

W. Lamar Stockton  
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**A Philosophy of the Idea of Christian Liberal Arts Education**  
*Why is it important?*

I think rather that the Christian college has not sufficiently articulated its educational philosophy, and has not sold the evangelical public or perhaps even its own students and teachers on what it is trying to do...Christian education should not blindfold the student's eyes to all the world has to offer, but it should open them to truth wherever it may be found, truth that is ultimately unified in and derived from God. It should be a liberating experience that enlarges horizons, deepens insight, sharpens the mind, exposes new areas of inquiry, and sensitizes our ability to appreciate the good and the beautiful as well as the true<sup>1</sup>

What is the purpose of higher education? Why should one attend a university and what should he or she hope to come away with when all is said and done? Sufficient answers to these questions and others like them are essential to the educational responsibility of students and teachers alike. For thousands of years, educators, academics and philosophers have wrestled with such inquiries, earnestly struggling to uncover the keys to securing a good education for themselves and those to follow. Some have met the challenge with great success and others to no avail. Unfortunately, in more recent times it seems that less and less thought is being given to the original purpose of education. Or maybe it is not that less thought is given to the matter, but rather that less is being done to help students obtain a good, well-rounded education and understand the purpose of their education. Many students finish high school and head straight to college with no idea where they are, why they are or what they are going to do with themselves. As V. James Mannoia Jr. puts it in *Christian Liberal Arts: An Education That Goes Beyond*, "Unfortunately for many Americans, college has become a rite of passage that obscures the deeper questions about the purposes and distinctives of educational institutions."<sup>2</sup> Even more tragic is the fact that many teachers have lost sight of the purpose of education as well. Our universities are full of professors who profess nothing at all or, worse yet, indoctrinators who offer neat and tidy answers to un-pondered questions.

It seems we have traded well-rounded, intentional education for equal-opportunity vocationalism. We are robbing some of a good education in order to give everyone a mediocre education. Students today are simply fashioned into tools of production—a bureaucrat's ideal. We go to high school in order to get out and go to college. We go to college in order to get out (as quickly as possible), get a job and start making money. Education has truly become "an appendage to the world of business."<sup>3</sup> Schools and universities today are not about the business of cultivating souls for the present, but of carving marionettes for the future. "In short," writes Mannoia, "there is a crisis of identity in many educational institutions in the United States today."<sup>4</sup> They do not understand their mission—their purpose—thus they

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<sup>1</sup> Arthur F. Holmes, *The Idea of a Christian College* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975), 10, 19.

<sup>2</sup> V. James Mannoia Jr., *Christian Liberal Arts: An Education That Goes Beyond* (New York: Rowman and Littlefield, 2000), 1-2.

<sup>3</sup> Christopher J. Lucas, *Our Western Educational Heritage* (New York: Macmillan, 1972), quoted in David Naugle, "The Greek Concept of Paideia." An essay given in PCS 4390 *Pietas et Doctrina* I: Studies in Christian Scholarship at Dallas Baptist University, January 28, 2002.

<sup>4</sup> Mannoia, 2.

fall short of what they could and should be. A need for clarification exists, and as Christians we have a duty to be involved in the reshaping—the redemption<sup>5</sup>, if you will—of education.

The objective of this project is to clarify in my own mind the purpose of education, and to demonstrate how that purpose may be uniquely accomplished through a Christian liberal arts education. I will analyze the importance and significance of a Christian liberal arts education over against other educational philosophies. This essay includes, first, a look at some of the shortcomings of contemporary education on the whole, and some problems that result from improper education. Second, it features a discussion of both the intrinsic and instrumental values of liberal arts education, specifically Christian liberal arts education, and a call for a balance and combination of the two. Third, it comprises an explanation of the notions of developmental and integrative scholarship, and an introduction to the concept of *critical commitment*, shaped by the principles of *constructive dissonance*, *modeling* to form *habits*, and *community*, as the objective of Christian liberal arts education. Fourth, and finally, I will end with an examination of the advantages of such an education over against the curricular paradigm of today's university.

### Shortcomings

I believe that most problems in higher education today stem from two primary sources: the presumed irrelevance of universal values and the fragmentation of knowledge. When values are deficient throughout the educational process, the student is left with nothing to hold on to. She questions all her former assumptions and is left to fend for herself, face down in a pluralistic quagmire. Likewise, the fragmentation of knowledge due to overspecialization leaves the student with an abundance of information and no clue how to put it all together. He too is confused and disenchanted.

Let us look first at the loss of value in today's university. In an enterprise entitled *The Abolition of Man*, C. S. Lewis brilliantly addressed this problem and set out to persuade his audience of the importance and relevance of universal values—natural law—such as courage and honor in contemporary society. Upon examining a few textbooks that seemed to turn English lessons into a “debunking” of all emotions and values as unreliable, purely relative and contrary to reason, Lewis emphatically stated,

The task of the modern educator is not to cut down jungles but to irrigate deserts. The right defense against false sentiments is to inculcate just sentiments. By starving the sensibility of our pupils we only make them easier prey to the propagandist when he comes. For famished nature will be avenged and a hard heart is no infallible protection against a soft head.<sup>6</sup>

Educators ought not to trivialize or eliminate emotions and values from the mix; instead they should, to quote Aristotle, encourage students to “like and dislike what [they] ought.”<sup>7</sup> Lewis went on to explain that prior to the modern era people believed “that objects did not merely receive, but could *merit*, our approval or disapproval, our reverence or our contempt.”<sup>8</sup> To illustrate such thought, he referenced such thinkers as Augustine, Aristotle and Plato, and such religions as Hinduism, Taoism, Judaism and Christianity. Though different on many levels, all of these philosophers and philosophies share a common thread—“the doctrine of objective value, the belief that certain attitudes are really true,

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<sup>5</sup> Albert M. Wolters, *Creation Regained: Biblical Basics for a Reformational Worldview* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans PC, 1985).

<sup>6</sup> C. S. Lewis, *The Abolition of Man* (San Francisco: Harper, 1974), 13-14.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 16.

and others are really false, to the kind of thing the universe is and the kind of things we are.” Lewis referred to this common thread as the *Tao*, the “reality beyond all predicates.” Within the *Tao*, emotion may coexist with reason as long as it never overshadows reason. “The heart never takes the place of the head: but it can, and should, obey it.”<sup>9</sup>

Unfortunately, many of today’s educators stand outside the *Tao*, denying the coexistence of sentiment and reason. A dichotomous wall has been constructed between facts and values, between that which can be proven scientifically and that which cannot. As John Angus Campbell notes in his article, “John Stuart Mill, Charles Darwin, and the Culture Wars: Resolving a Crisis in Education,” “while it remains true that ‘good fences make good neighbors,’ the methodological and metaphysical Berlin Wall that has separated science from the humanities—and from philosophy and theology—is not my idea of a good fence.”<sup>10</sup> Correspondingly, Lewis warned that such a fact/value dichotomy yields weak creatures, “men without chests,” thought of by many as intellectuals, yet incapable of being virtuous. For “without the aid of trained emotions the intellect is powerless against the animal organism.” More specifically,

It is not excess of thought but defect of fertile and generous emotion that marks them out. Their heads are no bigger than the ordinary: it is the atrophy of the chest beneath that makes them seem so...In a sort of ghastly simplicity we remove the organ and demand the function. We make men without chests and expect of them virtue and enterprise. We laugh at honor and are shocked to find traitors in our midst. We castrate and bid the geldings be fruitful.<sup>11</sup>

You may recall that Plato addressed this in *Republic*. He believed that reason rules appetite through the spirited element, or, as Lewis put it, “the head rules the belly through the chest.”<sup>12</sup>

Clearly then, values are essential to a liberal arts education, and especially a Christian liberal arts education. Everyone, it seems, operates from a system of values, even if their system of values discredits all value. “Everyone has a worldview...we cannot do without the kind of orientation and guidance a worldview gives.”<sup>13</sup> Every educator brings to the podium a worldview, and that worldview influences everything that takes place in their classroom. According to Nicholas Wolterstorff, “we cannot render inoperative all our particular identities as we engage in academic learning.”<sup>14</sup> The problem is that our current university system operates from a worldview that detests worldviews as intolerant, irrational, and irrelevant to the academic vocation. “The result,” writes Arthur Holmes “is a multiversity not a university, an institution without a unifying worldview and so without unifying educational goals.”<sup>15</sup> Furthermore, Holmes, in the same manner as Lewis before him, regretfully notes,

We face a generation of students for whom much in life has lost its meaning, for whom morality has lost its moorings, for whom education has lost its attraction...it [is] overwhelmingly obvious that we need to get down to basics, to the underlying and central reason for existing at all. Otherwise the student and the college may both lapse in “bad faith”

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 14-15.

<sup>9</sup> Lewis, 18-19.

<sup>10</sup> John Angus Campbell, “John Stuart Mill, Charles Darwin, and the Culture Wars: Resolving a Crisis in Education,” *The Intercollegiate Review* Vol. 31 No. 2 (Spring 1996) : 46.

<sup>11</sup> Lewis, 24-25.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 24.

<sup>13</sup> Wolters, 4.

<sup>14</sup> Nicholas Wolterstorff, “Scholarship Grounded in Religion,” *Religion, Scholarship, & Higher Education: Perspectives, Models, and Future Prospects: Essays from the Lilly Seminar on Religion and Higher Education*, Andrea Sterk, ed. (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2002), 15.

<sup>15</sup> Holmes, 9.

into the faceless anonymity of people and places without distinctive meaning and become mere statistics in the educational almanac.<sup>16</sup>

Similarly, Steven Garber believes the major problem facing this generation of students and people in general is the endemic absence of a purpose sufficient, “personally and publicly,” to orient our behavior and activities over the course of life.<sup>17</sup>

Consequently, the absence of an overarching context with which to orient ourselves and the information we receive breeds our second problem, the fragmentation of knowledge. Information abounds today. It is currently impossible to be an expert in many fields. There will never be another DaVinci. As a result, a great deal of concentration in one area of knowledge is necessary to become an authority on anything in our fast-paced modern society. That said, concentration in one area of knowledge is not an education. With this in mind, George Marsden, commenting on John Henry Newman’s *The Idea of a University*, writes,

Newman correctly identified one of the major afflictions of academic thought since his time. Each discipline tends to aggrandize its way of looking at reality and to ignore other ways...Although we have accumulated incredibly more information and expertise in the past century and a half, we have far less sense than our ancestors did of how one part of our experience relates to the rest.”<sup>18</sup>

Such aggrandizement of each individual discipline’s view of reality has resulted in the virtual exclusion of certain fields from university curricula, namely theology. Since the inception of the modern era, science and technology have been praised as the potential saviors of the world, leaving theology and many of the humanities to be thought of as “unscientific, unprofessional, and inappropriate.”<sup>19</sup> John Henry Newman, a strong advocate of the liberal arts, rejects this exclusion, stating, “A University by its very name professes to teach universal knowledge: Theology is surely a branch of knowledge: how then is it possible to profess all branches of knowledge, and yet exclude from the subjects of its teaching one which, to say the least, is as important and as large as any of them?”<sup>20</sup> At any rate, science alone, without the aid of other fields of knowledge, has proven insufficient for solving the afflictions of this world. In fact, “Many of the most interesting and important subjects dealt with in academia, those involving creativity, the unique aspects of human biography and history, or questions of justice and morality, are not known best through scientific procedures alone.”<sup>21</sup> In a sort of academic system of checks-and-balances, the sciences need the help of the humanities, and the humanities need the help of the sciences. Wolterstorff refers to this as “‘dialogic pluralism’: a plurality of entitled positions engaged in dialogue which is aimed at arriving at truth.”<sup>22</sup> For all knowledge is connected, and in need of integration into what Plato called a “unified vision.”<sup>23</sup> “True enlargement of mind,” wrote Newman, “is the

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<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

<sup>17</sup> Steven Garber, *The Fabric of Faithfulness: Weaving Together Belief and Behavior During the University Years* (Downers Grove, IL: Inter Varsity Press, 1996), 42.

<sup>18</sup> George M. Marsden, “Theology and the University: Newman’s Idea and Current Realities,” from “Rethinking *The Idea of a University*,” an appendix to John Henry Newman, *The Idea of a University*, Frank M. Turner, ed. (New Haven: Yale UP, 1996), 303-304.

<sup>19</sup> Marsden, “Theology and the University,” 307.

<sup>20</sup> John Henry Newman, *The Idea of a University*, Frank M. Turner, ed. (New Haven: Yale UP, 1996), 25.

<sup>21</sup> Marsden, “Theology and the University,” 312.

<sup>22</sup> Nicholas Wolterstorff, “Scholarship,” 14.

<sup>23</sup> Plato *Republic* 7.537c

power of viewing many things at once as one whole, of referring them severally to their true place in the universal system, of understanding their respective values, and determining their mutual dependence.”<sup>24</sup>

According to Mark Schwehn, author of *Exiles from Eden*, it is no surprise that academic life has withered to little more than fragmented information issued forth as vocational training. Schwehn notes that German thinker Max Weber, writing in the early twentieth century, saw the academic life as “both the result and a cause of [the] ever-accelerating process of disenchantment that had been going on for thousands of years.”<sup>25</sup> In Weber’s own words,

The fate of our times is characterized by rationalization and intellectualization and, above all, by the *disenchantment of the world*. Precisely the ultimate and most sublime values have retreated from public life either into the transcendental realm of mystical life or into the brotherliness of direct and personal human relations.<sup>26</sup>

Lewis warned us of such disenchantment in the final, prophetic paragraph of *The Abolition of Man*, saying, “to see through all things is the same as not to see.” Lewis’s ideas may be found throughout Schwehn’s text. For instance, the interconnectedness of the “mastery of the world and self-mastery;” the over-rationalization or ‘seeing through’ of tradition; and the idea of “specialists without spirit” and “sensualists without heart”—*men without chests*.<sup>27</sup>

One may argue that a broad, value-based education cannot yield specialists or experts and will slow the progress of science and technology. First of all, I am not here supporting the eradication of specialization; I am rather supporting a liberal arts foundation on which to build. Secondly, as for the deceleration of progress, it may not be such a bad thing. I think we have progressed beyond our means in the last few centuries. In the words of Lewis, “Each new power won *by* man is a power *over* man as well. Each advance leaves him weaker as well as stronger. In every victory, besides being the general who triumphs, he is also the prisoner who follows the triumphal car.”<sup>28</sup> Correspondingly, Marsden cautions, “If counteracting virtues are not cultivated, it is easy to be co-opted by a system of sheer competitiveness, which is producing far more specialized information than the world really needs and which has no coherent moral rationale.”<sup>29</sup>

The fragmentation of knowledge into isolated, individual fields, and the incredible accumulation of information in recent years have led to two more prominent problems: a confused role for the teacher, and a vocationally motivated educational system. First, due to the modern scientific emphasis on research and the advancement of knowledge, university educators are faced with a great deal of pressure to expand their field through research and publication. What results, as Schwehn notes, is the belief that the primary calling of university faculty “involves making or advancing knowledge, not transmitting it.”<sup>30</sup> They tend to think that teaching is a burden to endure, a necessary evil, that takes time away from their “own work.” Schwehn argues that the primary task of the teacher ought to be teaching, but not merely transmitting information. Teachers ought to help students “learn how to lead more ethical, fulfilling lives” as well.<sup>31</sup> Second, due to the overwhelming amount of information that exists today, education seems to have settled for little more than vocational training. Students are required to take a few classes in a

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<sup>24</sup> Newman, 99

<sup>25</sup> Mark Schwehn, *Exiles from Eden: Religion and the Academic Vocation in America* (New York: Oxford UP, 1993), 9.

<sup>26</sup> Max Weber quoted in Schwehn, 9.

<sup>27</sup> Schwehn, 15, 19.

<sup>28</sup> Lewis, 58.

<sup>29</sup> Marsden, *Outrageous Idea*, 108.

<sup>30</sup> Schwehn, 4.

small variety of fields, given no evidence of any relevant relationships between them, and then briskly ushered on to their major field of study. Better yet, students can attend a technical institute, skip all the ‘useless’ history, literature and language classes and move on to a rewarding career in no time. I am not arguing against trade schools or majors. I understand the role of each. However, neither qualifies as a liberal education. Our society seems so focused on jobs and economics that we even define ourselves as human beings by trade. Gilbert Meilander notes this problem in his theological treatise on friendship:

When the system of vocations as we experience it today is described in terms which make the work the locus of self-fulfillment, Christian ethics ought to object—on the empirical ground that this is far from true, and on the theological ground that vocation ought not make self-fulfillment central. When work as we know it emerges as the dominant ideal in our lives—when we identify ourselves to others in terms of what we do for a living, work for which we are paid—and when we glorify such work in terms of fulfillment, it is time for Christian ethics to speak a good word for working simply in order to live. Perhaps we need to suggest today that it is quite permissible, even appropriate, simply to work in order to live and to seek one’s fulfillment elsewhere—in personal bonds like friendship, for example.<sup>32</sup>

As Arthur Holmes so wisely and succinctly puts it, “Vocations and jobs are made for people, not people for vocations and jobs.”<sup>33</sup> Thus, education ought to engender men and women “with a disciplined understanding of [their] heritage plus creativity, logical rigor and self-critical honesty,”<sup>34</sup> fit for whatever life may throw their way, instead of “trousered apes”<sup>35</sup> trained to precisely execute a specific task.

## **Solution**

### *Intrinsic and Instrumental Value: Combining Two Traditions*

In Part I, I briefly mentioned two fundamental educational traditions: the philosophical tradition, represented by Plato, and the oratorical position, represented by Cicero. The philosophical tradition privileges the intrinsic value of knowledge—learning as an end in itself—and the oratorical tradition privileges the instrumental value of knowledge—learning as a means to an end. So the question is which tradition should we follow, which tradition is right? V. James Mannoia Jr. believes, and I agree, that both are right, and that Christian liberal arts education can combine the two traditions and move beyond them.

Holmes notes that many students look at a liberal arts curriculum and ask “What can I do with all this stuff anyway?” This question illustrates the typical view among students of today. We tend to exaggerate the instrumental value of knowledge to the detriment of its intrinsic worth. If we don’t see it as useful, then we don’t have time for it. Holmes says that students are simply asking the wrong question. Instead, they ought to be asking “What will all this stuff do to me?”<sup>36</sup> However, this seems to go to the opposite extreme<sup>37</sup> and exaggerate the intrinsic value of knowledge

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>32</sup> Gilbert Meilander, *Friendship: A Study in Theological Ethics* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981), 97, quoted in Schwehn, 19.

<sup>33</sup> Holmes, 25.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>35</sup> Lewis, 9.

<sup>36</sup> Holmes, 23-24

<sup>37</sup> Let it be noted that Holmes’s intention was not to isolate or exaggerate only the intrinsic value of learning. Rather he sought to bring to our attention the lack of attention given to the transformative faculty of education.

to the detriment of its instrumental worth. According to Mannoia, who derives many of his ideas from Holmes, we should ask both questions. Education is valuable both as an end and as a means to an end.

Let us first ask what a liberal arts education does *to* us. Mannoia calls on Cardinal Newman to answer this question. Newman neither denies nor ignores the usefulness of liberal knowledge or the advantages of what he calls “mechanical” arts; however, he does state “that Knowledge, in proportion as it tends more and more to be particular, ceases to be Knowledge,” and that knowledge satisfies “a direct need of our nature in its very acquisition.”<sup>38</sup> For Newman, education is the process of becoming what we are intended to be; of forming a “habit of mind...of which the attributes are freedom, equitableness, calmness, moderation, and wisdom.”<sup>39</sup> Freedom is key to the intrinsic value of education. Liberal education broadens our perspective and liberates us *from* the “prisons of intolerance, of closed-mindedness and narrow-mindedness, and of parochial perspectives.”<sup>40</sup> What’s more, it liberates us *to* pursue truth and discover virtue.<sup>41</sup>

To answer our second question, what does a liberal arts education do *for* us, Mannoia elicits the support of Cicero. As mentioned in Part I, Cicero’s complaint toward followers of the philosophic tradition was that their heads were so far up in the clouds that they were useless to society. Knowledge is useful and practical. II Timothy 3:16 tells us that knowledge of the Scriptures, which Augustine tells us requires knowledge of many things, equips us for “every good work.” Wolterstorff informs us that education should inculcate “responsible *action*.”<sup>42</sup> A liberal education then is useful and practical, but for what? Mannoia offers four ways in which liberal arts education is instrumentally valuable. First, it is useful for further studies—for graduate school. He writes, “it is both interesting and ironic that there is empirical evidence that students concentrating on liberal arts studies not directly related to their chosen profession are often better prepared for graduate work in that field than those who have specialized early.”<sup>43</sup> Second, it is useful in the job market. According to Holmes, “liberal education *is* good career preparation.”<sup>44</sup> Since most students do not end up working in the same field they concentrated on in college, the cognitive skills, attitude toward work, breadth of education, imagination and value development one gains through an integrated study of the liberal arts prove far more valuable in the real world than forty-two credit hours of accounting.<sup>45</sup> Third, liberal arts education is useful for research. Serious research demands the ability to physically and mentally organize and contextualize vast amounts of data. Mannoia notes, “Choices among theories are often matters of judgment, and some of the most creative aspects of discovery are born out of analogy, pattern recognition, and synthesis of enormous amounts of contextual information”<sup>46</sup>—skills characteristic of a liberal education. Finally, it is preparation for citizenship. It was true in Cicero’s day, and it is especially true in our society that

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<sup>38</sup> Newman, *Idea*, quoted in Mannoia, 17.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 19.

<sup>40</sup> Mannoia, 19.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 20-21.

<sup>42</sup> Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Educating for Responsible Action* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980), emphasis added.

<sup>43</sup> Mannoia, 23.

<sup>44</sup> Holmes, 38.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 38-41. My brother can attest to this fact. His degree is in accounting, and he is a youth minister of all things. Needless to say, he isn’t exactly in a position to make the most of his major. He can, however, help the kids with their math homework.

<sup>46</sup> Mannoia, 26.

Unless the citizen today is able to think and communicate clearly about issues pertaining to the community, democracy cannot work as it should...modern liberal democracy requires everyone to envision frameworks for justice, discern assumptions, relate principles to particular concrete situations, make connections with precedent, revise hypotheses, form judgments independently, articulate opinions to others, and so on.<sup>47</sup>

Clearly, liberal arts education does something to us and for us; it combines the philosophical and oratorical traditions and it “connect[s] knowing with doing, belief with behavior.”<sup>48</sup> But what is more, Christian liberal arts education, correctly executed, takes us “beyond both” traditions.<sup>49</sup>

The goal of the Christian is to know Christ and make Him known—“to become like Christ” and “to serve others.” “Knowing Christ is both intrinsically valuable and instrumentally valuable because it affects who we become and what we do.”<sup>50</sup> The scholar seeks truth to acquire understanding and orientation for life. The Christian scholar goes beyond this, seeking truth to become more like Christ. The scholar serves others out of duty to the community. The Christian scholar serves others out love for the Lord. “In this way the Christian liberal arts education brings together and goes beyond the best of both the oratorical and the philosophical traditions.”<sup>51</sup> It changes who we are and what we do, making us ‘fit for everything’ and ‘equipped for every good work.’

### **Developmental Scholarship**

#### *Critical Commitment—the Goal of Christian Liberal Arts Education*

Developmental scholarship, a feature of Christian liberal arts education, offers a unique solution to problems created by the absence of values in the educational process. Developmental scholarship done well produces what we will call critical commitment. Many Christian institutions seem to miss the mark when it comes to true education. Indoctrination and dogmatism are common in such institutions. On the other hand, secular universities, or ‘multiversities,’ breed pluralism, skepticism and cynicism. Critical commitment is an attitude that “goes beyond both dogmatism and skepticism...an open attitude toward a firm belief...the freedom to be critical and to question, combined with commitment to truth.”<sup>52</sup> In my mind, critical commitment is a middle ground between dogmatism and skepticism that rises above them both. It is a questioning of one’s beliefs in order to solidify them. “To be faith it must first be doubted.”<sup>53</sup> An idea embodied in Renee Descartes’s *Meditations on First Philosophy*. He employed radical doubt in order to prove to himself and to others the validity of his beliefs. Sharon Parks describes this quest for truth as having “an element of ‘shipwreck,’” involving “threat, bewilderment, confusion, frustration, fear, loss...”<sup>54</sup> The threat is then transformed into something that strengthens. This should be the goal of the Christian college. Instead of spoon-feeding students neat answers to little-considered questions, the Christian liberal arts college creates an atmosphere where a variety of views may be mulled over—“Liberty without loyalty is not Christian, but loyalty without the liberty to think

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<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 27.

<sup>48</sup> Garber, 43.

<sup>49</sup> Mannoia, 31.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 33.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 34.

<sup>52</sup> Mannoia, 41.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 68.

<sup>54</sup> Sharon Parks, *The Critical Years* (New York: Harper & Row, 1986), 52.



for oneself is not education.”<sup>55</sup> Instead of paralyzing students with all questions and no answers, the Christian liberal arts college asks questions “in order to be justifiably committed.”<sup>56</sup> The Christian college is not about the business of insulating and protecting students, yet it is also not about the business of destroying values and beliefs.<sup>57</sup> Critical commitment must be the goal of the Christian college.

Arthur Holmes suggests that many people see the Christian college as nothing more than a “defender of the faith,” a “safe environment,” or simply a training ground for “church-related vocations.”<sup>58</sup> This could not be farther from the truth. Such an atmosphere would never instill an attitude of critical commitment as described above. Rather, a Christian college should cultivate “the creative and active integration of faith and learning, of faith and culture.”<sup>59</sup> Building on Holmes, Mannoia believes that such integration requires four distinctives: *dissonance*, *habituation*, *modeling*, and *community*.<sup>60</sup>

First, critical commitment requires *dissonance*. In order to learn we have to be shaken up a bit. We have to be challenged in order to grow—no pain, no gain. John Angus Campbell points out that the student must “be able rationally to defend his or her ethical commitments,” which entails “that the student be able to consider alternatives, even radical, immoral, or socially unacceptable alternatives to present ethical practices.”<sup>61</sup> Likewise, Sam Keen notes, “The whole notion of teaching young people to be saints before they are sinners is ridiculous...they try to teach wisdom before folly has been tasted.”<sup>62</sup> Education, specifically Christian liberal arts education is risky business, and the responsibility of guiding students through this dissonance lies on the shoulders of the university faculty.

Second, critical commitment requires *habituation*. Quite simply, it entails the consistent use of virtues acquired through a liberal education. Mannoia asserts, “It is not enough to have the tools to make critical commitments. The liberally educated person must tend to use those tools to make such commitments more regularly than those who are not.”<sup>63</sup> Unfortunately, while bad habits seem to come easy and naturally, good habits demand discipline. Thus, Christian liberal arts institutions must include activities that involve discipline.

Third, critical commitment requires *modeling*. Modeling ensures that the habits that are formed are good ones. A student exposed to dissonance needs a way out. She needs someone to observe who has been through the trenches and come out with something to believe in—a professor who is not afraid to profess something. Speaking of mentors, Steven Garber says some “lessons cannot be taught from a textbook; they have to be learned from a life.”<sup>64</sup> Furthermore, he refers to modeling as “that last thread that binds the others together;” “it is that dynamic relationship of a faculty member opening his life up to a student which enables young people to understand that their worldview can also become a way of life.”<sup>65</sup>

Fourth, critical commitment requires *community*.

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<sup>55</sup> Holmes, 61.

<sup>56</sup> Mannoia, 59.

<sup>57</sup> Holmes, 85.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, 4-5

<sup>59</sup> Holmes, 6.

<sup>60</sup> Mannoia, 77-90.

<sup>61</sup> Campbell, 44.

<sup>62</sup> James Fowler and Sam Keen, *Life Maps: Conversations on the Journey of Faith* (Waco, TX: Word, 1978), 123.

<sup>63</sup> Mannoia, 80.

<sup>64</sup> Garber, 130.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, 135, 129.

Where the pressure comes from sources the person can perceive only as “other,” his tightening of his boundaries in rejection or combat will be the same whether he is acting from “intolerance” or simple “integrity.” The issue will be clear only where the pressure for change comes from a source perceivable as within his own community, or where his resistance to the pressure would itself involve him in activities contrary to the values he already shares in that community.<sup>66</sup>

This statement offers us an insight into the powerful sway of community. In the words of Arthur Holmes, “A community...is perhaps the single most powerful influence in shaping a person’s values.”<sup>67</sup> In addition, he reminds us that we are all social beings, “created to live in communion with God and community with other people.”<sup>68</sup> Common values and purposes and a common mission characterize community, and it is a necessary part of Christian liberal arts education. Without community, diversity gives way to pluralism; however, within community, diversity sharpens belief. A strong community built on trust and shared vision allows an atmosphere of openness, diversity and dissonance that is vital to the development of critical commitment.

### **Integrative Scholarship**

Integrative scholarship, another feature of Christian liberal arts education, addresses the second source of problems noted in this section: the fragmentation of knowledge. As I mentioned earlier, overspecialization and an increased emphasis on research and vocational training are a few unfortunate trends in contemporary higher education. Yet, through integrative scholarship, the Christian college has a unique opportunity to overcome these problems. According to Holmes, “the Christian college is distinctive in that the Christian faith can touch the entire range of life and learning to which a liberal education exposes students.”<sup>69</sup> Likewise, Marsden says, “it is in the undergraduate classroom that students must begin to explore the intellectual relationships between their theological commitments and everything else they are learning.”<sup>70</sup>

Christian liberal arts education provides a unique opportunity to receive a well-rounded, holistic, intentional and *integrated* education. Holmes believes that integration begins with attitude.<sup>71</sup> Unfortunately, many evangelical Christians have developed an attitude of anti-intellectualism over the years. As Os Guinness points out in *Fit Bodies Fat Minds*, “Those more educated now tend to be significantly less religious; those more religious tend to be significantly less educated.”<sup>72</sup> The first goal of integrative scholarship then is to transform the attitude and motivation of the student. Holmes elaborates upon this transformation:

Somehow or other the student must realize that education is a Christian vocation, one’s prime calling from God for these years, that education must be an act of love, of worship, of stewardship, a wholehearted response to God. Attitude and motivation accordingly afford

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<sup>66</sup> William G. Perry, *Forms of Intellectual and Ethical Development in the College Years* (New York: Holt, Rhinehart, Winston, 1970), 65. Quoted in Mannoia, 87.

<sup>67</sup> Holmes, 85.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, 79.

<sup>69</sup> Holmes, 45.

<sup>70</sup> Marsden, *Outrageous Idea*, 105.

<sup>71</sup> Holmes, 49.

<sup>72</sup> Os Guinness, *Fit Bodies Fat Minds: Why Evangelicals Don’t Think and What To Do About It* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1994), 16.

but a beginning; this personal contact between faith and learning should extend to disciplined scholarship and to intellectual and artistic integrity.<sup>73</sup>

A proper attitude toward education is only the beginning of the integrative scholarship of Christian liberal arts education. It also includes the integration of disciplines, the integration of theory and practice, and the integration of faith and learning.<sup>74</sup> First, the integration of disciplines, also known as interdisciplinary studies, is crucial to a liberal education, for “academia may be divided into disciplines, but the world is not.”<sup>75</sup> Interdisciplinary studies are general or contextual studies. In other words, “they try to avoid the limitation of seeing issues from the conceptual framework of only one discipline.”<sup>76</sup> Interdisciplinary studies are also bridged or connected studies. They equip students to examine problems from multiple perspectives, and they call “for a willingness to make connections whenever and wherever it is profitable.”<sup>77</sup> Finally, interdisciplinary studies are advanced studies. Most people equate interdisciplinary with “low-level;” however it does not have to be this way. Mannoia writes that “interdisciplinary studies, in the form of advanced general studies, can be the most sophisticated studies a student will ever do.”<sup>78</sup> Second, the integration of theory and practice is a necessary part of liberal education. We know that liberal arts education has both intrinsic and instrumental value, yet often times we fill ourselves up with intrinsically valuable theories and never practice them in the real world. To this Mannoia warns, “Like faith without works is dead, an education that remains only theoretical is of little value.”<sup>79</sup> Third, the integration of faith and learning, the very motto of our university, is what thrusts Christian liberal arts education beyond the liberal arts. The Christian college ought to provide students with an “all-encompassing world and life view,”<sup>80</sup> from which to approach their education. This is the best way to counteract fragmentation. The student needs to understand that everything fits together, that everything is connected, that all truth is God’s truth. Christian liberal arts education provides such a framework.

### **Tying It All Together**

The contemporary university tends to concentrate on the parts rather than the whole and to come away with a fragmented view of life that lacks overall meaning.<sup>81</sup>

I have noted above what I consider to be the foremost problems in higher education today, and I believe that Christian liberal arts education, done properly, offers a remedy to those problems. It combines the intrinsic and instrumental values of education, and it develops an attitude in students and teachers alike of critical commitment through developmental and integrative scholarship. The Christian liberal arts institution, run properly, affords an atmosphere or community in which students may learn via dissonance and modeling in order to develop a “habit of mind”<sup>82</sup> that lasts a lifetime. Many argue that Christian colleges present a biased version of education. The fact is that

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<sup>73</sup> Holmes, 49.

<sup>74</sup> Mannoia, 108-114.

<sup>75</sup> Richard Cummings, “Interdisciplinary Challenge,” *National Forum* [Phi Kappa Phi Journal], Spring 1989, pp. 2-3, quoted in Mannoia, 108.

<sup>76</sup> Mannoia, 108.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*, 109.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*, 109-110.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, 113.

<sup>80</sup> Holmes, 57.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>82</sup> Newman quoted in Mannoia, 80.

everyone brings some sort of bias to the table. We all work from certain assumptions whether we realize it or not. Besides, I have attended both secular institutions and a Christian institution, Dallas Baptist University, and I have found my experiences at DBU, especially those in the philosophy department, to be more inclusive and less biased than my experiences at secular institutions. Christianity provides orientation for all of life, which certainly includes education, and without such a framework existence is helter-skelter. Christianity changes the way we envision our role in all that we do. It supplies the proper context from which to live, and I believe that true education is only possible within that context. I feel that George Marsden captures the unique role of Christian liberal arts education in the following statement:

Christianity at its best teaches people that they stand not at the center of reality, but on the periphery along with everyone else. It teaches that we are not dependent on our own brilliance and insight, but on a revelation that appears foolish to many and whose source we are unable to comprehend. It teaches that humans are flawed and often self-deluded creatures and that Christians are not exceptions. Hence our scholarship should be marked not only by firm defenses of the insights we believe we have seen revealed by God, but also by a willingness to be critical of ourselves and our own traditions.<sup>83</sup>

### **My Proposition**

In my opinion, an off-campus retreat center enveloping a combination of the best parts of L'Abri Fellowship and Outward Bound would cover all the facets of a Christian liberal arts education in a non-university environment. I am not proposing a substitution for Christian liberal arts education, but an exceptional supplement. In L'Abri we find a beautiful model of community—fellows working together for a common purpose. It promotes a liberal atmosphere where questions are welcome, yet faith is nurtured. It exhibits modeling, as visitors meet with mentors and observe them at an everyday level. L'Abri also practices integration. It helps people tackle real world problems through a belief system that “speaks to all of life.”<sup>84</sup> As for Outward Bound, its concentration on the cultivation of values such as compassion and service produces men with barrel chests, rather than ‘men without chests.’<sup>85</sup> It also wisely utilizes the tools of dissonance and diversity as participants are thrown into adverse situations and forced to show their true colors. Moreover, Outward Bound encourages a responsibility to the world around us and the fostering of the whole individual—spirit, mind and body.

One day, I would like to open an institution that embodies all of these characteristics. In my mind, the mountains of Colorado or somewhere in the Pacific Northwest will be an ideal setting. It will be a place where people can come and live for a few weeks, a month, or maybe even longer. It will feature intellectual seminars that address relevant issues and outdoor excursions that challenge the body and stir the soul. We will read Augustine and conquer rapids; we will discuss postmodernism and climb rock faces; we will peruse Kant and Nietzsche while we cultivate a garden; we will sing songs of worship and study Scripture around a fire built to protect us from the harsh elements. I could go on and on, but time and space won't allow it. This project has helped me begin to think seriously about this dream. Undoubtedly, I have a long and winding road ahead of me before I can achieve such a goal; however, the wheels are now in motion—a process has begun in me and only time will tell where it will lead.

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<sup>83</sup> Marsden, *Outrageous Idea*, 109.

<sup>84</sup> p. 48.

<sup>85</sup> A play on Lewis's *Abolition of Man*.