

A Calling to Talk and Libraries

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The idea of the university was discovered by Christians, who needed places in which to talk about their Book, to discover the ramifications of its teachings for the life of the world, and to articulate with greater clarity the lines between truth and error. Christians knew from the start that the study of their own Book often meant the study of other books as well, that such study was nurtured by communities of students and teachers who could read and talk together about the Book and the books. This was most fitting, because, as Robert Jenson has observed, “We serve a talkative God, who does not even seem to be able to do without a library. In his service, we will be concerned for talk and libraries.”

Christians knew that talk and libraries were ways (for people so gifted) to respond in obedience to the great commandments to love God and neighbor. Talk and books are ways of being tethered to truth. Loving God and neighbor requires knowledge of the truth about God and the truth about the many challenges and opportunities of human experience in the world God has made. The university was originally assumed to be a place in which the diversity of these explorations could be made more fruitful because of the essential unity of truth (that unity accounts for the uni- in university).

But many modern preoccupations and prejudices have put asunder what God had once united. While I know of no institution of higher learning that has changed its name to employ the term “multiversity,” it would be a truer description of how these institutions function. Thanks to the forces of skepticism, specialization, and secularization, the assumptions about God, creation, human nature, history, language, and truth that formed the foundations of Western higher education are all in ruins.

To be fair, the Church must assume some of the blame for this state of affairs. Skepticism about the unity of truth is not hard to find in conservative congregations around the country, which are often as anti-intellectual

as the universities are anti-religious. If academics assume that faith in God is a private matter to be left at home, many Christians see the university only as a place to do evangelism. The idea of Christian scholarship is equally outrageous to both parties.

I meet many students who struggle with keeping their faith intact while in college. There are numerous ministries devoted to encouraging them in that struggle. That encouragement often takes the form of well-crafted arguments defending basic Christian beliefs, and these are obviously valuable resources. They reinforce the foundational convictions on which we all build. But I sometimes wonder if these students might be even more sustained if they had a robust sense of the rich and comprehensive structure of Christian intellectual life which can be erected on those foundations. If the congregations in which they were raised had confidently and expectantly taught and preached and conversed in a way that assumed the unity of all truth, and if they affirmed the value of intellectual vocations, would these students be more likely to deflect skeptical questions about their faith?

The recovery of the convictions that built the Western university is a task for the whole church, for every congregation and Christian family. We can begin by regularly reminding ourselves that the God who saves us is the God who made us and all things, that our message of redemption only makes sense in the context of the bigger story about creation. Our God cares about all aspects of our lives, and thus the renewing of our minds is as needful as the cleansing of our hearts.

Even with these truths confidently affirmed by Christian students, they will still struggle in the secularized multiversity. But their struggle will be assisted by a confidence in the worthiness and importance of their calling as students, equipped with some knowledge of the right questions as well as a godly passion for seeking answers.