

# The Ten Pillars 2030

## A Christian University and Its Worldview

In the late summer of 1900, there was a man who lived in a thriving city on the Texas shore. People came from far across the ocean to visit this growing city, as it was a rising center for commerce, innovation, and trade.

One day, with no warning—for those were the days before forecasts and radar—the winds became a wild thing, and the sea began to rise. A great storm was coming, and the people were not prepared.

The man and many of his fellow citizens took shelter at the courthouse where his father was a judge, behind the thick granite columns that held up the house of law, and prayed for the best. The rain fell, the flood waters rose, and the wind blew and slammed against the building. But the pillars held.

The thriving coastal city was Galveston; the man was the father of HBU's founder Stewart Morris; the storm, the Great Galveston hurricane, was the deadliest natural disaster in the history of the United States and was later named "The Storm of the Century."

Houston Baptist College was founded in 1960, and today you can see ten of those same granite columns at the center of the HBU campus, a gift from the survivor's son. Given in the fall of 1969 at the height of the Cold War and cultural upheaval in the United States, they are more than merely relics of the past. They are a constant reminder that our ability to weather fierce storms depends upon solid foundations.<sup>1</sup>

***Universities in the Midst of the Whirlwind.*** Many universities have lost the ability to organize themselves around a unifying purpose or a singular vision for human life and society. But this incapacity has not diminished their immense cultural influence. Universities retain great cultural

power, but they sometimes wield this power chaotically, with no constructive purpose. Their impact is significant and undeniable, but it often resembles the scattered wreckage left in the wake of a hurricane rather than the refuge of wisdom that is needed in the midst of the storm, the respite to be found in the good, the true, the just, and the beautiful.

Thus, many universities end up serving especially, if not solely, to provide credentialing and networking, often sustained largely by athletic enthusiasm. In these instances, university values are too selective, relative, and subject to cultural whims. For some, the institution's only unified purpose is as an economic engine for the given state in which it resides. For others, the university's mission appears more oriented to teaching and training for political activism around prescribed and, thus, limited points of view. This latter role tends toward utopianism and often leads to the suppression of contrary perspectives, promoting a uniformity of speech and behavior achieved by social pressure and even force, not evidence and reasoned debate. Such patterns of intellectual coercion are at odds with the long history of universities and their purposes.

The Christian university is a different kind of university. It is not one that has added a few religious practices (chapel, for example) or a few extra courses (Bible and theology) to an otherwise standard curriculum. As Richard John Neuhaus has argued, "There is no such thing as a university pure and simple."<sup>2</sup> All universities have a character, a personality, and a culturally conditioned identity. No university, however, should fail to promote the good faith engagement of discovery, research, creativity, writing, speaking, and new ideas. Such failure not only leads to authoritarian practices and dishonest outcomes—as may be seen historically when the interests of power or money control the voices of free speech and righteous learning—but it also lacks the necessary humility required for doing discovery, teaching, and all the practices of thought and dialogue that are at the core of the university experience and purpose.

The Christian university shares these commitments to humble truth seeking and does so with the grounding of historically distinctive core convictions. A Christian university is a certain kind of university, whose belief that Jesus Christ is Lord over all things, visible and invisible, reflects theological givens but in no way suppresses the institution's ability to look at all of reality. Indeed, our convictions support and encourage the investigation of the world around us, as well

as ordered methods to understand it. We desire as a Christian university to be a witness to and a preserving influence for the functions historically common to all universities properly so called.

*Scripture and a Christian Worldview.* This understanding of the vocation and mission of a Christian university is a consequence of what the Scriptures teach about God and his purposes for the creation. The Christian belief in one true Creator God, whose act of creation leaves nothing outside the results of his initiative in speaking the worlds into being, demands a worldview that is comprehensive, orderly, curious, and humble. The creation of human beings, male and female, as uniquely formed in the image of God and given a delegated responsibility to care for and manage his creation demands a submissiveness of mind and heart that engenders an intellectual humility—a truth-seeking pursuit of coherence that promotes just and loving communities of work and worship. The reality of the Fall and its consequent pervasive effects of human alienation and brokenness reinforces the need for humility and honesty in all matters of faith, thought, and learning.

A Christian worldview is a way of looking at reality in all the ways we categorize it, whether visible or invisible, and according to all the disciplines of learning known or yet to be defined. Such a worldview of necessity draws upon the central sources of Christian faith and tradition for normative guidance. Nearly every Christian tradition relies upon and appeals to the Christian Scriptures (with some variation as to the books that should be counted as authoritative) as the foundational point of departure for Christian thinking and living. Christians differ as to the interpretation of the Scriptures, though the church throughout its long history has generated bodies of theological knowledge and tradition that, though subject to review and reformation, at the most basic levels have gained general consensus and attained their own authority over time.

With recognizable variations, all Christian traditions in theory, though in different mixes and measures, point to the authority of the Bible and rely upon the work of the Spirit and a community of faith (either historical or contemporary) to read and interpret the Scriptures. In so doing, they seek constantly to reflect in more accurate and relevant teaching the thinking and lifestyle demanded by the Scriptures themselves.

A Christian worldview, then, must be derived from the Scriptures at some foundational level; and though it can be questioned and analyzed, it ought to reflect the most comprehensive ways possible of looking at the world. Like eyeglasses, which allow us to see everything else more accurately, a worldview should enable us to see (take in) all that is and provide a frame of reference for deriving coherence from all the data that surround us.<sup>3</sup> We normally don't look *at* our glasses; we look *through* them. Of course, if our glasses need cleaning or repairing, we look at them and make adjustments. The same is true of a worldview. It can be modified as part of a cycle of thinking and learning, but its primary function is as an enabling tool to discover, interpret, understand, and comprehensively assimilate all that can possibly be observed and known about every conceivable sphere of reality.<sup>4</sup>

We therefore intend to make central use of the Scriptures in constructing a worldview. This is a practice common to all Christian traditions, but it is particularly true of our tradition and founding as a Christian university (see the "Preamble" to HBU's Letters of Incorporation, 1960) born in the mid-twentieth century in a major American city and within the cross currents of Baptist history and evangelical theological traditions.

The larger narrative of Scripture, the story of the Bible, presents an inextricable link between belief and practice. In Scripture, the story of the Bible is, in effect, the story of God's mission in the world. It is presented in the form of a plot-shaped history, and it begins with the creation of the world, visible and invisible, and all things in it. There is nothing outside the creation, the total sum of reality made by the word, power, and fiat of the one true God.

This act of creation includes the creation of human beings, male and female, made in his image (*imago Dei*), where "image" refers primarily to the functional responsibilities of the man and woman to govern and rule God's world. It is a delegated responsibility that presumes God as king over the creation. Human beings, made in his image, are by that fact given a divine mandate and are responsible to him to protect, govern, and work in his world (the garden is the original temple of his presence) and extend the frontiers of his rule to all the earth.

We say above that the biblical narrative, what we are describing as a Christian worldview, is plot-shaped, and by that we mean that creation is good—“God saw all that he had made and it was very good” (Genesis 1:31)—but, as in all stories, the original setting soon endured conflict and rebellion. What is traditionally known as the Fall—a moral rebellion by the humans—provoked expulsion from the garden for the man and the woman, a curse of decay and mortality placed upon them and the entire creation (Genesis 3; Romans 8:18-25), and the inability of humans to fulfill their divinely mandated mission.

It is precisely here that many views of the scriptural story are truncated. It is popularly said that the story of the Bible is something like the following: “We were made for a relationship with God; sin spoiled that relationship, but Jesus has come to forgive and restore that relationship so that when we die we can go to heaven.”

Such a truncated view narrows the purpose of God in creation to our “relationship” with him, often neglects the mission of God for human beings—that is, to extend the frontiers of his rule to all the earth—and largely omits much of the rest of the story of Scripture (except as background stories that generate good examples for moral living and a few typological anticipations of the coming of Christ), especially the middle. As with all stories, the middle is crucial for developing the strategies that move toward plot resolution, including the full drama and power of the climax. These strategies in turn are critical for shedding light both backward and forward and thus enabling a better understanding of both the initial tension and the climax.

In the remainder of the opening narrative, things go from bad to worse—the murder of brother by brother, the Flood, and the Tower of Babel (Genesis 3-11). The appearance of Abraham, however, in Genesis 12 marks a new and major subplot in the macro narrative of Scripture. The promises made to Abraham serve as the template of God’s plan for restoring the whole world. This plan of restoration involves not only a reversal of the Fall and the forgiveness of sin, but a return to the mandate given to human beings in Genesis 1.

The covenants with Abraham (see Genesis 12-18) thus anticipate the reversal of humankind’s failure and initiate the divine plan of rescue: to bless and restore all the nations through the seed

and offspring of Abraham—ultimately Israel and Jesus the Messiah (cf. Galatians 3:15-16, 23-29). These storied goals, developed with surprising plot twists in the narrative of Scripture, involve the shocking death of the Messiah, his vindication, enthronement, and the coming of God's Spirit as the Spirit of Christ to his people, his renewed temple. The promises to bless and restore the world will be fulfilled with the return of Christ, the resurrection of the dead, and the restoration (new creation) of heaven and earth (Romans 8:21-22; 1 Corinthians 15:24-28; Philippians 3:20-21). These climactic events initiate the renewed circumstances within which human beings once again pick up God's mandate to govern faithfully his creation, to be co-heirs with Christ the king (Romans 8:17; Revelation 1:6; 5:9-10; 20:4-6; cf. 1 Corinthians 6:3). These promises, once fulfilled, reinstate through a new creation (begun with the resurrection of Jesus and the gift of the Spirit) human beings as able and enabled to do God's work in the world.

By overlooking the rest of the Old Testament story—from Abraham through the ongoing agonized longing of postexilic books like Ezra, Nehemiah, and Malachi—the foreshortened view of the narrative of Scripture fails to appreciate the theologically shaped history of Israel. As God's people, Israel receives and preserves the oracles of God's work in history, especially his promises to Abraham—and thus to Israel—to bless Israel and the nations. It also thereby fails to contextualize the good news announcement in the Gospels (beginning with John the Baptist) of the coming of the kingdom of God. This announcement, continued in the preaching of Jesus, points then to Jesus as the Messiah of Israel who inaugurates the long-anticipated kingship of God.

This good news of God's imminent and dawning reign was not only the spoken message of Jesus but was reinforced and signified by his actions, including especially his conflicts with Jewish and Roman authorities, miracles, and demon exorcisms. His crowning achievement was his obedience through death to the will of his God and Father. Because of his faithfulness, God vindicated him by the resurrection and through him inaugurated the new creation, redefining for his followers the standards for exercising power and achieving status in the reconstituted empire of God. Now enthroned at the Father's right hand, he establishes the rulership of God and, by sending his Spirit to his followers, enables them to carry forward the divine mission.<sup>5</sup>

A foreshortened view lacks the full, storied basis for stating that Jesus is himself the fulfillment of God's promises to Abraham (2 Corinthians 1:20), the presence of Yahweh as king, the one who overcomes Satan and restores the temple/garden, the initiator of the new creation, and the one who as the image of God accomplishes in his submissive death human obedience to God's mission. It is this long-awaited new covenant restoration that also recommissions forgiven human beings to resume their calling to do God's work in the world.

A narrative description of a Christian worldview as grounded in the story of the Bible therefore incorporates both the content of belief—about God, the world, human brokenness, social structures, nations and societies, human psychology, gender, marriage, families, the goodness of life, the church as God's Spirit-empowered agents in a still broken world, and the hope of restoration in this age and in the one to come—and the divinely given mandate for human beings with respect to their work. The Christian university, as an act of discipleship and as a reflection of the mission of the church in the world, participates in precisely that mandate.

Although in our brokenness we never fully understand it or accomplish it, such a worldview tells us, especially since the inauguration of the restoration of all things in Christ, what to believe and how to live. It similarly gives content and purpose to the character and mission of a Christian university.

## The Ten Pillars: Core Convictions at HBU

Houston Baptist University has a history of affirming these particular ways of thinking and living, which we hereby describe as Ten Pillars. These convictions are an essential part of the traditional beliefs and commitments of the University. They are set forth here to bring to mind the ten physical pillars that are now iconic on our campus and thus represent the durable historical and theological commitments that undergird our practices and enable us to translate our worldview, Preamble, and mission into academic programs, curricular structures, and habits of the mind and heart. HBU confesses and takes shelter under these Ten Pillars.

**Pillar One. God, the Creator of a Good and Knowable World.** The world was created and is sustained by God the Father and through Jesus Christ his Son. It reflects his presence and power and is good, orderly, and can be known. Human beings, male and female, are made in God's image and given responsibilities to preserve, protect, and order God's creation. The world and God's ways constitute the arena and object of our academic goals for learning and teaching.

**Pillar Two. A Plan of Restoration.** The world is fallen and, because of human rebellion, under a condition of chaos and brokenness, but God's plan of rescue, effected through the history of Israel and the nations and culminating through the faithfulness of Jesus Christ, is one whereby God will unify all who trust in Christ and will one day restore the entire creation—heaven and earth, nations, peoples, and ethnicities—through him.

**Pillar Three. The Importance of Human Agency.** God acts through the processes of history, and, as disorderly and chaotic as the world is, his work can still be done in it. Human beings, and especially his followers, are God's agents of restoration and possess certain capacities of will, talent, and giftedness. We are thus made to do his work in the world, and we attain to our greatest flourishing when we are submissive to his plans and purposes as revealed in Christ and Scripture.

**Pillar Four. A Renewed People.** Through Christ and the Spirit, the church was created as the people of God who fulfill the promises made to Abraham. It is comprised of men and women from all segments of human societies and of whatever racial, ethnic, economic, national, or religious origin who confess allegiance to Christ and follow him as agents of God, empowered by the Spirit to worship, encourage, and teach one another to carry out God's restorative plans in the world. The church therefore labors with persistence to reflect now the love of God, whose purpose is the restorative summing up, the reunification, of all things in Christ. The church accomplishes its mandated mission, directed to all nations and peoples, by acts of healing, charity, service, teaching the gospel, and worshipping the Father, in the power of the Spirit, through Jesus Christ the Lord. The church does its work in a broken world and in anticipation of the return of Christ, who will raise the dead, judge the earth, and heal the nations, having subjected all things to himself.



**Pillar Five. A Mandate to Understand the World.** The Christian university as an arm of the church participates in God’s plan of rescue and does so in the sphere of long-term commitments, not immediate activism. As a university, we patiently trust God’s working in history and confess that this is his world and he will accomplish his merciful intentions for it, however difficult they are to discern. God’s purposes involve his use of all things good and evil and frequently require decades, centuries, and even millennia in their outworking. We nonetheless believe that his world and his ways are discernible and that, in spite of our own fallen state, we may make progress in knowledge. However, even with the ability to know, we now know only in part and must humbly examine our assumptions, methods, and conclusions, realizing that we are often mistaken, while awaiting the restoration of all things, when we will understand more fully the ways of God.

Our task is to understand all that we can of the world and his ways in it. We research, we teach, and we reflect upon the Creator, his world, and the peoples in it. We think about its origins and nature, its peoples and their histories. We study and analyze human beings, their social and political thought and behavior, their languages, philosophies, governments, and literature, and their beliefs and failures. We work for more than technological proficiency and professional expertise, as instrumental as these practices are. We preserve and retain the traditional arts of freedom—the liberal arts—to understand our purpose as humans, to build social structures of civility and justice, and to experience the liberty that enables us to be agents of order and peace, fulfilling God’s purposes in the world. These tasks we do in an environment of faithful tolerance and intellectual freedom.

**Pillar Six. Learning and Teaching as Discipleship.** We believe that all forms of instruction, whether by teaching, counseling, performance, coaching, training, or research, are best done not only by reading and lecturing but by a kind of practicing discipleship. Professors and counselors are intended to be academic and professional leaders, well trained in their fields, knowledgeable experts who are able to teach. We also affirm that the transmission of knowledge occurs through human interaction and example, is empowered by relational engagement, and aims toward accountable and disciplined learning that produces transformed behavior and thinking. “The life

of the mind” is not the cultivation of thinking and reflection in isolation. Those valuable disciplines of deep work and thought flourish in community and are intended to engender synthesis, communication, apprenticed learning, and constructive, purposeful behavior aimed at fulfilling God’s mission for the world. Work therefore is a divinely mandated expression of what it means to be truly human. It is an expression of vocation, and whether compensated or voluntary, it is an act of worship, stewardship, and obedience.

**Pillar Seven. Life, Marriage, Gender, and Humanness.** God created man and woman in his image and commissioned them as stewards and managers of his good creation. Life is therefore a purpose-driven gift of God, and we affirm the dignity of all people and the goodness of life from conception forward.

Marriage is a lifelong union of one man and one woman who are committed to each other in loving intimacy and constitutes the beginning of human community in service to God. We therefore believe in male and female genders as a gift of God reflected biologically in the genetic differences that are specific to an individual even before birth. Though the fallenness of this world and the curse of mortal corruption under which it exists can produce emotional confusion in individuals, we believe that gender identity is not self-determined or discontinuous with the bodies with which we were conceived and born.

We believe that full humanness was lost in the Fall, but incarnate in Jesus Christ, who is the very image of God. We believe that in Jesus, God has revealed the full humanity to which we are called and into which we will be transformed when we receive a resurrection body like Christ’s. We believe in forgiveness through Christ, the cleansing power of the Holy Spirit, and the moral necessity to pursue even now the purity, blamelessness, and holiness that will accompany our restored humanity when God re-creates heaven and earth at the return of Christ.

We therefore believe the promised restoration of true humanness at the return of Christ stands in contradiction to all human efforts to create human beings in the image and likeness of artificial technologies, as in for example the practices of transhumanism as it aims toward a post humanist world.

We believe that living according to God's creational intent is central to purity and holiness, whereas violating God's laws, ways, and wisdom leads to the corruption of our humanness and, finally, death. The only remedy for such moral and physical corruption is the redeeming and re-creating power of God through Jesus Christ.

**Pillar Eight. Governmental Institutions.** We believe in governmental institutions as established by God for the purpose of justice and human flourishing. We believe in the necessity of accountability in social life, as determined by just and fair structures of government, while also insisting that the freedoms of conscience, speech, and religious liberty in all matters of faith, practice, and belief must be maintained and supported. We seek always to honor the just and necessary constraints of a civil society and will work within the social contract to fulfill our responsibilities, though always subordinating all social and political demands to our loyalty to God and his will.

**Pillar Nine. The Christian University.** We believe that a Christian university is a particular kind of university but it also shares certain historic functions common to all universities properly so called: a respect for the conscience of others, a love of learning, and the provision of an environment conducive to listening, debate, and the preservation, discovery, synthesis, and dissemination of knowledge. These functions represent intrinsic goods worth preserving, defending, and enabling to flourish.

The Christian university also exists at the interface between the church as God's imperfect but representative people and the world in its brokenness. We will therefore seek to translate the cultural, world-shaping mandates embedded in our Christian worldview as far as possible into the traditional structures of higher education, while also seeking to adapt and transform those structures in ways that are faithful to the pursuit of truth in every sphere of reality and that enable us efficiently to accomplish our purpose and mission as a Christian university.

**Pillar Ten. The Mystery of Unity in Christ.** The restoration of the world involves, at its deepest levels, the reversal of human alienation from God, from other people, and from the creation. The rebellion of the human heart against God and the consequent corruption of the

creation permeate the personal, social, and physical structures of human existence. Human societies embody these patterns of brokenness and are divided, racist, greedy, lustful, violent, and perverse, reflecting an idolatrous will to power. But these evidences of human pride have been denounced in Christ, the crucified and resurrected Son of God, who has conquered the powers of darkness, inaugurated the reign of God, and established his church, a community that, though itself still broken, best exemplifies in its Lord and the effects of the Spirit the beginning of a new creation, the restoration of all things. All peoples in Christ are united to one another, freed from the enslaving forces of lust, materialism, class, race, and power. Christ is reversing the prideful consequences of the Tower of Babel and creating a new people, his body, who no longer reflect the status distinctions of nations and ethnicities, slave and free, male and female, educated and foolish, Jew and Gentile. The walls of division that separate the human family are broken down in Christ, who thus establishes the true peace of God. This peace from oneness, a mystery begun in Christ and worked toward by the church, will be fully revealed at the return of Christ, when “the glory of God will fill the earth like the waters cover the sea” (Habakkuk 2:14; cf. Isaiah 11:9; John 12:20-32; Ephesians 2:1-3:21; Philippians 3:20-21).

## Epilogue

Like every confession of enduring convictions, this one, too, has emerged from a particular historical context. This vision document for Houston Baptist University grows out of listening sessions and information gathered over the last several years, but these words are being written during the COVID-19 crisis, whose end we have yet to foresee. The pandemic has changed much of how we manage and deliver the content of higher education and affects greatly our ability to project trends for the future. In addition to the virus-related social and economic turmoil and the subsequent conditions of rapid change that it has generated and under which all of us operate—whether in higher education or other enterprises—this document is being composed on the heels of the most divisive, rancorous, and bitterly fought national elections since the reelection of Abraham Lincoln in 1864. The United States is experiencing a cultural divide of significant proportions; one even hears use of the word “secession.” This social chasm did not suddenly occur. We are reminded more than ever that politics is downstream from culture and that the

divisions we are now experiencing, though no doubt exacerbated by the recent election cycle, have a longer history, going back many decades at least. We didn't get to this point of national crisis overnight, and it will not be repaired with a series of court decisions or legislative maneuvers.

All of us, in our families, work environments, professional associations, voluntary societies, and political organizations, must consider and reflect upon the roots of these chaotic days and look for deeper sources of renewal whereby some modicum of peace and unity can be achieved. We must undertake painstaking and patient efforts at considering the things that truly matter. Political structures, parties, and leaders have great influence, but unity and renewal will not happen through new laws, suppression, censorship, or political mandate; nor do we require or want superficially contrived methods of uniformity. Rather, we need at a minimum good faith discussions of honest differences within contexts of mutual respect and freedom. These are long-term projects.

We are not utopians. These problems are deeply embedded within the human situation, individually and socially; but we also believe that universities, though they too have contributed to our social ills, can provide (as can the family, houses of worship, and other voluntary societies) a context for approaching these age-old problems of human brokenness. Universities by their very nature and historical disposition are well situated to undertake this kind of long-term work by recommitting themselves as models and laboratories of freedom, thus reflecting the human capacity to tolerate vigorous differences. American universities must preserve and in some cases restore their historic practices of protecting and exercising the freedoms of conscience and speech. These historic behaviors and commitments can begin to renew the role of education, including university education, in our culture. Honoring these values will engender and in some cases restore public respect for the university and its mission. The university must, by conversation, reflection, research, writing, and teaching, exemplify those unifying commitments that can draw us together into a just and tolerant society, modeling what it means to be truly human.

Houston Baptist University endeavors to be just such a university—founded and framed by the convictions of these Ten Pillars, animated and sustained by our central confession that Jesus Christ is Lord. By God’s grace, we will be a place of stable shelter where wisdom may flourish even as the winds blow and the nations rage.

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<sup>1</sup> Some phrases and themes borrowed from “The Ten Pillars: Faith and Reason in a Great City,” Houston Baptist University, amended August 2016, <https://hbu.edu/about-hbu/the-ten-pillars/>.

<sup>2</sup> Richard John Neuhaus, “The Christian University: Eleven Theses,” *First Things*, January 1996, <https://www.firstthings.com/article/1996/01/the-christian-university-eleven-theses>.

<sup>3</sup> Analogy borrowed from N.T. Wright, *Paul and the Faithfulness of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2013), 463. See also N.T. Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992), Ch. 3.

<sup>4</sup> The word *worldview*, if narrowly understood, would privilege the notion of viewing or looking. However, we include in our use of the word other senses (physical and intuitive) and ways of knowing (individual or communal), such as listening to music or touching material objects, to enable the gathering and assimilation of data.

<sup>5</sup> For a fuller summary of the biblical narrative and its implications, see *Paul and the Faithfulness of God*, Ch. 7.