

# Academia Coram Deo

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## Higher Education Before the Face of God

Consciously or unconsciously, we all live our lives coram deo—“before the face of God.” Our words, actions, and thoughts play out before an audience of One.

Conducting all aspects of academic life before the face of God has been a Reformed rallying cry in higher education since the Protestant Reformation. Dutch theologian, educator, and statesman Abraham Kuyper spoke to this most eloquently in his inaugural lecture at the Free University of Amsterdam in 1880:

No single piece of our mental world is to be hermetically sealed off from the rest, and there is not a square inch in the whole domain of our human existence over which Christ, who is Sovereign over all, does not cry: “Mine!”

Higher education before the face of God calls for a delicate balance of three sometimes conflicting habits of the Christian mind and heart:

- Piety—consistent personal and collective engagement with God and his Word.
- Explicitly Christ-centered engagement with all aspects of God’s world in light of the common grace God grants to all creation.
- A constant awareness of and response to the antithesis—the ever-present conflict between sin and evil on the one hand, and God’s will and kingdom on the other.

All three of these mind/heart habits are beautifully tied together in Colossians 1. Paul says we are rescued from the power of sin and evil and made members of God’s kingdom through Christ’s sacrifice, and he explains that our reconciliation with God and with the world he created and sustains through Christ is the basis of our faith. Our faith is established and held firm through the hope we have in the gospel, the good news of Jesus.

If a university acknowledges that its teaching and learning go on before the face of God, then the mission of the institution and the hearts and minds of the faculty and administration need to be fully rooted in the Word of God.

Educators must know God’s Word and study the Scriptures in order to live lives that fit with God’s purposes. Students need solid instruction in Scripture and Christian wisdom in order to discern what is true and good from what is false and evil. They need rigorous study of the Bible, of theology, and of Christian philosophy.

But that doesn’t happen only in religion classes. We weave the doctrine of creation, the passion

of Christ's redemption, and God's demand for justice into the study of math, science, business, communications, language, history, the arts, and all other areas.

## Knowing God

In 1636 when Harvard University was founded, the concept of knowing God was one of its basic tenets. The founders were Puritans who were passionate about the gospel and about education. In the years from the founding of Harvard to the American Civil War in 1860, more than two hundred other colleges and universities emerged, with the majority of them soundly founded on Reformed principles.

Yet none of these schools is distinctively Christian today. In fact, schools that once had the most solid Christian commitment are now often the most hostile toward the Christian faith. What happened? One simple explanation is that they slipped off their foundation of knowing God. A pervasive secular humanism began to take root and cause cracks in their foundational principles. It no longer seemed important that all disciplines be taught by Christians and from a Christian perspective—after all, why would you need a Christian professor to teach mathematics or astronomy?

By the 1920s universities that had been church-related began to distance themselves from their church backgrounds and put more emphasis on “ethical” dimensions of faith rather than emphasizing the gospel as their foundational philosophy. Church membership requirements for faculty were dropped. The goals of diversity caused the rewriting of mission statements to allow for more and more inclusivism, and statements of faith were liberalized to open the way for hiring the “best faculty” in each discipline.

These pressures for secularization are also strong today. It takes an institution strongly rooted in the Bible and in practicing piety to be able to take on the challenges of being both academically excellent and distinctively Christian, to have a clear Christian identity and achieve openness and diversity.

## Living as Agents of Grace

What is God's common grace, and what does it mean to live as agents of common grace?

God created the world good. He delights in all aspects of it—its beauty, its marvelous processes—and God desires the shalom, the flourishing, of all his creatures. Although sin entered the world through people and affected every aspect of creation, the world is still God's handiwork.

At Calvin College the core curriculum is based on the premise that all disciplines can and must be taught through the lens of faith: we use the lens of God's Word as we study and teach about God's world.

In his Institutes of the Christian Religion John Calvin refers to the world as “a dazzling theatre of God's glory.” The cadence of creation calls us to march along with God, and God gives us the

Scriptures so we can see and understand creation as God ordained it. Only then can we perform well in our callings and seek to transform God's world into a place of shalom.

That's why we believe a Christian liberal arts approach to education is important. That's why we teach, learn, and write about politics and science, education and social work, philosophy and foreign languages as part of the "cultural mandate." That's why we take delight in seeing our graduates go out as agents of transformation in law and medicine, teaching and engineering, government and business, science and recreation.

### Losing the Connection

The concept and practice of common grace have been great strengths of the Reformed tradition in higher education. But they have also been among the tradition's great weaknesses.

The Reformed tradition in higher education has set loose one of the greatest engines of secularization in today's world. For example, many individuals and institutions today have moved from the teaching that "everything is sacred" to the teaching that "nothing is sacred" or has any spiritual significance.

Such people believe they can carry out God's purposes in this world without being committed Christians. They try to retain ethical dimensions and concerns of Christianity without individual and collective engagement with God and his Word. The result is that they often focus on moral activism and work for the common good but cease to be Christian.

This misunderstanding and misuse of common grace often results from two interrelated tendencies. The first I have already mentioned: the loss of the connection between engagement with God's world and engagement with God and his Word.

The second tendency is to ignore or deny the existence of the ongoing conflict in this world between sin and evil on one hand and God's will and God's kingdom on the other.

As St. Augustine saw it, two spiritual kingdoms are in conflict with each other—the city of God and the city of humanity—and their mutual opposition is central to the historical process. This conflict also exists within each of us because of sin.

Kuyper described this as a fundamental confrontation between the worldviews and life systems of "normalists" and "abnormalists," between those who believe and act as if the world is normal and those who believe and act as if all of life is distorted by sin and evil.

Because normalists deny that God created the world and that sin entered the world and the lives of human beings through the Fall, they believe and live as if things are normal. They believe and live as if salvation and transformation are not necessary.

Committed Christians, who are abnormalists by this definition, recognize the sin and evil in themselves and the world around them. They also believe in and live with the comfort of

salvation through Christ's work and the calling to be his agents of transformation.

### **We Are Called to Stand**

We are called to combat the materialism and selfish pursuit of pleasure in our culture. We're called to oppose our culture's worship of individualism, its glorification of violence, its sexual immorality, its unjust domestic and international policies.

Christians need to stand against scientific naturalism—the belief that reality and truth are defined solely by natural processes that can be proved with scientific evidence.

We need to stand against the rampant relativism of our day that says there is no ultimate right or wrong, nothing good or bad, only personal preferences and social customs.

We need to stand against the cynicism that postmodern university culture has fostered because it believes there is no real meaning to life.

The natural tendency toward cultural and intellectual conformity is strong. At many formerly Christian universities recognition of and opposition to the antithesis (the conflicts caused by sin and brokenness) fell away with the decline of faith commitments and piety. None of these institutions sustained a “missionary confrontation” with the surrounding culture.

Embracing and balancing piety, common grace, and the antithesis in our teaching and learning, our research and scholarship, and our personal and communal living is no easy task. Few colleges or universities have been able to sustain higher education before the face of God.

I have learned over the years, especially from my Kuyperian mentor, Richard Mouw, that piety provides the spiritual resources needed to embrace and balance common grace and the antithesis.

By developing and practicing piety, a true knowledge of God's world and his common grace, and an awareness of the antithesis, we can know and live with certainty, as Martin Luther wrote in his Reformation hymn, that “God's truth abideth still; his kingdom is forever.”

Consistently doing education coram deo is a worthy and wonderful calling. It's the challenging and meaningful task God has given us. May God grant us the intellect, the self-awareness, the love, the truthfulness, the courage, and the grace to confront the task before us.

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