

Assessment As Doxology

by David S. Guthrie

Introduction

Michael Patton (1986) relates a curious but notable extra-biblical account of the origin of assessment as follows:

In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth. And God saw everything that He made. "Behold," God said, "It is very good."

And the evening and the morning were the sixth day.

And on the seventh day God rested from all His Work. His archangel came then unto Him asking, "God, how do you know that what you have created is `very good?' What are your criteria? On what data do you base your judgement? Aren't you a little close to the situation to make a fair and unbiased evaluation?" God thought about these questions all that day and His rest was greatly disturbed. On the eighth day God said, "Lucifer, go to hell."

Thus was evaluation born in a blaze of glory.

Irrespective of its beginnings, whether honorable or villainous, the call for institutional assessment has become increasingly prevalent among the nation's colleges and universities during the last decade. Many of these institutions, in response to pressures from federal and state governments as well as the public at large, have embraced assessment as a means to retain valuable financial resources, expedite accreditation, or enhance prestige. In contrast, Christian colleges have not responded as quickly to the assessment movement. On the one hand, perhaps Christian institutions may be applauded for not rushing haphazardly and pragmatically into the assessment conversation. As one Christian college administrator puts it: "Skepticism is a healthy approach to the mandate to assess student outcomes (Van Harn, 1986, p. 1). Clearly, "looking before one leaps" is often a prudent act. On the other hand, however, one wonders if Christian

colleges have adequately addressed their involvement in this movement, particularly since Christians seldom can be criticized for being "early birds that get the worms."

This paper is an attempt to encourage Christian colleges to embrace institutional assessment as a valuable tool by articulating what may be referred to as a "theology of assessment." Since Christian institutions ostensibly are committed to implementing programs that are based on biblically-reasoned rationales, such a theology of assessment is a necessary starting point for institutional faithfulness on this issue. Seen in another light, this paper is also an apology for assessment. I believe that Christian colleges should be assessing student learning; ultimately, I want you to believe that too and do something about it.

I suggest that assessment fundamentally is doxological activity. That is, institutional assessment brings praise to God in that it helps a Christian college come to terms with its faithfulness as an organization that is committed to a biblical view of student learning and development. Assessment glorifies God at Christian institutions because it focuses attention on acknowledging God as the convener of student learning, on reconstituting student learning in more faithful ways, and on renewing and mobilizing institutional effort to enact student learning as to the Lord.

To demonstrate the doxological nature of assessment, I rely on five doxological themes that were developed by H. O. Old (1992) in his book Themes and Variations for a Christian Doxology. Although Old uses these themes as a means of framing ecclesiastical worship, I believe they also provide a useful strategy for understanding assessment as doxology. Therefore, I now turn to a discussion of each doxological theme and its relevance for institutional assessment that brings praise to the Lord of our institutions.

Assessment As Epicletic Doxology

Epiclesis literally means "to call upon, to make an appeal, or to address someone." In an ecclesiastical worship context, epiclesis refers directly to the invocation. As you may know, the invocation in a worship setting is the communicants' "cry for help;" it represents the worshippers' pleas for the redeemer to take note of their individual and corporate needs and respond accordingly. Perhaps the most recognizable examples of epiclesis, or invocation, among Christian believers are the supplications present in the Lord's Prayer that the Redeemer will consummate his Kingdom, provide daily bread, pardon sins, and protect from evil. Seen in this light, epiclesis is not mere obeisance to the divine, but must be understood as a passionate petition for God's presence in our situation; or, as Calvin (as quoted in Old (1992), p. 31) put it long ago, "[Invocation] is that habit of our mind,..., of resorting to [God's] faithfulness and help as our only support."

For the Christian college, institutional assessment is an epicletic activity for two reasons. First, assessment is epicletic because it represents a tangible expression of "call[ing] upon the Lord who is worthy to be praised." A Christian college that undertakes an assessment effort demonstrates that God's faithfulness is a precondition to institutional vitality. Doing assessment reaffirms that a Christian college needs and wants God's advice and presence in constructing and delivering college education. When a Christian college assesses student learning, it is, in effect, petitioning God for assistance in creating an educational experience on campus like it is in heaven.

The second epicletic aspect of assessment is that assessment underscores the importance of accountability. When a Christian college assesses, it is confessing that it belongs to God. In the same way that a worshipper petitions God and expects response based on an existing

relationship characterized by responsibility, a Christian college that embraces assessment communicates that it requires God's faithfulness to survive, desires God's direction in performing faithful education, and is willing and ready to modify existing structures and practices if it means that God will be more satisfied. Ultimately, assessment helps Christian institutions uncover what God may want for them, which, in turn, results in increased praise for God and the Kingdom.

One additional comment regarding accountability is warranted. At a national level, assessment for accountability has negative connotations. According to Hutchings and Marchese (1990), in some circles, assessment is a "dirty word" because of its perceived connection to accountability. The argument typically goes like this: assessment implies accountability; accountability implies external constraint; external constraint is undesirable; forget assessment. One hopes that such a rationale is not the explanation for the lack of assessment efforts among Christian colleges, particularly since we presumably understand the inevitability and the importance of accountability. As representatives of Christian institutions we realize that we--as well as our institutions--are ultimately answerable not to presidents, trustees, faculties, alumni, or donors, but to the Lord. Stated another way, since accountability is sensible within a Christian worldview, we should consider assessment a normative institutional activity. Consequently, a Christian institution which does not assess student learning is ostensibly an oxymoron.

Assessment As Kerygmatic Doxology

Kerygmatic doxology emphasizes acclamation and proclamation. In a worship context, parishioners commonly acclaim their devotion to God in both singing and speaking with characteristic simple phrases such as "Alleluia!" or "Praise the Lord!" Acclamations reflect personal acceptance of the "good news." Acclamation, however, is not without moral

imperative. Those who personally acclaim God are obliged to publicly proclaim God as well; believed "good news" must also be testified "good news." Amidst the many wonderful hymns in the Christian church, Charles Wesley's are exemplary for their balanced expression of both acclamation and proclamation. Those who may sing the following Wesley hymn clearly proclaim a highly acclaimable Master:

Ye servants of God, your Master proclaim,
And publish abroad His wonderful Name;
The Name, all victorious, of Jesus extol;
His Kingdom is glorious, and rules over all.

God ruleth on high, almighty to save;
Though hid from our sight, His presence we have,
The great congregation His triumph shall sing,
Ascribing salvation to Jesus, our King.

Salvation to God who sits on the throne!
Let all cry aloud and honor the Son:
The praises of Jesus the angels proclaim,
Fall down on their faces and worship the Lamb.

Assessment is also kerygmatic in that it highlights institutional acclamations and proclamations. In fact, one might say that the business of assessment is comparing an institution's acclamations and proclamations to determine the degree to which they correspond. Every college in the nation, including Christian colleges, acclaims certain institutional beliefs concerning learning, students, and personal development in their promotional/admissions materials, mission statements, and informal conversations. Christian colleges acclaim, for example, that they exist to develop Christian leaders, cultivate students' talents in response to a divine calling, or train students for informed and principled service in all walks of life.

These same Christian colleges concomitantly make daily proclamations such as classroom lectures, policy decisions, residence hall activities, committee discussions, advising

appointments, and donor solicitations. Examining the congruence between institutional self-pronouncements on the one hand and institutional enactments on the other constitutes the "basic stuff" of assessment; are students learning, by both formal and informal means, what we say they will learn? In the same way that an individual Christian seeks to harmonize personal profession (acclamation) and public performance (proclamation), Christian institutions must strive to create environments in which daily proclamations consistently reflect acclaimed presuppositions and, conversely, every proclamation can, with great sincerity, receive hearty acclamations from institutional constituents. According to the former president of Harvard University, Derek Bok (1986), failing to devote serious energies to such a task is, irresponsible, self-serving, anti-progress, and anti-improvement. If Bok is correct, and I am inclined to believe that he is, Christian colleges must make haste to discard any existing pretense that simply being a Christian institution ensures that everything is automatically done right. Rather, Christian colleges must embrace assessment as a crucial point of departure in clarifying and reconciling their institutional acclamations and proclamations.

Assessment As Wisdom Doxology

The centrality of wisdom is clearly apparent in the Christian tradition, so it comes as little surprise that a third dimension of assessment is wisdom. In Christian worship, the reading and preaching of the Scriptures has a primary role because the testaments reveal the nature of divine Wisdom. In turn, as worshippers attend faithfully to God's Word, which serves as the foundation of wisdom, their lives are enlightened and transformed.

In a similar way, institutional assessment produces light and potential transformational change; in short, assessment opens our institutional eyes. It not only reveals to us the works of

our hands concerning student learning but, like a lighthouse beacon, assessment illumines a path for faithful institutional navigation in the future. In so doing, assessment provides responses to two fundamental questions about the educational endeavors at our institutions: What has been accomplished? and, How might it be accomplished better? (Manning, 1986). Insofar as we are seeking honest answers to these two questions, I believe that we are pursuing wisdom institutionally. Clearly, an institution that deals with its affairs prudently may be described as an institution that invests itself in an assessment effort that is designed to "improve retention and recruitment strategies, ... identify problems within particular curricula, ... establish the need for [increased emphasis] on particular skills areas across the curriculum, ... improve program articulation with primary feeder institutions and with institutions that receive graduates, ... revise and evaluate particular service or support functions across the campus, ... [and] focus institutional attention on its most critical activities, teaching and learning" (Ewell, 1985, p. 2).

A word of caution is in order here. Although we typically attach positive connotations to words such as illumination and enlightenment, I suggest that they also may be challenging--and even threatening--words as well. As Christians we know that following the Light has costs involved. Similarly, because assessment enlightens, it also is risky. One wonders whether Christian colleges have not rushed into the assessment movement precisely on this point. After all, assessment may spotlight some issues that Christian colleges may not want to address. Or worse, assessment may illuminate new paths of institutional faithfulness. In short, assessment may--God forbid--produce change. From my perspective, we should not eschew assessment because of a preference for institutional preservation rather than institutional transformation. Rather, our institutions are wise and God is glorified to the degree that we perform our educational task with our institutional eyes open not shut--and assessment helps us do that.

Assessment As Prophetic Doxology

The primary focus of prophetic doxology is holiness. In a Christian worship context, prophetic doxology is vital because it creates an understanding among the communicants that the holiness of God demands the righteousness of his people. Further, God's holiness is magnified to the extent that God's people live upright lives; individual righteousness embellishes God's praise; as others see Christians' "good works" they give praise to God.

In a Christian college context, assessment functions as an effective way to monitor institutional holiness. Although the idea of institutional holiness may sound strange, I submit that institutions that take on the name Christian--just like persons who take on the name Christian--must seek to produce faithful testimony to their holy callings. Assessment is prophetic in that it assists Christian colleges in uncovering areas of righteousness and unrighteousness concerning their God-given mandates to help students learn. When Christian colleges, to use Astin's (1991, p. 1) words, "are not really very clear about we are trying to accomplish, and ... perpetuate questionable practices out of sheer habit, for convenience, or to fulfill purposes that are unrelated or at best tangential to [their] basic mission[s]," I submit that they are not pursuing institutional holiness. In turn, God's praise is muted. Assessment, however, provides Christian colleges an opportunity to take stock of institutional purposes and practices and highlight the glories and glitches of student learning. The importance of such activity, to state it again, is to realize that insofar as our institutions strive for holiness and understand the points at which they are faithful as well as unfaithful, they give praise to God and augment his own holiness.

Assessment offers more than simple summation of institutional holiness. It also may improve educational practices. Bok (1986, p.20) observes that "the time faculties and administrators spend working together on education is devoted almost entirely to considering *what* their students should study rather than *how* they can learn more effectively or *whether* they are learning as much as they should." One wonders whether the same might be said about Christian college faculty members and administrators. Whether the "shoe fits or not," assessment is a means of discovering how student learning might be improved, which may include rethinking the core curriculum to ensure college objectives are more intentionally addressed, restructuring course sequences to better account for human developmental concerns, offering innovative strategies for positive faculty-student interactions, experimenting with creative pedagogies that account for diverse learning styles and maximize students' involvement in learning, providing students with more, different, and better methods of classroom feedback, creating and/or restructuring the delivery of academic and co-academic student services that better account for student needs, and modifying the larger campus environments in which learning occurs to ensure that students receive a uniform message regarding educational expectations. Again, as Christian colleges utilize assessment to improve student learning, they not only righteously fulfill their calling as institutions, but they magnify God's holiness as well.

A similar discussion is currently raging in the larger postsecondary education environment, but the fashionable words are quality and excellence rather than holiness and faithfulness. Typically the issues are these: the public is dissatisfied with higher education and is demanding a better quality product for the money; institutions must demonstrate that they are making concerted efforts to improve educational programs; state legislatures, accreditation agencies, and other interest groups use assessment as the proverbial "stick" to improve quality in

response to public pressure; and, institutions are complying with external constituencies, mounting assessment efforts, and creating managerial techniques to implement assessment results--thus the proliferation of approaches such as strategic planning, TQM, CQM, CQI, and so on. One of the overarching principles of each movement is that quality is no longer defined by the producers of education, but rather by the consumers or customers of education (Marchese, 1993).

One of the most interesting aspects of this larger discussion is that, despite increased interest and initiatives about quality, many institutions retain their fundamental assumptions about excellence--namely that the best institutions are those with reputations and resources (Astin, 1991; Astin, 1987; Halpern, 1987). That is, the really "good" schools are those get ranked in magazines because of SAT scores of entering students, faculty productivity measured in articles published or grants received, size of endowment, cost of tuition, worth of physical plant, beauty of physical plant, or prowess of athletic teams. Needless to say, such a situation probably comes as little surprise given the generally materialist values of American culture at large.

Before I drift too far afield, however, I wish to make two observations regarding Christian higher education and the search for excellence. First, with one notable exception (which is Bob Sandin's, The Search for Excellence: The Christian College in an Age of Educational Competition), discussions regarding quality in Christian higher education are scant at best. We prefer to converse with one another about the nature and preservation of institutional orthodoxy. Although "staying the course," so to speak, is a vitally important issue, I believe we have ample reading material on the subject and would do well to shift our energies to understanding and creating quality living/learning campus environments.

Second, I wonder whether the absence of a dialog among Christian colleges regarding quality, excellence, and assessment is an indication that they are following their secular counterparts in defining "good education" in reputational or resource-related terms. Or, even worse to my mind, perhaps many Christian colleges believe quality to be a moot point. After all, so the argument may go, since we are God's colleges, how could we be anything less than the best; being Christian colleges makes us excellent colleges. To embrace such a view, whether conscious or unconscious, is to deceive ourselves and dishonor our students. Like the Israelites in Amos's day, we believe our institutions to be automatically faithful, but our educational holiness is, in reality, wanting. For us, Amos 5:21-24 may read like this:

I hate, I despise your attempt at learning,
and I take no delight in your faculty meetings.
Even though you offer me your integrated core curriculum and
major fields of study,
I will not accept them,
and the faculty advising, co-curricular activities, and sports teams,
I will not look upon.
Take away from me the noise of your educational policy committee meetings,
to the melody of your alumni donors I will not listen.
But let justice roll down like waters,
and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.

The point is simply this: Christian colleges are not automatically holy. We must do education as to the Lord and work hard to pinpoint the quality of our efforts. Without assessment, identifying the quality of institutional performance in this regard is impossible. Assessment not only illuminates a Christian college's educational efforts that are holy and bring praise to God but also reveals those efforts that mock God's holiness. In short, assessment helps Christian colleges discover and maximize institutional holiness with respect to student learning.

Assessment As Covenantal Doxology

The last aspect of doxology, covenantal doxology, represents a summation of doxological living. In an ecclesiastical context, it refers to interrelated responses from parishioners (although one Hebrew word--*yadah*--means all three): giving thanks to God for our redemption, confessing our covenantal obligation to God that we owe him our lives, and witnessing to the faithfulness of God while in the highways and byways beyond the comfort of the church walls. Insofar as those assembled in Christian fellowship unite around these three activities, God is worshipped and praised.

Assessment provides a similar experience for the participants of Christian colleges. It enhances a college's potential to offer God faithful worship institutionally by evaluating and refocusing its educational mission, by recommitting necessary energies to do education for God's own glory, and by mobilizing institutional participants around the proclamation that the institution belongs to God who will be rightly praised to the extent that faculty, staff, and students envision and execute student learning with wisdom and grace. Seen in this light, assessment may be analogous to the notion of biblical sabbath in that assessment demonstrates covenantal relationship between Christian colleges and God. That is, when a Christian college assesses student learning, it is making several important statements. First, it is stating, "Thank you, Lord, for taking care of us over the years. By your grace, much good learning has occurred in this place." Second, when a Christian college assesses, it is offering, "Lord, here's what we've been up to recently at our college. Take and look and see what you think. Because we always wish to be mindful that our institution belongs to you, please tell us what we're doing that gives you great pleasure, what we're doing that makes you sick to your anthropomorphic stomach, and how we might do better in the future." And, third, when a Christian college assesses student

learning, it is saying, "Thanks for your mercy and grace, dear Lord. We enjoy your input, and look forward to putting your advice into action. After all, Lord, we want most to do education that gives you pleasure and praise. We'll be back later for more guidance. Until then, bless our efforts and please don't desert us." From this perspective, assessment is a natural feature and necessary component of institutional life precisely because it reifies the covenantal bond between a Christian college and God. Moreover, assessment gives visible expression to a Christian institution's obligation to educate for Christ alone.

Conclusion

Rossman and El-Khawas (1987) posit three primary reasons for assessment--political, economic, and educational--to which Erwin (1991) adds a fourth--the public's right to know what to expect from higher education. To these, I would add a fifth rationale, namely that Christian colleges assess because it is right to assess; assessment is simply a natural outworking of the values of Christian colleges and reflects a biblical pattern--God creates, then assesses; Christian colleges do education in service to God, then assess in an effort to identify new directions and strategies that will produce greater institutional faithfulness.

In a recent article, Ward (1992, p. 8) suggests that Christian higher education is currently "writing its way through...an ultimate final examination" that includes answers to questions about survival, interpersonal relationships, community, and mission. While I have no quarrel with the content of the article, Ward's words are incomplete. A student must study to pass and, better yet, "ace" an exam; stated in more formative terms, one must study to learn and develop. What makes us think that it is any different for our institutions? Unless we dedicate ourselves to examining and understanding what we really mean by higher education (Westling, 1988) and,

moreover, unless we come to terms with the extent to which we are realizing our educational goals, we may survive, but we certainly will not experience, if I may, abundant institutional life. And to go one more step, unless we honestly seek to fold our "results" back into the highways and byways of education as it finds expression on our campuses, we cease to pursue institutional sanctification. I submit that when a Christian institution neglects to assess its efforts or shrinks from utilizing the wisdom gained from assessment as a means of improving its continued efforts--even though that institution says all the "right" things in its college catalog--I suggest that its potential to praise God is truncated. Insofar as Christian colleges embrace assessment as doxology, however, I believe their educational expectations and educational performances will coalesce and improve, God will be honored, and his blessings will flow as he responds to our work with delight: Well done, good and faithful Christian colleges. Should we strive for anything less, even if our respective accreditation agencies had never mentioned assessment?

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