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INTELLECTUAL EMPATHY: Operationalizing the Great Commandment through the University General Education Program

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The general education curricula of most American universities generate an incredible love-hate relationship with students. Often, students—even as alumni—will complain that “gen ed” classes are a waste of time and money because they are irrelevant to eventual careers even as they report that favorite professors in a gen ed class changed their lives in ways intangible and substantial.

General education curricula are essential to postsecondary education. When done well, they instill institutional distinctives to most undergraduate students. They connect students to the Great Intellectual Tradition of higher education, reflecting the inheritance of the humane letters and the best of liberal tradition in Western thought. They cultivate a deep sense of community among students and faculty. They are essential to the identity and the value proposition of a college education. Ideally, they confront students with the prominent questions of existence, as informed by the great thinkers of history, under the guidance of well-equipped professors, and assisted by the leadership of the co-curricular areas of the university (campus ministry, student life, etc.). However, too often the general education core devolves into a somewhat chaotic, pragmatic financial factor in the success of universities. These courses tend to have higher enrollments and are often taught by nonpermanent faculty (non-tenure-track) or even graduate assistants with minimal qualifications, which means they are the highest net revenue courses on campus. General education courses tend to be among the largest on campus, financially subsidizing smaller courses in academic majors but adding to the sense that they are something

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wholly different than “real” courses taught by “real” professors. Because permanent faculty are not involved in many institutions, the curricula are easily manipulated for political or philosophical purposes by small groups of faculty leaders, or they are completely ignored and left adrift.

For Christian institutions, these curricula are essential to the cultivation of spiritual vibrancy that should occur in traditional students during their time at university, even as they are essential to the formation of adult learners in nontraditional contexts. There is no place in the university where Christ-centered thought should reign supreme more than in the general education program. This is where a university should be the most intentional, the faculty the most engaged, the cocurricular leaders from student life the most connected, and the theological priorities of the institution the most self-evident.

A Christ-centered education is one where Christ not only reigns pre-eminently but where the attributes of Christ are inseparable from the outcomes of the enterprise. Certainly the liberal arts tradition is foundational to education in the West, but in a Christ-centered context, the Great Commandment found in the Gospels is a refining lens that focuses the task of education toward a singular outcome: the production of intellectual empathy rooted in the selfless love of Christ and understood in the redemptive mission of God to his creation. In particular, the value of intellectual empathy, which finds its definition in the Great Commandment of the Gospels, should be a hallmark of the general education program at a Christian institution of higher learning.

I. HISTORICAL CONTEXT

In the United States, the regional accrediting bodies governing most institutions require a general education program as part of the basic requirements for a degree.¹ Institutions retain great latitude in the construction of their own core curricula, but general education is a substantial part of the work completed by students. These courses are not preprofessional but rather provide foundational thinking skills for further study. Core courses are taken by all students, regardless of degree focus or postgraduation plans. This portion of the curriculum may be small (nontraditional institutions tend to have few requirements) or quite large (traditional

¹ For example, the Southern Association for Colleges and Schools includes Standard 2.7.3 on general education requirements. *The Principles for Accreditation: Foundations for Quality Enhancement* (2010): 17.

liberal arts institutions have extensive requirements). These courses are usually undertaken during the first two years of study, with many institutions mandating completion of a large portion of these courses prior to the pursuit of the academic major or minor. This approach to education reflects very specific historical foundations.

For millennia, education was conducted in the home. Sons were quickly initiated into the world of men and the professions, just as daughters were taught the domestic arts by their mothers. At some point, the system advanced into a more formal system, where professional educators or tutors taught the children of the wealthy or assembled children in small schools that were typically comprised of extended family groups. The Greeks termed these tutors *pedagogues* (meaning “to lead or guide a child”; pedagogues often were slaves who were attached to households with children), the word that has become the technical term in English for education, “pedagogy.”

Most educated persons, apart from the slave-pedagogues, were expected to apply their learning in professions or in their roles as citizens. The trades were given particular knowledge that might advance one’s career as a butcher, a weaver, or a baker, but for a select few, a more elaborate education was viewed as necessary to prepare for public service in particular. This breadth of learning developed into what became termed the liberal arts, which were fairly well codified by the time the Romans had established themselves as the cultural successors of the Greeks.

Seven “arts” or skills dominated the commonly taught core for education, which set the pattern for virtually all higher education in the West. The liberal arts were conceived of as a carefully wrought pattern that progressed deliberately toward the goal of producing rigorous thinkers. The first level of work was called the “Trivium” (the “three roads” or “paths”), which included grammar, rhetoric, and logic; the second level was the “Quadrivium” (the “four roads”), which explored arithmetic, astronomy, music, and geometry.

These two levels were both sequential *and* intentional, the goal being the advancement of higher-level abilities in analysis and thinking. In the Trivium, grammar sought to prepare students to understand how language works; logic (also called “dialectic”) helped students learn to think in disciplined (“rational”) ways; rhetoric sought to combine the two skills in the communication of thought from one person to another. As those skills were mastered, the Quadrivium refined how students understood the larger

world, using mathematics as the primary tool for ordering and analyzing the universe. The roads did not stop with the Quadrivium, however, as students who mastered both paths to learning were then allowed to pursue the highest aims for thinkers (at least until the Enlightenment): philosophy and theology (which was sometimes called “the queen of the sciences”).

The Enlightenment (post-Descartes, ca. 1637) began to detach theology from the liberal arts (viewing it as unworthy of rational inquiry equivalent to the empirical pursuits of modern science), but both the Industrial Revolution and the rising pragmatism that resulted from the advent of new technologies began the final process of undermining liberal arts education. The Enlightenment removed the first term from the idea of “Christian liberal arts education” while the narrower demands of technical education have stripped away the second term, leaving us with specialized professional education standing as the dominant form of education in the third millennium of the Christian era. Rampant empirical skepticism undermined liberal arts education in Europe, while the American love of practicality has circumscribed its dominance in the United States.

Most American institutions, however, have retained some of the nomenclature of the liberal arts in two of the primary undergraduate degrees conferred by most universities, the “bachelor of arts,” which emphasizes languages, arts, or humanities, and the “bachelor of science,” emphasizing mathematics or science, both of which are general degrees that prepare students for more specialized study in graduate or professional schools.²

II. THE CHALLENGE OF THE SELF

A foundational contrast inherent between a pagan worldview and a Christocentric one is the problem of egocentrism. Even the pagans understood the dangers of egocentrism, and while their educational system did not include anything the early church would recognize as sound theology or orthopraxy, it did at least underscore the idea that heads, hands, and hearts were somehow united in the living out of the worthwhile life.

Higher education can devolve into a kind of self-guided intellectual

² In the United States, almost all institutions of higher learning prior to the Civil War were established to be Christian colleges built on the liberal arts. From Harvard (whose original motto was *Veritas Christo et Ecclesiae*, “Truth for Christ and Church”) to most of the smaller colleges that dotted the American frontier, the history of American higher education is impossible to write without noting the enablement of Christian sects and churches. Indeed, Brown University and the University of Chicago both began as Baptist colleges. For a helpful survey of Christian education in the United States, see William C. Ringenberg, *The Christian College: A History of Protestant Higher Education in America*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2006).

buffet, where universities provide a range of courses, consumed according to student tastes and preferences, with only a few cohesive requirements in the chosen major's subject providing substance. Thus, the goal of post-secondary work is the completion of a degree, typically one that prepares students for gainful employment; certain majors are "pre-rich" (pre-med, pre-law, engineering, and business), and the rest are "pre-service" (religion, social work, education, and psychology) or "pre-figuring out what to do with one's life." This exaltation of personal preference is the outgrowth of a shift in how the self is viewed in a post-Enlightenment philosophy of education.

For millennia, though, education was thought of as a formative process, the goal of which was *education for the sake of education*. The fruit of such labor was the students themselves—thinking persons in possession of high-level skill sets that could serve society ("the state"). Education produced abilities, not merely credentials for professional fields or the workforce. This process conveyed a moral force, which included a kind of soul formation. Developing students' minds was never detached from the development of character or the cultivation of the spirit.

The liberal arts were "liberal," then, in that they sought to free—"liberate"—individuals from their own selfish desires and delusions.³ Fully educated persons were liberated from the delusion of viewing themselves as the centers of the world and the ultimate arbiters of right and wrong. The connection between liberal arts education and citizenship is quite strong; indeed, the "liberal" part of the term comes from the Latin term for "free" (*liber*), as the skills in thinking, communication, and leadership skills acquired through such an education were thought best for "free" men, not slaves. Through extensive readings, memorization, and dialogues, these sons of freemen were prepared for duties as citizen-leaders. Foremost among these skills were those of critical thinking and rational analysis, with an emphasis on the kinds of application that might be communicated to others. Further, a life of active reflection was encouraged, where one

³ Marcus Aurelius, the Stoic philosopher, battled the idea of the selfish, pleasure-seeking ego in his influential treatise *Meditations* (trans. George Long; Mineola, NY: Dover, 1997), which became standard reading for young scholars. More recently, in 1946, Jose Ortega y Gasset wrote, "General education means the whole development of an individual, apart from his occupational training. It includes the civilizing of his life purposes, the refining of his emotional reaction, and the maturing of his understanding about the nature of things according to the best knowledge of our time" (quoted in Henry Rosovsky, *The University: An Owner's Manual* [New York: Norton, 1990], 100). Rosovsky himself spends a great deal of time exploring the value of humility, humanity, and humor in liberal education, traits that he learned from John Buchan (101).

would not merely react to the events of the day but would learn from them through rigorous pondering and hindsight analysis.

Learning was therefore a steady stream from the past to the future, with citizen-scholars standing in the midst of the flow, at once receiving the best thoughts of those who had gone before them and also transmitting those thoughts to present circumstances that would shape the future. This passing on of knowledge between generations and the compendious nature of the knowledge that was available was summed up in a term that the Greeks often employed: *enkuklios paideia*, the circle of scholars that yielded a fulsome knowledge base that was communal in nature and compendious in scope (this is where the English word “encyclopedia” derives its name).

This pagan system sought to produce citizens (for advanced education was reserved for those who would lead) who renounced the self and understood their lives in terms of duty to the state. By exploring the Trivium and Quadrivium, learners came to understand the world in which they lived and their place in it. Their outcomes were located in the city, as they became—at least ideally—citizens whose lives were dedicated to placing the needs of the city and, by extension, the culture above their own desires. While the examples of this attention to civic duty are manifold, there is no better exemplar than that of Aeneas, the hero of Virgil’s seminal *The Aeneid* (ca. 29 BC) who is tempted to follow his own desires with Dido, the Queen of Carthage, but who finally renounces the temptation to lead another city and moves forward to found Rome itself. The term that dominates his final resolution is “duty-bound,” an assertion of the selfless renunciation of the internal for the external.⁴ The ultimate object of this duty is the state, the polis, and its composite element, the family.

The ultimate goal of education in this view is outside of the individual self, not internal to it. As John Adams wrote to his son, who would likewise become president of the United States, “You will ever remember that all the end of study is to make you a good [m]an and a useful [c]itizen.”⁵ An educated citizenry meant a potent, stable state, or as Will Durant once observed, “How can a society be saved, or be strong, except it be led by its wisest men?”⁶ This view of a well-rounded education reflects a view that is hostile to the passions and self-centeredness of the ego.

⁴ *The Aeneid*, trans. Robert Fitzgerald, in *The Norton Anthology of World Literature*, vol. A, 2nd ed. (ed. Sarah N. Lawall and Maynard Mack; New York: Norton, 2002), 1097.

⁵ Quoted in Michael J. Hillyard, *Cincinnatus and the Citizen-Servant Ideal: The Roman Legend’s Life, Times, and Legacy* (Xlibris, 2001).

⁶ Will Durant, *The Story of Philosophy* (New York: Pocket Books, 1961), 8.

The post-Enlightenment shifts in the philosophical underpinnings of general education curricula, along with the progressive educational movements of the post-World War II era, shifted the emphasis to one of particular subjectivity. The goal in perhaps most secular universities is the emphasis on the self, the “freeing” of the individual from the “hegemonies” of authority structures, institutions, and traditions. This view of education is relentlessly horizontal. It speaks frequently about the individual’s relationship with the earth (from whence we came as products of blind chance or nature), our relationships with each other (from whence we gain our identities and intersectional “value” as humans), and our relationships with ourselves (from whence we gain our own “authentic” truth). Sometimes this horizontal perspective reveals itself as naturalism (nature is all there is and all that there ever will be), sometimes it reveals itself as altruism (caring for one another is all that matters), and sometimes it reveals itself as outright solipsism (the world is what I make it out to be because only the self is truly knowable). These presuppositions refuse to look up; they are horizontal. They look to the material world, to others, and within the self to see what they can learn. They refuse to consider revelation, their relationship with the divine, and the possibility of transcendence or eternal answers because they lie outside of this mortal plane.⁷

III. THE CHRISTIAN ANTIDOTE: INTELLECTUAL EMPATHY

Educational philosophies that elevate the state, the self, or pragmatic career preparation all elide the primary goal of a Christ-centered education: loving God with our whole being *and* loving others as we love ourselves. Approaches to education that aim at practicality or the exclusion of theology risk the creation of “men without chests,” to use C. S. Lewis’s term.⁸ In the twentieth century, Martin Luther King Jr. put an even finer point on this: “The function of education, therefore, is to teach one to think intensively and to think critically. But education which stops with efficiency

⁷ An example of this viewpoint can be found in the summer 2015 issue of *Stetson University Magazine*, the alumni and friends publication of Stetson University. The issue focused on the great questions of life, the pursuit of meaning that could be engaged in while attending the university. In response to the question, “What is the meaning of life?,” the answers from the community were quite revealing about the foundations of the university’s curricula. The magazine issue carried precious little that was vertical in perspective. There was nothing about transcendent love. There was nothing about a relationship with God. As would be expected, this lack of a Christocentric worldview reflects the eventual nihilistic or egocentric worldview that now dominates Western higher education.

⁸ C. S. Lewis, *The Abolition of Man, or Reflections on Education with Special Reference to the Teaching of English in the Upper Forms of Schools* (San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 1974).

may prove the greatest menace to society. The most dangerous criminal may be the man gifted with reason, but with no morals.”⁹ Earlier, in the seventeenth century, John Milton described the purpose of education as being “to repair the ruins of our first parents by regaining to know God aright, and out of that knowledge to love him, to imitate him, to be like him, as we may the nearest by possessing our souls of true virtue, which being united to the heavenly grace of faith makes up the highest perfection.”¹⁰ In an age where the news is filled with evidence of incredible moral failures among leaders, including the best-educated ones, the need for a model of education that includes ethics rooted in spiritual development is abundantly clear.¹¹

Christian colleges have a unique opportunity to engage in such an approach to education that employs a specific worldview rooted in both Scripture and the extensive Christian Intellectual Tradition. One of the reasons that early Christian educators embraced the historic liberal arts (and continue to) is because of the resonance of the problem of the self and its evidence in Paul’s writings about the struggles between the old, sinful self and the new, redeemed self (Rom 6:5–7; Eph 4:22; Col 3:9), as well as Peter’s words about the same struggle with the sinful self:

Therefore, with your minds ready for action, be sober-minded and set your hope completely on the grace to be brought to you at the revelation of Jesus Christ. As obedient children, do not be conformed to the desires of your former ignorance. But as the one who called you if holy, you also are to be holdy in all your conduct; for it is written “Be holy, because I am holy” (1 Pet 1:13–16).

Post-Enlightenment views of religion and other institutions or schools of thought inverted the goal of liberation to one of the individual rebelling against external forces and exalting internal sufficiency. For these thinkers, to be liberal was to be free from the superstitions of outdated forms of

⁹ “The Purpose of Education,” *Maroon Tiger*, January-February 1947, 10, <https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/king-papers/documents/purpose-education>.

¹⁰ John Milton, “On Education,” in *The Major Works, including Paradise Lost* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 277.

¹¹ For an excellent collection of essays on this topic, see Douglas V. Henry and Michael D. Beaty, eds., *The Schooled Heart: Moral Formation in American Higher Education* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2007).

thought and repressive forces; the individual is liberated *from* religion (or any other form of power over the individual) to live as one sees fit within one's own understanding and reckoning.¹² In the Christian view, though, one is liberated from the *self* to the exaltation of God. Rightly understood, a Christian glorification of God over the self is tied more closely with the historical basis of the liberal arts than is the exaltation of the self over and against God.

Perhaps no idea is more crucial to understanding a specifically Christian approach to general education than that of the Great Commandment. In Matt 22:36–40, an expert in the law addresses Christ as a pupil would:

“Teacher, which command in the law is the greatest?”
 [Jesus] said to him, “Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the greatest and most important command. The second is like it: Love your neighbor as yourself. All the Law and the Prophets depend on these two commands.”

Christ calls attention to a correct self-view in his response, noting that we are to love God and love neighbors, both thoroughly and humbly. These words have in mind another foundational statement: “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom” (Ps 111:10), which is echoed in “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge” (Prov 1:7). Just as the Great Commandment advances the OT *shema* (Deut 6:4) and Lev 19:18 into an assertion of priority that emphasizes God and others, the roots of intellectual humility likewise are rooted in an OT view of God as the sovereign creator over all things.

In the gospel configuration, the Great Commandment is not merely about the individual and God; it is linked inexorably with fellow persons. To put it in modern theological terms, the essence of Christ's command is the simultaneous, coequal importance of both *orthodoxy* (“right thinking” about God) and *orthopraxy* (“right action” toward fellow persons). The distinctive mission of Christ-centered higher education should then see the general education program as a primary site of implementation,

¹² This contrast seems to echo hauntingly the words of Satan in Gen 3:4–5: “No! You will certainly not die,’ the serpent said to the woman. ‘In fact, God knows that when you eat it your eyes will be opened and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.’” This same thought underlies the sentiment that Isaiah once offered: “We all went astray like sheep; we all have turned to our own way.” (53:6).

coherence, and community.

For a Christian liberal arts core curriculum to be faithful to the Great Commandment, it must find coherent ways to inculcate a love for God and for others. This does not mean watering down the academic coursework or content, but rather shifting the goal from the exaltation of the self to the exaltation of God. One of the best ways to do this is by creating a sense of a communal commitment to viewing learning itself as a devotional activity. Study is one means through which we may learn about God and his ways. This was, in fact, the primary methodology of Christian higher education for the past thousand years. The liberal arts were viewed as critical to building a foundation to proper thinking about God (theology). The Christian humanism of Desiderius Erasmus (1466–1536), Roger Ascham (ca. 1515–1568), Edmund Spenser (ca. 1552–1599), Francis Bacon (1561–1626), Isaac Newton (1643–1727), and so many others viewed all education as pointing to the divine order built into the universe. All truth, in this view, is God’s truth because he is the author of all that is true; thus, the pursuit of truth is the pursuit of God. The fullest fruit of this view toward education is the expansive Christian Intellectual Tradition, which may be broadly examined throughout the core curriculum.

Because the Great Commandment calls us to live in community with others, to love in ways that bring glory to God, a Christ-first, coherent core curriculum must provide students with a passion for loving their neighbors. Once we have humbled ourselves before God as the start of wisdom, exalting him as Lord of all, we are to serve humbly. This means employing fully integrative service learning and other kinds of applied learning in support of other assessments of student learning. Christian learning communities should emphasize a sense of connectedness among persons because the intellectual humility of understanding our proper place in the universe overflows into how we live in community, through intellectual empathy. Intellectual empathy allows the individual to not only serve others but to serve with a particular point of view: the shared human experience.

It is shared because there are many common experiences: love, loss, death, pain, suffering, and joy. While different worldviews propose ways of handling these issues, Christianity places an emphasis on how these things function in community. Emphasizing the shared nature of humanity, the NT in particular underscores the importance placed on sharing in the context of community. For example, Paul speaks in Phil 4:13–14 to his

reliance on God but includes his joy at the support of the church: “I am able to do all things through him who strengthens me. Still, you did well by partnering with me in my hardship.” This is a classic path forward to empathy: connecting with others in times of need and “partnering” in that solution.

Through a broad range of readings, reflections, and discipleship, students can be led to think empathetically about their fellow creatures. A strong sense of shared humanity allows us to feel more deeply, love more authentically, and serve more passionately. Empathy is certainly not a characteristic reserved exclusively for Christians,¹³ but when combined with the gospel’s clarion call to care for the lost, the oppressed, and the downtrodden, it results in a special sensitivity to the world.

This is particularly true when academic work is connected to real-life applications in highly integrated, intentional service learning. Service learning is an academic overflow of content into praxis, helping students not only to integrate their work intellectually but to understand it more intimately as they find ways to use their work in the service of others. This strong, clear connection cultivates a clear understanding that content is not merely a passive abstraction but rather a powerful tool for serving and understanding others.

A similar application of intellectual empathy comes as the variety of courses undertaken introduce students to a variety of ways of thinking professionally about the world. Understanding different academic disciplines not only allows students to encounter areas of study they have not yet experienced (and therefore have not yet considered pursuing professionally) but also to learn a more well-rounded approach to problem-solving. Intellectual empathy includes the human equation in thoughts. It accounts for the effect of decision-making on others. An example of this would be in the negative, where the brutalist architectural movement ignored the human element of life in community and produced structures that have allegedly created stress and even mental illness in occupants of the structures.¹⁴ An architect who approaches such a design project with Christ-first intellectual empathy should design projects with a deep emphasis on connectedness

¹³ Indeed, a kind of empathy is often cited as one of the primary results of a secular liberal arts education. See, for example, Howard W. Figler et al., *Keys to Liberal Arts Success* (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 2002), 10.

¹⁴ For various examples of this brutalist architecture, see several essays collected in Nikos A. Salingaros, *Anti-Architecture and Deconstruction*, 3rd ed. (Wilmington, DE: ISI, 2008).

and community. Furthermore, thinkers should be exposed to other fields so that they can likewise think outside of the proverbial box. For example, when someone studies a controversial topic, it is helpful to be able to think like a scientist to understand the facts of the topic, like an economist to understand the costs of the proposed solutions, like a political scientist to critique how the solutions might play out in the realm of governments, like a sociologist to ponder its human effects on other cultures, and like an ethicist to scrutinize its larger-picture ramifications on creation as a whole. All disciplines are stronger when they have elements from other disciplines in their quiver of analytical and empathetic tools. In a Christian context, this is even more pronounced.

The successful combination of orthodoxy and orthopraxy in a core curriculum that emphasizes intellectual empathy will yield several benefits for the institution. First, it will provide a sense of purpose and cohesion to the program in that courses will fit together (and even overlap) in complementary ways. This clarity of purpose can likewise produce a core curriculum that emphasizes shared experiences among the learning community. By having a strong overriding content in the general education program, both professors and students will be able to have common experiences over the course of the core, providing effective points of reference and teachable moments for their discussions. Finally, a strong core curriculum will allow students the opportunity to pursue a sense of calling for their lives. As students come under the intellectual mentorship of professors and are exposed to a variety of thinkers and academic disciplines, they will be able to learn about previously unknown opportunities for service and employment.

In traditional higher education communities, particularly residential universities, students are embedded in a highly relational context. Their professors are more likely to be available to them and to invest personally in them. Student life and athletics staff are more likely to be engaged in personal cultivation of each student. Even classmates are more likely to be interested in—and opinionated about—the larger questions of life and existence. The deeply layered elements of such communities produce intellectual discipleship that is greater than mere advising, relational connections, or even mentoring. Intellectual discipleship seeks the deliberate development of each student as not merely a person but as a person made in the image of God. Intellectual empathy understands a thorough anthropology that grasps the totality of a person's sinful nature, the need

for personal conversion, and the imperative of pursuing God's calling on one's life.¹⁵

This is the ultimate brilliance of a Christ-first approach to higher education. It avoids the temptation to emphasize one element of the faith to the exclusion of another. Christ has drawn out a "Way" (Acts 9:2) that avoids the path of a grace-free legalism on the right and a Christ-free gospel on the left. This helps to explain why Christian principles have been so closely associated with the intellectual achievements of Western civilization.¹⁶ Indeed, the Christian Intellectual Tradition is one that has advanced human history, economic prosperity, cultural enrichment, and theological sophistication unlike any other single tradition, as it emphasizes shared humanity and a God-glorifying mindset.

IV. PRACTICAL CHALLENGES TO A GENERAL EDUCATION CORE ROOTED IN INTELLECTUAL EMPATHY

In our own era, with its increasingly hostile views of faith, there are many challenges to the cultivation of Christ-centered intellectual humility through the core curriculums. First is the notion that anything "Christian" is automatically intellectually defective because of its basis in faith. This view is particularly popular among secular critics of Christianity, many of whom follow the thoughts of either Karl Marx, who viewed religion as "the opiate of the people," or Sigmund Freud, who viewed religious fervor as a form of mental illness. The influences of Marx and Freud are manifold in the academy, and the ramifications of this kind of thought are felt even within some Christian college faculty members, who feel ashamed to be labeled as believers because of the largely secular academic guild's distaste for things faith-related. Likewise, some critics view the implicit and explicit authority of religious orthodoxy to be hostile to free thought,

¹⁵ While I do not have space in this article to address the role of student life in the core curriculum, general education programs should have a clear, strong partnership with the co-curricular elements of the university, especially in a traditional, residential setting. Wise campus leaders will find ways to interleaf the work of residence life, student leadership development, and other units on campus with the work of the academic classroom curriculum. This is, of course, an extension of the view that a Christian university should be a learning community that considers all of its members as partners in the educational enterprise.

¹⁶ This view of the West has been outlined clearly in works such as Philip J. Samson's *6 Modern Myths about Christianity and Western Civilization* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2001). Indeed, even secularists admit this debt to Christianity; see John D. Steinrucken, "Secularism's Ongoing Debt to Christianity," *American Thinker*, July 30, 2010, http://www.americanthinker.com/2010/03/secularisms_ongoing_debt_to_ch.html; and Camille Paglia, "Religion and the Arts in America," *Arion* 15, no. 1 (Spring/Summer 2007): 1–20, <https://www.bu.edu/arion/files/2010/03/Paglia-Religion-and-the-Art.pdf>.

believing that any authority outside the individual thinker is intrinsically bogus and coercive.

The antidote to these criticisms is the recovery and extension of the vast Christian Intellectual Tradition and the expression of it with intellectual humility. In every academic discipline, it is impossible to create an honest survey of the discipline's history without an examination of the influence of Christian thought and worldview. In literature, for example, the entire practice of literary criticism would be impossible without the work of Augustine, Dante, Chaucer, Spenser, Shakespeare, Milton, Johnson, Eliot, and an almost endless stream of devout believers whose creative works and hermeneutical discourses have built Western literary thought.

A second challenge to a rigorous Christian liberal arts core curriculum comes in the form of degree compression—the three-fold challenge of alternative credit completion, reduced hours for undergraduate degree completion, and the increased hours for professional academic majors. The second half of the twentieth century saw an explosion of methods by which college credits could be earned outside of the traditional college classroom. Some approaches allowed high school students to “double-dip” their coursework, earning college credit for their high school courses; others allowed standardized examinations to provide credit; and still others allow unparalleled mobility of credit hours, taking courses at a variety of institutions (including online institutions) and transferring them to their “primary” institution. Rare is the student who completes every single college credit through the traditional offerings of a campus. These options mean that students are increasingly bypassing the traditional general education program. For a Christian college, this is particularly challenging because it also means that these students are missing out on the very courses that are often the institution's most distinctive courses in terms of mission and content.

Not only are students bypassing the traditional core, but a third challenge is that degree requirements have been eliminating the space once held by general education classes. The number of credit hours required for the completion of undergraduate degrees has been declining for the past few decades. Not long ago, it was common for degrees to require 128 semester hours of work, but the threshold is now moving to 120 hours. Additionally, many legislators are pressing for three-year baccalaureate degrees. While three-year degrees are nothing new, current proposals often have students completing a portion of their college courses during their

high school career and heading to college with most, if not all, of their freshman courses completed.¹⁷ To ensure this possibility, these legislators have strongly encouraged institutions either to trim their degree hour counts or to find ways to credential other experiences as course-bearing.

A fourth and final challenge is that the expansion of the technical content of many fields has increased the number of credits required for the completion of the major requirements for the degree. This often stands at odds with the previous issue of degree compression. Demanding fields such as engineering, nursing, business, and even the fine arts have ramped up the rigor of their program contents, particularly in fields that require a licensure examination.

Christian colleges must be proactive in dealing with these four challenges to the core curriculum. The marketplace of higher education carries with it very real forces that must be recognized and met. The forbearance of all alternative credit is unrealistic for most institutions; it is difficult to maintain degree completion totals that are out of step with other universities in the same market. Likewise, it is impossible to resist accreditor mandates that enlarge academic major requirements. Campus leaders must find ways to protect the essential elements of the general education program, as well as the co-curricular activities that undergird the first year of college for traditional students. Additionally, institutions must ensure that a vigorous general education program is intact for nontraditional programming, ensuring that those programs, especially degree-completion programs, contain mission-specific content that reflects the Christian mission of the university, including intellectual empathy.

V. CONCLUSION

When the Spanish conquistadors encountered the Aztec civilization (ca. 1520), they stumbled across a religious system that was built on human sacrifice. During festivals, sacrificial victims were taken to the tops of the stepped pyramids that anchored cities, and priests with obsidian knives cut out the hearts of the still-living persons. The hearts continued to beat, so that the excoriated victims lived long enough to behold their own hearts in the bloody hands of the priests. Excoriated bodies cannot, of course, live for long; they die quickly and begin the process of decay.

¹⁷ I have written about my own experiences in graduating with my undergraduate degree in three years of coursework: "Confessions of a 3-Year Degree Student," *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, November 4, 2009, <http://chronicle.com/article/Confessions-of-a-3-Year-Deg/49001>.

Similarly, challenges to the general education program threaten to excoriate higher education, leaving it without a heart and heading toward eventual decay. Christian institutions should be about the business of intellectual encouragement and the development of students' hearts, souls, and minds. Rightly conceived, the core curriculum should reflect the very heartbeat of the institution: a vision for how we might love God and love others with every aspect of our beings.

Intellectual empathy operationalizes the love of God as the love of others. It changes how we view others and ultimately how we view the world and our work within the created world. It cultivates people who are more than selfless; they are truly whole as their worldview encompasses a reality that lies beyond the individual, a worldview rooted in the fear of God and the service of others. Intellectual empathy underscores that distinctive spirit of Christ-first higher education.

