



Jesus U

NCU PRESIDENT
JOSEPH WOMACK
PHOTO BY TODD COOPER

NORTHWEST CHRISTIAN UNIVERSITY TALKS FAITH, TOLERANCE AND HIGHER PURPOSE by Rick Levin

Fronting Franklin Boulevard and cozied up like a cat against the much larger University of Oregon, the campus of Northwest Christian University has sat for well nigh 125 years as a curiosity to some and a beacon to others. What, after all, is a Christian university all about? Jesus himself was a peripatetic teacher, opting to wander the wilderness with his radical message of universal love and liberation from the false knowledge of the Pharisees.

Confronted with the concept of a Christian university, I am of two minds at once: My harsher secular perspective tells me that the phrase Christian university is an oxymoron, pointing to an institution of exclusivity and closed-mindedness that churns out furiously protected graduates who believe evolution is a lie, homosexuals are satanic spawn and the world was created a mere 6,000 years ago.

On the other hand, true Christian practice emphasizes humility and service, kindness and tolerance, while focusing the devotee away from the clamoring distractions of everyday life and unto the pursuit of cosmic wisdom and principled life. The unfettered acquisition of knowledge minus a higher focus is often a dead end, and

if a Christian school — or any other kind of school — can offer a greater goal, more power to 'em.

So please understand, I came not to ambush NCU, but to understand. As a recently revoked atheist currently on a spiritual path of discovery, I find myself far more open to religious matters these days than ever before. In fact, I made this clear to NCU president Joseph Womack, who was joined for the interview by the director of university relations, Jeannine Jones, a nice woman who nonetheless continued to eye me with the pinched skepticism of a bodyguard. God bless her.

"In broadest strokes in academy language," Womack told me, "NCU is a small, liberal arts university that we refer to as a Christian liberal arts university. We place at the core of our educational endeavor Biblical Christianity as a lens through which we look at all subjects."

NCU has been in its same location since 1895 when, according to Womack, it was "founded very strategically across the street" from the UO to "buttress an education that already existed. The idea was to help supplement what were land-grant colleges back then." Both schools are accredited, state-recognized universities, and students moved freely between the two until 2004, when NCU

switched to the semester system. Technically, NCU's current student body of about 700 can still attend both schools, but it's difficult in practical terms. "It just wouldn't be easy," Womack notes.

The distinguishing factor between the two schools, Womack says, is largely environmental. Northwest Christian offers studies in business, communications, psychology, exercise science and criminal justice, with the difference that at NCU "a significant amount of Bible study" is a part of the curricula. "Even if it's a study that's secular in itself," he says, "the faculty's faith is going to permeate the study." What this means is that, yes, Darwinism is taught as a theory, though "we try not to be an institution that indoctrinates on issues not evident in the scripture," Womack notes.

Although "faith is a central part of most students' decision to attend NCU," students are not asked to profess a faith as a prerequisite of enrollment; members of the faculty, on the other hand, must be professed Christians. "All students are expected to understand, when they come, this is where you're coming," Womack says. "We are proudly and without apology who we are. Their involvement in the community requires a respect of that."

And does that respect go both ways? Meaning, would a person identified as gay be allowed to attend NCU? "Sure," Womack says. "We deal with that question all the time. A student struggling with their orientation is welcome to come to NCU." He points out, however, that when it comes to upholding the school's religious prohibitions — no drinking, no premarital cohabitation — everyone must toe the line. In that regard, Womack says, "I discriminate against all the students. They're expected to uphold a standard. We all struggle with challenges. Redemption is required. The blood of Christ is required."

If faith, as faith, permeates awareness, then who are we to question each other's faith? Hardcore Marxists see history as the history of class struggle, and Freudians divine truth in our neuroses. Aside from deviations like, say, the Inquisition, is there anything inherently wrong with promoting a Christian faith that permeates all, i.e. asking oneself what Jesus would do?

And what, at the university level, does that look like?

According to Jeannine Jones, the answer is service. "One of the things that makes NCU unique is students are graduating with a focus on service," she said, pointing out that the guiding principles of the school are wisdom, faith and service. "They're serving God and they're serving their families and communities in a variety of professions."

Rather than limiting one's education, Womack says he believes the idea of honing education to scriptural principles is liberating. "You're expected to use that in the service of others," he says of an NCU degree, whether it's plied in the business world or the ministry. "The education for selfish means is not enough of the endeavor of higher education. The growth of the intellect must find service to humanity. That animates the individual and gives purpose and frees us from using an ever-changing cultural measurement of success, and to seek a higher definition of what success is." ■

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