

Philosophy of a Christian Liberal Arts Education

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One of the first callings that God gave to his children was to bring the created world under their collective authority ([Gen 1:28](#)). The very first cultural production included things that looked like science in the naming of animals ([Gen 2:19](#)), agriculture in the production of food ([Gen 1:29](#)), and the humanities in the wonder and response of Adam at his introduction to Eve ([Gen 2:22-23](#)). Collectively this work predated sin and was part of what God declared to be “good”. The continuation of this work in the modern world is sped along and amplified with a strong liberal arts education that enables Christ-followers to fully participate in this cultural mandate.

The idea of a cultural mandate is grounded at two points in the Bible. The first is in [Genesis 1:28](#),

God blessed them and said to them, “Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky and over every living creature that moves on the ground.”

In this context the mandate takes the form of having dominion over the earth and subduing it. It can be related to the ideas of “gardening” or “stewardship” in this pre-fall state. Shortly after the fall however, in [Genesis 3:17-19](#), it took on the additional sense of “redeeming”. Therefore this first call on humankind asks us to be people through whom the raw material of creation is guided, shaped and redeemed to become something beautiful, creative, efficient and sustainable.

The other place that the cultural mandate finds expression is in [Matthew 28: 18-20](#),

Then Jesus came to them and said, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.”

In this case the cultural mandate is honed and focused on the work of redeeming people and conferring the responsibility for human flourishing through the work of the Gospel.

In the first mandate, God had just finished the initial acts of creation and commanded us, as image-bearers, to be a part of the continuation of this process. In the second mandate, God had just finished the foundational work of the redemption of his people and he commanded us to participate with him in its ultimate fulfillment.

In order for us to take on this calling effectively, we need to be prepared and trained. Without a *depth of knowledge* of the history, the expressions and the mechanics of culture, broadly understood, it is difficult to bring about human flourishing in a meaningful way. Similarly without the *skills* to create, knowledge of culture is not sufficient to right wrongs and to innovate culture anew. Without an ability to *think theoretically*, to deconstruct agendas and rhetoric, to think about ideas from a critical framework, and to engage in technically correct conversation, it is difficult to work with others toward a shared goal of bringing God glory.

My intention in using the word “culture” is to include a wide variety of expressions of human production. It includes art, of course, literature and music, but I also believe it includes the institutions that we enact and reify through government, large and small. I believe it also takes shape in the scientific ideas that we pursue and the rationale that we use for trying to tackle one problem or another.

I am inspired to participate in the creation of culture by two Biblical passages. The first is in [Exodus 35:30-35](#). In this passage, God, through Moses specifically asks for a man named Bezalel to be in charge of constructing the tabernacle. I love that God placed a priority on having people who are skilled, intelligent and creative to construct the place where he was going to dwell. In addition to being a good artisan, Bezalel was apparently also a good teacher. So Bezalel is an example of someone who was trained to think critically, to apply knowledge, to train others and to apply skills which he learned in the effort of bringing glory to God.

I’m also inspired by the story of Daniel’s training in [Daniel 1](#). In this passage, a hostile king recognizes that there were people among the Israelites that were valuable for their ability to learn, to understand and then to serve in a role of governance. So in [Daniel 1:17](#), the Bible describes Daniel and his compatriots as having completed a course of study that included all kinds of literature and learning and these were necessary skills that the king needed at his disposal in order to effectively govern:

In every matter of wisdom and understanding about which the king questioned them, he found them ten times better than all the magicians and enchanterers in his whole kingdom.

We, of course, live in a different world than either Moses or Daniel. Nonetheless the ability to think soundly, with historical and factual context has never been more urgent and there is no reason to think that our mandates have changed. With the integration of the internet into every facet of our lives, we must do so continuously and at high-speed. The pace at which ideas arrive, and either flame out or go viral and impact our society is dizzying. Being able to *quickly* identify how new ideas fit into the cultural milieu in which we find ourselves is a new critical skill for people in our age. Without a strong liberal arts education it is easy to think that old ideas are new ideas, that things that have been tried and failed might work if dressed in new clothes, or that we should embrace things that run counter to what is life-giving in the teachings of Scripture.

Therefore, a liberal arts education is the imbuing of knowledge, the development of skills for the synthesis and generation of culture, the development of an ability for critical examination of the ideas of others and the concurrent transformation of one’s character in response. A Christian liberal arts education is one that does this in the context of the cultural mandate to subdue and redeem creation and to bring about human flourishing. Ultimately this is also an act of spiritual development as it requires a partnership with the work of the Holy Spirit in a person’s life so that the learning and efforts are not wasted in a secular attempt to bring God glory.