

99400

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Essay #2: What is the contribution of a Christian liberal arts education to your fulfillment of your vocation?

In *Educating for Shalom: Essays on Christian Higher Education*, Nicholas Wolterstorff (2004) explores the purposes of a Christian liberal arts education. He explains the value of such an education as follows:

Think for a moment of the works of high culture that human beings have produced down through the ages: works of natural science, of philosophy, of theology, of music, of painting, of poetry, of architecture. The image that immediately comes to my mind is that of a mighty stream, ever widening as it approaches us, flowing down from the distant past. I suggest that the best way to think of a liberal arts education is to think of it as education designed to enable the student to interact fruitfully with that stream... When science opens our eyes to the astonishing pattern of creation, and when music moves us to the depths of our being, then we experience some of the shalom that God intends for us. (29)

The image of the liberal arts as helping to expose college students to a beautiful stream of human culture and productivity is a compelling one. If students engage in an overly technical education, without exposure to the broader stream that Wolterstorff describes, they will be limited in their capacity to understand the world and perhaps to make a useful contribution to it. As a Christian thinker, Wolterstorff ties this all to God's creation; we are to see human culture and creativity as a fulfillment of the Creation Mandate that God gave to Adam: that he should rule over the earth and be fruitful and multiply. While literal in nature, this is also a command to create human

culture, with the imagination and creativity that God gave to people when He created them in His image.

This answers one part of the question of what a liberal arts education is for. It does not, however, explain how the Christian liberal arts can or should help to shape a student's sense of vocation. As Bruce Lockerbie (2005) writes in *A Christian Paideia: The Habitual Vision of Greatness*:

We want every believing student in the Christian school to come to the point of maturity that asks, What does this lesson say to me? What is its truth applied to my life? If the lesson is about the environment, the teaching is not successful unless a student is willing to stoop over and pick up a piece of litter—even someone else's trash. Merely to know that God has mandated the care of His creation isn't enough... We need to understand and apply that knowledge as action. So then, the integration of faith and learning must become the integration of faith and action: thinking-and-acting like a Christian must become the primary outcome toward which our schools are aimed. (54)

This strong statement expands upon the earlier emphasis on the liberal arts as an invitation to engage human culture and add to it. Rather, a liberal education ought to have what the Greeks called a *telos*, or a goal. For Christian institutions, this goal should be—as Lockerbie asserts—students who are Christlike as they apply their learning to the real world.

With this framework for the purpose of a liberal arts education, I can consider how it is shaping my own vocation as a storyteller and storycrafter. This vocation has been shaped by my experiences in my communications courses, yes, but also by my engagement with Wheaton College's student theater group, Workout. There are many *kinds of stories* that can be told, and equally many *ways to tell them*. A Christian liberal arts education has shaped my view of both of these. First, in terms of the kinds of stories that can be told, a broad exposure to theater and literature has helped me to appreciate the elements of narrative and storyline. Simply put, everyone loves a good story. This is because the grand story that we inhabit as human

beings—creation, fall, and redemption—is ultimately a good story, albeit filled with twists and turns, gains and losses, suffering and joy. A good story doesn't shy away from the truth, but rather tells it fully. Second, I have learned a great deal through my education about the ways in which to tell good stories. They should be truthful (as already mentioned), but also engaging and compelling. And they should be told with an eye toward redemption. As Wolterstorff explains,

We are more than heralds. We are also agents. We do the work of him who in turn did the work of his Father. We heal and we liberate. We struggle for shalom in all dimensions of human existence... What does this have to do with the Christian college? A great deal. The most fundamental thing to say about the Christian college is that it is an arm of the body of Christ in the world... the Christian college cannot neglect the suffering of humanity.  
(33)

Thus in my storytelling and storycrafting, I seek to not only speak the truth, but also to address the suffering of humanity. Often this involves telling stories that haven't been fully told, or helping those without a voice tell their story. For example, this summer I hope to work with underrepresented incoming college students to help them to learn theater as a means to find their own voices and ultimately tell their stories. I believe that by doing so, I am taking part in God's redemptive work to make people healed and whole. To me, this is the way that my experiences in a Christian liberal arts institution have shaped my vocation.

### Works Cited

Lockerbie, Bruce D. (2004). *A Christian Paideia: The Habitual Vision of Greatness*. Colorado Springs, CO: Purposeful Design Publications.

Wolterstorff, Nicholas. (2005). *Educating for Shalom: Essays on Christian Higher Education*. Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eedrmans.