



A Christian Logic for Curriculum in Liberal Arts Education¹

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One hazard in the liberal arts approach to higher education is the naïve assumption that exposure to the “right stuff” of human information can result in a proper education. Perhaps no one really believes this to be an adequate definition of education or an adequate representation of the essence of the liberal arts formula, but the tendency is there, nonetheless.

The sort of faith that is manifested in the “liberal arts philosophy” falls little short of being a religion in itself. For Christians, especially, the potentiality for idolatry—worship of the creation instead of the creator—is troublesome. The argument is not merely between two educational philosophies but rather a commitment to one source of values rather than to another source. For some Christians in higher education the liberal arts philosophy is both good news and bad news. Christian higher education profits much from certain of the dominant themes and convictions represented in the liberal arts approach to education. At the same time, Christians must insist that the emphases implicit and explicit within any educational philosophy must be brought under the discipline of theological priorities.

That education should be committed to breadth of understanding than to narrow specialization is one common ground between the Christian theological roots and the Greco-Roman roots of the liberal arts. There is much to be said for the common ground, especially for the commitment to a high view of the significant role of human beings in the universe, the respect for values of intensive and intentional human inquiry, valuing of the expressive and creative arts, commitment to the value-based and justice seeking disciplines of human society, among others.

All of this is held in high regard by the secularist committed to a nontheistic view of the universe and by the Christian, as well. But the Christian must wonder about the common liberal arts presupposition that the adequate source of curricular foundation is the accumulated disciplinary lore of the arts and human sciences. Does the liberal arts theme provide appropriate and adequate imagery to ground a worldview that accepts as its basic presupposition the creational and redemptive works of God? Indeed, is there in the liberal arts philosophy a recognition that without divine assistance, human intellect and social justice provide only a faulty basis for coping with the complexities of the modern world? Three troublesome questions must be raised:

1. Why would Christians, in particular, choose an essentially extra-biblical logic for grounding curricular decisions?
2. What happens to the Christian worldview in classrooms where the dominant values are drawn from the content of the discipline?
3. To what extent do the students put the parts of the curricular experience together around the Christ-center in order to see the wholeness that is presumed to be basic in the liberal arts education?

The difference between “liberal education” and “liberal arts” should be carefully noted. (This terminology has proved difficult for doctrinaire Christians who have strong negative biases about anything that smacks of non-conservatism; nevertheless, the terms have validity and usefulness—

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especially for Christian higher education.) “Liberal education” usually refers to the sort of education that contrasts with indoctrination and “animal-training” types of patterning of responses. While it is not the purpose of this paper to elaborate a definition of “liberal,” it is important to identify the bias of this paper with the liberalizing and liberating that comes, as in the Gospel itself, from knowing the truth. In Hebrew epistemology, the concern about knowledge is far more than the intellectual storage and retrieval of information demonstrated by a well-labeled recall system. The preoccupation of the Bible with obedience is rightly understood as a concern for *doing* truth—putting truth into action. In the Judeo-Christian views of knowledge and learning, the concern is for nothing less than a discipline of the whole of life that demands a disciplined mind interacting functionally with a disciplined walk.

“Liberal *Arts*,” however, connotes a disciplinary combination in which the issue becomes more a matter of means than ends. Particular disciplinary choices are presumed to be appropriate, others are not. (Indeed, compromises abound, and the exotic rationalizations of business courses and computer languages are enough to wilt the beard of many a sage of the movement.) The debates are joined over the facile distinction between vocational and non-vocational applications of knowledge.

More common ground and a more conciliatory and constructive spirit could prevail if the issues were posed in terms of the values of a liberal education rather than of a liberal arts education.

Happily, much of the more significant content of the typical liberal arts curriculum has room within it for the voice of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Christianity is no anti-intellectual religion, despite what some of its own sectarians have said. “All truth is God’s truth,” has been repeated by the faith-and-learning specialists. More importantly, *truth is because God is*. The starting point for Christian education is not truth in some arbitrary or limited sense of a curricular commitment. The starting point is God.

If there is a body of the “right stuff” for the curriculum of Christian higher education it would come from this foundation, not merely from “the great books” or from some other distillation of the intellectual excellences of the past.

It is not good enough that certain teachable arrays of human knowledge are taken to be the substance of being educated. Clearly, there are inherent limitations in any closed system of curricular choices. No school can hope to teach everything about anything. In the era when the liberal arts philosophy of curriculum first gained respectability it was much easier to imagine the possibility of picking just the right some things that would be possible for eager and thoroughly dedicated students to wrap themselves around.

Today all of higher education must come to terms with the fact that not only the rich go to college. The working classes are within their rights to ask what the educational experience will provide in the way of employable skills. To act as if this concern were either unchristian or ignorant is of the worst sort of snobbery. The responsible forms of Christian higher education must be prepared to give satisfying answer. Indeed it is valid to remind that a sound college education can provide far more in the way of development of the grounding for a satisfying life than merely vocational skills. But that had better not be the whole response. The corpses of the little colleges that leave the answer at that glib level are apt to become more numerous. It is one thing to help students—and their parents—see education in more holistic terms, but holism demands an adequate orientation to the world of work as well.

The word “Christian” works better as a noun than as an adjective, but when used to modify “higher education” it adds some important distinctives. To what extent is there agreement on what they are?

The transcendent values of the Christian grounding of a worldview are most tersely embraced in three words: *faith*, *hope*, and *love*. These terms and the practical and metaphysical components of life which they connote are indisputably central to the development of a fulfilled humanity. Again, the scope of this paper delimits the pleasure that is to be had in a thorough examination of the educational implications of these three qualitative dimensions of life.

Other values and commitments flow from these three. For example, service, accountability in stewardship, and the skills of fulfilling these values with concern for the welfare of others. These are not just rudiments of humanism; more to the point, they are Christian values. They are God-given and grounded in the special revelation, the Bible.

Non-Christian values, especially those of the competitive marketplace where striving for riches and glory, greed, and insensitivity sit in authority, are a special matter of concern for Christian higher education. These values capture the minds and spirits of many, even corrupting the motivations and the decision-making capabilities of Christian young people and their parents. It is the special burden of the Christian education—to the extent that it is willing to operate in the power of the Holy Spirit, to come to grips with these conflicting values—to guide the society in godly critique, to speak prophetically against the values that represent a denial of the Gospel, and to help young people relate constructively to their own needs and to the needs of society in ways that are effective and responsible.

Many formerly stalwart liberal arts colleges have gone by the wayside, casualties of the quest for the mirage: becoming all things to all people in order to sell something to everybody. Driven by a market mentality, this specialty and that major have been added to many a college. It has become popular to pursue a sort of will-o-the-wisp quest for uniqueness, often at the cost of serious overextension and a great deal of resultant confusion in the minds of the donor and student-source public. Far from achieving greater uniqueness many have simply lost their distinctiveness in a sort of collegiate emulsion, becoming like interchangeable parts in a big machine. In these times, deciding which college to attend more often comes down to convenience and superficial matters which can be reduced to color photographs in a brochure. This technological society simply wants the skills that will assure economic independence; these are assumed to be widely available. Ironically, the issue at stake among the American people is wanting *the good life* without willingness to define it. Pandering to this craving in unregenerate society, much that passes as education today represents a denial that there are any moral costs involved in achieving *the good life*.

Considering the hedonistic climate, college professors and administrators can be forgiven for feeling sorry for themselves. But rather than to risk the consequences of paranoia, the promising alternative is active engagement in the promotion of the values of education. Christian higher education faculty, of all people in education, have the most satisfactory “product” to sell. In the interests of the kingdom in which Christians claim primary identity and as honest reflection of the cause to which Christians dedicate their professional competencies, each faculty person and administrator should become clear of mind and heart about the issues and contributions that must be forthcoming from the Christian college.

Lest the message of the Christian higher education institutions be hollow, it must be based on clear image of the values and purposes of the mission of Christian higher education. It is not enough to promote what everyone else promotes: socioeconomic pragmatics of the college degree. Nor is it adequate to join the secular appeal to the superiority of a liberal arts approach to higher education. The effective promoter of Christian higher education must take the time and invest the effort to clarify the very concept of education itself in light of Christ-centered values and biblical foundations.

The American society shows signs of recognizing the moral bankruptcy which lies just around the corner if relativism and pragmatism in matters of ethics, morality, and justice are allowed to run their course. The very fact that religious extremists can get large followings and substantial attention in the mass media point to a widely felt awareness that something must be done to head off moral disaster. The answers that extremists offer are rarely worthy solutions to basic human problems—whether in Iran or in the United States. What can the Christian liberal arts college offer?

Can we define and effectively “market” the purposes of higher education that we believe in? Can we deliver on the promise to produce people who are both religious and rational? People who are both committed and concerned? People who are both holy and helpful? Both secure and sensitive?

Higher education is indeed a commonplace if all it does is to produce *educated people*. That really isn’t hard to do, especially if being educated is only a matter of information-gathering, intellectual reasoning, personal goal-setting, and fitting productively into society. What is it that is different about Christian higher education?

The answer cannot simply be that *Christian* higher education adds a spiritual emphasis or perspective to all that the secular mind expects as education. The Christian-perspective-added view concedes the game before the team even gets on the playing field. The crucial differences between Christian and secular definitions and purposes of education are ignored. Further, such an approach lets mathematics professors and most other teachers of scientific content exempt themselves if they are of such a mind.

Nor can we simply argue that the essence of Christian higher education is that commonplace education is being provided in an uncommon place—all surrounded by Christian warm-and-fuzzy support systems. There simply must be an honest intellectual wrestling with the fact that every aspect of the curriculum is different when it starts with the presupposition that God is the Creator, Sustainer, and Redeemer of the universe.

Just how different should the curriculum be? The only answer that will hold up is that the purposes, content, context, and resources of Christian higher education must be carefully defined and designed to work together toward the end of a very uncommon sort of education concerned with the deliberate and redemptive interaction of the biblically grounded value system of the Kingdom of God and the realities of the social context of today’s world.

What is Christian higher education? Just how different and in what ways different from the commonplace ideas, images, and values of education? Answering that question exceedingly well and putting the answers to work in full view of the whole society—indeed, the whole world is the job to be done.

All Educational Decisions Reflect Values. In truth, education is altogether about the matter of values: what is important enough for one person or institution to assure that it is made available for the next person or generation of persons is at the very heart of the institutionalization of human learning. If there were no value-based concerns, if there were no commitments, no convictions, and no beliefs, there would be no need for deliberate education. But since the cornerstone of human society is commitment to advancement and “progress,” the matter of education is not left to chance. Deliberate decisions about what should be taught, to whom, and under what conditions are being made, reaffirmed, revised, and acted upon in the name of formal education (schools) as well as in the myriad contexts of nonformal education throughout every society. “Value-free curriculum” is nonsense—contradictory words used to confuse the issue of worthy learning.

All Curricular Decisions Reflect An Image Of the Future. Some sort of notion of what the future will be like and what the learner will need to know in order to cope competently with the

unfolding future is at least implicit in every curricular decision. As educational planners have become more aware of this truth, the emphasis on “futurism” has increased. Reflective speculation on the patterns of sociopolitical development in human experience coupled with careful study of the trajectory of human society at large have now become acceptable forms of input to educational decisions.

Curriculum That Cannot Be Justified. Not just any curriculum concept is adequate to the tasks of Christian higher education. For example, the ordinary strings-of-information to courses and programs is seriously deficient. Such experiences simply do not add up. They culminate in some sort of grand examination in which the information is used once—to pass the test—and then it loses most of its residual value.

Another questionable curricular form is the integration-by-perspective routine, in which everything is taught essentially as it would be in a non-Christian school, and somewhere along the line, someone (not always even the main professor) adds a few tidbits about the “Christian perspective” and attempts a sort of belated baptizing of the unredeemed approach. If anything Christian is to be done about the student’s worldview, it must be done persistently and continuously. Every experience must be related to every other experience in the student’s tapestry of learnings. This is not easy, and certainly not every professor is equally competent, but it is the inescapable task of Christian liberal education.

An Appeal For Grand Themes And Substantial Information. One way to get the curriculum coordinated and all the subjects working together for truly liberal education purposes is to see every learning experience as an intersection between a *grand theme* and a certain parcel of *substantial information*. The curriculum specifications then take the form of a matrix rather than merely a set of lists. The matrix is formed by arraying the *grand themes* down the left or vertical axis and arraying the content specifics of the curriculum, subject by subject, across the top or horizontal axis. The resultant array would be huge indeed, especially in the horizontal dimension, and may never be seen all in one place at the same moment—but the idea should be there at all times and in every mind, student and professor alike.

The *substantial information* is the familiar stuff of the syllabus and list of intended outcomes—the examinables and the metaphysical intentions of a given learning experience. This horizontal array is the stock-in-trade of the professor.

What makes the truly Christian curriculum hold together is the intersections of all these bunches of information and concepts with the significant values of the faith, the *grand themes*. Rather than leaving these to chance, they should be specified, defined, and deliberately sought out for their points of intersection with the subject matter of the disciplines.

Which *grand themes*? Here is one more situation where closed lists may be undesirable in the long run; nevertheless, the candidacy of certain items identified in this paper should not be overlooked. Consider the importance of identifying faith, hope, love, service, and others of the seminal keystones of the Christian faith as the longitudinal, continuously focused and refocused warp of the curricular fabric, with the specifics of substantial and relevant information intersecting and illuminating as the woof.

The following six items review the concern that Christian values should transcend whatever other values may be implied in the “liberal arts education” motifs:

1. *Confusing Liberal Arts and Christian Educational Values.* Perhaps more a danger of dubious fusion than of confusion, the tendency among some of the zealots is to see liberal arts as nothing more nor less than an embodiment of Christian values as they relate to education. As with many

another system of human virtues, when measured against the fullness of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, the liberal arts philosophy is, at best, a partial embodiment.

2. *The Oversimplified Notion of Learning as Filing Information.* The phenomenon of human development and learning is a reflection of the image of God. Reducing it to the mechanical imagery of information-processing is disrespectful—to the student, and to God. The teacher who is concerned only about the recall and use of information is taking false comfort in a truncated epistemology; there is more to knowledge and wisdom than that.

3. *The Idolatry of Testable Curriculum.* Among the least recognized of the characteristics of contemporary curriculum is the tendency to teach what can be tested. The importance of nonmeasurable outcomes has been demeaned by technicians, especially the followers of Robert Mager.

4. *The Confusion of Ends and Means.* A common human tendency is to defend what one *does*, without giving adequate attention or taking full accountability for outcomes. In curricular terms, the endless debates about which way something should be taught could be resolved by evidence about consequences. In any educational system, the test that counts most is the worth of the outcomes.

5. *Faith in Labels.* A recurring symptom of enslaving education is the emphasis on creating and maintaining dichotomistic systems of classifying, labeling, and dismissing ideas. It is important to the creative process that people learn, reflect on nuance and uniqueness.

6. *Demeaning Vocation* (and thus *Service*). The importance of a person's life is integral with the call of God upon that life. There is worth in work and rewards for service. To exalt the non-vocational aspects of education runs the risk—no matter how unintended—of suggesting a small worth in one's calling to productive service in the family and the society.

No paper on the subject of liberal arts education is complete without some attempt to relist or specify from some unique point of view the valid aims of liberal education. Following is the list that represents the optimism of this paper. The domain of structural development being particularly emphasized in each aim is parenthesized:

1. Development of the power of analysis (moral-intellectual).
2. Development of flexible personality (moral-social-psychological).
3. Stimulation and regulation of self-motivation (moral-psychological).
4. Development of values and skills of democratic interpersonal and societal relations (moral-political).
5. Development of values and skills necessary to remain an individual in the mass (moral-sociological).
6. Enhancement of educability and development of vocational skills (economic).
7. Conscientization toward service-custodial-stewardship functions in the world (moral-cultural).

The presumed dichotomy between liberal arts and vocational approaches to education is a source of great confusion. Facetiously, it can be said that the “hidden curriculum” of even the most rigorously “non-vocational” liberal arts curriculum is essentially vocational, in light of the many college professors who use it as their means of vocationally recruiting others to the professorial vocation! On a more serious level, it must be recognized that the typical liberal arts college allows about one-fourth of a student's enrollment to be invested in a given discipline—almost always having some direct bearing on the student's vocational choices and preparations.

Conversely, the university or college that makes no particular claims about being guided by the liberal arts mystique almost always insists that the student's program include a significant investment in a disciplinary breadth. In both types of institutions—together representing the vast majority of academic options in the United States—there is a great deal of curricular philosophy in

common. This commonality is evident especially when one compares the curricular mandates for the first two years. Yes, the more one observes and works in institutions on both sides of this “great divide,” the more one wonders what all the liberal arts noise is about. The disagreements seem to be more related to differences of opinion about the effectiveness of means more than about the worth of the ends.

The liberal distinctives of liberal education are more in the minds of the faculty and in the minds of the students—far more than in the institution’s array of courses offered. Regardless of the self-description and the claims of the institution, some professors teach toward liberal education outcomes; others don’t. Regardless of the type and claims of the institution, some students come away with a “liberal arts” orientation toward themselves, knowledge, and the world; others don’t. Until this evidence is systematically examined, the liberal arts case will continue to be heavy on rhetoric and light on substance.

Unfortunately, the minds of faculty are often undisciplined by the philosophical claims of the institution. The blight upon liberal education is the supposedly “liberal arts” course which is actually taught in such a way that it contributes little more than diverse information. To qualify as “liberal arts” in any rudimentary sense, a course must be taught in such a way as to encourage the student to open up to a larger worldview and to develop a more open attitude toward nuance and variability in the society. What happens far too often is that the narrowly invested professor introduces the student to his discipline with a closedness that reflects more proprietary provincialism than breadth. From such a course students would be better served if they could come away, with something practical in the vocational sense; it is sure that they will get nothing valuable in the realm of mind-stretching. Unfortunately, this accusation is hard to prove and is very easy to evade with self-serving disclaimers. It is common to leave the matter of liberal arts *outcomes* un-evaluated, taking ultimate satisfaction in claims about the professor’s motives rather than from evidences of their effects on students.

These changes should not be interpreted as lack of commitment to the values of a worldview-shaping and personhood-stretching education. Indeed, they are motivated by the same beliefs about the importance of higher education as those held by the typical advocate of the liberal arts approach to curriculum. The difference in the perspective represented here—to the extent that it is a difference—is in two matters: first, a concern that outcomes be the unit of analysis rather than the claims; second, the conviction that education requires responsible and authoritative moral grounding. For this Christian the debate about liberal arts versus vocationalism is of less importance than the matter of grounding of the curriculum in biblical values. Can’t we have both? Indeed it may be possible, but the inherent humanism in the liberal arts philosophy cries out for an authority base on which to stand—lest it drift into a culture-reflecting relativism inadequate to the needs of whole persons.

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