One of the great grievances of many Christians has to do with the history of higher education in America. Many have heard the story of how the majority of colleges began with Christian foundations and slowly moved away from the faith. Schools changed their hiring policies, their standards of behavior, their leaders, their church affiliations, their curricula, and even their mottos. Christian higher education in America simply became American higher education.

The transition happened mostly in the 20th century and is nearly complete. Fabulously wealthy secular private schools and the finest state universities dominate the top tier of American higher education. At the most exclusive institutions, students enjoy spectacular facilities on gorgeous campuses. Their professors have earned their degrees from the most prestigious programs. They labor under strong research and publication expectations, while instruction is often a secondary concern. Many professors at these schools teach no more than two courses per semester (often with assistance from graduate students). Tenure is difficult to achieve. Though the strongest candidates get the assistant professorships, a number of them will fail to get tenure in an up-or-out process. The model resembles partnership at the kind of law firms one might find in the top floors of downtown skyscrapers.
TWO GIANTS – CATHOLIC AND PROTESTANT

Christian colleges and universities exist almost completely outside of this elite world. There are two notable exceptions. The University of Notre Dame, the premier Catholic school in the United States, has billions of dollars worth of endowment to subsidize its operations and commands hefty tuition prices. Once known mostly for its Fighting Irish football teams, Notre Dame has become one of America’s premier universities. The only problem as all this relates to Christian higher education is that Notre Dame’s faith identity is somewhat in doubt. While alumni insist that students continue to be devout in dormitories, David Solomon (a longtime professor and faithful critic) notes that Notre Dame hires primarily for purposes of rank rather than with the school’s historic mission in mind. In many ways, Notre Dame appears to be belatedly slipping into the two spheres model which eased many Christian colleges into secularization. The idea is that a Christian school can have a healthy spiritual life through student activities while going after the academic work in a largely secular fashion. But the idea is false. For better or worse, a university is its faculty. If professors no longer profess the faith, the university will eventually cease to do so as well. Solomon, by the way, is being eased out of his role directing an institute on ethics and culture at Notre Dame.

The other significant exception is Baylor University. Baylor now has a billion dollars in endowment. That amount, for a private university, is probably just about the minimum required to compete financially with the top tier schools. Baylor embraced the two spheres approach with enthusiasm for decades, but slipped into secularization less fully than might be expected, perhaps because of the university’s strong traditional ties with Texas churches. When Robert Sloan became president in 1995 (himself an interim pastor at many different churches in the Lone Star State), he and others at Baylor realized that the recent break from the Baptist General Convention of Texas might be the final step toward serious secularization for the university. Sloan and a number of notable persons at Baylor, such as
Donald Schmeltekopf, Michael Beaty, David Lyle Jeffrey, and others, worked toward a vision of reinforcing the university’s Christian identity while simultaneously reaching for true research university status.

The vision meant big changes for Baylor in a variety of ways. Sloan and top administrators provided substantial oversight over hiring to make sure that new professors were serious about the Christian faith. At the same time, the profile for hiring tilted toward scholars likely to be prolific in research and publication. Existing faculty, long oriented more around classroom teaching, felt concerned that they were being demoted to second-class status. Attempts to reassure them, such as establishing a separate teaching track as a path for promotion and tenure, only exacerbated the problem. The new vision was stressful for the university financially, as well. Baylor hired professors at a rapid rate, engaged in ambitious building projects (including a $100 million science building), and reduced teaching loads from three courses a semester to two for research faculty. Caught in the maelstrom of ideological, spiritual, and financial stressors, Sloan resigned after ten years as president. Providentially, it seems, the plan has worked and Baylor today is strong, financially successful, and more intentional about its faith. Though Baylor has not yet reached Notre Dame’s level of success, it has become a major university and arguably excels Notre Dame as a Christian institution in the sense that faith remains a major consideration in hiring. Should Baylor put together a few football seasons like the one it just had, the sky would be the limit. (I am kidding, but only a little.)

Based on the historical patterns, Notre Dame appears to be a candidate for secularization while Baylor is something different. It is different in the sense that it self-consciously reversed course against secularization and in the nature of its ambition. Mark Noll once told me that Baylor undertook the journey Wheaton chose against. In other words, Baylor decided to be a comprehensive Protestant university with full-scale research, scholarship, NCAA division one athletics, and funded graduate education. It is now sui generis. Unique.
CHRISTIAN COLLEGES: WHERE ARE WE?
With respect to Protestants and evangelicals, the rest of the Christian colleges and universities with serious spiritual missions are older schools which somehow avoided the massive wave of secularization which hit the sector in the early to mid-twentieth century (probably thanks to heroic leadership in many cases) and relative newcomers (say, less than 70 years old) founded as a direct answer to secularization. How do these institutions fare?

Allen Guelzo, a brilliant and much-decorated Lincoln scholar who is also a believer, wrote a piece for *Touchstone* within the last year in which he delivered a largely negative verdict on Christian higher education. Guelzo pointed out a number of troubling realities, such as that few of the schools are selective, alumni are not giving, and many of the schools are in bad financial condition, despite the continued rise in tuition rates. His verdict is both right and wrong.

It is true that most Christian colleges lack significant endowments and rely heavily upon tuition in order to fund operations. This fact is disturbing because we do not have a business-type mission of making money or acquiring a dominating market share. Really, we just want to offer a distinctively Christian education to students. We would prefer to have the option of discontinuing tuition, which was an idea Harvard flirted with prior to the 2008 crash. The reality, however, is that we simply do not have the means to operate tuition free. We are able to offer some scholarships and tuition discounting, but it would be much better to be able to give the students more generous packages. Denominational aid to Christian colleges has been a traditional source of student scholarships, but such assistance has declined in real dollars over time.

On a related front, Guelzo is also correct about a lack of alumni giving at many Christian colleges. But there are good reasons for the perceived lack of financial attention from many of our alumni. The dominant one is that graduates from Christian colleges serious about their faith spend the rest of their lives with charitable obligations which they consider to be prior to the needs of the school. I am thinking of the obligation to tithe. Students from families
serious enough about their faith to want a Christian education are also committed to their churches. They give to churches, to missions, to Bible translation, to the poor, etc. The typical Christian faces many more routine demands on his charitable dollar than a secular graduate of Big State U.

One of Guelzo’s complaints is that Christian schools are not selective enough. He proves his point by showing the high acceptance rate at many of the colleges. But a study of the percentage of students admitted at Union would not tell the story Guelzo suggests it does. Union likely admits a majority of the students who apply, but that is part of its model. Union aims to attract applications from students who are a good fit spiritually and academically and actively discourages the ones who are not. Union’s selectivity would be better measured by an examination of the mean ACT scores of its recent freshman classes, which have been very high. Other schools use a similar model. It is not necessary to turn down a lot of students if you can get good ones to apply.

Another problem is that Christian colleges lack the means to sponsor doctoral programs outside of professional training areas such as education or counseling in which students can count on improving their income by getting the degree. Christian universities are typically unable to afford the graduate fellowships or stipends expected by budding scholars who do not foresee getting rich teaching history or English. This is a significant missed opportunity because it means that Christians largely cede academic graduate training to secular faculty members. Dwell on the cultural importance here. Christian colleges and universities, for the most part, do not produce professors in the traditional academic areas (arts, humanities, sciences, social sciences). They are almost all trained at secular universities. Notre Dame and Baylor are the notable exceptions as both are running traditional Ph.D. programs with graduate teaching and research assistantships. Baylor’s decision to move into that arena has been courageous, far-sighted, and culturally important.

It is also the case that scholars at our institutions are at a competitive disadvantage when it comes to the pursuit of publication.
At the large state schools and in the most elite private ones, professors teach only two courses each semester. Sometimes less. Our professors almost always teach four courses per semester, which is a consuming task if done well.

I could go on. Christian colleges have fewer scholarly centers and think tanks, hold fewer conferences, publish fewer journals, etc. We are fighting hard to accomplish our missions, but scarcity is an every day reality. We scrutinize our expenditures very carefully.

Professor Guelzo is right to point to problems. There are some. But he has also missed the ascendancy of some Christian universities in the sector under discussion. Baylor has already been discussed, but there are other bright spots. For example, just as one Christian school, Lambuth University, announced its closing here in Jackson, Tennessee, Lambuth’s longtime sister school, Union University, has enjoyed record enrollments and is in the midst of a successful capital campaign to build a beautiful library on a campus which has been transformed during the last couple of decades. Union’s budget has nearly quintupled over the period and the school outperforms just about all of its peers in terms of financial health.

The reality is that Christian universities, as a sector, are likely to undergo some serious sifting. One knowledgeable observer suggested to me that several will close in the next decade. I agree with Dr. Guelzo that there are very possibly too many and that we would benefit from consolidation. Imagine if we could have Baylor as the research flagship and five to ten very strong liberal arts universities. They would all be cultural gamechangers if they remained faithful.

We do not control these things (the life and death of universities) from some central Christian planning office for what we perceive to be the maximum advantage. The response of our colleges and universities to the creative destruction of a free society in the area of higher education will be planned in some cases, spontaneous in others, and providential all around.

Talk has begun of a higher education bubble. Certainly, tuition prices have increased at a rate substantially higher than inflation for many years. Those of us educated just a couple of decades
ago experience sticker shock when we see the bills students face today. If the economic situation continues to be one of little or no growth and government has to make spending cuts in order to deal with fiscal crises, the prospects for colleges and universities (which rely on private prosperity and government subsidies/financing) appear to be unpromising.

Add to these new realities the fact that technology is beginning to offer the potential to revolutionize education and we see the beginnings of significant upheaval. Educational content is now everywhere. A person can learn nearly anything, anytime, anywhere on a bewildering array of devices. The Internet has gone from a marginal existence as a frustrating and hard to reach resource to being the very air we breathe.

THE WAY AHEAD
When the universities began, a significant part of their appeal was their collections of books. In the age of massively democratizing trends with respect to information, it is not as if a student must enter our grounds and buildings in order to locate and read information. Having the information is not enough.

Institutions have protected themselves, to some degree, by gaining quasi-monopolistic powers over credentialing. We say who is and who is not college educated. The Christian colleges participate in that power. Employers buy into the system because it acts as a filter. They use higher education as a form of quality control on their applicants. Students buy in because there are no good ways to circumvent the system.

But institutions of higher education cannot simply count on credentialing power to sustain them. The forces of free market creative destruction find ways over, around, and through. There was a time when many lawyers were self-educated. It could happen again. The same could be true of other fields. Individuals could educate themselves or make other arrangements for mentoring and training and then prove themselves through respected exams or simulation exercises. John Stuart Mill envisaged such a system back in the nineteenth century.
Another serious challenge is that education is in danger of becoming a commodity like heating oil, orange juice, copper, or soybeans. Retailers are cropping up to soak up as much demand (and federal/state dollars) for the commodity as they can. The Kaplan company, for example, recently made a big play to move from offering SAT prep courses to forming its own university with satellite campuses around the country.

What all this means is that all colleges and universities must find ways to prove their value to the student if they are to continue to command a substantial portion of social resources. I think that the answer will include distinctiveness in terms of philosophy, critical thinking, character formation, and community. To the extent that professors simply convey information, they will become obsolete. Substantively, instructors of this type already are. The credentialing power keeps them relevant for now. The best professors, though, will understand how to be guides for young people. They will have a vision of teaching that goes beyond pre-packaged, easily digestible textbook industry capsules and extends into the philosophy underlying a field or an activity. The great publisher Henry Luce, founder of the *Time-Life* empire, made an enormous success of *Sports Illustrated* (though he was not much of a fan himself) because he knew it was important to do more than simply report on wins, losses, and statistics. He realized that one had to care about the philosophy of sport and the story of it. Philosophy, story, the why, the music... these are the things that represent the upper level of education.

Professors in every field will need to have the ability to function as guides for students. Anyone can get through a journey with a map (and there are a lot of maps out there online), but we know that if you want to get the most you can out of a trip (or a quest) then you need a guide, a person who is familiar with the terrain, is a good translator of the language, and has a profound understanding of the fundamentals. The best universities will hire those kinds of professors and will cultivate a living and learning community of instructors, staff, and students.

The new situation is both a potential threat and a boon to Christian colleges and universities. On the one hand, it is a great threat to the extent that our institutions simply try to participate...
as just another organization in the market, offering a service which can be obtained from many other providers. If Christian schools go in that direction, they will suffer from an inability to compete with state universities and cut-rate online retailers on price. They will also suffer an erosion of their mission because market imperatives will eventually overtake those of faith.

On the other hand, the new reality is a boon because it offers an opportunity to excel where Christian colleges should have an advantage. If the great body of educational content is commoditized, then the college which is able to differentiate itself can make a compelling pitch to students and their families that there is a value-added dimension to their education. We can successfully argue that the best educational experience connects with the mind, the body, and the soul.

Accordingly, when we have done our job well, we will offer students the opportunity to work with professors who are trustworthy and insightful mentors ready and willing to lead and participate with students in a learning community. Christian colleges should be great citadels of educational integrity, trust, insight, and community excellence in the pursuit of truth about the world, its Creator, and ourselves. In other words, if Christian colleges are committed to being Christian rather than simply acting as educational institutions with Christian ornamentation, they should have the wherewithal to survive and thrive in the changing environment.

Hunter Baker, Ph.D., J.D., is the author of The End of Secularism and serves as associate dean of arts and sciences at Union University.