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A Tale of Two Colleges

Mercer University and Shorter University represent opposite trajectories on the landscape of American education.



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Shorter University and Mercer University are institutions of higher education in Georgia, and both have been historically related to the Georgia Baptist Convention — the state’s largest Baptist group. Both schools have been in the news in recent days over the issue of homosexuality. Seen together, the actions taken by the schools point backwards to critical decisions made in the past, forward to issues that will be faced by every college, and directly to the present, where the future is taking shape before our eyes.



At the end of October, the trustees of Shorter University, located in Rome, Georgia, adopted a series of statements intended to protect the Christian commitments of the university. Faculty are to operate within the guidelines, which include both articles of faith and a “personal lifestyle statement” that includes an affirmation that the Bible forbids “premarital sex, adultery, and homosexuality.” Shorter President Donald Dowless said that the statements represent “a continuing affirmation of our Christ-centered mission.”

Within days of that decision, the administration of Mercer University, located in Macon, Georgia, announced that it was changing its personnel policies to allow for coverage of domestic partnerships involving homosexual employees. Mercer President Bill Underwood said that the new policy “brings Mercer into line with other leading private universities in our region, including Emory, Duke, Vanderbilt, Wake Forest, Tulane, Furman, Rollins, Elon,

and Stetson.”

Neither decision came out of the blue. For many years, Mercer University has been putting as much distance as possible between itself and Southern Baptists. Controversy has followed controversy. The university gained control of its own trustee election process decades ago, and the university has sought to identify with the highly secularized world of elite private universities. That explains President Underwood’s reference to what Mercer sees as its peer institutions — schools such as Furman University, Stetson University, and Wake Forest University. Those three institutions, like Mercer, were formerly affiliated with Baptist state conventions, but broke their denominational ties and now see any historic association with the Southern Baptist Convention as something of an embarrassment.

Mercer University no longer represents any real connection to the convictions of Baptist stalwarts like Adiel Sherwood or Jesse Mercer, its namesake. Over the years 2005 and 2006, the Georgia Baptist Convention revoked its relationship and funding of Mercer, citing long-lasting theological concerns and more recent controversies over homosexuality. The latest announcement from Mercer will cause disappointment among Georgia Baptists, but no real surprise.

Shorter University (Shorter College, until 2010) also has historic ties to Georgia Baptists. Like Mercer, it has roots in the nineteenth century expansion of Baptist higher education. Unlike Mercer, its more recent history represents a rare case of a denomination regaining control of a wayward institution. In that sense, the story of Shorter University is similar to the Southern Baptist Convention’s recovery of its six national seminaries. After Shorter College’s trustees attempted to wrest control of their election process from the Georgia Baptist Convention, the denomination took the institution to court, eventually winning control of the school and changing its direction over the last half-decade. To those watching the trajectory of Shorter University in recent years, the announcement of the new articles of faith and lifestyle statement will also come as no real surprise. As its president and trustees made clear, the statements are necessary in order for Shorter to maintain its Christian identity and commitments.

Several lessons emerge from these two developments and the stories behind them.

1. As time goes on, colleges and universities that choose to identify with the ethos and standards of the secular academy will inevitably increase the distance from their founding churches and theological commitments.

As the announcement from Mercer makes clear, the school finds its identity and accountability in the secular academy. The norms and ideological foundations of the secular culture prevail. The academic standards and the ethical principles that control the institution are drawn from comparisons with other private universities. Furthermore, the schools that

aspire to gain the respect of the secular academy find that compliance with secular norms is the admission price to secular respect. Mercer made the decision to move in this direction decades ago. Capitulation to the secular academy's prevailing norms on homosexuality was only a matter of time.

2. Colleges and universities attempting to maintain accountability to churches and Christian denominations will discover that specificity and clarity in terms of worldview commitment and lifestyle expectations is required, and not optional.

Given the secularization of the larger academy and the ideological and cultural pressure exerted by the dominant academic ethos, schools that intend to require definite and specific doctrinal, worldview, and moral commitments on the part of faculty will have to make those expectations definite and specific — just as Shorter University has done.

Shorter's trustees adopted a "Shorter University Statement of Faith" that includes an explicit affirmation of the inerrancy and infallibility of the Bible, which is "the only certain and authoritative rule of every aspect of the Christian life." The statement also includes affirmations of other basic Christian doctrines. The trustees did not adopt the confessional statement of the Southern Baptist Convention, "The Baptist Faith & Message," and its statement is not specifically Baptist. It does require an affirmation of basic evangelical doctrines.

The trustees also adopted "Biblical Principles on the Integration of Faith and Learning," which will require faculty members to submit an annual plan for the integration of the Christian worldview with their teaching area and discipline. A statement entitled "A Philosophy for Christian Education" affirms an educational philosophy that is "reflective of and permeated by the timeless truths of Jesus Christ."

The fourth document adopted by the trustees, known as the "Personal Lifestyle Statement," requires active church membership, as well as a statement on alcohol that does not require total abstinence. The third section of this statement has attracted the preponderance of public attention:

"I reject as acceptable all sexual activity not in agreement with the Bible, including, but not limited to, premarital sex, adultery, and homosexuality."

Until recent years, no Christian institution would have considered those statements to be anything other than normative. Nevertheless, the prevailing culture of higher education now requires that such moral and theological commitments be clearly and publicly articulated and contractual for those who will teach and lead the institution. Otherwise, there is no mechanism for accountability. This is the great insight of confessional accountability among Christians. What must be required must be articulated and what is not articulated will not be

required. Given the trajectory of the secular academy and the larger culture, additional doctrines and moral principles will require articulation in the future. Of that we can be certain.

3. The issue of homosexuality now presents an unavoidable test of conviction for Christian institutions of higher learning. The pressure to normalize homosexual relationships and behaviors will be strong, and the cost of resisting this pressure will be steep.

The moral revolution on the issue of homosexuality has occurred with unprecedented speed. In a single generation, this moral revolution has produced nothing less than a moral reversal. What had been condemned by society (homosexuality) is now officially normalized, and what was previously normalized (the moral judgment against homosexuality) is now condemned. Adherence to the Bible's authorization of only one context for sexual activity — monogamous heterosexual marriage — is now considered a radical and regressive moral judgment.

The pressures faced by Christian colleges and universities (along with seminaries and private Christian schools of all sorts) will come from the academic guilds, accrediting agencies, student advocates, and the government, among others. Capitulation on this issue will be the admission price required for full acceptance by the secular academy, and the shape of full capitulation is not yet even clear. Where same-sex marriage is legalized, a host of other challenges will come. Over time, the issue of homosexuality may well represent the greatest challenge to religious liberty of our times.

Mercer University and Shorter University represent opposite trajectories on the landscape of American education. Given the decisions made by these two schools in recent days, Mercer will receive the applause of the secular world, while Shorter will bear derision. The church had better take a good look at these two trajectories and understand what is at stake.

What comes quickly into view is the tragic cost of losing one school, and the necessary cost of recovering another.

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