Christian Liberal Learning

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The history of liberal arts education is a history of two competing ideals (Kimball). The philosophical ideal can be traced back to the ancient Greek philosopher Socrates. The rhetorical ideal is rooted in the Roman statesman Cicero. In this section, I will characterize these two conceptions of liberal education in terms of their general nature, purpose and content. The philosophical model and the rhetorical model pull in different directions. However, they also share some common ground. In sketching these two approaches to the liberal arts, I will be more concerned with providing possibilities for thinking about the nature of liberal learning than with reporting historical facts. As a result, I will portray the two types rather starkly as contrasting paradigms in a way that may not be completely faithful to their actual origins. Once we have a general grasp of these two traditions, I will recommend a conception of liberal learning that maintains the tension between them, affirms what they have in common and provides a home for the Christian faith.

Though rooted in Athens, liberal education flowered later in Rome as an outworking of the rhetorical ideal. Under the tutelage of Cicero, liberal education was aimed at training citizens to be leaders of society. What made the education liberal is that it was an education for free citizens with the leisure to study. What this meant at the time is that the students of the liberal arts were wealthy free men. The poor had to work and so did not have the leisure to study. Slaves were neither citizens nor free for study. Women were not citizens either. Since the purpose of liberal education was to train free men to lead society, it was primarily practical. A good leader is someone who is able to practice good leadership. What makes one capable of practicing good leadership is the possession of wisdom, moral virtue and eloquence. Thus, in the rhetorical tradition, a good liberal education would involve instruction that would lead to the possession of these personal attributes. Classical texts were used as the basis for the cultivation of these traits. Rhetorical educators assumed these classical works to contain statements of important truths, models of genuine virtues, and examples of eloquent speeches. In this tradition, the knowledge acquired by liberal learning was valuable primarily as an instrument enabling its possessors to be good leaders in the community. Moreover, the true test of the possession of genuine wisdom was a person’s ability to communicate it eloquently.

The philosophical ideal for liberal education is embodied in the Greek philosopher Socrates. This approach can be best understood by thinking about Socrates’ famous claim that “The unexamined life is not worth living.” What Socrates meant by this is that, in order for our lives to be worthwhile, we must carefully examine our opinions and values to see whether or not they are really true and good. After critically scrutinizing his own important beliefs and values, Socrates claimed to be ignorant about what is ultimately true and best. Moreover, he cross-examined a number of his contemporaries who claimed to be wise and good. In doing so, he used what has become known as the “Socratic Method” of critical questioning to show that these “authorities” were not nearly as wise as they thought they were. Socrates applied his disposition to question authority to books as well. Books were not repositories of truth to be digested but instead records of thinking to be critically engaged. When all was said and done, Socrates persisted in being skeptical about the possibility of knowing the answers to the important questions he raised. Nonetheless, he believed that if he stopped pursuing the truth about these things, his life would no longer be worth living.
This emphasis on the perpetual pursuit of truth distinguishes the philosophical ideal of liberal education from the rhetorical model. Socrates contrasted himself with the “sophists” who claimed to be wise (the Greek word is *sophos*). Instead, he called himself a *lover* of wisdom (in Greek *philo* + *sophos*). You can love wisdom without being in possession of it. If you love it but don’t have it, you will want to pursue it and try to acquire it. If you are sufficiently skeptical, your pursuit of truth may become perpetual. Though Socrates was primarily interested in pursuing the truth about matters of morality, later philosophers extended the Socratic quest to include speculation about ultimate reality. Plato and Aristotle believed that pursuing the truth about such speculative matters (and contemplating it if it is found) was the best way for a human being to spend time. Thus, the philosophical approach to liberal learning came to be characterized by a perpetual search for the answers to questions about theoretical and speculative matters. They considered knowledge about these things, if one could ever attain it, to be not only the best kind of knowledge, but also worth having for its own sake whether it had any practical value or not. For these philosophers, though moral virtues like courage and self-control were considered important for the sake of good citizenship, intellectual virtues like knowledge and theoretical wisdom were even more important and were necessary for good scholarship.

The primary differences between the rhetorical ideal of a liberal arts education and the philosophical model, as I have characterized them, are summarized in the following table. The contrasting phrases should be thought of as differences in emphasis:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The Rhetorical Ideal of Liberal Learning</th>
<th>The Philosophical Ideal of Liberal Learning</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Emphasizes practical goal of good living</td>
<td>Stresses theoretical goal of true believing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acquisition of moral virtues best</td>
<td>Acquisition of intellectual virtues best</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relatively dogmatic</td>
<td>Relatively skeptical</td>
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<tr>
<td>Primarily oriented to community life</td>
<td>Primarily oriented to individual study</td>
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<tr>
<td>Education for good citizenship</td>
<td>Education for good scholarship</td>
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<tr>
<td>Accent on pursuit of goodness</td>
<td>Accent on pursuit of truth</td>
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<tr>
<td>More value placed on effective speaking</td>
<td>More value placed on logical thinking</td>
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<tr>
<td>Knowledge valued as an instrument</td>
<td>Knowledge valued for its own sake</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pragmatic political orientation</td>
<td>Speculative metaphysical orientation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emphasis on the possession of wisdom</td>
<td>Emphasis on the pursuit of wisdom</td>
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In spite of these differences, these two ideals also share some significant common ground. In particular, they are both agreed in their rejection of (a) educational sophism and (b) educational utilitarianism. Let’s look at educational sophism first. The sophists were described above as counterparts to Socrates who thought they were wise. Sophists were itinerant teachers in ancient.
Greece who offered instruction in things that fostered success. In particular, they taught people the information and skills they would need to be effective public speakers. The art of persuasion could be especially valuable in a democratic society such as Athens. The orators and philosophers were not so much averse to education in the discipline of rhetoric (indeed, rhetoric has pride of place among the orators) as much as they were against the sophist’s abuses of argumentation. The sophistic tendency to pervert the art of rhetoric is immortalized in their boast to be able to teach their students “how to make the weaker argument into the stronger.” The problem with this approach, of course, is that it makes arguments into instruments of manipulation rather than tools for seeking truth. Both the orators and the philosophers oppose this abuse of logic and rhetoric because both groups value truth over merely making something to pass for true in order to come out ahead.

Educational utilitarianism is the view that an education is worthwhile only if it provides training in a specialized profession or vocation. From the standpoint of the educational utilitarian, both a rhetorical and a philosophical liberal arts education are too general to be of much use. What is needed instead, these utilitarians think, is instruction in the technical methods of a particular occupation. Orators and philosophers are united in their condemnation of the utilitarian approach as overly narrow and restricted. Though the former two groups agree that an education can and should be useful in some sense, they also think that the best education will involve the “cultivation of humanity” to use Seneca’s phrase (in On Anger). A liberal arts education, as opposed to special vocational, professional or technical training, is general enough to enhance the life of any normal adult human being, regardless of his or her particular career. Another way to put this same point is that a liberal education is a humanistic education. It is an education intended to develop general human capacities.

This characterization of liberal learning as opposed to vocational training does diverge in one important respect from the views of some philosophers and orators. In saying that a liberal arts education is meant to profit any normal adult human being, I have introduced a democratic element that is not present in every version of the philosophical and rhetorical ideals. Early versions of both of these models were clearly aristocratic in their orientation. As I said above, the word ‘liberal’ (liberalis in Latin) in “liberal arts” was originally meant to restrict such an education to people with adequate freedom and leisure to benefit from such an education. Given the political realities of ancient Greece and Rome, this meant that a liberal education was for wealthy male citizens. This, however, seems more due to the accidents of the political situation than to the essence of a liberal education. A more democratic society, such as our own, provides a setting in which more people have the resources to enjoy and benefit from liberal education.

In sum, though the orators and philosophers disagree in some important ways about the nature and purpose of a liberal arts education, they agree about two very important things: (1) A liberal education values truth and reason and (2) A liberal education is both general and humane. These two common convictions provide a basis for a conception of liberal learning that can accommodate both the rhetorical and philosophical traditions. It can also be integrated with the Christian faith, as we will see in the next section. Let us turn now to consider this inclusive approach to the liberal arts.

Any good framework for liberal arts education will give a general account of the nature, purpose, methods and content of such an education. The framework I propose makes use of the agreements of the orators and philosophers. Consider first the nature of liberal learning.

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1 This quotation is from a fragment of the sophist Protagoras’ writings. Another sophist, Gorgias, attempted to illustrate this principle by concocting an extensive argument for the claim that nothing exists!
Essentially, a liberal education is a *humane* education. That is, it is a course of study that emphasizes the cultivation and perfection of certain human abilities and capacities. In Aristotle’s terms, a liberal education is an education that *actualizes* a certain range of human *potential*. What range of human potential is this? That is, what is the *scope* of liberal learning? Normal human beings are born with a variety of physical and psychological capacities. These capacities combine to constitute an individual human being’s potential for growth, development, maturation and education. These inborn potentialities are actualized in human beings as a result of their interactions with their environments over time. Some of these changes are relatively automatic and some require more conscious deliberation. Moreover, some of the changes have more to do with the body and some are more involved with the mind. Learning involves changes to a person’s mind (in addition to whatever changes it brings about in his or her body). Since learning is a *natural* process, it can occur without deliberate effort on the part of the learner. It can occur rather passively without the intervention of a teacher. However, *liberal* learning requires a deliberate, disciplined engagement of the learner in a program of study that is designed to cultivate human intellectual capacities. Let’s adopt Aristotle’s terminology and call these cultivated mental capacities “intellectual virtues”. In sum, then, the nature and scope of a liberal arts education is the deliberate cultivation and refinement of human intellectual virtues.

What is the *purpose* of a liberal arts education? That is, what are the desired results of the cultivation of human intellectual virtues? In general, intellectual virtues are abilities to use one’s mind well. So a very general way to state the purpose of a liberal education is to say that it is an education that enables you to use your mind well. Can we be more specific? You can use your mind well in a variety of ways and for a variety of purposes. Following Aristotle, we can identify three general and important purposes for which we can use our minds well. We can use our minds (a) to think about what’s true, (b) to live a good life, and (c) to make and enjoy beautiful and useful things. Our intellectual virtues contribute to our capacity for reflection, action and creation. I said above that the orators and philosophers agreed about the value of *truth*. That is, both groups assumed that the truth is something that is worth pursuing and also possessing if possible. Many human intellectual virtues can be characterized in terms of the search for or the possession of truth. These include calculating, estimating, hypothesizing, reasoning, questioning, knowing and remembering. But the orators and philosophers also valued *goodness* and *beauty*. Intellectual virtues that are cultivated for the sake of living a good life include imagining, deliberating, discerning, valuing, planning and deciding. Among those virtues with beauty in view are perceiving, imagining, inventing, organizing, measuring, evaluating and designing. So we might say that the purpose of a liberal arts education is to inculcate all the general intellectual virtues that have truth, goodness and beauty as objectives. This is on the right track, but it needs to be qualified. The kind of learning most prominent in a liberal arts education is learning that leads to knowledge of truths. So the intellectual virtues aimed at truth are central in the liberal arts. But this model also accommodates the goals of goodness and beauty. Among the truths to be known, if possible, are truths about how to live a good life and truths about how to make and enjoy beautiful and useful things.

A liberal education concerns the acquisition of human intellectual virtues primarily for the pursuit and possible possession of truth. What general methods will enable liberal learners and their teachers to attain this end? Since the main goal of liberal learning is knowledge of various truths, and since human beings grasp truths primarily (and perhaps exclusively) by means of
language, the methods of liberal learning will involve various uses of language. Chief among these uses of language are reading, writing, speaking and listening. These methods will be employed in liberal learning both in order to understand and in order to know. You can’t know something to be true unless you first understand what it means. If you are reading or listening, you won’t be able to understand what someone claims to be true unless he or she expresses it clearly. Even if you understand a claim someone has said or written, you may not agree with the person unless he or she argues logically and convincingly for it. Whether you are the one communicating and arguing or listening and evaluating, you will need to be skilled in language use, reasoning and convincing.

This brings us to the subject of the content of liberal learning. The original three subjects covered in a liberal arts education were grammar, logic and rhetoric. These subjects cover the skills I just mentioned: language use, logical reasoning and effective communication. These really are at the heart of a liberal education. Later, the four subjects of arithmetic, geometry, music and astronomy were added. These seven subjects constituted the septem artes liberales. Today, the typical liberal arts curriculum includes the humanities (philosophy, history, literature and the creative arts), the natural sciences (physics, chemistry and biology), the social sciences (psychology, sociology, anthropology, political science and economics) and the mathematical sciences. This may seem like a “grab bag” without a unifying theme. However, all of these disciplines combine to provide the liberal learner with the general intellectual skills and knowledge needed to understand oneself, others, and the world in which we live together.

I have tried to characterize the liberal arts in such a way as to accommodate both the rhetorical and the philosophical approaches. Have I succeeded? First, I said that the nature of a liberal education is to cultivate human intellectual virtues. This may seem to favor the philosophers. However among the intellectual virtues is practical wisdom, which has as its goal the living of a good and moral life. So this includes the rhetorical emphasis as well as the philosophical. Second, I held up the pursuit and possible possession of truth as the primary goal of liberal learning. This allows for both the orators’ relatively dogmatic assumption that we can possess the truth about practical matters as well as the philosophers’ relatively skeptical claim that we should rather only pursue the truth about speculative matters. Third, I said the main methods of liberal learning are language-oriented. This may diverge from some approaches, but it is congenial to both the orators and philosophers, who differ only in their different emphases concerning the uses of language. Finally, both orators and philosophers will agree with the general curriculum I outlined. Again, their differences involve the amount of stress to be placed on some disciplines as opposed to others.

Christian Liberal Learning

I have characterized liberal learning as learning that is humane, general and primarily intellectual (aimed primarily at truth on the basis of reason). What distinguishes Christian liberal learning? I will identify four ways in which a Christian liberal arts education is distinctive. In an ideal Christian liberal arts college, the addition of Christian studies (theology, biblical studies, church history, apologetics, etc.) will serve to (a) complete, (b) ground, (c) correct and (d) direct liberal learning.

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2 I will leave open the possibility that some truths are graspable also, or even only, by non-linguistic means. My claim is only that language is the primary vehicle of knowledge of truths.
A Complete Education

A liberal arts education is ideally both general and universal. That is, it should impart the knowledge and skills needed for human flourishing (general) and also expose students to all the major domains of human knowledge and investigation (universal). Since Christian studies constitute an area of human knowledge and investigation, an ideal liberal education will be Christian. This is the sense in which Christian subjects complete a liberal arts education.

In The Idea of a University, the nineteenth century Roman Catholic educator John Henry Newman argued that every university ought to teach theology (14-32). His argument for this claim is that (a) a university, by definition, teaches “universal knowledge”. That is, it teaches every subject that includes truths that can be known. (b) Theology is a branch of knowledge – it is a subject that includes knowable truths. Therefore, (c) a true university will teach theology. Today, of course, virtually all institutions of higher learning classified as “universities” exclude the teaching of theology from their academic programs. How should we think about Newman’s argument in light of this educational reality? One response is to deny (b), the claim that theology is a branch of knowledge. This would allow a person consistently to claim that an institution can be a genuine university even if it excludes theology. This is, perhaps, the position of most educators today. Another reply is to deny (a) by defending the view that a university is not bound by its nature to teach all domains of knowledge. A skeptical, postmodern argument for this position might deny the very possibility of knowledge, and even truth. Supporters of this approach could say that a university could be unified around the common interests of its constituents, whatever those interests might be. A final position is to agree with Newman and conclude that contemporary “universities” are not true universities. Some who take this viewpoint might agree with George Marsden that it would be desirable for public institutions of higher learning to reintroduce the study of Christian theology in certain carefully circumscribed ways.

However, whatever conclusion a person comes to about today’s public “universities” in light of Newman’s argument, it seems undeniable that some form of his reasoning is inescapable when applied to Christian liberal arts colleges. Ideally, a liberal education will be an education in all academic areas in which important truths can be discovered. Christian theology is such an area of study. So an ideal liberal arts education will include the study of Christian theology. From the standpoint of this argument, any liberal education that excludes the study of Christian theology is deficient. Moreover, as Newman points out, by its nature, Christian theology has an especially important role to play relative to the other academic disciplines. A cardinal Christian doctrine is that God is the sovereign creator of everything that exists other than God. Consequently, when we study any aspect of the universe, we are studying God’s creation. Our studies provide us with both direct knowledge of the created order and indirect knowledge of God, the creator of this order. Another Christian belief is that the key to the redemption and fulfillment of the whole universe is to be found in God. Thus, any discipline in which questions are raised about value, meaning and purpose will be substantially crippled if Christian theology is not a part of the overall academic program that contains that discipline.

A Grounded Education

So the addition of Christian theology and other Christian studies does not merely make the list of liberal disciplines longer. Christian studies play a special role in Christian liberal arts education. Christian liberal learning is learning from the standpoint or perspective of Christian faith. Christian liberal learners are people who approach every learning situation by asking “What should (or may) a Christian think about this?” Your Christian convictions provide a
ground or foundation for learning. They are the starting point or basis on which you engage in the process of learning. They are the initial “given” of your learning experience. Now it is true that Christians will continue to learn about their faith as they take up Christian studies. Consequently, one’s Christian perspective may be broadened. But what one believes may also be revised or corrected. The Christian convictions with which one begins the enterprise of liberal learning are really a provisional ground. To say that your convictions are a ground is to say that they are what one assumes to be settled. To say they are provisional is to say that one is open to the possibility that they are in need of amplification or correction. This can be a difficult balance to strike, but the very idea of Christian liberal learning requires that you find such a balance.

To say that Christian convictions are the provisional ground of Christian liberal learning is not to say what it is that ought to ground Christian convictions themselves. The answer to this question has been the subject of much controversy throughout the history of Christian education. Roughly speaking, there are two main competing positions on this issue. Augustinians hold that faith is the ultimate ground of Christian belief. Their motto is “faith seeking understanding.” Christian education, on their view, is a process of employing reason to work out the implications of Christian faith. Educators in the Thomistic tradition, on the other hand, believe that Christian faith ought to be based on reason. In particular, one establishes the existence and main attributes of God on the basis of reason. This provides a rational foundation for one’s acceptance of the truths of Scripture on the basis of faith. Christians continue to be divided on this issue. However, those who disagree about the ultimate ground of Christian belief can still agree that Christian convictions, whatever their basis, are the appropriate ground of liberal learning.

Christian Convictions as Correction

Consistency requires that your beliefs be logically compatible. Accordingly, if a claim conflicts with something you believe to be true about the Christian faith, if you are logical, you will refrain from believing both things. In such a case, you may end up revising your faith convictions. However, you may also end up rejecting the other claim. How it goes will depend on the claims in question. For instance, suppose you are watching Carl Sagan’s television series Cosmos. Dr. Sagan comes on and says, “the cosmos is all there is and all there has ever been and all there ever will be.” Has Dr. Sagan said something true? Well, as a Christian, you believe that God created the universe. You assume that by ‘cosmos’, Dr. Sagan means just ‘universe’. So if what he says is true, then God has never existed and never will, since God is not the universe or a part of it. Thus, what Dr. Sagan said is inconsistent with a fundamental Christian belief. They can’t both be true. In this case, the Christian belief is so basic that the only reasonable course open to you as a Christian liberal learner is to conclude that Dr. Sagan is wrong. It is, however, sometimes appropriate in such circumstances to revise your Christian convictions instead. For instance, the Catholic Church condemned Galileo on the ground that his thesis that the Earth moves is inconsistent with Scripture (it conflicts, for instance, with the literal reading of Psalm 104:5: “The Lord established the Earth. It shall never be moved.”). However, scientific investigation eventually confirmed that Galileo was correct. In this case, an assumption about the Christian faith had to be revised.

Why is it appropriate to side with Christian convictions in one instance but not in another? A comparison of these two examples illustrates one general principle that ought to govern Christian thinking in this area. In the first example, Carl Sagan, a scientist, makes a philosophical or religious claim without any arguments to back it up. Christians can rightfully reject such a claim as unwarranted and stick to their religious convictions. In the second example, the Church made
a scientific claim on the basis of a fallible interpretation of the Bible. The general lesson to be
drawn here is that scientists should not make unwarranted theological or philosophical claims
and Christians should be careful not to draw scientific conclusions on the basis of inadequate
biblical or theological grounds. An important part of Christian liberal learning is the formulation
and justification of general methodological principles such as this that ought to govern one’s
thinking about the interplay between Christian studies and the other liberal disciplines.

*Christian Convictions as Direction*

The goal of all learning is knowledge. This includes knowing the truth, knowing how to
classify things, and knowing how to perform a variety of skills, especially intellectual skills.
Earlier, I said the purpose of liberal learning is the acquisition of all the intellectual virtues that
have truth, goodness and beauty as objectives. Another way to put this is that the goal of liberal
learning is to acquire the ability to use your mind well for the sake of knowing the truth,
knowing how to live a good life, and knowing how to make beautiful and useful things. Though
this formulation does provide liberal learning with a relatively specific purpose, it also leaves a
number of important questions unanswered. Are some truths more important than others are?
That is, are some truths more worth knowing than others? If so, is there a general way to
distinguish the more valuable from the less valuable truths? What makes a life a good one? Is
there one general way of living that is better than all the others? Is it possible to know what kind
of life is best? Are some things really more beautiful than others are, or is beauty in the eye of
the beholder? For which human purposes is it most worth producing useful things? These
questions can be answered adequately only from the standpoint of a relatively specific world and
life view that provides answers to perennial questions about reality, knowledge and value. The
Christian faith provides such a perspective. Christian theology provides general answers to all of
these questions (though many specific issues are the subjects of debate between Christian
theologians). For instance, the good life can be defined in terms of knowing, loving and serving
God. The truths most worth knowing, the actions most worth taking and the things most worth
making will be those truths, actions and things that contribute best to knowing, loving and
serving God. This is the sense in which the Christian faith provides direction to liberal arts
education.

In his book *The Christian Mind: How Should a Christian Think?* Harry Blamires says that
the goal of Christian education is the formation of a “Christian mind.” Michael Peterson
expands this idea to include the whole person. From his perspective, the total aim of Christian
education is the formation of a ‘Christian person’. Human persons are, of course, more than just
minds. We have hearts and bodies as well. We have desires and feelings in addition to thoughts.
We can also act as well as think. Responsible acting on the basis of our thoughts, feelings and
desires requires the cultivation of moral virtues in addition to intellectual virtues. I stated above
that the goal of liberal learning is to cultivate the intellectual virtues, that is, those mental habits
that enable you to use your mind well. Does this mean that I side with Blamires’ narrower
conception of Christian education as opposed to Peterson’s more inclusive version? Not
necessarily. There is a way to construe their views so as to make them compatible.

This harmonization requires us to make a distinction between three kinds of goals: *proximate*
goals, *ultimate* goals and *intermediate* goals. A proximate goal of a given activity is a goal one
aims at *first* in undertaking that endeavor. It is the *immediate* goal of one’s efforts. One can
strive to achieve a proximate goal as a means to the attainment of other goals. If one of these
other goals is a result one seeks to bring about for its own sake rather than for the sake of some
further goal, it is an *ultimate* goal. Any goals one has that are neither proximate nor ultimate are
intermediate goals. Proximate goals are often pursued for the sake of an intermediate goal or goals and intermediate goals are desired for the sake of fulfilling an ultimate goal. An example will make these distinctions clear. Sam takes up a career in order to make money. Making money is Sam’s proximate goal. The reason Sam wants to make money is so that he can be financially secure. This is an intermediate goal for Sam rather than an ultimate goal, since the reason he wants to be financially secure is so that he can be happy. Since Sam wants happiness only for its own sake, being happy is his ultimate goal.

We can now use these three kinds of goals to explain a way consistently to combine Blamires’ conception of Christian education with Peterson’s. Christian liberal learning is a goal-oriented activity. Ideally, students engage in liberal learning in order to actualize their intellectual potential. When this liberal learning is Christian, this involves learning to improve one’s ability to “think Christianly” as Blamires puts it. However, this need not be the only goal of a Christian liberal arts education. An important intermediate goal of such an education is fully to become the kind of person that God made human beings to be. Intellectual virtue is at least a very important part of the means to this end. This is especially evident with respect to the various intellectual virtues that fall under the heading of “wisdom”. Surely God intends for us to become both wise and good – both intellectual competence and morally good character are components of true godliness or “God-likeness”. After all, God is both maximally intellectually able and supremely morally good. So liberal learning is both for the sake of mental growth (the proximate goal) and the growth of the whole person (the intermediate goal). This accommodates Peterson’s position. But there is more (as I’m sure both Blamires and Peterson would agree). Becoming a Christian person may be valuable in itself, but it is also a means to another goal that is good only in itself. This is the goal of knowing, loving and serving God. This is the ultimate ideal goal of all of human life and of each part of human life. Therefore, it is the ultimate goal of the human activity of Christian liberal learning. So Christian liberal learning has three important goals: Its proximate goal is to improve a person’s mind; its intermediate goal is to contribute to the cultivation of Christian personhood; and its ultimate goal is to enable people to know, love and serve God.

This account of the goals of Christian liberal learning provides a framework within which to accommodate both the rhetorical and the philosophical ideals discussed in the previous section. Recall that the rhetorical ideal emphasizes the acquisition of the moral virtues for the sake of good living and good citizenship in the form of political involvement and contribution to the community. On this view, knowledge is good primarily as an instrument for these purposes and effective speaking is the highest art. The philosophical view stresses the cultivation of the intellectual virtues for the sake of true believing and good scholarship focused on metaphysical and scientific investigation. On this view, knowledge is good primarily for its own sake and logical thinking is the highest art. These two ideals are often in tension with each other, since their advocates tend to tout the values embodied in them as higher than those composing the other ideal. However, it is not necessary for these two visions for liberal arts education to be mutually exclusive. Liberal learning can improve students’ minds by making them wise. Wisdom is a kind of knowledge that comprises an important part of the proximate goal of a liberal education. Both rhetoricians and philosophers applaud it. This is because wisdom comes in a variety of forms. In general, wisdom is knowledge of important truths. Valuable truths include those that explain the nature of reality and the meaning of human life, those that enable their possessors to live well, and those that provide a basis for making beautiful and useful things. A liberal arts education can instill wisdom of all these kinds. Though they stress
different kinds of wisdom, rhetoricians and philosophers can agree that wisdom in general is a very good thing. Moreover, though these groups may highlight different aspects of the intermediate goal of a good life for human beings, they can both agree that wisdom is a very important component of such a life. Finally, if they are Christians, they can find much common ground in the commitment to the ultimate goal of knowing, loving, and serving God.

These common commitments can coexist peacefully with ongoing disagreements of a more specific sort that emerge out of the competing ideals of liberal learning. This continuing tension can be a good thing. Both the rhetorical ideal and the philosophical ideal are prone to lapsing into degenerate forms. The rhetorical ideal, with its focus on practicality, can tend to become overly fixated on technology and technique at the expense of substance and content. It can also tend to become overly pragmatic, anti-intellectual and anti-theoretical. The philosophical ideal, which stresses theory, can be disposed to become excessively pedantic, academic, and “ivory tower”. It may become impractical, irrelevant, and removed from important human concerns. A healthy Christian liberal arts college will honor both of these ideals so that, in struggling to hold them together, these inadequate forms of each will be avoided. Perhaps the best way to do this is to make wisdom of all kinds (theoretical, practical, productive, etc.) the primary proximate goal of a liberal education.
Works Cited


