

Headwinds Facing Christian Higher Education: How Can We Climb the Heights of Biblical Education... Without a Disciple's Sure Foundation First?¹

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The Disciple Dilemma

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Abstract

This paper explores the challenges facing Christian higher education institutions, focusing on trends and “headwinds” that threaten operational viability. These institutions are argued to be at risk due to a loss of mission, rooted in a broader cultural shift away from biblical Christian discipleship. The paper uses a Wall Street-style risk assessment to categorize institutions into four quadrants based on headcount and investment: Thriving, Hoping, Inertia, and Struggling. The analysis reveals that a significant majority of Christian schools fall into the Struggling or Hoping categories, suggesting potential long-term viability issues. The paper suggests that the root cause of these challenges is not in attempting or failing to compete with secular schools, but rather, the neglect of discipleship as taught by Christ, predominantly in churches, thence passed along as under-disciplined rising students. The paper proposes a return to “Empyrean Discipleship,” emphasizing the importance of faculty members as visible disciple-makers. By focusing on discipleship, Christian educational institutions can regain their competitive advantage and fulfill their mission

1 This article was written as part of the Zagreb Biblical Institute research project: “The Concept of Discipleship Among Evangelical Churches in Croatia.”

of creating educated disciples. The paper concludes that the path forward involves prioritizing discipleship over mere education to navigate the social headwinds facing Christian higher education.

Keywords: *discipleship, Christian leadership, Christian higher education, Nones, Dones, mission, Christian culture*

Introduction

I am very thankful for this opportunity to present this material to you at the International Theological Conference “Discipleship in Evangelical Churches” in Zagreb, Croatia. A variation of this same presentation was given to the Chief Academic Officers of the US accreditation Board “The Association for Biblical Higher Education” (ABHE) late last year. The material we will discuss is an extension of research and findings in writing the book *The Disciple Dilemma*.² As a brief background, I have served as a Chief Executive Officer for six Wall Street-backed industrial corporations³ to help them return to viable, profitable operations. I have, over these same years, also served as an elder and teacher in mega, medium, and small-sized churches in the cities my wife and I have lived in. Our observations and research around challenges, which we term “headwinds” facing the Western Church have been adapted into this paper focusing on the same symptoms and root causes emerging in Christian Higher Education.

The thesis here is that Christian higher educational institutions face near-term viability risks. Risks have been induced because distortions of intent and content about the mission of institutions are being lost. Mission loss then impairs the identity, meaning, and purpose of who Christians truly are. Further, this impairment metastasizes beyond individual disciples, returning to churches, and, to the crux of this paper, into the viability and vitality of Christian schools and seminaries in the West. Such negative Western trends then migrate into the globalizing social arena of, for example, Central European churches and schools as well. With no intent to be dramatic, this threat is coming for you, your children, and your friends. Do not mistake this presentation to suggest *an accusation of failure by faculty or staff at Christian educational institutions, nor in the local church*. This is a deeply entrenched, traditions-laden challenge. It did not emerge overnight. It will take time to right this situation.

2 www.thediscipledilemma.com.

3 Dennis Allen. LinkedIn profile: https://www.linkedin.com/in/dennisallenceo/?original_referer=

1. Adverse Trends on Campus

Let us do something you may not be comfortable with, analyze Christian higher education through the lens of a capitalistic Wall Street risk assessment. Christian higher education, like other organizations, is along with its higher call, also a business. Christian institutes can be risk-assessed using two simple and available metrics: headcount and investment.

Student headcount tallies both physical and online student enrollments. Investment is a peculiar term, tracking the balance sheet assets of facilities, programs development, and endowments. Both headcount and investment are core to any educational institution's success and long-term survivability.

Now let us parse the data into four business quadrants. Such categorizations are used by corporations and commercial consulting firms, usually applying specialized criteria relevant to that industry along the X-Y axis to analyze the strategic vitality of organizations in that sector. In this case, that criteria becomes our headcounts and investments.

In Figure 1, the grid shows changes in headcount enrollment between 2015 and 2023 on the vertical (Y) axis, and the change in financial investment over the same period from left to right across the page's horizontal (X) axis. The dotted lines demarcate growth versus shrink in the X & Y criteria metrics.

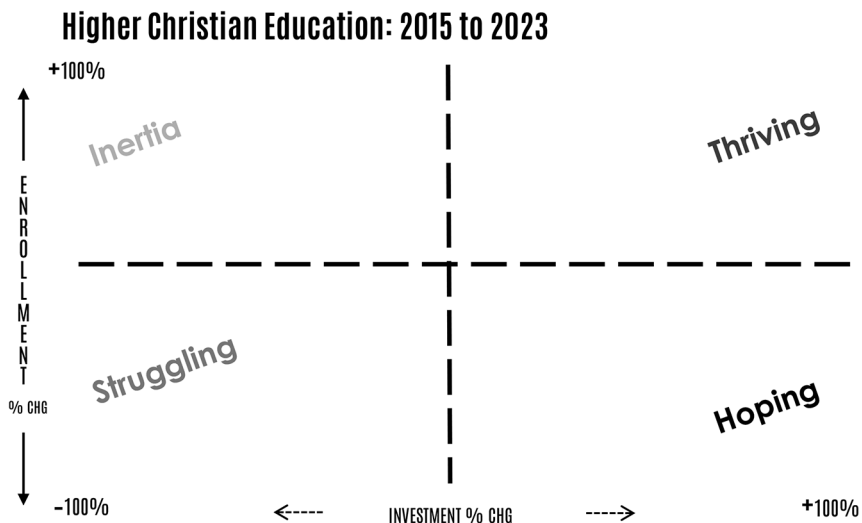


Figure 1: Quadrants

Do you see the four labeled quadrants? The Upper right quadrant “**Thriving**,” shows increasing headcount (online headcount + on-campus) and increasing investment in a school. No distinction is made between part-time and full-time headcount. The bottom right quadrant, labeled “**Hoping**” represents declining headcount, but at the same time, increasing investment—hence, “hoping” increasing investments in facilities, programs, faculty, and amenities will induce headcount to return to a growth trajectory. The upper left quadrant is “**Inertia**,” where headcount continues to grow, but investments are decreasing. The lower left quadrant—“**Struggling**”—categorizes institutions where headcount is shrinking and investments are going down simultaneously.

The two most predictable metrics used in the commercial market for “Thriving versus Diving” are Revenues and Profitability. A commercial entity can function for a while with decreasing revenues, but it will not long survive with negative profit. We argue in this article that the two key variables in Christian education are Headcount and Investment. In this grid, headcount is Profit, while Investment replaces Revenue.

Now you can credibly argue that numerous complex factors beyond the two indicators here affect the vitality of organizations. Yet this paper argues that these two fundamental lagging indicators summarize the effects of many other factors in analyzing an educational organization’s long-term viability.

Figure 2: 234 of the approximately 350 Christian higher education schools listed in North America were plotted based on data obtained from the Annual Data Tables of the Association of Theological Schools (Annual Data Tables).

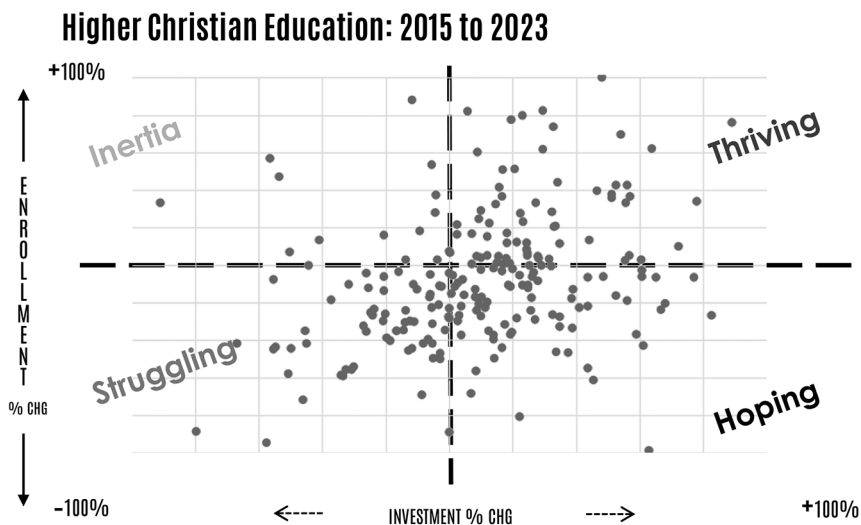


Figure 2: Plotting 234 North American Christian Colleges

The dots taken from the ATS data tables illustrate the absolute value change in enrollment and operating investments⁴ from 2015 to 2023, eight years. Why not the entire population of 350 schools? We excluded schools that came or went during the 2015 to 2023 period. Why? While a few new schools emerged in that timeframe, one reason not all 350 schools are shown is many simply shut down.

1.1. Do We Have a Problem?

At first glance, the plotted points might appear, more or less, grouped around the middle. Is all then generally well? See Figure 3. Notice the HCE SCHOOLS crosshair centers on the verge of **Struggling** & **Hoping** for Christian schools.

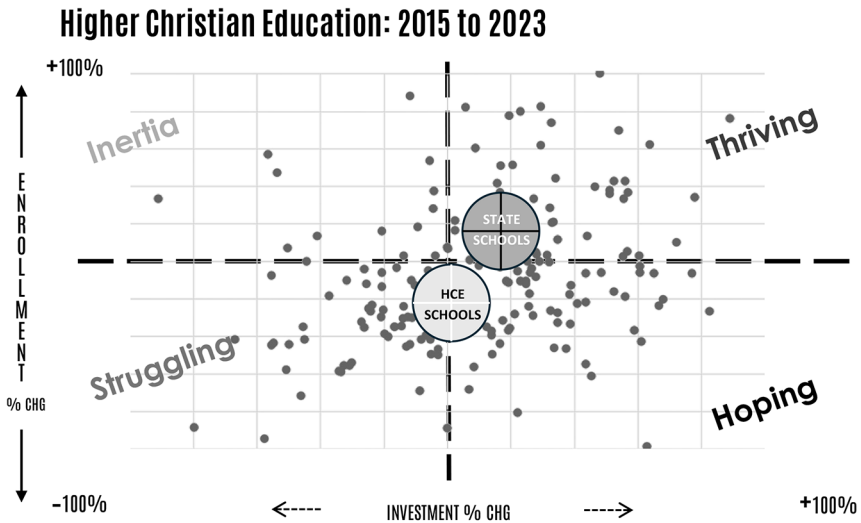


Figure 3: Averaging the Plots of Christian and Secular Colleges

As a comparison, in the STATE SCHOOLS crosshair centers on Figure 3 is the center-point for secular schools, using the same headcount/investment criteria, taken from a 2023 Wall Street Journal survey (Korn, Fuller, and Forsyth 2023). The Wall Street Journal made the point that though most secular schools have lost State & Federal funds in recent years, they continue to thrive on investments.

1.2. What Do the Numbers Tell Us?

For Christian higher education, 67% of the schools plotted are categorized in either the **Struggling** or **Hoping** quadrants. If you add in the **Inertia** quadrant,

4 Capital investments in faculty growth, facilities and programs.

73% of these schools are at “risk.” Why at risk? For perspective, three-quarters of Venture Capital-backed businesses in these same risk quadrants *fail within 5 years* (Gage, 2012).

Let us start looking at symptoms. Two common concerns (symptoms) voiced by North American Seminary and Christian University leaders (Berding 2014; Bouma 2015; Cary 2022):

- biblical literacy among incoming students is in decline
- anxiety and stress among students are consuming budgets and overwhelming staff

These trends are symptoms of a deeper thing, as they are not causes and are not merely the consequences of simplistic things like campus curb appeal. The trends highlight *that there are causal roots beneath the surface that must be identified*. Let us tour more symptoms facing Christianity, to help highlight the cause, and then consider a way forward for Christian schools.

2. The Problem is Deeper Than Just the Campus Numbers

Figure 4 is a “Religiosity Index”—published in the peer-reviewed journal *Sociological Spectrum* (Grant 2008). Around 1998 the index tilted steeply downward. This downslope marks the same timing when Nones & Dones predominantly emerged in North America.

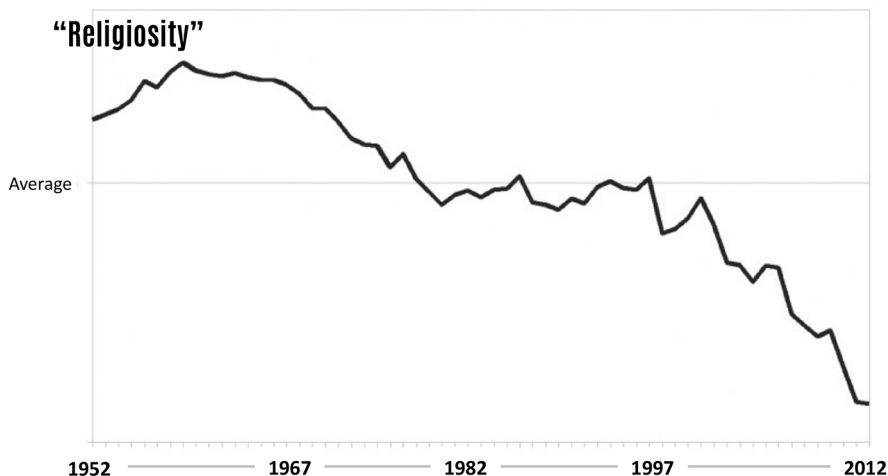


Figure 4: Religiosity Index 1952 to 2012

The local church supplies you with your students—is that good? Let us start well before a lot of today’s students were alive. Thirty-eight years from 1972 to

2010: The C and D lines in Figure 5 represent people who attend church rarely. The C & D lines represent the “Occasional” church-goers. These people come to church randomly, as in monthly or a few times a year, but are not regularly present in the life of the church community. There is not much change on those black and grey lines of the occasional church-goers over the 38 years tracked.

Now look at the A and B lines at the top of Figure 5. The B line “weekly” attendees swapped places with the A line “Never/Rarely.” That swap in the A and B lines represents five million people pulling away from Christianity in the US between 1972 and 2010. By 1998 the “Nones” and “Dones” (Nones: No church; Dones: Done with church/Christianity) had come on the scene. Many Millennials (born ~ 1981-1996) were teenagers during that period.

Declining Attendance

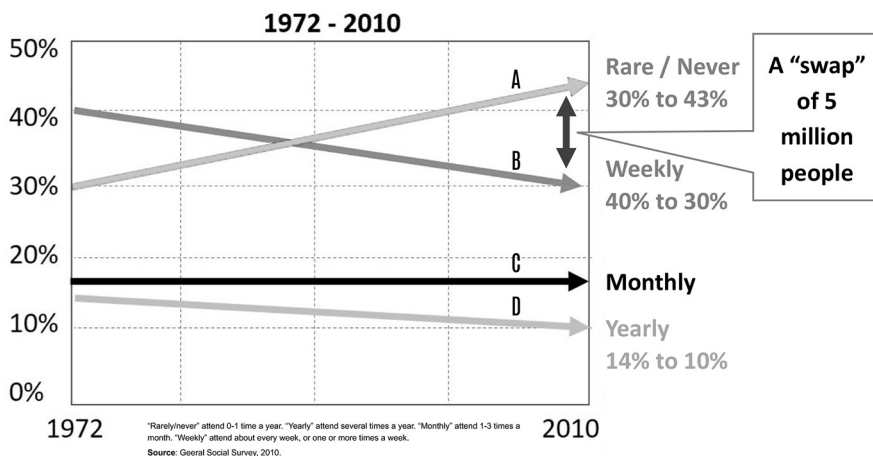


Figure 5: Christian North America Loses 5 Million

Now nearer to the present. Two studies, one 2007-2014, and the other one 2009-2019 tracked the shift in people identifying as Christian in the West. Notice in Figure 6 the tilt downward on the A (Protestant) and B (Catholic) lines. And the uptick on the C and D lines – the “nothings” agnostics and atheists. These two studies suggest, in aggregate, that thirty-three million people exited Christianity between 2007 - 2019. In other words, not only are today’s arriving students (born ~1996-2006) awash in a church vomitorium,⁵ but their parents probably were captive to this deforming trend as well. The aggregate “shift” effect of the period 2007 through 2019 is shown in Figure 7.

5 Roman term: A passage situated below or behind a tier of seats in an amphitheater or a stadium, through which big crowds can exit rapidly at the end of an event.

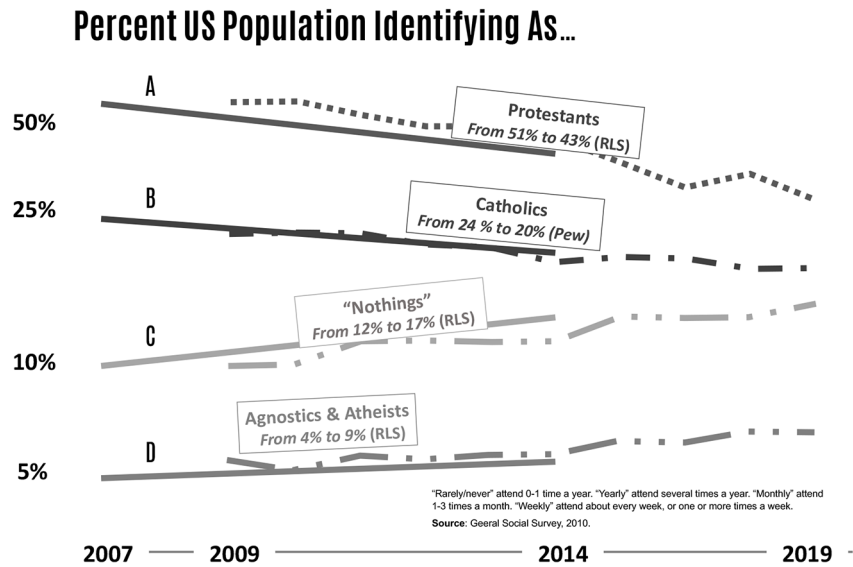


Figure 6: Religious / Non-Religious Population Shift 2007-2019

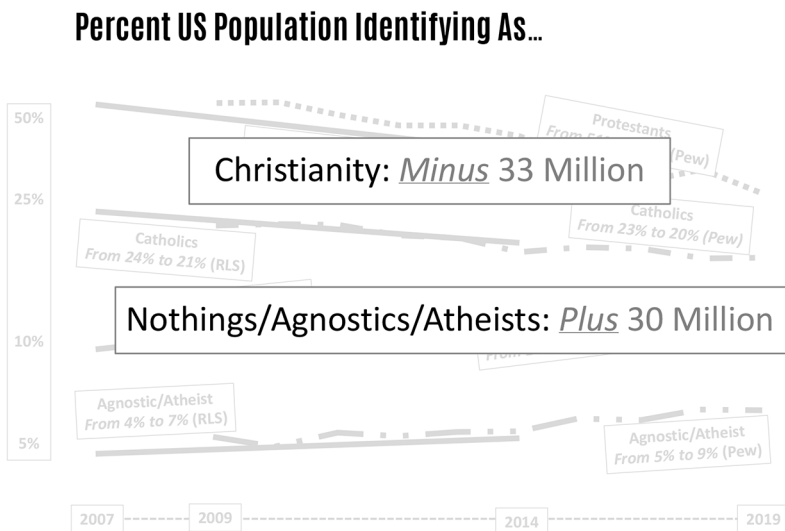


Figure 7: Aggregate Religious / Non-religious Shift 1972-2019

3. Not Exodus But “Exit, Us”

A lot of followers are not following Christ anymore. Christian culture was changing. Is changing. Why? What does that mean for you in Christian education? Campus leaders commonly assume their students were established as disciples in the home congregations sending the students out, and now the college can focus on academics. It is not an accurate assumption, nor is it a new story:

He was born in a Christian country, of course he is a Christian; His father was a member of the Church of England, so is he. When such is the hereditary religion handed down from generation to generation, it cannot surprise us to observe young men of sense and spirit beginning to doubt altogether the truth of the system in which they have been brought up... (Wilberforce 1834, 6).

It is hard to pass on that which we do not have. According to Cindy Perkins (2023), COO of the Bonhoeffer Project: “Less than 20% of pastors have ever been disciplined. Lay people even less. We fundamentally do not understand what discipleship even means.” Is something wrong here? A massive exit of people who were raised in the Church. The rarity of discipleship in churches. Headcounts in most Christian colleges are declining as well as investments in the vitality of those Christian schools. Is something wrong here?

Consider other recently documented trends among Western Christians. The Nones & Dones we mentioned earlier? Six out of ten raised in U.S. Christianity *walked out* (Allen 2022, 4-7; Davis, Graham, and Burge 2023, chapter 1; Barna Group 2015).

1. A third of Christians that did stay in church say “Not My Job” for them, to talk about Christ, about their faith, about “the reason for the hope” (1 Pet 3:15) they carry.
2. More than a third of attending North American evangelicals say “Jesus is not the only way to God.”
3. “Inert Christians:” No prayer life, no personal bible study, no close community. And 1.7 times a month is the average worship attendance in North America. 82%.
4. “The Muted and UNs:” UN-able, UN-willing, UN-prepared to talk about Christ, or to give “a reason for the hope within them.” Nine in ten in North America.
5. “Spiritual Distancing:” Nearly half of North American believers say their life in Christ is private, off-limits to transparent awareness with others.

This paper will not attempt to tackle the scope of nationalism, social justice/tribalism, or power & abuse dynamics, all of which further lure away from Christ’s purpose, meaning, and destiny for each believer. Yet the globalization of such

social pressures, like the five traits above, and broader political and illiberal movements lurch toward Europe, as well as the West.

Why should these marginalized Christ followers want to attend a Christian school? The short answer is, in growing numbers, they do not. Why do investors invest in organizations in decline? They usually do not. Christian schools and seminaries should not (and cannot) compete against the strengths of a secular school – meaning “strengths” of the spending, secular edginess, catechizings, and religious apathy, not to mention commercial endowments, government funds, and substantial facilities.

But Christians do have unique weapons in this competition too. Four key biblical themes: Meaning, Purpose, Identity, and Belonging, which, when aggregated are what we know as discipleship. Secular schools cannot compete. Cascades of those perhaps, but no sustainable competition. These core beliefs of meaning, purpose, identity, and belonging about myself are at the center of what it means to be human, and they are four ideas fulfilled only in Christ. *These four words outline biblical discipleship.* Such discipling, if reformed and reinstated among Christian colleges offers the basis of “sustainable competitive advantage,” which is something enduringly unique for one, but not for other competitors. These four pillars of a disciple are the sustainable competitive advantage in Christianity, and here, in Christian higher education.

What is the real mission of a Christian college or seminary? And does that institution’s culture support that mission? No business turnaround I have been involved with has succeeded by throwing money and marketing at symptoms of decline. Until the mission and culture are clear and deployed into its leadership and populace, money and marketing are a waste. Yet rarely do I encounter leaders who understand how fundamental mission, culture, and leadership are in establishing mission and culture to right a struggling organization. Here it is then: The truncation and omission to disciple as Christ taught discipling *is the cause* of these many adverse trends we have reviewed in Christian higher education.

Conclusion: The Path Forward is Looking to the Past – to Empyreal Discipleship

What is “Empyreal?” It is not Empire. It means the highest, the best, the “real deal.” Christ’s empyreal discipling, the Lord’s version of discipleship, is the only way back from the adversities confronting Christian higher education. And that way back in discipling begins with you, as a discipling educator. Not merely in the classroom though. The way to overcome these headwinds in Christian education involves you plus one, or perhaps two, following you, imitating your passion to serve Christ, talking about your failures as well as successes in life, learning your ways of graciously answering those who inquire (or scoff) at Christ (Col 4:6). It

is not a semester, not a few dinners together. It is life made open and available, usually for a couple of years in a student's life. In other words, the path forward is about faculty dedicated to the idea of disciples, making disciples who make disciples.

The most poignant (and final) directive of Jesus was “Go and make” (Matt 28:19). That is our mission as followers of Christ, individually, and corporately. Discipleship is the fountainhead of meaning, purpose, identity, and belonging for Christ followers. The symptoms and trends we see in Christian higher education will not be reversed until we bring our sustainable competitive advantage—Christ's discipling—discipling individual-to-individual back into the journey in the Academies.

Mission motivates people to be more, and to do greater things. The mission is both performance-focused and motivating. What is your mission in Christian higher education? *Is it possible that your mission is not education?* Could it be you are in the “educated disciples” business, and education is the primary means of your discipling? Many educators would claim discipleship is not their mission, and that education is. Going back to the opening title, “Can one climb the scaffold of biblical higher education...without a disciple's sure foundation beneath it?”

I want to humbly lay this idea at your feet: *your primary mission is discipleship.* Education is your core strength and talent, but your mission? Discipleship. In Kingdom impact, your mission – church leader, professor, or layman is progressing (making) disciples, DWMDWMD—which means, “disciples who make disciples who make disciples.” Lifelong, thriving disciple-making of disciples is the key to navigating the social headwinds facing Christian higher education. Do you want to see your Academy growing and flourishing again, with world-changing students who go out into their world as disciples who make disciples? Or will you keep on being a fact-factory, first and foremost?

Discipleship is not happening in student upbringing today. It is not happening in most of their churches. It did not happen with most of their pastors. Students have almost nobody discipling them. Discipleship then, must begin with you, Professor! Against such a discipling gale of the Spirit, no headwind could ever prevail (Matt 16:18; 28:19).

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Suprotni vjetrovi pušu u pramac kršćanskoga visokog obrazovanja: možemo li se popeti na visove biblijskog obrazovanja... ako ne postavimo čvrst temelj učenja?

Sažetak

Ovaj članak istražuje izazove s kojima se suočavaju institucije kršćanskoga visokog obrazovanja, a usredotočuje se na trendove i „suprotne vjetrove“ koji prijete operativnoj održivosti. Članak tvrdi da se ove institucije nalaze u rizičnom trenutku gubitka svoje misije s obzirom na svoju ukorijenjenost u šire kulturološke pomake od biblijskoga kršćanskog učenja. Članak koristi procjenu rizika u stilu one koju koriste brokeri s Wall Streeta te svrstava institucije u četiri kategorije na temelju broja studenata i ulaganja: uspješne, obećavajuće, inertne i posrnule. Analiza

pokazuje da značajna većina kršćanskih škola spada u posrnulu ili obećavajuću kategoriju zbog čega je upitna njihova dugoročna održivost. Članak predlaže da glavni uzrok ovih izazova nije ni u pokušavanju ni u neuspjehu da se natječu sa sekularnim školama, nego u zanemarivanju učenitva koje je Krist poučavao i to najviše u crkvama iz kojih stoga dobivaju studente koji nisu dovoljno napredovali u učenitvu. Članak zagovara povratak „empirejskom učenitvu“, pri čemu je važno da predavači zaista podižu učenike. Usredotočujući se na učenitvo, kršćanske obrazovne institucije mogu povratiti svoju konkurentsku prednost i ispuniti svoju misiju stvaranja obrazovanih Kristovih učenika. Članak zaključuje kako put prema naprijed podrazumijeva stavljanje učenitva ispred pukog obrazovanja u svrhu plovidbe ususret suprotnim društvenim vjetrovima s kojima se kršćansko visoko obrazovanje suočava.