Response to George Marsden

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As he always does, George Marsden has provided a thoughtful and thought-provoking analysis of the complex issues of the Christian faith and higher education. In his brief history of the liberal arts tradition, as well as in his brief for continued Christian engagement in the liberal arts, George has framed the issues straightforwardly and quite persuasively. He calls into question those “golden age of liberal arts” narratives that we may be too enamored of at times, while at the same time, he offers a frank but hopeful view of prospects for Christians in the liberal arts. I wish to amplify what George has said about the recent history of the liberal arts tradition and reflect upon his reading of the current state of affairs.

In my early years on the faculty of Wheaton College, I began to think about this history as a result of having heard departmental colleagues repeatedly lament the quality of contemporary students. Today’s students, they said in the late 1970’s and early 80’s, simply do not have the same passionate and pure commitment to the liberal arts as those who came one, two, or three generations before them. My colleagues decried the incipient careerism and intellectual glibness they found in today’s undergraduates and spoke warmly of the measured seriousness and lofty idealism of the students of earlier days.

What was missing from most of those conversations was the essential historical perspective that George Marsden and others have brought to the discussion of the liberal arts tradition. “Liberal arts education was always an enterprise for a select few,” Marsden writes. At the beginning of the twentieth century - the heyday of the liberal arts, only four per cent of college-age Americans attended college. It is safe to say that many of those in that four per cent were children of privilege; they came to college with an impressive background in historical, classical, and linguistic studies, and their lofty disregard of career concerns was often underwritten by healthy inheritances and comfortable annual incomes.

None of my own grandparents, all of them recent immigrants from Sweden, would have been among that liberal arts cohort a century ago, nor would my father or mother have been a few decades later. My mother graduated from a public high school in Rockford, Illinois in 1930. She was an extraordinarily gifted and tenacious student who would have flourished, I am certain, in a liberal arts college. But as a woman who was the eldest of six children in a working class family in the depression, she had absolutely no prospects of college. And her story, of course, was hardly an isolated one.

The last sixty years have witnessed an enormous broadening of the collegiate enterprise. George Marsden tells us that fully 40 per cent of college-age young people now undertake undergraduate study. Whatever the reasons for this transformation - and the reasons are legion - the fact remains that a once-elite experience has now become an
egalitarian expectation. The built-in advantages that the liberal arts approach once enjoyed no longer exist, and we have little reason to be nostalgic for the conditions that made it easy for that ideal to flourish.

To question such nostalgia is not at all to deny the power and worth of the subject matter of the liberal arts. While there may have been something deeply elitist and limiting to the educational practices of the early liberal arts tradition in America, there is nothing inherently elitist about reading Plato, studying Roman history, or immersing oneself in Shakespeare’s tragedies. Those of us who love the poetry of Dickinson or fiction of Dostoevsky have nothing for which to apologize, when we seek to share that love with others, especially our students. But if we believe in the subject matter of the liberal arts, we still face the challenge of promoting this subject matter at a time when the enterprise has far fewer built-in advantages than it once enjoyed.

From the vantage-point of the individual practitioner - the classroom teacher - the challenge is to know how to win over an audience that is anything but captive. When he touches upon this question near the end of his paper, Marsden’s metaphors are those of “educational markets” and “market niches.”

While market metaphors are pertinent to administrative questions about the future of the liberal arts, they need to be supplemented for the individual Christian teacher and scholar by images of love and witness. “What we have loved/ Others will love; and we may teach them how,” Wordsworth wrote at the close of The Prelude, and the contemporary teaching of the liberal arts by Christians would do well to follow this Wordsworthian example. In speaking of friendship, on his “four loves,” C. S. Lewis contrasts it with erotic love. “We picture lovers face to face but Friends side by side; their eyes look ahead” at a shared object of delight. Such is a commendable model for the Christian college or university teacher, who is called to speak with critical affection of what he or she would point students to. It is the act of bearing witness, as the contemporary poet Richard Wilbur so tellingly puts it in describing the responsibility shared by all who have the power of language at their disposal: “In the strict sense, of course,/ We invent nothing, merely bearing witness/ To what each morning brings again to light.”

For both teachers and administrators, Marsden raises at the close an issue of great importance to this act and art of teaching and bearing witness to what we love. As Christian colleges move, “increasingly in the direction of university standards for hiring and promotion,” the Christian advocate of the liberal arts faces the dilemma of what I have come to think of as the double vision of Moby Dick. Given the nature of a liberal arts college, the competing demands of scholarship and teaching mean that faculty members often find themselves speaking to two different audiences that remain unaware of one another. Most of our students have only a vague sense of the professional world in which we work as scholars, and the scholarly world for which we write cares little for what we do in our undergraduate classrooms. The image that surfaces when I think of the sometimes dizzying dimensions of the scholar/teacher’s life in the liberal arts college comes from a short chapter in Moby- Dick. Melville’s Ishmael is meditating on the meaning of a whale’s head. Its eyes are separated “by many cubic feet of solid head,
which towers between them like a great mountain separating two lakes in valleys.” As a result, the whale “must see one distinct picture on this side, and another distinct picture on that side, while all between must be profound darkness.”

For Christian academics who promote the liberal arts, a central challenge of the coming years will be to create models of teaching and scholarship that can bring those two visions together and shed some blessed light on the profound darkness that often seems to lie between them.