

Re-Imagining a Distinctively Christian Liberal Arts Education

by Richard Slimbach

Not long ago, I began teaching a course in applied anthropology by asking my students a simple question: "If you did not have to worry about making a living, what would you most like to do for the rest of your life?" I am not sure what I expected, but I was not ready for what I heard. Virtually all of the students dreamed of occupying their lives with travel and sports activities. Not one mentioned anything even remotely related to service to others, much less service among the least, the last, and the lost. Mind you, these were not students enrolled in a state university. They represented the present generation of evangelical college students. While I too love sports activities (I ride my bike to work nearly every day) and am regularly accused of wanderlust, their responses startled me. I came to class assuming a common passion for cross-cultural

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understanding and service. When class dismissed, I was left asking myself: Is there anything really distinctive about a Christian college education?

Months later, as I continue to reflect on that class of anthropology students, I wonder if the students' "pre-text" (what they bring to their college experience) is at least as important as the combined affects of their "context" (the institutional environment) and, more particularly, their "text" (the disciplinary content and pedagogical process of the liberal arts). This essay attempts a tentative exploration of these relationships. On a surface level, I hope to offer a set of seven "imaginings" as a series of cognitive signals for rethinking the potential power of a Christian liberal arts education. On a deeper level, however, I am venturing a personal response to the central challenge expressed that day through my class: How might Christian higher education be re-imagined to enable a new generation of Christians to become salt, light, and leaven in all areas of life?¹

Educating a Post-Christian Generation

After years of interaction with Christian college students, I find much that I admire in them. Generally speaking, they are considerate, polite, and curious. With the overwhelming majority coming from concerned Christian families, they possess strong moral sensibilities, enjoy asking spiritual and ethical questions, and manifest a genuine respect for Jesus Christ. Many will defend the social values of gender equality, multicultural harmony, and environmental stewardship. Consistent with the spirit of adventure expressed among my anthropology students, they are characteristically laid-back, hip and outdoorsy in a Doc Martens, Land's Endish kind of way. That's on a good day. On a bad day, however, informality turns to self-containment, curiosity to conservatism, and the quest to explore and discover to intellectual timidity. They are generally impatient with real ideas and in flight from the unbearable (and seemingly unintelligible) realities closing in upon them. They find it easier to blend

¹This essay explores a variety of issues related to the mission of Christian higher education in an intentionally provocative, and at times confrontational, manner. The author invites reader reactions and the continued exchange of ideas through correspondence (APU, 901 E. Alosta Ave., Azusa, CA 91702) or email (slimbach@apu.edu).

in, to avoid the specter of the "uncool," to not take things too seriously and, above all, to not buck the system that promises to protect their privileged status following graduation. A growing number are disaffected from the Church (many for good reasons) and have been conditioned to expect that religious ideas and institutions belong to the soft, private world of values and opinions and not to the serious, public world of facts. They are the Christian college's first genuinely post-Christian generation.²

True to the cool consumerism promoted throughout the general culture, this generation often calculates its present academic investments in terms of their future monetary yield—period. A college education is perceived as the gateway—indeed, the *only* gateway—to a financially secure future. Admissions personnel and faculty advisors encounter an almost intractable what-can-I-do-with-it vocationalism among incoming students. More often than not, the institutions themselves are complicit with this utterly pragmatic outlook. In the struggle to survive the fierce competition for students, many have scaled back or completely abandoned their historic liberal arts mission in order to expand their offerings in specialized and professional subjects that are in greater demand.³ This is simply one way institutions adapt to an escalating cost-benefit careerism among students and their parents, many of whom question what a broad curriculum in the arts and sciences has to do with real life.

But students are not entirely to blame. As good Americans, they have learned how to live by the rules of consumer capitalism, that "immense cosmos into which the individual is born, and which presents itself to him . . . as an unalterable order of things in which he must live."⁴ Education—even a Christian education—readily becomes just another commodity to be used and used up, not unlike a pair of Nike's or

²Leslie Newbigin adds this provocative clarification: "[Ours is not,] as we once imagined, a secular society. It is a pagan society, and its paganism, having been born out of the rejection of Christianity, is far more resistant to the gospel than the pre-Christian paganism with which cross-cultural missions have been familiar. Here, surely, is the most challenging missionary frontier of our time." *Foolishness to the Greeks: The Gospel and Western Culture* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1986), 20.

³See David Breneman, *Liberal Arts Colleges: Thriving, Surviving, or Endangered?* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings, 1994).

⁴Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (New York, NY: Charles Scribner, 1958), 54.

a Blockbuster video. Especially within an enculturation system where God has been moved to the periphery or else made into a religious plaything, the central purpose for Christian higher education gets muddled in their (and their parents') minds. Why does the Christian college exist? To protect young people against the sin and secularity of public institutions? To offer a good education laced with biblical studies in a morally regulated environment? To cultivate religious commitment among the uncertain? To help one find a Christian life partner? To have the time of one's life while becoming more competitive in the marketplace?⁵

Many parents nevertheless saddle the Christian college with these off-center expectations. As an *in loco parentis* extension of the family, they expect that the Christian college will reinforce, rather than challenge, what some students refer to as a "sweet and sheltered existence." To the extent that faculty and administration are not gripped by higher purposes themselves, or operate in fear of not satisfying their customers, these expectations tend to become normative in the culture of the institution. Students learn to be good, to enjoy a pocket God, to earn high GPAs, to avoid controversy, to vote Republican, to have fun, to take few risks and, above all, to get ahead. A generation ago, courses had to somehow relate to critical social problems; now they only have to relate to one's career. Among a typical graduating class, precious few will be energized by Kingdom ideals or a holy discontent over things as they are. The vast majority will reach commencement as Protestants with nothing to protest, having failed to break through the pale security offered by a cultural Christianity identified with "the American Way of Life."

Inheriting a New Earth

As this generation of Christian collegians leaves the twentieth century, they will enter a world with two faces. In his haunting article entitled

⁵Judging from their promotional materials and advertisements, an outside observer would have to conclude that the undergraduate experience at many Christian colleges exists as something between a glorified church camp and a retirement spread for young adults. For prospective customers of graduate programs, the university portrays itself as a flexible and efficient means of enhancing one's marketability. Only occasionally are the academic purposes (for undergraduates) and distinctive Christian identity (for graduate students) of the institution represented. In a buyer's market, they simply do not "sell."

"The Coming Anarchy," Robert Kaplan quotes foreign policy analyst Thomas Fraser Homer-Dixon to describe the cruelly divided world emerging before us:

Think of a stretch limo in the potholed streets of New York City, where homeless beggars live. Inside the limo are the air-conditioned post-industrial regions of North America, Europe, the emerging Pacific Rim, and a few other isolated places, with their trade summits and computer-information highways. Outside is the rest of mankind, going in a completely different direction.⁶

Accustomed to life "within the limo," this generation of Christian college students has rarely stopped to ponder those "outside"—the ones who occupy a nightmarish world of disease, filth, malnutrition, unemployment, illiteracy, ethnic strife, fatalism, pain, and sudden death. These conditions have assumed human faces for me. I worked on this essay while residing in Central America where I was reminded daily of the tens of thousands of economically stagnant peasants jammed in huts without electricity or plumbing, forced to sell their labor to landowners who live behind the fortified walls of houses filled with imported entertainment centers and fine furnishings. And the swelling number of children roaming the night streets, hopelessly undernourished, illiterate, and condemned to a life of promiscuity and crime.

But the poverty is not just economic, nor limited to those stuck in the past. In cities like San José and San Salvador, middle-class teenagers are surrendering their cultural identities and values at an alarming rate. They act and look much like their counterparts in Miami or Los Angeles, listening to the same music, watching the same movies, wearing the same clothes, eating many of the same foods, using the same appliances, living in the same kind of houses, attending the same kind of schools, and, of course, learning to speak the same language—English. Neighborhoods which used to nourish local community spirit can no longer compete with the lure of the modern and translocal, whether it be at the ubiquitous McDonald's, in the temple-like mall in city center, or in front of the television which nourishes a commodity consciousness for

⁶See Robert Kaplan, "The Coming Anarchy," *The Atlantic Monthly* (February 1994), 44-76.

hours each evening. Each promises a way into the limo—its exotic lifestyles, its power, its identification with a global elite. All they ask is that users be willing to deny their differentiated selves, pick up a standardized monoculture, and follow the all-beneficent processes of globalization. This appears to be the “religion” that is winning the heart of the global teenager.

Imagining a New Liberal Arts

The student “pre-text” and global “context” raises searching questions regarding the “text” of a Christian liberal arts education: What is the relationship of the Christian college, both to its post-Christian children of privilege and to the disprivileged world inhabited by two-thirds of the human family? What biblically informed vision of the “good society” will it take sides with and promote throughout its institutional life? How will we hope, as a community of faith and learning, to imagine, order, and shape the presence of the Kingdom of God in the world? Into what set of understandings, values, relationships, and life commitments will we lead the students in our care? Finally, how will we do it? What kind of college experiences—in and out of class—will provide optimal conditions for equipping our graduates with the competencies needed to fulfill their part in the mission of God? It is in response to these questions that the Christian college will be able to reactivate its mission and redefine the purpose of a liberal education. The discussion that follows begins that process. It invites us to release our God-given capacity to wonder and dream as we re-imagine the core qualities of a distinctively Christian liberal arts education.

1. **Imagine the Christian liberal arts as celebratory.** Colleges and universities that identify themselves as Christian embody a living tradition and a vibrant, celebrated faith. They are grounded in and guided by a convictional framework within which they aim to educate students to live a life of faith—a radically Christian life in contemporary society. As such, a Christian education cannot be, nor pretend to be, all things to all persons. Other schools may consider that the academic enterprise should be carried out in a value-neutral, all-inclusive, non-authoritative, and

disinterested manner.⁷ This is clearly impossible for the Christian college. It recognizes the fact that value-neutrality is not itself “value-neutral,” nor the representation of opinion ever disinterested. Nobody (as postmodernists remind us) can be completely objective and impartial; every academic institution carries a perspective, a fixed starting point, a frame of reference which guides them in matters as diverse as hiring faculty, setting curricular priorities, interpreting research, and defining excellence. The question is not *whether* higher education will promote certain values, but rather *which* values they will be.

This said, the Christian liberal arts will not merely articulate a particular point of view, but celebrate it openly, explicitly, and unapologetically. This is to be done, not in a spirit of propaganda or indoctrination, but in a manner that joins a fair presentation of competing perspectives to a particular witness of faith. But there is no way of avoiding the authority question: if God exists and has spoken, then that speaking must be seen as critically important to ultimate and basic questions of life, meaning, and destiny which reside at the heart of a liberal education. The educational aim becomes not so much to *instruct* students in certain beliefs about Jesus as it is to *incline* them to be a certain type of person—one whose mind, motives, and feelings are permeated with the love and truth of God.

Such a project will require that the Christian college both accept a set of Christian convictions (about human nature, God, Christ, the natural environment, redemption, and eschatology) and apply them throughout the entire institution. This is not a simple task! But it stands reiteration that the college does not automatically become Christian by formulating a clear statement of faith, offering regular chapel experiences, or establishing Bible requirements, though all of these may be important. The much more difficult pursuit will be to charge the entire atmosphere of the school with the consciousness of Christ which, when authentic, produces singleness of purpose, integrity of learning, and a deepened sense of responsibility to the world.

⁷The underlying assumption of those who promote a value-neutral approach is that empirical knowledge—the world of facts—bears no intrinsic relationship to the world of spiritual, moral, or social values. Thus, value judgments are merely subjective and self-interested expressions of personal feelings and attitudes.

2. **Imagine the Christian liberal arts as visionary.** Considered from a Christian perspective, the college degree is not a ticket to self-advancement, but an indication of abilities to seek, cultivate, and sustain God's vision of the future. That vision finds its ground in God's self-revelation and dares not be identified either with the alleged triumph of free market capitalism and liberal democracy, or with personal lifestyles showcasing bourgeois values and conspicuous consumption. Rather, its signs are to be found in the evidences of the "now but not yet" Kingdom where the hungry are fed and the naked clothed, where the lives of the unborn and elderly are protected, where basic human rights are defended, where the earth is cared for, and where the gospel is welcomed as "good news" among all peoples. In liberal learning that is eschatologically real, students study and serve in the light of the day when, in real history, God will reconcile all things in heaven and earth (Col. 1:20), liberate all of creation from its bondage (Rom. 8:19-21), sum up all things in Christ (Eph. 1:10), and create a true city where there will no longer be any death, crying, or pain (Rev. 21:4). In this vision of the End, God is "making all things new" (Rev. 21:5)—all of creation is being renewed to a state of ecological harmony and multicultural unity, in which "all the glory and honor of the nations" is made visible, tangible, and audible to all (Rev. 21:24-26).

This is not merely the stuff of religious faith. As Rene Padilla reminds us, "To speak of the Kingdom of God is to speak of God's redemptive purpose for the whole of creation and of the historical vocation that the church has with regard to that purpose here and now."⁸ As the educational arm of the Church, Christian higher education shares in that vocation. It looks to eschatology to orient pedagogy—to inform its goals and direct its content and process. It is not enough that we casually assent to the proposition that the overarching purpose of higher education is to develop and assess student talent. The question is, develop that talent toward what desired ends? In short, what kind of person is to be nurtured by what kind of university for what kind of society? In sustained reflection upon this single question, faculty, administrators, and trustees could go far towards re-envisioning the meaning and purpose of a liberal education.⁹

⁸Rene Padilla, *Mission Between the Times* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1985), 186.

⁹A helpful model of this process is provided in the booklet *Liberal Learning at Alverno College*, 5th ed. (Milwaukee, WI: Alverno Productions, 1992).

A distinctively Christian education, in its anticipation of the End, will give less consideration to what students will come *into* the school with than to the dispositions, knowledges, values, virtues, sympathies, skills, and commitments that will characterize them when they go *out*. Working backwards in this way will discipline the subtle drift toward making institutional decisions with only an accountant's pencil. It challenges the college to be driven by serious reflection on God's ultimate intentions rather than, like many of its secular counterparts, simply by an analysis of market trends. In the process, the heart of a Christian liberal arts education is clarified: to provide optimal conditions for *igniting the spirit* to imagine, to wonder, and to worship; for *instructing the mind* to reflect, to ask unasked questions, and to see things in relationship; for *impassioning the heart* to interpret the present, to make value judgments, and to articulate what it loves and hopes for; and for *committing the will* to rebel against false ways of seeing and doing things and to act responsibly and joyfully on behalf of God's vision for the world. In pursuit of these ideals, students learn to image their Creator who reasons with us, seeks to realize the values invested in the creation, and is creatively acting through the sacrificial service of the Church to manifest the Kingdom as a historical reality.

3. **Imagine the Christian liberal arts as communal.** The life of faith is not a solitary one; it is lived within a community of believers whose interpersonal relations form around shared practices, obligations, and convictions in pursuit of a common task. For the Christian college, this requires much more than organizing the right curriculum, creating warm fuzzy feelings, enjoying extracurricular activities, or accumulating credits. Rather, it is concerned with fashioning a learning community with the purpose of equipping women and men with the requisite competence to reform individual lives and redirect social institutions as diplomats, business persons, teachers, artists, scientists, nurses, and the like.

While this is our hope, critics of the Church are quick to remind us that mainstream evangelical institutions have historically functioned to reinforce, not redirect, the social status quo.¹⁰ To a large extent, they are

¹⁰They remind us that in different periods of its two thousand year history, the teaching and practice of most Christian churches has condoned slavery, theologically justified racial segregation and anti-Semitism, and in the twentieth century, excluded

correct: radical truth in biblical and Christian history has been preserved more on the critical edges of Christendom than in its mainstream. In oftentimes sacrificial ways, Christian "fringe" movements challenged unjust structures and proclaimed a millennial vision of social equality.¹¹ They will probably be remembered best for their nonconformity and unpredictability. Their fidelity to the gospel set them against established hierarchies and predictable stances. Admitting that they were "aliens and sojourners on earth. . . [with] citizenship in heaven" (Heb. 11:13; Phil. 3:20), they knew they could not be molded simultaneously by Jesus and by a particular national or ideological allegiance. To the contrary, in penetrating ways each sought to recapture and offer to the world alternative visions to both the dominant political agenda and the accommodating patterns of the institutional Church. The only label they were free to wear was that of "Christian."

In continuity with this rich evangelical heritage, the contemporary Christian college should be anything but culturally conformist or ideologically predictable. Regrettably, this is rarely the case. Too many Christian colleges have accommodated themselves to the middle-class North American subculture, one which has traditionally existed in such close relationship with Christianity that it has been difficult to distinguish what is American from what is Christian. Under these conditions, Christian education easily degenerates into little more than social respectability and belief in "the American Way of Life." Os Guinness sounds a poignant warning:

To the extent that well-meaning Christian conservatives (and their institutions) continue to confuse Christian principles and conservative politics, romanticize American history, idolize political power, rely

women from ordained ministry and public preaching. In actuality, the evidence is contradictory. For example, it was an evangelical college (Oberlin in New York) that was the first coeducational college in the world, while Wheaton College served as a way station for the underground railroad.

¹¹These "Jesus movements" would include the early Benedictines and Franciscans; the sixteenth century Anabaptists and radical reformers; the eighteenth century Moravians and Wesleyans; the nineteenth century Quakers, Mennonites, and Salvation Army; and, in the twentieth century, the historic black churches, the Confessing Church of Nazi Germany, and the "base communities" of Latin America.

too heavily on single-issue politics, and forget the blistering biblical critique of "religion" . . . the Christian faith is again turned into an ideology in its purest religious form, with the spiritual ideals of the faith serving as weapons for the social interests of the nation.¹²

The necessary first step to reversing this "ideological captivity" is for Christian higher education to reclaim as its overarching purpose the deliberate fashioning of learning communities which will think and act out of alternative values and priorities. Imagine what such a community might look like:

- As a *community of discipleship*, students would be attracted to the Christian college, not as a safe haven where all issues are settled and all truth known, but as a training ground to think for oneself, to disturb old certainties, and to try on new ways of thinking and acting.
- As a *community of reconciliation*, the college community would recruit a multi-ethnic staff and student body to promote the interchange of diverse experiences and perspectives—across ideological, racial, cultural, and social class differences—and provide for a richer exploration of truth.
- As a *community of authenticity*, the various members (administration, staff, faculty, and students) would face problems together, admit and correct mistakes, refuse to hold private agendas, and share decision-making power in a common quest to live out a Kingdom consciousness.
- As a *community of worship*, the chapel service would become central to the educational task of the college. Rather than a fifty-minute spiritual/emotional interlude among otherwise intellectual or social activities, it would be organized to constantly renew the collective Christian mind (and not just arouse feeling), to examine critical academic issues through the eyes of faith (beyond pietistic sermonizing), and to give

¹²Os Guinness, *The American Hour: A Time of Reckoning and the Once and Future Role of Faith* (New York, NY: Free Press, 1994), 379.

public expression to the private exercise of spiritual disciplines.¹³

- As a *community of service*, the worship of the head and heart would find expression in the worship of the hands in community service. New students would experience the campus, not as an insular bubble, but as a community at work in integrating theoretical knowledge with first-hand experience dealing with real problems.

4. Imagine the Christian liberal arts as *interdisciplinary*. God is the Creator of all things in heaven and on earth; therefore, all of creation has intrinsic value and integrity and is worthy of serious study—indeed, of conscientious care and protection as the work of God's wise and loving hand. It follows that a liberal arts education from a Christian perspective will *include* representatives from a wide variety of disciplines in celebration of the extraordinary diversity of God's creative acts. It will also *exhibit* the breadth of human thought, culture, and experience in its epistemic relationship to the existence of the Creator, Healer, and Judge of all life. But then it will go one step further, enabling students to *make connections* between disciplinary perspectives on key intellectual and moral issues in order to learn and follow wisdom.

The modern evangelical college has done a poor job with the third imperative. We rarely expect that each course will complement all others like pieces of a puzzle, or that students will be able to see larger trends, patterns, and relationships at the end of their educational journey.¹⁴ There are numerous causes for this, but chief among them is a structural one: We have sub-divided the curriculum into fragments called disciplines and departments, each of which deals with only a small piece of the total picture. This seems to function well *until* we want our students to make

¹³There are certain spiritual disciplines which, when absent from the lives of faculty, administration, staff, and students, will all but guarantee that a Christian college will not be able to nurture a distinctively Christian liberal arts education. Here I speak of the habits of solitude, silence, prayerful meditation on Scripture, fasting, and public service.

¹⁴As an effort in this direction, many schools have incorporated an "integrative seminar" during the senior year. While a step in the right direction, such seminars typically suffer from not enough time to probe disciplinary or ethical relationships in depth.

connections between elements or factors in a whole system (as most of the critical issues on the agenda of Christian mission require). For example, in addressing the issue of globalization, no single discipline will enable students to see the relationships between deforestation and shopping malls, free trade and urban migration, new technologies and street crime, international aid and increased hunger. These are too readily handled as random, disconnected facts and not as threads of a single cloth. Educating students to *think interdisciplinary* means that merely acquainting students with a variety of disciplinary offerings (as is done in the typical general education program) is insufficient. Our central concern should be to help students *unify* their fragments of knowledge into a cohesive, meaningful, and missional vision for life. But this assumes that we, as educators, see that vision clearly ourselves. The reality is that few of us ever stop to consider what kind of student we hope to produce.

As a result, and in the wake of the information explosion of the twentieth century, most Christian educators find it hard to agree on what a liberally educated person should know.¹⁵ "Puritists" who categorically reject professional programs in the curriculum as merely "playing to the market" tend to appropriate academic models from pre-Christian Grecian culture. On the other hand, "professionalists" in business, computer science, education, social work, and nursing might be tempted to elevate the importance of the professions over non-professional academic disciplines. They run the risk of reducing God's marvelous works to their market value and the college to a credit factory for fitting students into well-paying jobs.

The eschatological vision discussed earlier compels the content and process of the liberal arts to be referenced to a horizon beyond either the preservation of a particular tradition or the demands of the marketplace. In our mining of God's truth, there can be no complete disjunction between the "liberal" arts and the "useful" arts; indeed, the liberal arts are useful and the useful arts rely on the contributions of the liberal arts. After all, can one hope to understand business without adequate foundations in

¹⁵A century ago, modern history, modern languages, social sciences, and natural sciences were added to the "canon" of the liberal arts. (Thus we now speak of the liberal arts *and* sciences.) Today, some scholars are speaking of technology and ecological design as two of the new "liberal arts" that will again transform the content and process of the liberal arts curriculum.

psychology, sociology, economics, mathematics, and political science? Predictably, an increasing number of students are maneuvering around the formal debates and resistant advisors to combine vital components in professional programs with stock from the traditional liberal arts curriculum. Biology and education majors are learning foreign languages, studying abroad, and pursuing interests in social and political issues. Students in the humanities are selecting minors in business or computer science. Together they are quietly forging a new liberal arts—one that is responsive not only to the wisdom of the ages, but also to the demographic shifts, technical developments, marketplace trends, and intellectual movements of their day.

5. Imagine the Christian liberal arts as prophetic. Rather than insulate itself from the contemporary cultural context, the Christian academic community will actively relate to it, both positively and critically. It will be compelled by a transforming vision of life aimed at freeing students from the dominant dispositions and values of the day—e.g., the quest to move upward from weakness to power, from poverty to wealth, from servant to master—in order to illumine the path of Kingdom discipleship. Positively, it will come to understand social reality by engaging in common struggles with community members. Critically, these involvements will compel students to make defensible value judgments based on theologically informed aesthetic, moral, or political values. While this calls upon Christ-followers to take risks in interacting with those persons and ideas which oftentimes belittle religious assumptions and satirize believers, it is essential to the task of expounding a Christian vision of life.

This engagement aims to lead students into an understanding of contemporary thought systems (e.g., naturalism, postmodernism, New Age pantheism) at the level of their core assumptions, discerning and exposing the idolatrous character of “arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God” (2 Cor. 10:5). At the same time, they will learn to judge the ways in which their own institutions, as households of faith, have been or continue to be complicit with the dominant idols of race, individualism, competition, consumerism, and scientism. Consider for a moment the mad rush on most campuses to “get wired” with the latest information technology. In order to balance the forecasts about how technological innovations will transform the

university of the future, we must stop and question the basic premise that the computer is an unqualified social good. It is generally assumed that through email, the Internet, and interactive multimedia, the cybernet will help solve global problems and renew local communities throughout the world. But what of a prophetic critique of the new technologies based on the gospel’s call to expose idolatry, overcome oppression, and restore the ecological integrity of the earth? Such a critique would consider how computers are enabling giant financial institutions and multinational corporations to deepen and widen global economic integration; how information exchange under conditions of centralized authority (away from state actors to transnationals) is resulting in downed forests, the displacement of millions of people, the destruction of rural societies, the widespread loss of jobs, the homogenization of cultures, and the promotion of a global consumer ethic; and how microcomputation is altering the pathways of cognition, the ways we learn.¹⁶

In expecting that the Christian college will give students experience in challenging assumptions and clarifying presuppositions, we are acknowledging that sin not only distorts our ability to *gain* knowledge, but also distorts the *content* and *use* of the knowledge we do gain. Thus, there can be no unconditional acceptance of the claims or insights of our disciplines. It follows that one of the most important goals of a Christian liberal arts education becomes that of cultivating in ourselves and our students a *wise skepticism* towards the received knowledge in our fields, as well as regarding our personal and institutional achievements. Christian educators will lead students into reflecting theologically upon the secular assumptions (e.g., notions of “liberal neutrality,” “the autonomous self,” and “technical progress”) that underlie their field of study. In so doing, they will assume that both the goodness of creation and the fallenness of human nature will in varying degrees find expression in the assumptions, methods of inquiry, models, and conclusions of their disciplines as the context of the larger cosmic warfare over human lives.

¹⁶Granted, I am relying on a computer at this moment to compose this essay with greater ease and speed than could be had with a conventional typewriter. But periodically I stop and wonder: If Jesus enabled me to look back one hundred years from now to assess the impacts of the computer (as we can now in the case of the automobile), what questions concerning computer technology would He want me to ask?

6. **Imagine the Christian liberal arts as integrative.** In contrast to the lack of philosophical and pedagogical coherence and unity characterizing most of higher education, the Christian college continues to affirm that faith commitments, moral feeling, and a comprehensive worldview should properly guide intellectual knowing and responsible action. This conviction underlies the truest attempts to integrate faith and learning. It also suggests, boldly enough, that the humanities and sciences cannot be fully understood and thus stand incomplete apart from the knowledge of God. We dare not affirm this in a cavalier manner, given the lack of theological consensus and intellectual creativity in much of popular evangelicalism. Neither can we fail to remind ourselves that an intellectual mastery of the Scriptures and theology is useless (and even detrimental) unless accompanied both by personal piety and the continuous testing of Christian revelation in public settings. Nevertheless, the theological/spiritual disciplines must be kept pre-eminent among the disciplines in a Christian liberal arts curriculum if there is to be any serious attempt to integrate faith and learning.¹⁷ Christian colleges should be encouraged to experiment with various ways of creatively doing this. Underlying each effort, though, will be the common conviction that a growing knowledge of and commitment to Jesus as Lord should illumine rather than limit our search for truth.

In their pursuit of faith-learning integration at the highest level, those of us in Christian colleges can lose our way in one of two directions. One hazard is to lapse into a purely privatized and intellectually rigid relationship towards the secular world. Academically, this leads the institution to withdraw from mainstream scholarship and to cultivate piety at the expense of learning.¹⁸ A second hazard is to become so

¹⁷Many Christian educators maintain that the integration of faith and learning does not necessarily require that "pure" Bible or theology courses be offered, but that Christian perspectives can be infused throughout the curriculum. They highlight the fact that many Bible courses are caught up in exegetical concerns unrelated to the broader questions and critical issues facing humanity. But the "infusion" model would seem to require that most faculty be able to critique the conceptual assumptions, methods of inquiry, and applications in their discipline from a biblical perspective. How many, in fact, are able to do so?

¹⁸Many curricular and co-curricular programs sponsored by such schools are educationally counterproductive as a result. For example, unless conducted with the input and under the scrutiny of appropriate disciplinary understandings, students participating in missions outreaches and service projects often lapse into unreflective mindsets and culturally insensitive behaviors. One wonders if many actually end up doing more harm than good.

enamored with achieving public visibility, recognition, and influence that we, as an academic community, come to gauge our success *primarily* in terms of the size of our enrollment, the amount of our endowment, the expanse of our property, the grandeur of our buildings, the literary productivity of our faculty, and the national ranking of our institution. Absolutized, these desirable things become part of the Great Lie that human life can derive its meaning in independence from biblical values that exist in tension, if not conflict, with the values of contemporary society. Schools can be led into this secularizing temptation either from *above* (through decisions made by trustees and senior administrators calculated to achieve institutional respectability on par with their secular counterparts)¹⁹ or from *below* (through faculty who allow such measures of "success" to compensate for feelings of intellectual inferiority). In either case, the end result is a mental and moral assimilation to domesticated forms of education.

The distinctively Christian alternative is to organize education to engage society at the point of its central intellectual questions and concerns. In doing so, it can hope to offer more promising life-views and life-styles than are available through non-Christian systems of thought. This level of faith-learning integration progresses beyond the evidences of caring and intregous professors and required courses in Bible and Church History, beyond statements of faith, chapel services, class prayers, and campus Bible studies. These are all available through other state or church institutions. To genuinely integrate faith and learning in a liberal arts context will require that faculty and students experience their education together as an act of love and worship to God, activating a common quest to reason and respond theologically in relation to issues that cut across multiple disciplines. This kind of "Christian theorizing" is grounded in (a) the ability to demonstrate a Christian lifestyle nurtured through spiritual disciplines; (b) the conceptual knowledge of what the Bible meant in the cultures in which it was revealed and what it means for us in our

¹⁹One trend in much of Christian higher education that I find disturbing is that of hiring senior administrators out of successful professional and business backgrounds, and not from professorial and theological backgrounds. While many are quite competent in managing capital campaigns and important administrative tasks, few can be expected to also have a thorough enough understanding of educational philosophy, classroom pedagogy, and faith integration to lead faculty in these areas and make decisions that properly balance the institution's educational mission with market realities.

cultures; (c) a thorough mastery of one's discipline; (d) the ability to reflect theologically upon the secular content of one's discipline and to evaluate it according to the norms of Jesus and the Kingdom; and (e) a dispositional passion ignited by a great love for life and a commitment to applying academic knowledge to real community problems. This kind of faith-learning integration constitutes the *sine qua non* of a distinctively Christian education.²⁰

7. Imagine the Christian liberal arts as redemptive. The vision of the Christian liberal arts is not only *of* the world, but also *for* the world. This means that the Christian college, rather than insulate students from the surrounding society, will inculcate in them a sense of mission in it.²¹ Liberal learning in a Christian context is expected to have redemptive power in producing students who will unite intellectual integrity and ethical conviction with compassionate involvement as salt and light in the world. But to what extent is that power evident in today's Christian colleges? How many students exhibit a compelling passion for truth and for justice? How many are fired by the missiological significance of their studies? On commencement day, what would a degree from a Christian college or university represent to most students: the necessary first step toward a prosperous career? A symbol of groups joined, tasks accomplished, and friends made? A receipt for knowledge-on-board? Certainly few (myself included) would contest the importance of graduates demonstrating an interdisciplinary breadth of understanding, a sense of history, analytic and critical thinking skills, and the ability to "learn how to learn" throughout one's lifetime. But wouldn't *any* decent college education produce this kind of competence? "Yes," some might argue, "but students in evangelical colleges also form a Christian worldview

²⁰For an expanded analysis of "Christian theorizing" see George Marsden, *The Outrageous Idea of Christian Scholarship* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1997).

²¹"Mission" is used here to refer to those activities which, by word and deed, and in light of particular conditions and contexts, offer every individual and human institution everywhere a valid opportunity to be challenged to a radical realignment of their affections, attitudes, priorities, and principles of life with those of the Lord Jesus, as something of that reality is made visible, audible, and tangible by the church. See David Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (New York, NY: Orbis Books, 1993), 389-420.

and a greater confidence in the gospel." While we would hope this happens, at least one study claims it is the exception.²² Even for those for whom it is true, we have to ask whether an intellectual understanding of Christian truth is sufficient. Can we be content with the *discovery* of knowledge without concern for how that knowledge is *applied*?

A Christian liberal arts education focused on nurturing a redemptive faith in students must not be seen as a primarily cognitive and dispassionate endeavor. The critical questions to ask are, What does that faith look like? What is its vision for the world? Is it a faith that is content to *talk about* a Christian worldview in our preparation of scientists, journalists, therapists, educators, and musicians who will, if lucky, achieve an innocuous success within the prevailing order? Or is it a faith that compels each graduate to actively *take sides* with God in building "the new heaven and the new earth"? At a moment in history when nearly a billion members of the human family live at the edge of starvation and the gap between rich and poor is widening virtually everywhere, Christ-followers cannot simply look away.

Nor can they be neutral. The Scriptures clearly reveal Christ as taking sides with the "losers" in the new world order.²³ The question for the Christian liberal arts is not *shall* it take sides?, but *with* whom is it *already* siding? Is it enabling students, in the words spoken by Dietrich Bonhoeffer to his privileged friends after ten years of resistance against Hitler, "to see the great events of the world from below, from the perspective of the outcast, the suspects, the maltreated, the powerless, the oppressed, the reviled—in short, the perspective of those who suffer"?²⁴ Or is it confirming students in perspectives and social positions complicit with an economic, cultural, and political system normed on

²²In a study of Christian liberal arts colleges, James Davison Hunter found that, "whatever religious beliefs and practices an individual carried in with him at the start of his educational sojourn would have been either seriously compromised or abandoned altogether by the time he was ready to graduate." *Evangelicalism: The Coming Generation* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 171.

²³Numerous passages reveal God's primary and partisan concern for the economic, moral, and spiritual struggles of the poor and marginalized segments of every society. See, for example, Lk. 1:46-53; Lk. 4:16-21; Lk. 6:20-21; Lk. 7:18-23; and Matt. 25:31-46.

²⁴Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison* (London: SCM Press, 1971), 17.

commercial drive, technological control, racial (white) dominance, and military might? Every curriculum takes a stand in that it reflects an image of a preferred future. Toward what redemptive ends will the Christian liberal arts deliberately guide learning? On what basis will it appraise the social outcomes of students? Beyond the acquisition and critique of knowledge, what ethical commitments will alumni be expected to demonstrate?

Conclusion

This discussion has set forth seven marks of a distinctively Christian liberal arts education. Taken together, they call upon colleges and universities to a deliberate and (seemingly) radical "re-imagining" of their institutional life for producing students who will affect, rather than be affected by, the world of the twenty-first century. They also constitute a clear antidote to the process of what Donald Dayton terms "institutional embourgeoisement" that imperceptibly acts to transform Christ-centered schools into irrelevant religious institutions. In our day, that domesticating process has accelerated. The faithfulness of Christian educators is being severely tested by the devaluation of the transcendent world and the deterioration of Christian influence throughout society. We are in danger, not of having plenty of faith without our knowing how to integrate learning into it, but rather too little faith to care how it might reshape a God-emptied world.

In such a crisis, we cannot be content with add-ons and half-measures. By the turn of the century, the distinctiveness of a Christian liberal arts education will not be measured primarily by the standards which rank institutions in the *U.S. News & World Report* "Best Schools" issue, but rather by engagement in teaching-learning that celebrates a vibrant faith, envisions a glorious future, nurtures a Kingdom-centered community, unites the best of liberal and professional learning, examines truth claims at the level of core assumptions, integrates biblical wisdom with disciplinary knowledge, and energizes mission through every sphere of life. If faithful to its mission, Christian higher education will still be accorded minority status by the larger society. But rather than cause for

further re-entrenchment, that status will actually provide us with a tremendous opportunity for a re-exhibition of hope. The words of Carl F. H. Henry remind us of the possibilities:

It is compatible with the God of historical surprises that some secular campus, being chastened and nauseated by the perturbing instability and intellectual nihilism to which postmodernism leads, might through reexploration of the history of thought, venture once again, through its evangelical remnant, to reconsider the Judeo-Christian theistic option and through earnest intellectual activity theoretically acknowledge again its compelling logic and experiential power. To have some modest part in such a conceptual recovery is the opportunity that now overhangs the life of the Christian.²⁵

²⁵Carl F. H. Henry, "The Christian Pursuit of Higher Education," *Faculty Dialogue* 24 (Spring 1995), <http://www.iclet.org/pub/facdialogue/24/henry24>.

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