

Spirit-Led Studies

I've been kicking dirt a lot this summer. "Kicking dirt" is an expression we use to mean visiting a construction site. At Lee University, we have built many new buildings in recent years, so I have spent much of my time as president kicking dirt. It's one of the most interesting parts of my job.

This summer, we have two major construction projects under way on campus. We are building a new facility for the School of Religion on one end of our campus and one for the Department of Natural Sciences and Math a few blocks away. The two buildings will include more than 100,000 square feet of academic space, so there is plenty of dirt to be kicked.

These two projects are something of a symbol of our whole university. One is a place where ministers will be trained and the Bible will be taught. It will be "home" for our students who are preparing for pastoral studies, theology, missions and other ministries. The other will be "home" for our science majors, who will go on to careers in medicine, research science and various health-care professions.

Scripture and science, preachers and pre-med, future youth pastors and future microbiologists, the laboratory and the mission field—at Lee, these things go together because we believe God calls young people to both and that it is our job to prepare them for whichever challenging future awaits them.

Lee is not a Bible college or research university, though I respect both types of institutions. My own undergraduate college experience—way back in the 1960s—was at a Bible college. I was a theology major, and I had many intellectually challenging teachers and courses and generally got a good four-year college education. I believe Bible

colleges still have an important role to play in higher education, and I hope those that remain will thrive and attract the right students to their campuses.

But after I graduated, I felt that the Lord was drawing me toward studying psychology, so I went on to Emory University to earn M.A. and Ph.D. degrees in the graduate school of arts and sciences there. It was secular to the core, and although it offered a striking contrast in almost every way to my Bible-college experience, it definitely prepared me for my destiny and calling in the kingdom of God.

Because of my background, I have a personal appreciation for both Bible colleges and secular research universities. But Lee University is neither. It is a Christ-centered, Spirit-led, liberal arts university, an institution that offers a powerful and unusual type of educational experience. I believe for many young people, it is the perfect environment for the college years.

At Lee, we try to make Jesus Christ the core of everything we do. We try to maintain the vibrant openness to the Holy Spirit that is part of our Pentecostal tradition. That's what we mean by "Christ-centered and Spirit-led."

At such a place, it is impossible for the ministerial students and the science majors or their professors to avoid one another; just as it is for those who study art or political science or business management or any of dozens of other fields we offer at Lee. Each student must live, study, think and explore their academic majors in a manner that recognizes the many different ways that other people make sense of God's kingdom.

At a place like this, it's hard to withdraw into the bubble of one's own intellectual life or specific calling. None of us can ignore the questions our neighbors are asking or the challenges our different intellectual traditions offer.

That makes a true Christian liberal arts university an exciting place. My opinion is that it is the best possible place to prepare young people for vocational ministry as well as for careers in the secular world.

So here at Lee University, we are “kicking dirt” with all our hearts!

We are building state-of-the-art labs and classrooms for the sciences while also constructing a terrific new building dedicated to the study of Scripture and the training of ministers. When we finish, we know Jesus Christ will be Lord in both buildings, and the Holy Spirit will move on students’ hearts on both ends of campus—and everywhere in between.

Paul Conn is the president of Lee University in Cleveland, Tennessee. He is also the author or co-author of numerous books, several of which have appeared on New York Times best-seller lists.