

November 1, 2002

Greetings,

Berea College was founded by men and women who were motivated by a Christian faith that was both ardent and egalitarian. This position of faith opened the doors of education to “all peoples of the earth,” white or black, male or female—a rather radical position in Kentucky and the South in 1855. Each generation of Bereans has decided how best to appropriate and extend this legacy of “inclusive Christianity.” Berea College’s 1996 strategic plan, *Being and Becoming: Berea College in the 21st Century*, asked, “Can we articulate our institutional vocation in a way that clarifies the relationship between our contemporary educational mission and our Christian roots?”

For five years, the Berea College community engaged in archival research, conversations with invited guests, the creation of expository papers, and discussions with all College constituencies about the core principles of our distinctive and inclusive Christian heritage. The following statement of “The Christian Identity of Berea College” is the result of these lengthy conversations and thoughtful reflections by the current generation of Bereans (faculty, students, staff, alumni, and trustees) about how to apply our inclusive Christian legacy in the 21st century.

Larry D. Shinn
President

Berea College has a particular Christian self-understanding that makes it stand apart from most other schools that call themselves “Christian.” First, Berea College’s founder argued that the Christian gospel could be described best by the phrase “impartial love” that welcomed students and staff from “every clime and every nation” to study and to work together. Second, Berea College was founded prior to the Civil War in the 1850s as an abolitionist college that welcomed black and white men and women students in a day when such equality was not supported in most Christian communities in Kentucky and much of the United States. Third, from their beginning the Berea schools were never associated with any denomination or sectarian Christian church. Finally, Berea College was rooted in a Christian spirituality that was egalitarian, socially provocative, and focused on serving the black and white students and communities of Appalachia and beyond.

John G. Fee founded Berea College out of convictions about education and about humanity that were rooted deeply in the Gospel of the New Testament. The heart of the Christian gospel for Fee was summed up in the two great commandments enunciated by Jesus: “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and soul and mind....and you shall love your neighbor as yourself” (Matt. 22:37-40). Another biblical text that expressed the heart of the gospel for Fee and the Berea College community was the statement of the apostle Paul, “God has made of one blood all peoples of the earth” (Acts 17:26)—a text that has stood as Berea’s motto for more than a one hundred and twenty-five years. Together, these and other such inclusive scriptural texts constituted what Fee understood as “the gospel of impartial love” which guided and challenged the earliest Berea community and still does today.

One instance of Berea’s current Christian self-understanding is the preamble to the Great Commitments that says, “Adherence to the College’s scriptural foundation, ‘God has made of one blood all peoples of the earth,’ shapes the College’s culture and programs so that students and staff alike can work toward both personal goals and a vision of a world shaped by Christian values, such as the power

of love over hate, human dignity and equality, and peace with justice.” From Berea College’s beginning to the present day, it has welcomed “all peoples of the earth” with a hospitality that is inclusive. Currently, the College is made up of students and staff from many religious traditions and of no religious tradition who accept Berea’s Great Commitments.

As a way of providing an overview of Berea College’s history and Christian self-understanding, the following nine points provide guideposts for prospective students, staff, donors, and friends of the College¹:

- 1 Berea College was chartered in 1859 by an independent, non-sectarian Christian community founded in 1853. John Fee and the Berea community were explicitly anti-sectarian.
- 2 Berea College is and always has been a college, not a church. While founded in the nineteenth century as a college “distinctly Christian” (Fee), it has never conceived its Christian identity in any ecclesiastical or sectarian sense, such as a “church-related college” or as a “Bible college” or as many of the contemporary “Christian colleges” might define themselves.
- 3 Berea College’s Christian identity is rooted in the founders’ “gospel of impartial love,” an expression of the biblical commandments to love God and to love neighbor as self, and in their commitment to live out this “gospel” in a practical way through lives of service to others. Throughout its history the Berea College community has sought to put these ideals into practice.
- 4 The “gospel of impartial love” and the motive of service to others that grows out of it have always been understood as a work in progress, an ongoing challenge, an aspiration with notable achievements and unfinished business. Each generation of Bereans has struggled to understand for itself what it means to be “Christian” in the context of this gospel and motive of service. This is true for our Berea College community today.

5 We understand Berea's Christianity to be inclusive. In this we are following the example of John Fee who, in the spirit of hospitality, welcomed persons "from every nation and clime" (Fee). Extending this historical tradition, Berea College welcomes all who accept Berea College's core values of impartial love and service to others, whatever their culture, faith or philosophy.

6 Out of this Christian self-understanding and a deep commitment to the liberal arts, Berea College has pledged in its Great Commitments to educate its students about the many literary, historical, and contemporary expressions of Christian faith, ethic, and motive of service through its curriculum, convocation programs, worship services, and other means.

7 Out of this same Christian and liberal arts identity and by like means, Berea College has committed itself to fostering social justice and equality for all men and women, especially for those in the African-American and Appalachian communities.

8 The Preamble to Berea's Great Commitments begins, "Berea College, founded by ardent abolitionists and radical reformers, continues today as an educational institution still firmly rooted in its historic purpose 'to promote the cause of Christ.' " The question arises, "Does one have to be a Christian to promote the cause of Christ?" Berea's historical record says no (W.J. Hutchins, 1929; F.S. Hutchins, 1943). Throughout its history, Bereans have encouraged and challenged one another, whatever their personal faith or philosophy, to commit themselves to a cause that is consonant with Berea's core values now expressed in its Great Commitments, and which its Christian members might express as the cause of Christ.

9 To be Christian and welcoming to all is Berea College's tradition. We must acknowledge that, while Berea College is a diverse community, many if not most of those who learn and work at Berea College identify themselves as Christians. Yet even Christians here do not share a common understanding of what that designation means.

Berea College strives to be a place where people with various Christian interpretations, different religious traditions, and no religious tradition work together in support of Berea's Great Commitments.

Over the past century, various leaders of the College have applied the College's inclusive scriptural foundation and spirit to their expanding world and welcomed those whose beliefs were consistent with the Christian gospel of impartial love. Therefore, Berea College today affirms its inclusive Christian tradition even as it respects the traditions of Jews, Muslims, Buddhists, and Hindus as well as other world faiths. Bereans have always struggled to express this inclusive Christian tradition in the midst of divergent views. We will not ignore our differences, but rather seek to understand each other honestly and respectfully, and together create a climate where anyone can openly discuss what they believe without fear of sanction. To that end, all persons who are willing to share in the spirit and the work of the Great Commitments as shaped by its preamble are welcome to study, to teach, and to work at Berea College.

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¹ *These points are articulated more fully in a paper, "Berea College's Christian Vocation and Self-Understanding: A Tradition of Inclusion and Spirited Debate," May 22, 2000.*



The Christian Identity of Berea College