



## WHAT WOULD JESUS DO ... AT MY UNIVERSITY?

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In his influential book *A Christian Critique of the University*<sup>i</sup>, Charles Malik asks the penetrating question, “What does Jesus Christ think of the university?” According to Dr. Malik, a professor of philosophy who taught at Harvard University and Dartmouth College and also served as Lebanese Ambassador to the United States and Secretary General of the United Nations, no other assessment of the university matters. “All other questions without exception are relatively silly when this question looms in the mind” he wrote. Malik then proceeded to present a comprehensive assessment of the modern university, suggesting that the great universities of the Western world are thoroughly secularized and not congenial to Christian values. Even today, 25 years after publication of Malik’s book, his assessment of the university is right on target.

Having completed his assessment, Malik went on to attempt to answer the question, “What then can be done?” He proposed the formation of an “Institute” of twenty-four high level members to “appraise the university from the point of view of Jesus.” The mandate of the Institute would be fourfold, wrote Malik: “(a) To find out, in the most authoritatively objective manner possible, the exact state of mind, morals and spirit in the universities, and to ascertain, in the most scholarly way possible, how it came to be what it is. (b) To let, in fear and trembling, Jesus judge this existing state of mind, morals and spirit, and the way it has developed in recent centuries. (c) To consider the possibility of bringing Christ back to the university and to suggest practical ways and means to that end. (d) To consider that its mandate shall last as long as there are universities, namely, indefinitely.”

Obviously, and perhaps unfortunately, no such Institute was established, and it is most unlikely that one will ever be instituted. So where does this leave us with respect to Malik’s fourfold mandate? Is there some other way to accomplish the goals Malik so ably set before us? I believe there is. Dr. Malik was writing to individual Christian academics and he assuredly expected individual professors to grapple with the question. Here is how he expressed the challenge, “Once a Christian discovers that ... Jesus Christ will find Himself less at home on the campuses of the great universities, in Europe and

America, than almost anywhere else, he will be profoundly disturbed, and he will inquire what can be done.” As Christian professors begin to wonder what can be done, they will think about their own university situation. So the relevant question for the individual Christian professor is not so much, “What does Jesus Christ think of *the* university?” but “What does Jesus think of *my* university?” And having pondered that question to ask in response, “**What would Jesus do ... at my university?**”

We can answer the question in both a general sense and in a particular sense. We answer the question in a general sense by understanding how Jesus accomplishes His work in the world and applying that understanding in a general way to universities and colleges. We will attempt to do this in the paragraphs that follow. We answer the question in a particular way by applying the general answer to our own university, considering the opportunities and challenges, the specific attributes of the institution, the personalities involved, and other appropriate dimensions of the task. Of course, it will be your challenge to answer the question for your university, and I might point out that how you answer it should be very important in how you view your university career for the remainder of your tenure in academia.

So what **would** Jesus do at my university? If Jesus were actually present on my campus, how would He go about transforming my institution so that as Professor Malik puts it, “He would feel perfectly at home there?” What would He do in order that He might be in accord with its mission, that He might affirm its research enterprise, and that He might enthusiastically embrace its teaching activity?

## **He Would Call People There**

**What would Jesus do at my university?** He would call people to join Him in transforming it. Os Guinness has much to say about how Jesus engages people in His work in his book *The Call: Finding and Fulfilling the Central Purpose of Your Life*<sup>ii</sup>. One particular thought is fundamental to our attempt to understand what Jesus would do if He were at your university. Guinness writes, “The truth is not that God is finding us a place for our gifts but that God has created us and our gifts for a place of His choosing—and we will only be ourselves when we are there.” God is not looking around for a place to use you and your gifts as you may have imagined He does when He places people in particular situations. According to Guinness, God created you and gave you different natural abilities and spiritual gifts specifically for a place He had in mind for you from eternity past. If you are a professor or academic staff member at a university or college, you may reasonably conclude that Jesus has called you specifically to that place, and, moreover, that He has an expectation that you will participate with Him there in a transformational way through your academic position. In fact, this is what Guinness means when he writes you “will only be [yourself] when [you] are there.”

To put it in a slightly different way, you have been called to the university—that is your calling. If you are at all serious about being faithful to your calling to the university, it will be necessary for you to answer the question, “How does Jesus intend

for me to be His representative in my university and in my discipline?” There is both an individual and a corporate dimension to calling. As Guinness puts it, “The call of Jesus is personal but not purely individual; Jesus summons His followers not only to an individual calling but also to a corporate calling.” So your investigation into how Jesus intends to use you as His representative in your university and in your discipline involves discovering how you are to act and interact with other believers in this connection. Now if this seems a bit overwhelming—to understand your calling to academe—let me assure you that many other believers have wrestled with these ideas and you can actually benefit from their thinking along these lines as you make your own assessment. In fact, that is one of the purposes of Faculty Commons: to help you think through your calling to the university and to resource you as you go about being Christ’s representative at your university and in your discipline.

### **He Would Make Disciples**

We can be absolutely certain that discipleship is the means Jesus employs in His transforming work; His last instructions to his own disciples in what we call the Great Commission were, “Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age (Matthew 28:19-20).” As Robert Coleman puts it in *The Master Plan of Evangelism*<sup>iii</sup>, “His concern was not programs to reach the multitudes, but men whom the multitudes would follow.” And A.B. Bruce enlarges on this strategy in his great classic, *The Training of the Twelve*,<sup>iv</sup> “Eventually they would be Christ’s chosen agents, fully trained to spread the faith after He left the earth. . . . In this course of training, they were to learn what they should do, believe, and teach as His witnesses and ambassadors to the world.”

**What would Jesus do at my university?** He would make disciples. What does this have to do with you as you seek to understand His call to you to be His representative in academia? Everything. Jesus intends for His representatives to be fully equipped for the task to which they have been called. The modern church has so thoroughly neglected Jesus’ method in this regard that if you are at all like most believers, you have probably not been discipled. If you have never been discipled in a small-group, life-on-life context, how important should this be to you? Dallas Willard in his book, *The Divine Conspiracy: Rediscovering Our Hidden Life in God*,<sup>v</sup> answering the question, “What would motivate a person to choose to become a disciple of Jesus?” puts it this way, “Obviously, one would feel great admiration and love, would really believe that Jesus is the most magnificent person who has ever lived. One would be quite sure that to belong to Him, to be taken into what He is doing throughout this world so that what He is doing becomes your life, is the greatest opportunity one will ever have.” Think of any opportunity you will ever have in your life. Being a disciple of Jesus makes any other opportunity you have pale in comparison.

At this point, assuming you have never been discipled, you are surely wondering, “Where would I go and what would I do to be discipled?” Faculty Commons considers

this to be such an important consideration in helping Christian professors to fulfill their calling in the university that we have developed a two semester small-group, life-on-life discipleship curriculum specifically for university professors and staff and we would consider it a privilege to come alongside and help you take advantage of your opportunity to become a disciple of Jesus. And by the way, if you have already been disciplined, can you think of any other opportunity you might have that would be more significant in your calling to the university than discipling other professors or staff members? If not, we would be delighted to help you avail yourself of this opportunity.

### **He Would Seek the Lost**

Jesus certainly believed that one of His most important tasks in His transforming ministry was to seek the lost. In Luke 19:10, He says as much, “For the Son of Man has come to seek and to save that which was lost.” And He reinforced this in much of His teaching; Luke 15, for example confronts us with three parables on seeking the lost, “The Lost Sheep,” “The Lost Coin,” and “The Lost Son(s).” All around us in the university are lost people. When Jesus instructed His disciples in Luke 10:2, “The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; therefore beseech the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into His harvest,” He surely had the modern university (as well as other venues throughout history) in mind. Many of your students and, if statistics are reliable, most of your colleagues in the university are lost.

**What would Jesus do at my university?** He along with His disciples would be reaching lost students and professors, and He would place a high priority on this. The Apostle Peter gives us a glimpse of how heavily the lost weighed on the heart of Jesus in 2 Peter 3:9, “The Lord is not slow about His promise, as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing for any to perish but for all to come to repentance.” As many writers have noted, reaching the lost is a complex process—unbelievers are at every imaginable stage with regard to coming to know Jesus, from openly hostile to actively seeking. Are you seriously engaged in reaching lost colleagues and students at your university for the Savior? Obviously, reaching the lost should be a continuing process not a one-shot proposition and not just for individual Christian professors but also corporately for all Christian professors at your university.

We have developed numerous strategies for reaching lost students and professors—strategies that are attractive, effective, appropriate, ethical, and legal. Strategies for use by individual believers and by groups of believers seeking to reach individuals and segments of the campus population. For example our “Every New Professor Every Year” initiative is a strategy for reaching new, untenured faculty members; our “Favorite Faculty Banquets” involve students in reaching professors; we encourage Christian faculty groups to reach out to colleagues and students through seminars and other outreach strategies. We offer a variety of training opportunities for individuals and groups in evangelistic strategies for reaching the lost in academia. We are available to help you and your Christian colleagues select strategies for reaching out

to lost students and colleagues that will fit with your spiritual gifts and abilities and that are appropriate for your particular university situation.

### **He Would Heal the Sick**

Just as there are many around you in the university who are lost, many of your students and colleagues are in need of healing. Many of your students are in painful situations—some will lose family members or friends during their time under your supervision. Many will have financial or relationship problems. Many are struggling with drug and other addiction problems. Some will be depressed; some will be suicidal; some will need mature counsel from someone they can trust. To whom will they turn when tough times come? Our experience has shown that most professors who come to Christ after beginning their careers do so because a Christian colleague reached out to them in a time of personal crisis. Perhaps a failed marriage, a serious illness, the death of a loved one, a rebellious child, a career setback, or an ethical or moral dilemma. Any one of these life challenges can cause someone who was previously closed to the gospel to open up and all of them represent potential opportunities to extend love and consideration in the name of Jesus.

When the disciples of John the Baptist were sent by John to Jesus to ascertain whether He was the Messiah, He sent them back to John with the message, “Go and report to John what you hear and see: the blind receive sight and the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, the dead are raised up, and the poor have the gospel preached to them (Matthew 11:4,5).” **What would Jesus do at my university?** He and His disciples would be reaching out in love to those who are in need of healing. The real question here is how do we make ourselves available to those who need healing; how do they find us so we can minister to them in the name of Jesus. Faculty Commons has pioneered a number of effective strategies for enabling this to happen; from effective ways of identifying yourself as a Christian in class to your students to ways of identifying the Christian faculty and staff to the campus community as, for example, through advertisements in the campus newspaper or in student and faculty orientation venues. Faculty Commons is available to share these strategies with you as you and your colleagues seek to minister in Jesus’ stead in your institution.

### **He Would Confront Untruth**

The gospel accounts are replete with stories of how Jesus confronted those who were misleading the Jews with respect to seeking God. Jesus had a way of asking questions that forced His adversaries to question their own faulty presuppositions and to open them up to consider alternative positions. For example in Luke’s gospel when the Pharisees questioned His authority to drive the moneychangers from the Temple, “He

answered and said to them, ‘I will also ask you a question, and you tell Me: Was the baptism of John from heaven or from men (Luke 20:2-5)?’” With this simple question, Jesus forced them to address the deeper question of the source of authority. The ultimate, unavoidable question in life is the question of authority—who has the right to determine the rules in life and the power to enforce them? This question is implied in almost every major decision we make in life. There are only two options with respect to the answer to this question: It is either God or human authorities (governments). The Pharisees knew He had exposed their error and refused to answer his question, however Luke tells us in the Book of Acts that many of the leaders ultimately became believers (Luke 6:7).

The university has become a place where truth is no longer universally pursued. The name of the game is now power and control. **What would Jesus do at my university?** He would surely respond to the many of the wrong-headed policies and principles which are being advocated often by your colleagues and often by the institution itself. It is abundantly clear that Jesus had a very high regard for truth and was willing to confront untruth whenever He encountered it. In a heated confrontation with the Pharisees, Jesus identified His mission with the phrase, “You will know the truth and the truth will set you free (John 8:32).” We need to be able to confront untruth in the university wherever it occurs, but we want to do so in ways that have the desired effect of causing people to seriously and dispassionately reconsider their faulty suppositions. Faculty Commons has developed apologetic material that is geared to address issues likely to surface in the academy to help equip professors and other university and college personnel to be able to winsomely confront untruth when it arises in different situations. We are available to help you in this aspect of representing Jesus.

### **He Would Proclaim Truth**

It was said of Jesus, “He has done all things well (Mark 7:37).” As His representatives in the university we also want to have a reputation of excellence. The Apostle Paul admonishes us along these same lines, “Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for men (Colossians 3:23).” I have always maintained that if we don’t pursue excellence in our teaching, our students won’t be much interested in anything we might have to say to them about Jesus, and if we are not pursuing our research program with excellence, our colleagues won’t be interested in our testimony for Him either. **What would Jesus do at my university?** He would pursue excellence in proclaiming truth—in teaching and research.

Most knowledgeable people recognize that Jesus was and is the world’s greatest teacher. His use of parables and simple illustrations to communicate spiritual truths was unsurpassed. His ability to use life situations as opportunities for communicating life lessons was amazing. His ability to cause unbelieving people to question their motives or their beliefs by asking simple questions was worthy of emulation. We can learn much from Jesus that will help us become excellent teachers. Ken Elzinga has much to say to inspire us in this respect, “Since the University of Virginia hires me to teach economics and not to [proselytize], to deserve *my* wages means I am supposed to know my field. I

think Christian teachers should know their material cold—as though it were an affront to Jesus, the Master Teacher, to walk into class any other way. For me, class preparation has meant not scheduling substantive activities before my lectures so I can focus my attention on the material and its presentation; it might mean mining an entire book for one small nugget—a useful classroom illustration<sup>vi</sup>.” Academic conferences offered by Faculty Commons will help you connect with professors like Ken Elzinga who can challenge and assist you as you pursue excellence in your teaching.

In a previous Ministry Minute entitled “God is My Colleague,” Kathryn Lindholm-Leary, Professor of Child & Adolescent Development at San Jose State University, wrote, “It’s taken me most of my career to realize that God knows more about my field of teaching and research than I do, AND that He is more than willing to help me with the specifics. He can help me because not only does He understand my field of study, He designed it. Think about what that means; no research idea or class assignment or test question or student problem is ever beyond His scope of skills and talents – or interest!” Dallas Willard likes to put it this way, “Jesus is the smartest person in your discipline; doesn’t it make sense to involve Him in your research?” How would Jesus conduct research in your area of expertise? What problems would attract His scrutiny? How does your relationship with Him inform and influence your discipline? These are questions that as Christian professors we need to be asking and answering as we do our research. Our “Academic Initiative” can help you as you pursue excellence in your research.

### **He Would Transform the Entire University**

In his little pamphlet, “My Heart—Christ’s Home”<sup>vii</sup> Robert Boyd Munger gives a wonderful illustration that portrays how Jesus goes about His work of transformation. In the narrative, Professor Munger relates how at the gentle nudging of Jesus he turns over one room after another in his home, which he uses as a metaphor for his life, to the Lord. Beginning with the study (the mind), continuing with the dining room (appetites and desires), the living room (fellowship), and so on. Finally, there is only one space left—the hall closet (where Munger has locked away “some personal things I did not want anyone to know about—dead and rotting things from the old life.” When Jesus asked what he had in the closet Munger writes, “It made me angry! That’s the only way I can put it. I had given Him access to the study, the dining room, the living room, the workroom, the recreation room, the bedroom and now He was asking me about a little two by four closet. I said to myself, ‘This is too much! I’m not going to give Him the key.’”

In the same way, Jesus wants to transform your entire university. Its mission. Its research enterprise. Its instructional activity. Its students. Its professors and staff. Everything. And He wants you engaged in the process with Him. He won’t stop until the job is completely done. He will leave no stone unturned. He is in it for the duration. And He has called you there as His hands and feet and ears and eyes and voice. You are in it for the long haul. Professor Munger continues, “When you have come to know and

love Jesus Christ, one of the worst things that can happen is to sense Him withdrawing His face and fellowship. I had to give in. ‘I’ll give you the key.’” **What would Jesus do at my university?** He would transform the entire university.

Well, there you have it. In general terms for sure. You and your colleagues will have to flesh it out for your university. How important is it that you get about the business of determining specifically what He has called you to do there? Here is how Professor Malik would answer that question. “What is at stake is not only the mind and spirit and character of our children, not only our own mind and spirit and character, but because of this fact, the entire fate of Western civilization and therewith the fate of the world.”<sup>viii</sup>

A word for the few who might have read this and respond along the lines of, “Well that is all very well and good for you, but not for me. I just want to do my teaching and research for the glory of God, I don’t have either the time or the inclination to participate with other Christian professors and staff at my university and I don’t want the hassle that being a visible Christian in the academy might entail.” I think this is pretty much what Simon Peter had in mind after his betrayal of Jesus and the crucifixion. John, the beloved disciple, tells us in the twenty-first chapter of his gospel that Simon Peter left Jerusalem and returned to Galilee along with others of the disciples, and Peter returned to his fishing boat. I think Peter was tired, he was afraid, he just wanted quiet, he wanted to return to his old haunts and habits. He wanted to do his own thing—alone. Jesus appeared to Simon and the other disciples on the shore of the sea of Galilee and after enjoying a breakfast together, turned to Peter and asked, “Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these?”

There is an ambiguity here in the text; that is, the word *these* may be in the neuter gender, thus referring to the occupation and implements of fishing which were all about them; or *these* may be in the masculine gender and refer to the other disciples present. I am personally convinced that the former rendering is accurate. Jesus was basically asking Peter if he loved Him more that he loved his occupation—more than the boats, the nets, the thrill of a large catch of fish. Peter, of course, answered, “Yes.” To which Jesus replied, “Follow Me.” Do you love Jesus more than the books, more than the lectures, more than the thrill of landing a big research contract? If your answer is “yes,” He is calling you to join Him along with your Christian colleagues to transform your university. The job can’t be done in isolation, it can’t be done surreptitiously, it is not a stealth operation. You will have to get your hands dirty—ministry is messy. You’ll have to work with others—students and colleagues. But it will be worth it—it is what Jesus created you and gifted you to do and you will be unfulfilled until you are where He created you to be. Incidentally, He promises that if you do faithfully follow Him, He will take care of the books, the lectures, the research contracts, and all the other accoutrements of academia for you (Matthew 6:33).

I’m assuming if you are still with me, you are ready to go. If so, you are probably asking, “Where do I go from here?” I think you would identify with one of three

different situations. Here is my simple answer to your question depending on your specific situation.

1. There is presently no organized faculty ministry at your university. Please feel free to contact us. Our staff will be happy to help you identify other Christian professors and staff at your institution and help you begin to take the steps necessary to organize and become Christ's body there.
2. There is a Christian faculty group on your campus but you have not been involved. Pretty obvious what your next move here is, right? Contact the group and let them know that you are ready to get engaged. By the way, if you have never been disciplined, this would be a good venue for that to happen. Ask someone about joining a faculty discipleship group or if none exists ask about starting one using some of our materials.
3. There is already a Christian faculty group on your campus and you are a faithful participant. Wonderful. Here is some sage advice from that great college football coach—Bear Bryant—“Keep on keeping on.” And know that the staff of Faculty Commons wants to do everything that we can to enable you to succeed there as Christ's representatives. Perhaps you could pass this little paper along to some of your colleagues who have not been involved to encourage them to get in the game.

In closing let me say that Faculty Commons does not have a one-size-fits-all blueprint to tell you how to represent Jesus at your university. As you and your colleagues think about your calling and how best to represent Jesus in your teaching and in your research and on your campus, He will show you what you need to do, individually and corporately. And it will be the right thing to do.

We are available to help you in whatever way we can—whether it be sharing strategies or materials with you, equipping you, hosting conferences for Christian professors. We love you and are grateful for your willingness to answer the call of Jesus to live for Him at your university.

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<sup>i</sup> [Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1982]

<sup>ii</sup> [Nashville, TN: Word Publishing, 1998]

<sup>iii</sup> [Old Tappan, NJ: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1963]

<sup>iv</sup> first written in 1871 [Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications, 1988],

<sup>v</sup> [San Francisco, CA: HarperCollins Inc., 1998]

<sup>vi</sup> [“The Academy and Jesus,” *God and the Academy*, Atlanta, Georgia, 2000]

<sup>vii</sup> [Downer's Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1986],

<sup>viii</sup> [*A Christian Critique of the University*, Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1982, p.110]