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The Crisis of Value and Our Flourishing University State of the University Address

September 22, 2010

Philip W. Eaton, President

Welcome to the State of the University Address and to the opening of this new academic year. I want to thank Stephen Newby for his homily this morning. And I say thanks to our whole team for planning such a meaningful worship service. This is the right and good way for us to open our year together.

This year, as you all know by now, we will have the opportunity to read the Scriptures together. We are opening our new and exciting *Lectio: Guided Bible Reading* on September 27 (that's next Monday morning). What a privilege to have Dr. Frank Spina guiding our way, opening up for us the text of Genesis. There will be various Bible study groups cropping up all over. Our Chapel series is designed beautifully to coordinate with the readings.

This practice has been the center of Christian community for centuries, since at least the time of St. Benedict in the sixth century. In his most recent book, N. T. Wright says that "the practice of reading scripture, studying scripture, acting scripture, singing scripture — generally soaking oneself in scripture as an individual and a community — has been seen from the earliest days of Christianity as central to the formation of Christian character" and Christian community. This is exactly what our *Lectio* is all about.

I want to thank the whole faculty of the School of Theology for these efforts. Especially I would lift up the strong leadership of Professors Dave Nienhuis and Rick Steele, and now Celeste Cranston. This is a very exciting venture for us.

Next Tuesday at the Opening Convocation, I want to talk about *The Christian University in a Post-Christian World*. And I believe so strongly that this reading and study of the Scriptures is one of the ways we become truly a Christian university — just at this moment when all the mighty forces of a decidedly difficult culture are coming at us.

But more on that next Tuesday.

This is my sixteenth State of the University Address. That's a lot of years. We have accomplished a lot of things *together* over those years. *We have built together some strong and solid foundations leading up to this moment in time.*

Over the summer and last spring, I have been in front of some one hundred people in the President's Dining Room. We have sponsored these luncheons as part of our campaign for the new University Center. I have been out making the case for this great project, making the case for fundraising at the next level, making the case for the vision and purpose of Seattle Pacific University.

And I always begin my remarks by saying that Seattle Pacific is flourishing. I believe this so strongly. We have laid the foundations and we are absolutely flourishing. Don't you agree? I am thrilled this morning with so many things that are going on throughout the university. We can be proud of those things. I am grateful to each one of you for all of this beautiful work.

Here are some of those foundations of accomplishments we can celebrate this morning:

- **Tomorrow evening we will welcome a record number of incoming students.** Jeff Jordan informs me, by the way, that we will also welcome some 2,000 parents and family members. Get ready. We will open our doors and arms to 725 new Freshmen. Our total enrollment for the year will top out at 4,120. This is a 14% increase in both graduate and undergraduate students over the last ten years. *Our persistence rate of 88% is the best ever!* Our admit rate will come in at 77%. Ten years ago we admitted 94% of our applicants. I can't tell you how important these numbers are as indicators of our health. These are strong signals of the demand for what we have to offer. Our ethnic minority enrollment, once again, will come in at 24% of our incoming students.

As we look at these healthy enrollment numbers, we can say a job well done by so many people. Our reputation is strong and vibrant. We are flourishing indeed.

• **We are attracting some of the finest Christian faculty anywhere in the country, continuing to build on this campus a great faculty.** We can take such tremendous pride in our faculty, who they are, what they are accomplishing, their attention to being great teachers. And I announce this morning, that even in these tight times, we have been able to add 6 new faculty FTE for this year. Over the last ten years we have added 26 faculty positions. My thanks to Vice President Steele and the deans for the good work of collaborating over these decisions about where to add faculty so that our programs are strengthened.

We are flourishing in part because we are building strong foundations with our faculty.

• **We have a very focused effort in fundraising right now.** We are aggressively making the case for the new University Center. Over the last few months, Tom Box, the Advancement team, and I have been in front of literally hundreds of our supporters. Over the summer I received pledges for two \$1 million gifts. Our cash and pledge numbers now stand at \$16.5 million toward this campaign. We can celebrate this. In the next week or two, I will be meeting with Bill Gates, Sr. in the President's Dining Room, to make our case. Our team is focused and our board is involved in fresh new ways with our fundraising.

• **Last year the Murdock Trust gave us \$600,000 for the Center for Biblical and Theological Education and another \$400,000 for our graduate program in theology.** Over the last ten years we have received grants from the National Science Foundation, the Lilly Endowment, the Murdock Trust, the Stewardship Foundation, and the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. As we go out for other major grants in the year ahead, we are working now from a strong track record with grants. I am so proud that we are maturing in the area of both institutional and academic grants.

• **One other encouraging note:** Jeff Van Duzer reported to me a couple of weeks ago that the Center for Applied Learning in the School of Business placed some 900 students in separate applied learning projects. This involved 600 community partners. This is a very important effort as we continue to reach into the business community with our strong program in business. And I know this kind of thing is going on in other disciplines as well.

• **I was just informed yesterday of another stunning number:** 20 % of our incoming Freshmen are declaring their intention to major in Biology. That is up from 7.6% ten years ago. The sciences continue to explode, another sign that we are flourishing.

I could go on and on, of course. But let me say this: All of this causes me to be hugely optimistic about the state of the university this morning.

By the way, next Thursday, September 30, 2010, at 3:30 in the afternoon, I would like to hold a President's Forum to lay out the progress on our plans for the new University Center. I will report as well about the quiet phase of our campaign that is fully under way. I hope you will take an hour to join me. There is a lot of exciting news and progress to report.

And so I believe we can be optimistic, encouraged, energized this morning. I come into this year with as much energy and excitement as I have ever had. We are flourishing. This is indeed the "state of the university."

But I must tell you I wake up at 2 o'clock in the morning in a state of sheer terror. In those early morning hours I say to myself, yikes!, what are we doing? What is happening in the world of higher education? This ought to be a time to coast. We have built all of these foundations. Things are going so well! Relax. Lighten up.

There are two things that create such anxiety for me:

• **First, we have set out some challenges for the years ahead that are staggeringly ambitious in historical terms.** We are designing, as we speak, the most ambitious capital project ever built, the new University Center. We have more money to raise, and more funding sources to secure, than we have ever imagined before. The economy continues to be full of uncertainty. And so I say to myself, *can we do all of this? At this moment in time?*

• **But there is a second thing going on here: We do our work in the context of some powerful forces that threaten to bring down the university as we know it.** We are faced with nothing short of a *crisis* in higher education. We face what I am calling a *crisis of value for the university of our day.*

Let's unpack this second point about a crisis in higher education. I concur with so many voices today that the American university is in a state of crisis. *I choose my words carefully.* As never before in our lifetimes, perhaps as never before in the history of the American university, we are faced with a *crisis of value.*

All of this is in the news almost daily. Just this morning in *The Seattle Times* there were two more editorials. Two weeks ago there was a scathing article in *The New York Times* Book Review. Last week there was an article in *The*

Economist. And on and on.

Are we worth the high price? Is a college education necessary anymore? When the world is coming apart at the seams, isn't a liberal arts education just a bit frivolous? Isn't the academy just a bit too elitist, grown flabby, and self-indulgent? And what about this Christian thing — isn't that quite fundamentally irrelevant to what a university is all about? And perhaps even unconstitutional?

Along with so many others, Stanley Hauerwas states quite bluntly: "I obviously think that the university as we know it *is in deep trouble*."

We spend in America today \$351 billion a year on higher education. And here is the question we face this morning: How do we make sure that the money invested in our enterprise — from students and families paying their tuition; from donors and foundations and granting agencies; from a society counting on us to equip the next generation of leaders for our world — how do we make sure there is adequate and sufficient return on this investment? Are we doing our job? And can we articulate in compelling ways the job we are doing?

"When a child comes asking for bread," Jesus asks, "is there any way we can offer up a stone?"

Do we really know the value of what we have to offer? Is the university of our day really offering up bread instead of stone? These are the questions swirling about our world today.

And here's my point: I think we must have compelling answers to these questions. I believe we all must be thinking together about just these questions.

What do we mean by *value*?

First there is the economic question. We are seen as costing too much, and our prices are perceived as spiraling out of control. Legislators have run out of money for our public universities. Our pressure in the private university comes through increasing levels of financial aid as the financial circumstances of our students and their families diminish in a brutally tough economy.

Sharon and I were just on the Oxford University campus two weeks ago, hosting and leading some forty supporters and potential supporters of SPU. There was much in the news and a great deal of hand-wringing about the continuing stress on the economics of Oxford. There was a big article in the London Times suggesting that students might have to pay a "premium" or "tax" *after they graduate*, throughout their lives, according to how much they end up making. Something is fundamentally broken in the economic model *even at Oxford*.

I have so much sympathy for our friends at the University of Washington and the other public institutions in our state. On Friday the Governor announced further across-the-board cuts in the state budget. Western Washington University says it will likely have to cut 14 academic programs, with another 12 on the block in the year ahead. The University of Washington has had to cut 850 jobs over the last six months, with more coming in light of this new announcement by the Governor.

The University of Washington has also had to raise its tuition by 14%. There will be more coming. The University of California raised its fees by 30%, with more coming there as well.

Even without the current economic crisis, universities have raised their prices twice the rate of inflation over 25 years, with no end in sight. This is a true story, and it can't go on. Something has to give.

But hold those thoughts on our economics for a moment. There is a second part of this story on the value of the university for our time. Can we say that what we are teaching and what we are producing is of real value to our students and our society and to the future of our world? Are we worth it, not only in economic terms, but in terms that really matter?

C. John Sommerville, in his book called *The Decline of the Secular University*, claims that "the secular university is increasingly marginal to American society." He says that "universities are not really where we look for answers to our life questions. That is the sense in which they seem marginal." Sommerville outlines what he calls the "very odd notion" of "the *irrelevance* of the . . . university in America."

I might add to this the truly frightening legal and legislative challenges to our identity as a Christian university.

There is federal legislation in motion, as we speak, intended to disallow any government funding, as with financial aid or research grants, if the proposed recipient discriminates in hiring on the basis of religion.

Something is in the air these days on these issues. *I truly believe in the days and years ahead we will face fierce opposition to our identity as a Christian institution.*

And so all of this is what keeps me up at night.

But here is the good news I want to trumpet this morning. These challenges ahead are real and threatening, no doubt about it. *But I am absolutely convinced that Seattle Pacific stands in just the right place with just the right purpose to answer these questions about true value.* We must stay vigilant and attentive. We must be smart and

savvy. We cannot have our heads in the sand. But we are poised. We are strong. We know what we are about. We are headed in the right direction. Our identity and our purpose and our quality are clear and certain.

That's why our demand is strong. That's why we can say that we are flourishing.

Here are my thoughts this morning about how to respond to these challenges swirling around our world today.

• **Over the years ahead we will need to pry open our economic model and examine every part of it.** We have balanced our budget for decades. We have strong reserves set aside. Our facilities are first rate. We are adding to and strengthening our faculty. Our demand is strong at the moment. But I believe the American university, just as with health care, will learn in the days ahead that our economic model is basically broken. *And I would love to see us out ahead of the curve.* So, let's be alert together to patterns that are emerging for genuine economic solutions.

• **Here's a second thing: let's make sure we know what is vital to our distinctive sense of value.** We are not just another university in the mix, but we are Seattle Pacific University. *We have a distinctive mission and purpose and history and vision.* Let's make sure we know what that deeper value is. Let's make sure we focus our resources around that value. Let's make sure we can articulate that deeper value in compelling ways.

I have been saying, for example, that we must work hard to define and nurture and articulate *the theological soul of our university*. We need the guidance and wisdom of our theology faculty in this arena. I can't tell you how important I think it is that Dr. Rick Steele is leading a training seminar on faith statements for tenure candidates.

Jesus Christ is the animating center of who we are. We must nurture and grow and mature into that deep commitment. But just as importantly, we have to know how to articulate and defend and translate the value of this deep commitment to a pressing post-Christian world.

We do not have the luxury of preaching only to the choir, of talking only to ourselves. We must speak, winsomely and effectively, into a sometimes suspicious and hostile culture.

• **Here is another thing I have come to believe about our value.** *We must be absolutely stellar as a teaching university.* This is where we can shine. As cutbacks force larger classes and less contact with professors in our comparison institutions, we must maintain and enhance this distinctive. This is a high value to our society. This is where education really happens. This is where competencies are formed and lives are shaped — so that the world might be a better place. As much as we will continue to support and value the scholarship of our faculty, we must learn better all the time how to be at the cutting edge as a stellar teaching university.

• **Finally, we must nurture our place as a grace-filled community.** It is one of my strongest convictions that people must be able to look in on our work and say, "wow, those people know how to get along. They know how to build a community of trust and grace and love and reconciliation." We must be a worshipping community. We must work at Christian character formation, not just among our students. *This may be one of the strongest statements to the world about our value.* We have another way of doing the work of the university. I pledge to you that I will be working even more through this year, on my own leadership, on how we might deepen even further our commitment to be a community of grace and trust and love.

N. T. Wright's most recent book is called *After You Believe: Why Christian Character Matters*. I have been making some big statements that this book just may have changed my life.

Listen to this as we close. Wright says that what the disciples discovered in Jesus was "a way of being human which nobody had ever imagined before." That may be one way of describing our distinctive identity as a university. "This was a way of generosity and forgiveness, a way of self-emptying and a determination to put everyone else's needs first. . . ." It was the way of "humility, charity, patience, and chastity," something unthinkable as virtues to the ancient Greeks (Wright, p. 131).

This is where we begin to find our real value as a university. We have a chance, in this place, in new ways every day, to discover in Jesus "a way of being human" that will blow the minds of the culture around us.

But listen to this: Wright says "Christian virtue isn't about [us] — [our] happiness, [our] fulfillment, [our] self-realization. It's about God and God's kingdom." And it is about our "discovery of genuine human existence by the paradoxical route — the route God himself took in Jesus Christ! — of giving [ourselves] away, of generous love which constantly refuses to take center stage" (Wright, p. 70).

Christian virtue is about "*doing things which bring God's wisdom and glory to birth in the world*" (Wright, p. 71).

That's it, isn't it? That's what it means for us to engage this culture and change this world: to do the things "which bring God's wisdom and glory to birth in the world."

That's the deeper value we have to offer a world that is profoundly suspicious of our value.

May God go with us as we seek to do the "things which bring God's wisdom and glory to birth in the world." May God go with each one of you as you begin the year.

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