatic productions, only to have the faculty back off when they knew our position.

I see no reason now, why that same thinking ought not be applied to the selection of a college.

But it seems that many of us lose our conviction here and turn to preference. The line of reasoning we use to send our children to local Christian schools seems to end at the conclusion of high school education. It seems then, that any college or university is fair game for our children to attend.

I know that there are reasons given for that approach to choosing a college: finances, closer to home, program of study, etc. And I will admit that oftentimes these considerations are real and need to dictate how our decisions are made. The question I want to raise, however, is whether the question of Christian vs. secular college or university is drawn in here. Do we, as parents, and do we, as students, make that a primary consideration in our college choice? My hope is that we will and that we do.

Why so? The answer follows directly from what has gone before: the choice is between an institution that is Christian—Christian in its mission, Christian in its perspective—or an institution committed to a secular perspective and a secular mission. What you can expect from a secular college is a secular perspective on history, on man, on the world. What you can expect from a Christian college is a Christian perspective on history, on man, and on the world.

This is not to say, however, that you will be able to agree with everything that is taught. But at least the people with whom you deal will approach problems and solutions differently and you can expect your professors to understand what you are trying to say.

If the decision then, is to choose a Christian college because it is that—Christian—there are going to be certain things that are necessary for you as a young person to understand. First, you will have to be a person of discernment. You are going to encounter new ideas and perspectives, beliefs and philosophies with which you don't wholly agree and you will have to be able to sort what you can embrace and what you cannot. Second, you will have to be a person with courage. Courage to speak your mind and courage to hold on to your beliefs whether that be in classroom discussions or in "bull sessions" with your peers.

The results can be very positive. If you come to college with convictions and with the ability to articulate, tactfully, those convictions, the result can be that you will be strengthened in those convictions. Just the fact that probably for the first time in your life you will not be able to reply upon the old phrase, "I don't believe that, because my church doesn't believe that," and will have to defend yourself can be a refining, sharpening experience.

So I come back to the beginning. We have never insisted that a Christian college be a requirement. In some cases, that would not even be possible to require. Some programs just are not available at a Christian college; many technical and vocational programs are offered only at the local community college. But where there's a choice, I would urge our young people to attend a Christian college. There is much to be gained, I believe, if they do. What, for example, would one who is going to be a medical doctor or a nurse prefer in his training, a Christian perspective on health care or a secular one? Or, if one is going to be a teacher, what would be preferable, a Christian perspective on education and on the child, or a secular one? The list could go on.

Some final words for anyone who is going to college. Keep in touch with your parents, your minister, and anyone else who can help you through the difficulties of college life. We often think that once you become a college freshman, you automatically become an adult. My experience has shown that much maturing goes on during college years, and the more help and guidance you have, the better off you'll be.

As for me, I've talked with many young people and am willing to help, even if you are going to some other school "down the road." My view of where to go may be somewhat biased after spending nearly twenty years at Hope College, but I believe that I am open enough to help you wherever you choose to go.

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