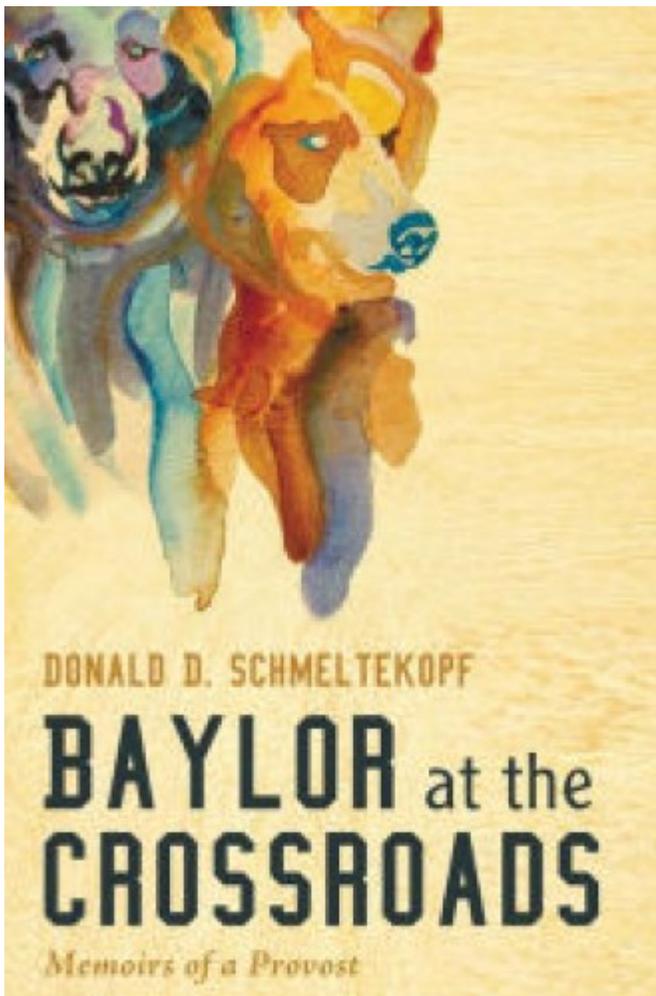


Faith, learning, and scandal

Baylor transformed itself from a regional Baptist teaching institution into an internationally recognized Protestant research university—but not without scandal.

by [David Cramer](#) in the [August 31, 2016](#) issue

In Review



Baylor at the Crossroads

By Donald D. Schmeltekopf

Cascade

It's not only in recent months that Baylor University has found itself at a public crossroads. In February of 2011 I attended a preview weekend at Baylor for prospective doctoral students in religion. There the vice-provost and graduate school dean Larry Lyon gave a memorable pitch for the program. "We're conducting a great experiment here at Baylor," I recall him saying. "Either Baylor will succeed in becoming a Protestant research university or no one will."

Lyon described how Ivy League universities had long ago abandoned the Christian heritage of their founders, while distinctly Christian colleges and universities have tended to prioritize undergraduate teaching over graduate programs and research. A few notable Catholic universities, such as Notre Dame, combine Christian commitments with robust graduate programs and research, but there were no such models in the Protestant tradition. As a result of the visionary leadership of key administrators in the 1990s and early 2000s, explained Lyon, Baylor was positioned to become that Protestant model.

One of those visionary leaders is Don Schmeltekopf, who served as Baylor's provost and chief academic officer from 1991 until his retirement in 2003. In *Baylor at the Crossroads* Schmeltekopf describes how Baylor transformed itself from a regional Baptist teaching institution into an internationally recognized Protestant research university. This book is both the story of a university and the memoir of its provost.

Schmeltekopf arrived in Waco in the summer of 1990, just months before the governing board amended Baylor's charter to assert the university "academic independence" from the Baptist General Convention of Texas. After freeing itself from denominational control, Baylor was left at what Schmeltekopf describes as a crossroads: Would the school retain its religious commitments? Could it integrate these commitments "with a serious commitment to graduate education and research"? Schmeltekopf's answer to both of these questions was yes. But as the responsibility to implement this vision fell largely upon him, he soon found that these objectives are easier said than done.

From the earliest days of his tenure, Schmeltekopf envisioned Baylor as the Protestant Notre Dame: a research university devoted to the integration of faith and learning. He was surprised to find almost immediate pushback against this vision

from faculty members. Some resisted the increased emphasis on research while others worried that the emphasis on “faith and learning” would hurt Baylor’s academic credibility.

Schmeltekopf candidly discusses an episode in which the tension between his vision and the faculty’s took a “decidedly ugly turn.” On the recommendation of then president Robert Sloan, the provost invited mathematician and philosopher William Dembski, an outspoken advocate for intelligent design, to establish the Michael Polanyi Center at Baylor in 1999. While Schmeltekopf and Sloan viewed the center as an application of their vision to the realm of science and religion, many faculty members saw it as “a backdoor reentry of fundamentalism at Baylor.” In response to faculty backlash against a conference hosted by the center in April 2000, Schmeltekopf was directed to assemble a committee to evaluate the center. After Dembski issued a press release misrepresenting the committee’s recommendation as “unqualified affirmation of [his] own work on intelligent design,” he was removed as the director. The center folded the following year.

In the midst of this embarrassing episode Schmeltekopf laid the groundwork for the signature achievement of his tenure: the strategic ten-year vision called *Baylor 2012*. This initiative formalized his vision to deepen Baylor’s Christian commitment while increasing its commitment to academic excellence. *Baylor 2012* provided 12 imperatives, which ranged from developing “world-class faculty” and “a top-tier student body” to building “a winning athletic tradition in all sports” and “a two-billion dollar endowment.” Like Schmeltekopf’s earlier initiatives, *Baylor 2012* encountered resistance from many of the faculty, leading to Sloan’s resignation from the presidency in 2005. Ultimately, however, *Baylor 2012* and its successor *Pro Futuris* helped redefine the university’s identity for the 21st century.

Baylor at the Crossroads offers a rare glimpse into the often veiled administrative inner workings of a Christian university. But Schmeltekopf says little regarding whether and how the institutional character of a Christian university might differ from that of a secular one. He fails to consider whether there might be circumstances in which an unflinching pursuit of excellence in its varied forms might be at cross-purposes with a commitment to Christian faithfulness.

An obvious point where he might have addressed this issue comes in the epilogue. Schmeltekopf mentions a scandal that occurred months after his retirement in which a player on the men’s basketball team shot and killed a teammate. He quotes a *New*

York Times article that describes how “the story unfolded, layer by layer, to expose the lying coach, the cheating program, drugs, secret tapes, clandestine meetings and an attempted cover-up at Baylor University.” As I read of this scandal and the many layers of corruption it exposed, I half-expected Schmeltekopf to lament that his vision for Baylor had been undone. Instead he mentions the story almost in passing, as though such scandals are par for the course at major research universities.

Which, unfortunately, they are. Baylor is back in the national spotlight, not as a model of the great Protestant research university that it strives to be but again as a site of violence and scandal. The Board of Regents has acknowledged the gravity of the offenses, and they’ve taken decisive actions to better align the school with its Christian mission. Nevertheless, these recent events reveal that there is still much difficult work to be done before Schmeltekopf’s vision of a Christian research university is realized at Baylor or anywhere else.