

2003

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Tenure paper

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September, 2003

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In this paper I intend to provide the beginnings of a philosophical foundation for teaching music at the Christian liberal arts college. This exercise of writing has helped me to ask and then to think more deeply about the questions of my own discipline—*music*, and my particular role in that discipline—a *teacher in a Christian liberal arts college*. These questions have caused me to also think about the role of the Christian liberal arts college itself. Following are several of what I consider to be the more important of these questions, along with some discussion.

First, if one of our primary goals as an educational institution is to produce an ‘educated’ person, we must ask what are the desired marks that distinguish this person from those perhaps not so well educated, or from those educated under some other system? What are the effects of modernism and post-modernism? How can I and those in my discipline structure our courses in such a way as to contribute to this education? What is a Christian worldview, and how does/can/should my own Christian worldview shape how and what I teach? What is meant by the word “integration” in the oft-quoted phrase “integration of faith and learning”? What is unique about the “liberal arts” approach to education? What is unique about the “*Christian liberal arts*” approach to education? What does excellence mean in music? What about integrity, truth, beauty? Is one style of music superior to another? Is music moral or amoral? On what basis do I choose the music that I perform, listen to, worship with, teach?

Such a discussion should begin with an attempt to define how our desired goal will look. That is—and our opinions may vary widely, what do we ultimately hope our

graduate will look like, be like, what attitudes, skills, and traits do we hope he or she will have developed. In short, what are the marks of an educated person? According to Aristotle, the educated person is one who is prepared to live an active life marked by excellence.¹ Such a statement seems to imply that a proper education will not only teach the student to live a life that is characterized by excellence, but that it will also help the student to engage in a well-rounded life, one that interacts on multiple levels with the surrounding culture. In his discussion of the *Christian* college, Holmes suggests that our ideal graduate will possess the following²:

- 1) Spiritual virtues: an unreserved commitment to God and His will
- 2) Moral virtues: character traits such as honesty, love, fairness, courage, self discipline
- 3) Breadth of understanding: openness to new ideas, analytical and critical skills, intellectual honesty about opposing views as well as one's own
- 4) Responsible activity in all areas of life: helpfulness, persistence, good family relations, active involvement in church and community, an effective agent of change
- 5) Qualities of self-knowledge: an honest appraisal of strengths and weaknesses, a willingness to address weaknesses and to develop strengths, an ability to learn from others

Both Aristotle and Holmes move far beyond the idea that education should prepare one for a job, though that component is certainly included as well. The ideas common to both are that the educated person has developed as a whole person, one that is able to interact wisely with those in their sphere, committed to contributing in a responsible way to their society, committed to life-long learning in and out of their discipline, etc., etc. In contrast, the educational models of the trade school, the labor trade system of apprenticeship and journeyman, the European *Hochschule*, and, to some degree, the

¹ Holmes, Arthur, *The Idea of a Christian College*, Revised edition (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1975): 100.

² Holmes, 102-3.

American music conservatory, all focus on teaching a high degree of technical proficiency in a job-specific skill. These models have proven both efficient and effective in training the student to perform the desired skills in a relatively short period of time. Such a system has considerable merit if one's primary educational goal is to become trained for a specific job; the education is completed in a relatively short period of time and for a relatively low cost. If, on the other hand, one's goals are more similar to those of Aristotle and Holmes, such models of education and their goals are shortsighted and narrow, producing a student who has little knowledge of—or commitment to—the larger world.³

The desirability of a broader education argues for a liberal arts approach. But what does “liberal arts” mean, and how does the idea of “Christian” fit into it? The idea of “liberal” was used by Plato and Aristotle to designate the education available to those who were “free”, as opposed to slaves, who were merely taught the necessary skills to perform specific tasks. According to Plato's idealistic model in his *Republic*, those that were free—and especially those intellectually gifted—were destined to become the social and political leaders of their societies. Through many years of training, these gifted young students, unencumbered by manual labor, would hopefully develop a deep understanding of all aspects of their worlds, eventually enabling them to contribute their leadership skills in developing an improved society, one characterized by commitment to the good virtues expected in an “enlightened” culture. They would study all the arts, opening their minds to think critically across the disciplines, to be able to reason logically

³ By ‘larger world’, I include other disciplines and the insights they shed on what it means to be human, other cultures, other religions, and other world views.

and express themselves well.⁴ More importantly, they would pursue answers to the questions fundamental to our purposes in being alive: what is being, what is truth, what is virtue. It is worth noting at this point that Plato was writing against the movement of the *Sophists*, a group of independent “teachers for hire”, who advocated an alternative educational shortcut in order to reach political power (a sort of trade school PhD?); Plato feared that students of the *Sophists* movement would come to power without having the breadth of understanding and moral values necessary to lead with wisdom.⁵

In part, Plato argued against the *Sophists* because he feared that their students would not have the moral or ethical background necessary to be wise leaders. Though his religious culture was polytheistic, he and the other Greek philosophers believed that there was ultimate good, that man must learn to do what is good and to avoid evil. Every skill could be used for good or evil, and the educational system must devote itself to training its students to discern between right and wrong, and then choose right; highly-developed technical skills used in the wrong way simply result in the destruction of the society itself. We do not need to look very hard to find examples to illustrate Plato’s concern.⁶

⁴ Gutek, Gerald Lee, *A history of the Western educational experience*, second edition (Prospect Heights: Waveland Press, 1995): 43-52.

⁵ Plato, *The dialogues of Plato*, pp.155-60, in *Education in the history of western civilization: selected readings*, edited by Frederick M. Binder (New York: Macmillan, 1970): 24-34. Somewhat similar to the problems Plato faced with the Sophists movement is the temptation facing those in charge of the liberal arts curriculum today to trade “breadth” for “depth”; that is, in order to provide more skills training in one discipline, a sacrifice of coursework in some other discipline must be made. Or, even within a discipline, the temptation may be strong to replace a fundamentals course with a “fad” course of more immediate student appeal. No school can survive without the ability to attract new students, but in the attempt to attract these students, care must be taken not to sacrifice the breadth of the liberal arts curriculum.

⁶ Flannery, Christopher, and Rae Wineland Newstad, “The classical liberal arts tradition”, in *The Liberal Arts in Higher Education*, edited by Diana Glyer and David L. Weeks (Lanham: University Press of America, 1998): 4,5. The authors cite modern examples of technical skill gone awry with the death camps of Auschwitz, the Bolshevik extermination of the Kulaks, millions killed in China’s political experiments, and the killing fields of Cambodia.

Plato's basic ideas were adopted by medieval scholars and became the philosophical basis for the medieval university's curriculum. The arts were divided into two groups, the *quadrivium* (numerical arts), which included geometry, arithmetic, music, astronomy, and the *trivium* (verbal arts), which included grammar, rhetoric, and logic. The modern college and university curriculum is based on the medieval model, though it has expanded these areas into three groups: the humanities, the natural sciences, and the social sciences, each group encompassing several disciplines.⁷

The medieval educational institutions, founded and supported by the Catholic Church, based their moral beliefs on the teachings of the Scriptures, believing that God was the creator and sustainer of the world. Underlying assumptions included God's holiness—with its standard of absolute perfection, man's sinfulness, the judgment of God, redemption by obedience to God, and life after death. But with the age of Enlightenment-modernism-humanism, the liberal arts education gradually moved away from its Scripture-based view of the world to one which demanded that everything submit to empirical reason, to rational explanation and scientific measurement. It was a belief system that was enthralled with the unexplored wonders of an apparently well-ordered world and yet at the same time unwilling to believe that which could not be proven. It had the idea that knowledge comes by reason, and reason gives meaning to life; truth is cognitive, and thus is something you either have or do not have. Moral guidelines from Scripture, though probably reasonable and could probably provide suitable guidelines for society, cannot be embraced as true because the existence of God and the verity of his words to mankind cannot be scientifically verified. Further, little

⁷ "Liberal arts", in Encyclopedia Britannica, Inc., CD-ROM version, 1994-2001.

attempt is made to find unity among the various truths, to create a meaningful whole out of the pieces. The result is an educational world that is compartmentalized, with each discipline working hard on its own concerns but not seriously considering how it should be contributing to something bigger than itself. The benefits of the modernist approach to knowledge have been significant, but the basic philosophy that the only truth is that which can be measured has left something missing from the educational system. This something cannot be filled by a typical non-Christian liberal arts college.

In contrast, post-modernism, which has replaced modernism in many disciplines in the later twentieth century (though certainly not all disciplines), reacts against the modernist assumption that knowledge is objective if it can be measured, and instead asserts that all truth is socially constructed, that all cultural realities are equal, and thus that all values are relative to their context. Such an approach attempts to marginalize assertions of universal good or measurable truth by claiming that perceptions of what is good or true are simply interpretations of a given culture, that ethical or moral truths are, in reality, only true for some but probably not for all; truth must be determined by the circumstances, not by pre-determined absolutes.⁸

Students are coming to our college with a mix of both a modernist and post-modernist framework, along with a few other ideas thrown in. Knowing their backgrounds and having a clear sense of where we hope to lead them will help us be effective educators. This leads to the question of the role of the Christian liberal arts college.

⁸ Van Leeuwen, Mary Stewart, "Faith and learning in psychology" in *Teaching as an act of faith*, edited by Arlin C. Migliazzo (New York: Fordham University Press, 2002): 22-24.

First, what a Christian liberal arts college should not be.⁹ It should not be a defender of the faith, a place for safe indoctrination, a place where students are “protected” from the temptations of the world, other theological viewpoints, or other worldviews. Such a role *might* suit a denominational Bible college or seminary (though I hope not), but a liberal arts college must help students to learn to think in new ways, to consider their faith in new contexts, to recognize and challenge their childhood assumptions, to force critical thinking, to become committed to a life of expanding their understanding of God and of their own faith. Neither should it be primarily a training place for church-related vocations. Training is important, but more importantly the educated student must learn how to develop new patterns of thought, independence of mind, and new ways of understanding truth. The college should not primarily be a place for social or extracurricular activities; students may enjoy such events and benefit from them, but the purpose of the college goes far beyond this.

The Christian liberal arts *should* be a place that refuses to compartmentalize religion. In a world where modernism refuses to recognize the metaphysical and where post-modernism marginalizes any notion of absolutes, the Christian college should intentionally attempt to help students view every aspect of their personal and academic lives through a perspective rooted in the Christian faith. What might this mean in general terms for the college and the student? Holmes offers several ideas.¹⁰ First, we must have the basic conviction that Christian perspectives can generate a worldview large enough to give meaning to all disciplines. The secular college/university reflects the pluralistic society in which we live, a society that makes little attempt to understand its many parts

⁹ Holmes, 4-6.

as integral to a larger whole. Second, we must believe, teach, and learn from the perspective that all truth is God's truth, no matter where or how it is found. The Christian should believe that the Bible is the final rule of faith and conduct, but at the same time must realize that it is not a comprehensive, exhaustive source; God can reveal truth through both the committed Christian and the atheist, through both arts dedicated to Him and arts created for selfish gain, through the Scriptures and through the study of revealed creation. The Scriptures provide necessary guidelines for life, but the Christian must develop an attitude of disciplined intellectual inquiry into the world itself.

Third, we should understand that the pursuit of truth carries with it certain moral prerequisites. These include a willingness and determination to learn, intellectual honesty, and self discipline; all three require significant depth of character, and cannot be acquired with ease. Our desire as teachers to see these traits develop in our students should help to inform the kinds of tasks we give, how we give those tasks, and the kinds of feedback we provide, remembering that our natural inclination toward laziness is also shared by our students.

Fourth, we should understand and attempt to help our students understand that a Christian commitment should not restrict intellectual development, but should rather inspire it toward meaningful learning. Christian education should be a liberating experience, one that expands our horizons, deepens our insights, sharpens our minds, and motivates us to work toward a fuller sense of what is true. In our assignments and lectures, we must avoid offering or allowing simplistic answers to complex problems, marginalizing unpleasant circumstances as unimportant, or encouraging intellectual

¹⁰ Holmes, 10, 13-22. The author does not present these points in the form and order listed above, but he

shortcuts by not addressing significant issues. We should help our students become critical, reflective, and eager to examine substance. This is quite different than the common goals of completing assignments in the easiest way possible or of working primarily to achieve a certain grade.

Let's turn now to the discipline of music. What do we know of its earliest uses, what about the question of morality, what about quality, and finally, what are some practical implications for me as a teacher of music? We know from the Scriptures that music was used in tabernacle and temple worship, that music was also used for non-religious purposes, that many of the priests were skilled in music, that both vocal and instrumental music were common, that many different instruments were used, that the use of music was often planned but was also sometimes spontaneous, and most importantly, that God gave music as a gift to humankind. God is the master creator, and one of the results of being created in his image is that the human being is also creative. This creativity has resulted in many different styles and traditions of music making, and the creativity can be used both for good or evil, but the ability still ultimately comes from God.

What about the morality question? Does music itself have the inherent ability to cause people to *do* good or to *do* evil? Does a particular style of music possess a certain moral power capable of influencing one's behavior toward evil, while another style possesses the moral power to influence one toward good? Or, is music morally neutral, and its perceived effects simply circumstantial or cultural? This question has been debated at many different times in recorded history, first by the ancient Greek scholars, and more recently in Christian circles concerning rock music and new age music. The

does discuss at least part of their essence.

eighteenth-century “doctrine of affections” was based in part on the idea that certain types of music had certain “affects” or powers on the listener. We must help students wrestle with this question and move toward a reasonable position. In his book, *Music through the eyes of faith*, musician Harold Best articulates the position that music is “amoral”, that it does not have the inherent power to influence others for good or evil.

“... With certain exceptions, art and especially music are morally relative and inherently incapable of articulating, for want of a better term, truth speech. They are essentially neutral in their ability to express belief, creed, moral and ethical exactitudes, or even worldview. I also assume that, no matter how passionately artists may believe what they believe or try to show these beliefs in what they imagine or craft, their art remains purposefully ‘dumb’. Further, I maintain that artists and their works can be separated and their works understood simply as handiwork. Even so, artists remain personally accountable for what they believe, how they behave, and for the reasons they make their art and music the way they do. Finally, I will assume that Christians are biblically justified in fully celebrating artistic activity of the most diverse sort, including that which may have been created in downright unbelief.”¹¹

Best does not deal with the question of text, which certainly adds another level of meaning and communication to music, nor does he deal here with the matter of context. But I think three conclusions follow logically from his position. First, music, regardless of style, who wrote it, or the composer’s intentions, does not in itself have the power to influence the listener for good or evil. Second, regardless of the nature of the composer’s intentions, his or her work stands alone as a work of objective, amoral creativity, to be viewed as separate from its creator. If these are both true, then the third conclusion follows: the Christian should be able to participate in and enjoy music of any style without being negatively affected, including music initially created to promote or support

¹¹ Best, Harold, *Music through the eyes of faith*, (San Francisco: Harper, 1993): 42.

non-Christian lifestyles, such as ragtime, or the music of any number of secular rock groups.

Three qualifications must follow if one is to support such a position, which I do. First, even if music itself does not carry a specific moral message, it can certainly have the power to affect the listener, often in dramatic ways; Beethoven, for example, counted on this power to hold the attention of the listeners through a long symphony. Film score composers use this power to create atmosphere that enhances the action on the screen, often succeeding in changing the breathing and heart rate of members of the audience. The second qualification is this: adding text to music immediately changes its message to one of specific meaning. The text doesn't change the music itself to moral, but the combination of text and music makes a potentially moral package. This message may permanently remain in a listener's memory even if the text is later removed or a different text is substituted. Third, the context in which the music is performed can create a moral message. This message may have a powerful affect on the listener, and it may continue even if the context is later changed. For example, when a person listens to a certain style of music while engaging in an unhealthy lifestyle, the music and the lifestyle may combine into a negative moral message. If that person were to later reject that lifestyle, hearing that same music may still communicate the negative moral message. This message is communicated because of the association with context, not because the music itself has moral power. If listening to the music would cause this person to fall back into the old lifestyle, then it would be wrong for them to listen to it. But, this is not a trait of the music itself, nor would it be wrong for others to listen to the music who do not have the same contextual association.

The above approach explains why music rejected by Christians in one era might be embraced by Christians in another, and why a certain style of music can have a seemingly powerful grip on some people while not affecting others. It also helps to avoid the pitfall of labeling certain styles as “evil” or “satanic” or “sacred” or “spiritual”, yet it acknowledges the power that both text and context can have on the message.

This approach may also *seem* to suggest that all music is equal, that no composition is better or worse than another, or even that one can choose his or her music without regard to the weaknesses of others. An important job of the music educator is to teach students that all music is not equal, and that quality does separate one composition from another. Another job is to provide the students with the skills and experience to recognize quality. Much of this can be learned through the systematic study of core music courses, plus the rehearsal and performance of quality literature.

But it may also be helpful to set up some philosophical guidelines. First, quality can be found in both long and short works; quality is not determined by length. A given composer may write high-quality short works, but lower-quality longer works. Second, compositions must be judged by the accepted “norms” of that particular style, not by “norms” of some other style. For example, a Black Gospel setting should not be judged for quality by the same criteria used to judge a Brahms motet; rather, its quality should be determined by comparing it with the best of other compositions in the Black Gospel style. Third, works judged to be of less than high quality should not normally be given the privilege of serious study or public performance.

So far, we have talked about the liberal arts, the special role of the Christian liberal arts education, the morality of music, and briefly about quality in music. What are the

practical implications of all this? What does it all mean for my colleagues and me as Christian educators? First, we must be committed to teaching our students to not only grow into craftsmen, but to also have the ability to step back from their craft and evaluate, critique, ask questions, place their work into a meaningful context. We must teach the details of our craft: the discipline of practice, of hard work, of careful research, writing, and reading. We must also continually remind ourselves and our students that God is the author of learning, the master of the details, the ultimate creator, that music itself is a gift, that the ability to study is both a gift from God and a holy responsibility, and that as we study our craft we are in part fulfilling our calling as Christians. We must model and teach that work in the rehearsal room and performing in church are equally important activities, equally “Christian” activities; they have different purposes, but both are an important part of what it means to be a Christian.

Fundamental to our calling as a committed Christian is the idea that we view our work, thoughts, relationships, and performance through the eyes of our Christian worldview, as informed by our faith. This affects our students not only in how we structure our courses, but also in how we model the Christian life. Our own faith must be strong, continually strengthened through practice, reflection, public and private worship, and through service. Our commitment to staying sharp and to growing in our profession will also model our Christian worldview. Our students should see us engaged in such activities as attending conferences, publishing, performing, and reading. They should see us making intentional efforts to improve our teaching methods through our use of new techniques, strategies, and through serious self-evaluation. They should see us model

respect and love as we support our own colleagues and as we demonstrate our commitment to the development of our students as whole persons.

What are some specific guidelines that can help me as a teacher of music history and choral ensembles? For choir, I must help the students experience and appreciate much of God's creation by exposing them to a wide range of styles, drawn not only from the major historical periods of western music, but also from cultures around the world. I must contribute to their understanding of excellence by choosing only high quality music. I must help them learn the discipline and value of hard work, and that excellence in the performance ensemble requires the endless pursuit of becoming better and better, that excellence in an ensemble is a process more than a goal, a process that combines intelligence with hard work. I must also help them experience balance in planning literature for a performance between "freedom of choice" and sensitivity to what is appropriate for a given situation ("All things are lawful, but not all things are expedient").¹²

In music history, I must always teach "good" history. That is, history instruction that meets the widely-accepted norms of comparison, stylistic analysis and development, cultural and political context, and personal biography. Students must develop a sense of the broad flow of history. Good history should be "...characterized by efforts to be fair minded, efforts to be appropriately self-critical about my own biases, and efforts to see with merciful and gracious eyes."¹³ The course should provide the framework for

¹² II Corinthians 6:12. In this passage, Paul argues that while the Christian has freedom in Christ to do many things, not all these things are useful. Christian freedom must be appreciated and used with responsibility, not only in how the freedoms will affect him or her, but also how the practice of those freedoms will affect others.

¹³ Mullen, Shirley A., "Faith, learning, and the teaching of history", in *Teaching as an act of faith*, edited by Arlin C. Migliazzo (New York: Fordham University Press, 2002): 281.

students to learn to be critical readers, writers, and thinkers; readers so they can understand, writers so they learn to formulate and express their ideas clearly, and thinkers so they can move beyond the material to deeper questions.

In conclusion, a discussion about the integration of faith with learning must begin with an understanding of the role of the Christian liberal arts college and the desired qualities, attitudes, and skills that our graduates will possess. Integration goes far beyond the notion of opening class with prayer or adding materials that have specific “Christian” content. Our intent must be to insist that every part of life is informed by who we are in Christ, that we view everything we do in and out of our discipline through the eyes of faith, that our goals as teachers must go beyond simply teaching content and skills. We must want our students to become life long learners, thinkers, open to new ideas, and equipped with the necessary experience and skills to evaluate these new ideas. We must remember that our students (and we) are part of God’s project, “created in Christ Jesus unto good works”, and that we have the incredible privilege of being a part of that project.

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