

THE SPIRITUAL MISSION OF OKLAHOMA CHRISTIAN UNIVERSITY

Statement of Mike E. O'Neal, President

Lectureship, January 28, 2004

On behalf of the entire University family, I want to express appreciation to each of you who have attended the 2004 Lectureship. In doing so you have demonstrated a love for the Word, for the church, and for Oklahoma Christian University. I pray that we have all been encouraged and challenged by this time of fellowship and dialogue.

Everyone here is well aware of the concerns surrounding some aspects of this Lectureship. It is not my intention in this forum to address the specific concerns that have been raised. We have set aside from 9 a.m. to noon on Friday, February 13 to listen carefully and with an open mind to those who want to share their thoughts about the Lectureship program. We invite any of you who are interested to return at that time.

Because, however, some are raising questions about the spiritual direction of the University, I asked Lectureship Director Shon Smith if I could have a few minutes of this Forum to share with you some of the core elements of the spiritual mission of OC, and what we are doing to strengthen it. Hopefully, these thoughts will be helpful as our friends and brothers consider our service to the kingdom.

The Trustees have charged me with the responsibility to provide careful leadership of Oklahoma Christian University. It is my intention to lead this institution only in paths that I believe to be: 1st and foremost—true and consistent with the will of God as revealed in scripture; 2nd—faithful to the mission and purposes of this University; 3rd—according to the direction of the Board of Trustees; and 4th—prudent and effective for the students and families we are serving.

In exercising stewardship over the mission of Oklahoma Christian, I pray that the Lord will never allow Satan to close our minds or hearts about any subject, particularly as it relates to matters of faith. My administrative colleagues and I have been faithful members and leaders in the church all of our lives; yet, in the presence of an omnipotent and omniscient God, we acknowledge our fallibility and finitude. To the extent we fall short of perfection, we seek the patience and the grace of God and of His children. Wouldn't it be tragic in an institution of higher learning that acknowledges God's sovereignty if we ceased being learners and disciples? There is some considerable wisdom in the naming of the three years of study at an academy in ancient Greece. The first year, the students were called "wise men." The second year they were called "philosophers—or those who wished to be wise men." And the third year they were called "disciples or learners." I wish all of God's people understood that profound progression, or at least acknowledged that "his ways are not our way."

Oklahoma Christian University is a private university founded in 1950 by members of churches of Christ, and has been staffed by and attended principally by members of those churches for over a half century. Churches of Christ have been and are restoring churches, dedicated to the challenging ideal of being Christians only, not divided by sectarianism or the accumulation of tradition, but seeking unity by returning to the Christ

and to the faith and practices taught by Jesus and the apostles as revealed in scripture. This is a challenging vision, never fully achieved by mankind, but always demanding diligent efforts. This is a religious heritage and a vision that Oklahoma Christian has shared from its beginning and enthusiastically and prayerfully embraces today.

I believe you and all of our friends deserve to know where the leadership of this University stands on the basic doctrinal issues that have characterized the churches of Christ. I make the following statements, not as a creed, but as criteria by which I hope OC and my leadership to be judged by God and by the churches. We affirm the great truths of biblical revelation. We affirm that the God of Abraham, Moses, Peter, Paul, and Jesus is the creator of all and the only true and living God. We affirm that Jesus Christ, the Son of God, came to earth through a virgin birth, led a sinless life, performed and empowered miracles, was crucified on a cross for the sins of the world, was raised from the dead, has returned to the Father, and will come again to claim his own. We affirm that the Bible is the inspired Word of God, and that it is the only authority for Christian faith and practice. We affirm that unity is a priority for God's people and that it can be achieved only by commitment to the Word and not to the doctrines, commandments, or traditions of men. We affirm that restoration of the church to Biblical purity and simplicity is essential and will always be a partially unfulfilled goal of the church. We affirm that the churches of Christ are the stewards of real treasures, both in doctrine and practice, which are needed by all who call on the name of Christ. We affirm that salvation is a gift, and is not of ourselves, and that it comes only through grace delivered to all mankind through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. We affirm the essentiality of believers' baptism by immersion for the forgiveness of sins. We affirm weekly communion. We affirm the priesthood of all Christians and direct access to the Father through prayer and through study of His Word. We want all to come to recognize their equality before the grace of God, while affirming the God-ordained male spiritual leadership of His Church and the family. We affirm a cappella singing in corporate worship of the churches and its unique power to allow each of us to speak to one another and to personally praise and petition God and Jesus. We affirm the autonomy of each congregation of God's people to seek Him through the scriptures under the leadership of godly men we call elders, or shepherds, or pastors. We affirm that preaching is an effective, powerful, and God-approved means of telling the Gospel message, but that ultimately each Christian is responsible to study God's word and "work out his own salvation with fear and trembling." And we affirm that we must live before God with humility and commitment and before our fellow man with gentleness and love.

The recitation of these affirmations is not the totality of our beliefs, but I believe they are the principal doctrines and practices which form the basis of Christian unity and the grounds for fellowship. We affirm these doctrines and practices, not from a desire to be separate from others who call on the name of Christ, but because we believe they are truths based in scripture that need to be heard in this post-modern world. These doctrines and practices have been the hallmarks of churches of Christ, and in the absence of a hierarchy, the University's allegiance to them will keep us closely aligned with and accountable to churches of Christ. But, let it be clear that our allegiance to these doctrines and practices is not because they are characteristic of the churches of Christ, or any segment of the churches of Christ, but because they are consistent with our understanding of scripture and what it teaches is best for God's people.

Our recently revised Mission Statement states that *“Oklahoma Christian University is a higher learning community which transforms lives for Christian faith, leadership, and service.”* Each word in that Mission Statement was very carefully selected over a lengthy period of time by faculty, staff, and trustees. Each word is rich with meaning for us and calls us to a higher purpose than just academic preparation in the context of some religious trappings or traditions. It also calls us to purposes in addition to religious training to which we must be true. If I could paraphrase that mission, it would be that Oklahoma Christian University is a sacred place where we diligently and faithfully seek truth—God’s truth in its manifest forms, and follow it wherever it may lead us. It is our goal that every young person entrusted to our care will grow in the likeness of Jesus Christ while with us and be given the foundation for lifelong growth.

In order to fulfill this mission, we are duty bound to create an environment of free and open investigation of ideas guided and given meaning by biblical truth. This is a very different project from secular education, which often investigates all ideas from the premise that there are no standards by which any ideas can be judged. It is also a very different project from fundamentalist education, which avoids or denies investigation of any ideas but its own. In contrast to these, our mission is to help our young adults be prepared to investigate all ideas from within the biblical view of the world and with the love and guidance of deeply committed Christians.

This means that we have to create on our campus an environment that is open to questions and debate, in which our Christian teachers guide our students to appreciate the truths of Christianity. We are committed to the principle that, within the framework of devotion to scripture, the free and open exchange of ideas is the best way for human understanding of truth to emerge. Truth has nothing to fear from investigation. It is Satan who is the father of lies and who has everything to gain by our satisfaction with our current understanding. Since this process often involves letting competing or even contradictory claims engage in combat on the battlefield of ideas, it should be obvious that we do not endorse every idea that gets a hearing on this campus. As articulated by the president of another university, “Academic freedom within a Christian academic community means that while all areas—except those clearly improper or immoral—can be explored, not all things can be advocated or affirmed.” This is not always a comfortable process, and it is not one without friction, but we believe it is ultimately for the good of our students and prepares them to combat such ideas when they leave the havens of our campus and their families. We do not strive to make our students safe from bad ideas, but to make them wise Christian thinkers who have been trained to sort out truth from error as God expects of all of his children.

I know that the recitation of these positions may not be satisfactory to some who perceive the purposes and practices of a Christian university differently. We do not desire to offend or to be disagreeable. We just ask that you acknowledge our efforts to be faithful to our mission and think about what I have said and not said. Please note that I have said nothing about seeking any change in the church. We have no agenda for change. Our only agendas are the agendas of scripture—to love the Lord our God with all our hearts, souls, and minds, to love our neighbor as ourselves, to stay true to the scriptures on matters of salvation, to seek to maintain unity, to encourage and inspire faith demonstrated through

action, and to be studious and humble in the sight of the Lord regarding our understanding of the word.

Some of our Christian colleges and universities have elected to identify, or by default have been identified more closely with a particular segment of our fellowship. I love and encourage them in their desires to be faithful and effective for the kingdom and I pray for them daily. It is, however, not our intention at Oklahoma Christian University to follow the path of any other Christian university, nor to be identified with any specific element or viewpoint in the churches of Christ. It is my personal dream—and I believe one shared by our faculty, administration, and trustees—that Oklahoma Christian will be a place of refuge, fellowship, and love for a wide spectrum of thought and practice within the churches of Christ, and perhaps even for those who have not discovered the blessings of our fellowship, but who appreciate and seek the affirmations recited above. Even where we disagree with one another, it will be a place we can come together and discuss our disagreements as brothers in Christ, as did some of our earlier brethren, Barton W. Stone and Alexander Campbell. Though trying to maintain fellowship and friendship with a wider spectrum within the churches is fraught with numerous challenges, Oklahoma Christian University seeks to “make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace.” Eph. 4:3 It is our desire that the University be an instrument of peace among brothers, a place where exploration and learning can take place in a biblically grounded and encouraging atmosphere, and a haven of warm fellowship and dialogue among those who share our affirmations and core values.

I ask that as you think about the worthiness of our work at OC, that you give due consideration to the results we are having with young people. Our graduates are active members and leaders among churches of Christ. As a percentage of total enrollment, OC has probably sent as many preachers and missionaries into the harvest as any other Christian institution during its short history. We are shaping lives for Christian faith, leadership, and service. The stories of the spiritual service of our students, faculty, and staff are numerous, amazing, and inspiring, and I wish all of you enjoyed the blessings of those on the campus of watching lives grow more Christlike day by day. We want to teach our young people to give an answer for the hope that is within them, but to do so with gentleness and love, as admonished by the apostle Peter in I Peter 3:8-9: “Finally, all of you, live in harmony with one another; be sympathetic, love as brothers, be compassionate and humble. Do not repay evil with evil or insult with insult, but with blessing, because to this you were called so that you may inherit a blessing.” Vs. 15 “Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope you have. But do this with gentleness and respect.”

Though approximately 80% of our students are from churches of Christ, Oklahoma Christian University also serves many who are not from the fellowship of churches of Christ. We want them to be welcome in our midst and to see Christ living in us in a way they have not experienced in their lives to that point. As we seek to teach and influence them, we will do so, not in a way designed to make them uncomfortable or to feel like an outsider, but with all gentleness and love.

I want you to know that doctrinal matters and sound biblical teaching are extremely important at Oklahoma Christian, and we must do our very best to understand and teach what we know of God’s revelation. We must continue to dispute error and untruth. At the

same time, we need to minister to families are falling apart, lives are being destroyed, and to the millions who are dying without Christ. We don't want to be in the Lord's lifeboats, arguing with one another about how to trim the sails, with people drowning all around us. The very reason we have called your attention to the inclusive nature of the kingdom this week is because we want this University to focus its attention and its energies to carrying out the work of the savior among the lost, the hurting, and the disenfranchised. Though we will guard diligently against error in matters that count, we just do not have the time, the energy, the resources, or the wisdom to become embroiled in every dispute or difference that may emerge among our brethren. Satan is working overtime in our fellowship to get us fighting and trying to break us up. We want no part of that! We want to spend our time pointing people to Jesus. We want the OC Community to be agents of reconciliation in a broken world and a hurting church.

There is the recently well-documented tendency of church-related schools gradually to lessen ties with their sponsoring body until they become essentially secular institutions, perhaps retaining a few "quaint" reminders of their religious past. I believe that tendency has impacted all of our colleges and universities affiliated with churches of Christ, and that it is only with intentional, concerted action of the governing boards and administration that our schools can avoid joining that sad parade. The first step in defending against that cultural trend is to acknowledge it. However, I would like to just list for you a few recent steps we are taking at Oklahoma Christian to ensure such disengagement does not happen here:

1. Creating a vice presidential office whose principal function is to monitor and advise the board and the administration regarding spiritual life of the university—which is in reality the spiritual life of its people, since a university has no spiritual life. Plus, this position is charged to help us serve and strengthen our relationship with the churches.
2. Strategic plan – New Strength – has caused us to revisit our history, our purpose for existence, our core values, and to direct or planning and define our success in terms of whether we are building on those foundations or allowing them to erode.
3. The implementation of the Oklahoma Christian Covenant as a commitment among all of our students, faculty, and staff to a higher calling. [A copy of the Covenant is attached.]
4. Addition of nine new trustees who are devoted to and leaders in the churches of Christ, and we are continuing to seek and add more in the days ahead.
5. We have documented as a board policy the previously unwritten requirement that all full-time faculty and staff of the University must be faithful members of the churches of Christ.
6. We have documented a board policy requiring that all new hires and all tenure candidates be reviewed and evaluated carefully regarding "compatibility and commitment to the spiritual mission and purposes of the University. Among the factors to be evaluated are the prospect's active membership in the churches of Christ, basic biblical views, integration of faith and learning, and the commitment

to going beyond the call of duty to teach and mentor students and promote the spiritual and academic mission and purposes of the University.”

7. On going support and promotion of summer and Spring Break campaigns, campus Bible studies and devotionals, service-learning, and vocational missions. (Highlight Max Dobson’s class for the severely handicapped.)
8. Rigorous study and evaluation of scriptural truth, as well as the many ideas which compete for the minds and hearts of our students. And there is a constant challenge to our faculty to integrate faith and learning in their academic curricula.
9. 14 highly qualified full-time Bible faculty (out of 84 faculty), along with 15 adjunct Bible faculty from among the pulpits in the area.
10. Vibrant daily chapel and 16 required units of Bible.
11. eBiblestudy.org on OC website/preaching seminars/preachers luncheons.
12. Ministerial scholarships/scholarships for children of preachers/church matching scholarships.
13. Support and guidance for the National Christian Schools Association, the Christian Chronicle, Cascade College, Tealridge Manor, etc.
14. Many more too numerous to recite today.

I hope this long recitation has been helpful in giving you some perspective about what Oklahoma Christian University stands for and what it is doing to strengthen its spiritual mission. We have no intention of following the well-worn path of gradual disaffection and disconnection with our heritage and our sponsoring fellowship.

I would like to close with one of my favorite readings from the Apostle Paul because it represents my personal desire to keep learning and growing in Christ, and which I believe should characterize the church of Jesus Christ. Late in his career, after he had likely preached for 30 years, had done it all, had served diligently and faithfully, he acknowledged with great humility that he had not arrived. Listen to what he told the Philippians from his prison cell in Rome, Philippians 3:7-16: “Whatever was to my profit I now consider loss for the sake of Christ. What is more, I consider *everything* a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them rubbish, that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ—the righteousness that comes from God and is by faith. I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, and so, somehow, to attain to the resurrection from the dead. Not that I have already obtained all this, or have already been made perfect, but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me. Brothers, I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it. But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus. All of us who are *mature* should take such

a view of things. And if on some point you think differently, that too God will make clear to you. Only let us live up to what we have already attained.”

I pray that Oklahoma Christian University will serve diligently and faithfully with the same measure of humility and devotion as the Apostle Paul.



OKLAHOMA CHRISTIAN UNIVERSITY
— Since 1950 —

OUR COVENANT

Oklahoma Christian University is a higher learning community which transforms lives for Christian faith, leadership, and service.

The values and behavior of this Christian community are derived from the Bible, rather than the prevailing culture. Because we are a higher learning community dedicated to a distinctively Christian mission, we join together in a community covenant. This covenant is not a creed demanding strict belief in its veracity and inerrancy, and it is not merely an ideal to which we aspire; rather, it is a personal commitment that while we are members of this community, we will abide by the principles and ideals set forth in the covenant. The purpose of our covenant is to unite all of us at Oklahoma Christian University—students, staff, faculty, administration, and Board of Trustees—in a Christian community which is based on biblical principles and which transforms lives for Christian faith, leadership, and service.

We recognize that the University is not the church; however, we are a Christian community which seeks to be guided by the teachings of our Lord Jesus Christ as revealed in scripture. We welcome all students, regardless of their church affiliation, who agree to abide by this covenant. Because the University was founded by members of the churches of Christ and because we seek to serve our church constituents effectively, we expect all full-time faculty and staff to be faithful, active members of the churches of Christ who fully embrace the principles of this covenant.

OUR FOUNDATION

God interacts with this world as both Creator and Savior (*Genesis 1; Hebrews 1:1-3*).

The Bible is God's inspired word, which shows us the nature of God, the risen Son, and the Holy Spirit (*2 Timothy 3:16; 2 Peter 1:19-21*).

We seek to honor God by imitating the nature of God and his son, our Lord Jesus Christ, through the guidance of the Holy Spirit (*John 13:13-17; 1 Corinthians 11:1; 1 Peter 2:21*).

As members of this Christian higher learning community, we are guided by specific principles set forth in the Bible (*Psalms 119:105; 2 Timothy 3:16-17*).

OUR CALL

God calls us to do our best in everything we do (*Colossians 3:17; Colossians 3:23*).

God calls us to submit our will to his (*John 15:14; James 4:7; 1 John 2:17*).

God calls us to submit to one another in love (*1 Corinthians 10:23-24; Galatians 5:13-14; Ephesians 5:21; Philippians 2:3-4*) and to show his love through the justice, mercy, and faithfulness of our lives (*Matthew 5; Matthew 23*).

God calls us to live lives of holiness (*Ephesians 1:4; 1 Thessalonians. 4:7; Hebrews 12:14; 1 Peter 1:15-16*).

OUR COMMUNITY LIFE

We strive to honor the Lord and be Christlike in all of our conduct (*Colossians 3:12-14; Titus 2:11-14*).

We strive to demonstrate love and respect for everyone, even those who have views that differ from ours, and avoid conduct or language that is demeaning to others (*Galatians 3:28; Philippians 2:3-4; James 2:1-13*).

We strive to exercise our Christian freedom responsibly within the framework of God's Word, humbly submitting to others (*1 Corinthians 10:23-24; 31-33*).

We strive to use wise stewardship of our mind, body, time, abilities and resources and make thoughtful, biblically guided choices in matters of behavior, entertainment, and interpersonal relationships (*Philippians 4:8*).

We strive to practice honesty and integrity in everything we say and do (*Colossians 3:9-10; Revelation 21:8*).

We strive to treat our bodies with the honor due the temple of the Holy Spirit—honoring God's plan that sexual relations be a part of a marriage between a man and a woman, dressing modestly, and avoiding any self-destructive practices (*1 Corinthians 6:19-20*).

For the sake of our personal influence and our life together in Christian community, we also agree to certain community standards of conduct which are not specifically set forth in the Bible, but which enable the community to operate peaceably and in harmony with these principles and with one another. These community standards are set forth in the Student Handbook, the Staff Handbook, and the Faculty Handbook.

By choosing to be a part of the Oklahoma Christian University community, every member of the student body, staff, faculty, and Board of Trustees affirms his or her understanding of, respect for, and commitment to abide by the principles, and standards of conduct set forth in this covenant.