

Key Goals of a Christian Liberal Arts Education

By Don Ratcliff

The basic goal of instruction and learning in a Christian liberal arts educational context is preparation of students for effective service in the contemporary world. Informed citizens need to understand the world as it is, as well as possess a vision for what it can be. While today some individuals question the idea of a stable reality that—to a greater or lesser extent—genuinely can be known, affirming a relativistic stance towards truth, Christians affirm the existence of a transcendent God who has revealed moral absolutes and sustains a relatively stable universe. While life sometimes appears to be meaningless and chaotic, Christians understand that this is due—at least in part—to the presence of sin and evil in the world, the consequence of the fall of all creation—including humanity—as recorded in the book of Genesis in the Bible.

At the same time, Christians can affirm the value of research and rational thought because humanity was initially created in the image of God, also recorded in Genesis. The potential for the acquisition of knowledge, as well as the limitations in this respect, contribute to the need for humility in education and research. Humility is a key virtue of Christianity and it should be reflected in the Christian's quest for knowledge and understanding. Rational thought and scientific inquiry will always fall short of the perfection that only God possesses, yet because people are made in the image of God, genuine knowledge and truth can—in part—be apprehended.

Students need a base of knowledge that is significantly informed by a Christian view of the world that is personal and to some extent unique, yet also draws deeply upon the shared wisdom and revelation of historic Christianity. Valid conclusions are based upon trustworthy research methods and carefully reflected personal experience. The learner is to be eclectic in gaining knowledge, carefully comparing, contrasting, and even integrating revealed Truth with the conclusions of academia in a non-contradictory manner. As a part of their educational experience, students in a liberal arts context are expected to synthesize Christian ideas, personal experiences, and perspectives offered by the academic discipline being studied. In this synthesis, the authority and priority of Christian belief, built upon biblical foundations, constitutes an adequate superstructure, along with biblically informed philosophical perspectives, for academic learning as well as personal faith.

Teachers in a liberal arts context need to cultivate a distinctive approach to teaching and learning that reflects a uniquely Christian perspective, even though it is recognized that much can be gained by exploring other viewpoints. Apparent contradictions between a Christian perspective and good scholarship must be due to inadequacy in understanding revealed Truth, less than accurate disciplinary scholarship, or less than robust methods and thinking in the process involved in relating revealed Truth and disciplinary understandings.

In teaching the liberal arts, a priority is placed on research-based concepts that reflect intellectual integrity, as well as the need to integrate faith with those concepts. "Research" is understood here to include the advances in a discipline that may not always be empirically derived, as occurs in the humanities and fine arts. Comparisons and contrasts between faith and disciplinary scholarship will fall short of exhaustive integration, in part because of the fallen character of humanity and partly due to the distinctive qualities of various disciplines that are not faith-related. Attempting absolute faith-learning resolution is to ask for either a truncated view of faith, an oversimplified view of a discipline, or a disingenuous resolution.

The liberal arts teacher should be flexible in responding to the distinctive needs of students. Western society is increasingly marked by multiple cultures and ethnicities, groups that may not understand one another a great deal. The Christian educator not only should attempt to understand and respect such differences, but--to the degree possible--adapt teaching methods to reflect cultural diversity and thus encourage maximal learning. The requirements and procedures of education should adapt to student needs and interests as well as the dynamic content of a given discipline. An instructor should present both desirable and less desirable ideas of both current and historical interest within the discipline, fostering the student's critical thinking in the process. By incorporating a diversity of perspectives in the classroom, and encouraging critical thinking, the teacher is also more likely to encourage a love for learning and ongoing self-education by the student.

Teaching in the liberal arts should include methods and procedures that are maximally effective and practical, thus facilitating the mutual search--by teacher and students--for a distinctively Christian viewpoint. It is not assumed that the teacher has all the answers, but is in a quest for the best possible answer given the limitations of human reason, realizing that only God is faultless. Thus mentoring endeavors, while overtly emphasizing the cultivating of skills by one that is more proficient to a student who is less proficient, must also admit to the likelihood that the mentor also learns from the mentoring process, if only how to better mentor in the future.

By modeling and sharing in the quest for a Christian perspective, the teacher is able to encourage students to defer judgment until sufficient evidence is accumulated and analyzed. Because of prior study in the discipline, the professor is also a guide or mentor who helps direct students to central concepts in that area of study, rather than allowing the class to become sidetracked with peripheral or irrelevant matters. The goal is to help students carefully evaluate the tenability of concepts from research and human experience. This is an important component in developing future Christian leaders.

Academic knowledge is important, but knowledge is inadequate without developing and implementing corollary applications. Opportunities to learn through creative writing and projects involving multiple learning styles can affirm multicultural and personal distinctive qualities, yet simultaneously affirm the practical value of what is learned. Education in the fullest sense is cognitively understood, affectively experienced, and behaviorally transforming. The whole person is involved.

A Christian liberal arts perspective tends to question narrow sectarian views of faith—a view shared with liberal arts education in general—yet is distinct from other forms of liberal arts by affirming the foundational doctrines of historic Christianity. Thus the instructor will believe that an adequate idea—adequate theologically/biblically as well as adequate in terms of a given discipline—if given an equal presentation in the public arena, will prove to be superior to other alternatives. Liberal arts teachers cultivate an openness by students and themselves in the quest for truth, and affirm that openness regularly in classes. Yet they also eschew a non-faith perspective that can become hopelessly subjective without transcendent principles from which to think and act. In sum, a Christian liberal arts orientation to education affirms that the Christian faith is the ultimate reference point for truth and the best foundation for theory and research.