



A CHRISTIAN PLACE OF THE MIND

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Address on the Occasion of his Inauguration as 23rd President of King University
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This is an edited version of President Whitaker's inauguration speech, given at First Presbyterian Church, Bristol, Tennessee (adjacent to the King main campus) to assembled trustees, faculty, staff, students, alumni, and friends of King University.

We gather today not simply to mark a leadership transition, but to reflect with gratitude and respect on those who through the ages have made this day possible through their labor, love, and devotion. There are other colleges, of course, that have reached their 150th year (although many never did), but few that have done so by being so steadfast and true to their founding principles and so consistent in their character. To do this while also being singularly focused on the needs of students and society in a changing world is no small feat. King has done this nimbly and successfully, however, because of a pantheon of heroes—almost all unsung—who have gone before us.

Foremost among these are faculty who at great sacrifice have from earliest days been the backbone and defining presence of this institution, men and women who have given themselves energetically and creatively to their students and to the craft of teaching well.

Standing alongside them have been staff who not only make possible all that happens here, but who whatever their particular charge also rightly see their roles as teachers, modeling for students (and the rest of us) the values of hard work and faithful stewardship of what God has given us.

With and behind these always have been our alumni, who invariably leave King brimming with gratitude for all they have received from this school and have understood their responsibility to sustain it for those who follow them.

King is blessed to have been birthed with and alongside Bristol, where our brothers and sisters see us as part of their family and we see them as the same. King and Bristol help define each other, support each other, and work together toward the betterment of this region.

And from the alumni and from the community and from those far beyond who know and value King have come forth trustees in every generation who have faithfully led and sustained this institution.

If one knows the history of this school and this region, it is difficult not to see ever-present the hand of a Provident God.

King has also been uniquely blessed by the 22 presidents who have preceded me, a mix of truly extraordinary men and ordinary men called to extraordinary work. Each of them, with their own particular gifts, did their part to lay the foundation on which we build today. I was privileged to follow one such president, Dick Ray, who at great personal sacrifice, with his beloved Lila at his side, answered the

board's and God's call to serve during a particularly challenging time of transition for King. As I told the trustees after my selection, I am the most fortunate of new presidents because I am the only one anywhere who gets to follow Dr. Ray, whose life has been given completely, Ecclesiae et Litteris—for the Church and for Learning (or Letters).



At this point in the ceremony, as his first official act after his installation, President Whitaker conferred upon Dr. Ray the honorary degree of Doctor of Letters.

As I was considering whether to answer the call to come to King, I talked with many who knew the institution. Again and again more seasoned alumni would refer to a particular phrase that had for them described their alma mater, one associated with King's 14th president, R.T.L. Liston. King was "a place of the mind," he was fond of saying, and those words plainly stuck with students, faculty, alumni and others, perhaps as much as did the school's motto.

It is interesting that this simple, five-syllable descriptor of King has had such effect, because one could dismiss it as a truism. After all, what is a college, a university, if not a "place of the mind"? At first it seemed to me a bit like saying the Navy is "a place of the sea."

Was the phrase Dr. Liston's reaction or corrective to some other competing value or distraction? Was there an incident or problem that prompted this as a response? Being a curious lawyer, I have inquired, and while there are theories, no one has yet offered a definitive rationale. In my inquiries I did learn that a certain board chair who might be on the platform today, upon hearing Dr. Liston in chapel say that "King College is a place of the mind," leaned over to his friend and said, "Uh-oh, they didn't tell us that: we'd better get out of here before it's too late!" (Well, thankfully for us today, it was too late).

The answer to this mystery, however, is perhaps provided best by where we find ourselves today in American higher education. Indeed, many of the ills that plague higher education can be traced to a failure to remember that we are always to be for students a place of the mind. Perhaps Dr. Liston understood that this reminder is always needed, always fresh.

There are many reasons this is so, some pernicious and some seemingly benign. I doubt many schools have set about deliberately *not* to be a place of the mind, but certainly there

is evidence that many simply are no longer genuinely so, no matter what credentials their faculty may have or what stratospheric levels of tuition their students are compelled to pay. We have all read ludicrous course descriptions from some schools that suggest they are more about ideological or political indoctrination than about imparting knowledge and wisdom. At the same time, free speech is being openly assailed at many schools, with speakers shouted down or disinvited or worse. We have seen great universities tacitly encourage cheating to emphasize big-money athletic programs over scholarship. Especially in the past year, we have seen schools that seem to be aspiring actively to be places of mindlessness.

But even for the most well-intentioned of schools the temptation to reduce the emphasis on the mind is powerful—and King is not immune from these pressures. Very real market and demographic pressures can at times force schools to broaden the pool of students they will admit. The necessity of retaining students can likewise tempt schools not to hold students or faculty accountable. And many things that are in themselves worthwhile and even essential to a college's development of well-rounded students can end up overshadowing and supplanting the university's core work of the mind. As with idols in our personal lives, such idols are usually good things that have been inflated and distorted in their importance, to the expense of what is truly important.

The examples of mindlessness in higher education that we have seen this year underscore how critically important it is that the development of the mind remain the centerpiece



President Whitaker in his regalia with King medallion.

of our work. Our graduates must not only absorb the knowledge associated with their particular field of study, but must also be able to reason, to question, to evaluate, to synthesize, to communicate, to advocate, and to engage. They must be able to do so humbly, with integrity, and in civil fashion, if they are to be effective. These are not things easily or naturally done in places where the place of the mind has been supplanted by some other endeavor.

Those who take the mind seriously must be open to

hearing and considering new ideas. That exposure leads to rejecting those things that are irrational or unsupported and embracing those things that make sense, are supported by facts, and ring true. Innovation, scientific discovery, and even orthodoxy all fall short if there is not such testing in the crucible of ideas. As with the body, one cannot develop the mind without stretching and testing and exhaustion— and even a bit of pain. The notion of “safety” or a “safe space” where one is protected from new ideas or opposing opinions or unexpected facts (or even an undesired election result) lest this upset established presumptions is a notion antithetical to the life of the mind, to human progress, and to fealty to the truth. We come to university precisely so we are triggered— triggered to put our assumptions to the test, triggered to be surprised, triggered to set aside our egos, triggered to learn new things, and triggered to affirm and reaffirm after testing that which is true and good and worthwhile.

Of course a university should provide a place that is physically safe and marked by respect and civility. But this novel notion of so-called safe spaces in fact produces those with a sense of entitlement who will be profoundly unready for the world into which they enter. Schools that cocoon students like this in fact ensure that outside a parent’s basement those students will not be safe— much less successful on their own.

It is more destructive than that, however. If a student is led to believe he or she has a right not to be disturbed by new or different ideas, then it becomes a violation of that right whenever a new idea is within view or hearing. That so-called right thus violated, they strike out to defend themselves, shouting down others or even acting out violently, as we have seen in at least two prominent schools this academic year. Because the supposed victim has been shielded on the front end from actually being exposed to an unfamiliar idea, the notion of debate degrades into demonizing, demeaning, and dehumanizing the person who holds a contrary idea or information (or, more accurately, what is *assumed* that other person thinks, since, protected and unwilling to engage, the supposed victim doesn’t really know). Whether one “wins” the argument, then, can only be measured by who shuts up whom, by whatever means are available. Power preempts persuasion, rectitude replaces reason. Hardly the hallmark of a place of the mind.

Being in a place of the mind, on the other hand, requires discourse and the exchange of ideas with others, and that vulnerability yields civility and respect, including and especially toward those with whom we disagree. I would suggest that it also produces humility and humor— as we learn to laugh at ourselves and our shortcomings. It invites and embraces true diversity. It builds a vibrant community. It encourages inquisitiveness, experimentation, risk-taking, and solving problems together. It forces us to see what we have in common with others.

Somewhat belatedly, one hundred faculty members at one of those two disrupted schools made just this connection



Aaron Hitefield ('17) led the processional of King's faculty into the Sanctuary.

between an emphasis on the mind and civility. They noted that “the primary purpose of higher education is the cultivation of the mind, thus allowing for intelligence to do the hard work of assimilating and sorting information and drawing rational conclusions.” The result of this done well, they added, “produces modesty with respect to our own intellectual powers and opinions as well as openness to considering contrary views.” It is a much-needed statement at that school and elsewhere. Although I’m biased, I think my predecessor said it more concisely decades ago: a university should, quite simply, be “a place of the mind.”

It was assumed when Dr. Liston used his simple descriptor that it was in the context of a Christian institution. There was a time that being a Presbyterian college like King implied there was a Christian orientation, emphasis, and character that would mark such a college’s life and education. Today that assumption sadly does not always hold. Indeed, no more than 10 of the historically Presbyterian colleges could be described accurately as faith-based. King, however, continues fully to embrace its Christian identity, and does not waver from that. And today, as in earlier days, we affirm there is nothing incongruous about being a decidedly Christian university and being also a place of the mind. Indeed, I would assert, being an authentically Christian university *enhances* our commitment to being a place of the mind and makes it more likely that we are so.

This is because the Christian is dedicated to truth, not as a “pluriform,” relative, individualized notion, but as transcendent, applying to all things. A respect for the notion of there being One Truth leads to an eagerness to discern

that truth, and that, in turn, propels us to learn all we can about ourselves, others, and our world. It prompts us to see and to listen. A commitment to truth also forces us to do the difficult work of reconciling our beliefs with that which we find, or places us in the humble position of admitting there is simply much we do not know or understand— further propelling us to keep working. As Christians we should also never be fearful about where such exploration will take us, since we are assured truth does not bind us but sets us free, does not restrain us, but renews us. For those of us confident in Christian orthodoxy, we have nothing to fear from learning more in any field of study— especially the sciences that give us understanding into the glories of God’s creation.

The Christian faith emphasizes both human worth as having been created in God’s image and human fallenness in having distorted that reflection. The first leads us to respect those who are different in background and belief than we are, to love them in selfless fashion, and to give them more of ourselves than we expect them to give back to us. That regard for others far transcends the minimalist and often self-serving standard of mere tolerance that seems all that is required by the culture. Surely the Christian way of approaching in love our neighbor— including the person who disagrees with us, challenges us, and thinks us wrong— is preferable to what we see today on many university campuses.

The second presumption prompts us to be realistic about our own propensity toward self-centeredness, self-flattery and error. The Christian faith, with its tough talk about selfishness, offers the most realistic (and most uncomfortable) assessment of the human condition—Reinhold Niebuhr observing that our original sin was the one empirically

further study, and causing one to dismiss rather engage the views of others. Although as Christians we believe in truth and affirm it in the person of Jesus and in Holy Scripture, we admit with Paul that we still see in a mirror dimly, and not yet face-to-face with God. There is nothing inconsistent with affirming Scripture as God’s Word Written and admitting



President Whitaker and his family

that in our fallenness we do not fully understand or absorb all it teaches. That Scripture is God’s truth is not something dependent on our efforts, as its having stood the test of time should amply underscore.

A Christian university is also strengthened as a place of the mind because we are a people of the Book. Words matter to Christians because the Word matters to Christians. We respect words when they reflect truth. We also respect the author of words and endeavor as best we can to discern the author’s intentions and meaning, instead of simply replacing them with our own. There is no room for euphemism or political correctness or deforming truth by clever use of words if we follow the straightforward example of Jesus. The Christian’s words must be plain words and honest. To be a genuine place of the mind, such clarity and forthrightness is essential.

A Christian university draws on a long history and tradition of intellectual scholarship, both in the Jewish predicate to Christianity and throughout the history of the church. This is magnified in schools with a Presbyterian heritage like King, where stewardship of the mind and diligent work to develop it has always been considered a Christian duty, so to prepare one for service to both the church and world. Too often today what passes for scholarship is opinion or feelings, unrooted in anything but the *zeitgeist*— the cultural whims of the moment— but for the Christian university we are tethered always to a Great Tradition that reaches back much further than the latest internet meme.

For the Presbyterian and others in the Reformed tradition, it is not only the university that is a place of the mind: it is church and home and place of work, every place



The Bible and work of literature presented to President Whitaker after his installation, representing the university’s motto, Ecclesiae et Litteris.

provable claim of the Christian religion. The Christian answer to what is wrong with the world is decidedly different from the secular answer— which always points toward others. With Chesterton we can answer the question of what is wrong with the world as every Christian ought: by saying simply, “I am.”

This posture should lead the Christian to humility within the intellectual enterprise. An inflated view of oneself corrupts or precludes there being a place of the mind, deterring

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God calls us to use the gifts he has given us. This sense of duty to develop the mind in all corners of life is sorely needed in the academy today.

Finally, there is for a Christian university the power of the Christian community—the Body of Christ—that enables a university to be the place of the mind. In this shared faith there is true safety—a transcendent love and sharing of burdens from which flows naturally the support and respect of our brothers and sisters in Christ, whatever we study, however we are challenged, whatever our disagreements.

This, then, is King University: a place of the mind and a distinctively Christian place of the mind. This is the core of what we do as a Christian academic community, and who we are as we serve the students entrusted to us. It is, of course, not all we do, nor is it all that is required for us to be a truly good or great institution: that list is long and that work is substantial. But if we are to produce graduates who excel as thoughtful, resourceful, and responsible citizens, with a passion for serving God, Church, and humanity, then this is where our attention must always be first.

These are challenging times for higher education generally, for private higher education in particular, and for Christian higher education even more so. We find ourselves today at a time of turmoil and division in our country, with political and religious divisions making our discourse difficult. We sense—we know—that there are great changes ahead and that we must respond to those changes to remain relevant and fulfill our mission. It can seem at times for any college leader a daunting undertaking. We know there are many dire predictions about higher education. We know it will not be easy. There are no certainties, no guarantees.

But we should remember that this university was born in



W. Craig Streetman, King's Chief Marshal, carrying the University's Mace, a traditional academic symbol of strength and authority. King's is crested by a Celtic cross and the university's newly refreshed official seal.

just such a time of upheaval, 150 years ago, when in life-and-death fashion the country and its citizens and this region had been rent asunder. The future was uncertain and the effort to start a college called King must have seemed at times a folly. Funds were practically non-existent, for the school or the students who came. But that small, resilient school not only survived, but consistently, year after year, decade after decade, punched above its weight, producing scholars, professionals, and leaders—Christian leaders—who would go on to change this region and the world beyond. It did so because of all those people I mentioned at the beginning of my remarks, and did so because they worked hard and relied on God's provision. It did so because those who shared the vision of this school believed deeply in our work and invested in it sacrificially.

But most of all, it did so because King was, faithfully and with intention, what by God's grace it will be always: *a Christian place of the mind.*





PRESIDENT ALEXANDER W. WHITAKER IV

Alexander Whitaker became president of King University in August 2016, bringing with him strong academic and professional credentials, broad experience in higher education and law, and a long history of successful leadership in his professional, church, and civic endeavors. He has a particular commitment to integrating free and robust academic inquiry with orthodox Christian faith and practice.

He earned a B.A. from Berry College in political science and his Juris Doctor from the University of Virginia. He also has a LL.M. in International and Comparative Law from Georgetown University and a M.A. in Religion from Trinity School for Ministry. He is completing additional advanced study at Duke Divinity School.

President Whitaker came to King from Berry College, where he was a senior officer of the college for nearly a decade. He was chief of staff and board secretary and in charge of Berry's public relations, religious life, historical assets, and governmental relations. Previously he oversaw Berry's major gift fundraising and planned giving. The Berry College board of trustees granted him emeritus status upon his departure for King.

Before coming to King, he served three years on Georgia's Nonpublic Postsecondary Education Commission, appointed by Governor Nathan Deal. He is a member of the Georgia and Virginia bars and various higher education professional associations.

He is a trustee and former board of visitors chair at Trinity School for Ministry, an Anglican and Episcopal seminary in the Pittsburgh area. Active in church and community, he previously served as chancellor (chief legal counsel) for the Anglican Diocese of the South and as president and chairman of the William S. Davies Homeless Shelter in Rome, Georgia. He is on the boards of the Bristol Chamber of Commerce, United Way of Bristol, and the Appalachian College Association, and is a member of the Rotary Club of Bristol Virginia/Tennessee.

He began his higher education career after 25 years as an active-duty Navy officer and judge advocate. A designated international law specialist, he had postings at sea and ashore, with tours on both U.S. coasts and overseas in Scotland, London, and Japan. He served as director of Navy general civil litigation, executive officer of the Navy's largest court-martial prosecution command, and commanding officer of the Navy's Southeast legal services office. His decorations include two Legions of Merit and four Meritorious Service Medals, in addition to numerous other unit and personal awards. He retired as a captain in 2007.

President Whitaker and his wife Maria have three children. Their sons, Andrew and Michael, are software engineers in Chicago and Seattle, respectively, and their daughter, Emily, is a Richmond, Virginia attorney.

