

confessions of a core curriculum revisionist

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For twenty-five years I have examined professionally the Reformed literature on Christian education—primary, secondary, and college. It has persuaded me that the Reformed academic community takes seriously the effort to achieve consensus on theological principles which will lead to identifiably Christian practices in education. Some call this a philosophy of Christian education to indicate that beliefs about goals, curriculum, and teaching methodology must all hang together responsibly, with all grounded plausibly in biblical evidence.

What has prompted such a search is not only the Reformed conviction that our theology is relevant to all areas of life, but also that in education the search should result in programs that are not pale imitations of secular practices and priorities. There are probably other matters which have prompted academicians to write and speak on education. I am confessing that these two explain why I have in the past, and now also, enter the dialogue.

For years, I heard theologians and other scholars exhort teachers on the importance of Christian education. They gave me little assistance in bridging the gap between these exhortations and what I was supposed to do as an educator. They never got beyond vague goal talk, couched in hortatory theological concepts like "Kingdom" and "covenant." In the last fifteen years, things have been better, although we still have a

long way to go in linking theory to practice. By now, all but the most impatient or the simplistic recognize that the forging of these links takes time and multiple academic skills. The enterprise takes the talents of the philosopher, the theologian, the psychologist, and more. Each of them has something to add, and none have a monopoly anymore.

Calvin Curriculum Committee

In the mid-sixties, Calvin College officially took note of the fact that consensus did not exist, even though much had been written by individuals. The administration appointed a committee of six faculty members and administrators to compose a document for discussion and adoption by the faculty. The result, after two years of committee work and a year of faculty discussion, was the book *Christian Liberal Arts Education*, published in 1970 and now out of print.

Because of the need to reflect honest differences, committees are not known for producing tightly knit pieces of reasoning. The stronger the different perceptions, the more internally incoherent the pieces and proposals. CLAE turned out to be no exception. Even though the faculty voted to adopt it, the document was not without its detractors, both in print and orally. The more acerbic critiques, and others were more gentle,

include my own contribution in the January, 1975 Dialogue, entitled "Calvin's Core Curriculum: The Rhetoric and the Reality" and an article by alumnus Stephen Krosschell in the Chimes of March 21, 1980.

This is not the place to document the alleged internal inconsistencies of CLAE as an educational treatise. The case need no longer be made, as the Chairman of the Committee and chief writer has gone public with his own dissatisfaction. Nicholas Wolterstorff, in a "Faculty Forum" piece in the Chimes of February 22, 1980, acknowledged that two strands of Reformed tradition were incorporated in the document, and that each would lead to a different, if not conflicting, curricular configuration. He called these the cultural mandate strand and the transformation/liberation strand, and explained that it was the former which governed the committee's curricular means. He then concluded that "we have a good deal of rethinking to do in our curriculum." He appeared then to want to resolve what he called the "deep ambivalence within the Reformed tradition" in favor of the transformation/liberation goal; therefore, he argued for courses on such social issues as warfare, prisons, poverty, pollution, etc. His public utterances and publications since 1980 (Reformed Journal, Dialogue) have reinforced this impression.

Curricular Options

Perhaps it will be helpful to both faculty and students not familiar with the CLAE document to note that the Committee went beyond goal rhetoric and beyond theological affirmations, to curricular options. This is where all serious educational treatises must eventually land. The committee identified two options which were judged inadequate and one that was to be the preferred. The two rejected were identified as Christian options, and their rejection did not imply that they were less Christian. Neither were they incompatible with any theological commitments expressed in the document.

Since the two rejected were important enough for them to consider, and since one of the two seems to me to offer more promise than the one finally accepted, this is the place to summarize the three.

Pragmatist View. This view was characterized by both goal talk and curriculum content identification. In the words of the Committee, "the acquisition of knowledge is to be justified primarily in terms of its utility for the solution of concrete practical problems in contemporary life"(p.40). The curriculum to best accomplish this will "be organized around a series of real problems faced by a learner-problems to him; and whatever knowledge and skills are available in the logically

organized packages offered by the several disciplines must be unpackaged, reorganized, and brought to bear on the solution of significant life problems"(p.41).

Classicist View. Here the Committee was both less clear and less quotable on specific goals and curriculum. They used such goal language as "the aim is the development of a wise and cultured man" and stipulated a general education should be "designed to give the student a conspectus of the main features of human culture" and "give the student some sense of the whole cultural heritage of man"(p.44). When addressing what curriculum content is most suitable, it offered only the clue(and warning) that the content choices" will not be achieved by grouping together a number of specialist courses in different areas. What must be aimed at is not details, not research methods, not technical discussions, but rather the broad patterns and structures to be found in the subject matter under consideration"(p.44). These clues were supplemented with comments about the respective merits of the humanities and natural sciences, but not much more that might help answer the question of the content and organization of subject matter.

Advocates of each of these two views exist on the faculty, then and now, and legitimate objections may be raised as to the accuracy or fairness of their descriptions. That is a matter I will not pursue, as the Committee used these two as little

more than foils for their preferred view. Each of the above was declared to contain elements" which deserve our assent" or were "enormously attractive." but neither was acceptable "as a whole"(emphasis in original).

Disciplinary View. Here the Committee gave a lengthy description and defense. The description of its goal talk and its curriculum content preference are captured in the following: "The primary focus of a Christian liberal arts education should be on teachers and students together engaging in the various scholarly disciplines, directed and enlightened in their inquiries by the Word of God"(p.47). This pursuit of the goal of engaging in the discipline was joined with the description of a discipline as a "disinterested(emphasis in original) theoretical study of some aspect or segment of reality"(p.49). Elaborations of these key assertions and their defense take many pages and are too numerous to do justice to here.

Detours and Side Roads

Debates and discussions since then have taken many twists and turns, much of the time going far afield from these options posed by the Committee. A call back to these options in further debates would do much to give focus to what otherwise seems like either empty rhetoric or personal preference and guarding

of present turf. Public faculty debates on internationalizing the curriculum and critiques of the present core never referred to these options, which seems to me to do a disservice to the deliberations undertaken by the Committee. Particularly amazing was the resurrection of the liberal arts vs. professional studies issue, as if that were the core curriculum design issue. Professional programs have been legitimized in a separate document, and the connection with core is only that some professional programs (like teacher education) do allow as compromises the substitution of some core requirements with professionalized courses.

Most recently, and even less enlightening, has been the debate in *Reformed Journal* and in *Dialogue* about who is veering "left" and "right" on political and social issues or who is conservative or liberal. It is unenlightening because even though the presumed announced context is curriculum, the rhetoric is all on politics, with scarcely a reference to what this means for curriculum. Quite apart from the question of whether or not this debate is edifying (and I believe it is not), it is distracting the academic community from a reconsideration of the three curriculum models competently described in CLAE. Until someone comes up with a fourth, we will need to reexamine these to discover what core curriculum each entails and which is the most theologically defensible for general

education.

Let me guess that if the "lefts" among us follow the implications of their rhetoric, both political and goal talk, they would align themselves with the model labelled as pragmatist. Perhaps that is what makes the "rights" uneasy. They sense that both the classicist and disciplinary models are in jeopardy, because both are out of tune with the revisionists who challenge both the status quo core and the theoretical defense of the disciplinary model, which the status quo approximates.

Momentum for Core Revision

Should both sides openly admit this as underlying their concern, I would be among the revisionists. I have long held that both the theological chapters of CLAE(e.g., Chapter II) and the goal statements sprinkled throughout chapter III align most consistently with the pragmatist model. I thus would join my colleagues in creating, slowly but surely, for each of the segments of the core, a series of requirements based on it.

The momentum for core revision in this direction was begun, perhaps unwittingly, in CLAE itself. I will mention three items, two of which have found root in the curriculum and one which remains only a recommendation made by the Committee.

The first is Christian Perspectives on Learning(CPOL), an

interdisciplinary course offered every Interim for core credit. Proposed by the Committee, it was adopted and continues to this day, even though it is out of tune with the disciplinary model.

The Committee also proposed the "Interim Term," specifically nothing that it would be the place to offer "a wide variety of new type courses"(p.96) and identifying interdisciplinary courses as an example. A quick look at both the topics and course descriptions of Interim offerings over the past few years reveals that over one third are aligned most consistently with the pragmatist model. This suggests that many professors conceive of this model as good Christian higher education, although the present structure of Interim rarely allows them to count it as core. Furthermore, it suggests that were the college to accept the pragmatist model as its parallel or even preferred way to meet core, many professors stand ready, having already acquired experience in constructing such courses.

The third item in the report, never administratively pursued, consists of repeated recommendations that two or more departments be asked to explore the feasibility of a joint course designed for the general college student(p.80, 81, 84).

Since 1970, momentum for core revision has been building, largely in the form of repeated attempts by individuals to alter

the tone of our goal rhetoric. Prominent in these efforts has been Nicholas Wolterstorff, who has voiced his opinions both in faculty meetings and in published articles. I am personally impatient with his shifting imagery and his reluctance to readdress the curriculum options he so ably outlined in CLAE. Perhaps he is convinced that goal talk must take root in our minds and hearts before we are ready to readdress the core curriculum options. Perhaps he is correct in saying that first our larger vision of Christian college general education must be debated and restated and reinforced. I will join him in that endeavor if it is only a tactical question of what should predominate in our present dialogue and not an avoidance of the curricular issue.

Straws in the Wind

Before noting some straws in the wind, I suggest one influence we as an academic community should confront. It comes in the form of *Our World Belongs to God* and is subtitled "A Contemporary Testimony." It was given provisional approval by the CRC Synod of 1983 for "submission to the churches for use in worship, education, outreach, and for discussion." Assuming the denomination which owns the college and the theological tradition it espouses should have a

message for us as educators, a dialogue on the educational implications of this contemporary testimony is in order. My admittedly biased reading of its implications suggest what some are now calling praxisoriented, issue-centered curriculum more than a disinterested study of the disciplines. For those who prefer the Greek variant of the word pragmatist, as if it gives the view more acceptability, I can only say that a rose by any other name smells just as sweet.

I conclude with several more straws in the winds of change. Peter De Vos this past fall proposed, and the faculty debated, a radical revision of the Interim offerings. While claiming to remedy various defects of the present Interim, its curricular thrust was to propose the introduction, over a period of years, of "CPOL-like" courses, each of them concerning a serious social-moral issue confronting us as Christians.* Its effect on the core was in the proposal that all students would be required to take three of these. Taken seriously, this would require either additions to existing requirements or substitutions for them.

Advocates of the classicist or disciplinary model have a right to be nervous about this turn of events, despite the ex-Provost's claim that he holds to the disciplinary approach and urges only that this should be "supplemented with something else." The new Provost will probably be a key

figure in the push to explore this something else. Since Provost Van Harn was a member of the original CLAE Committee, he should be the first to admit that this is a return to a consideration of the pragmatist model.

The Chairman of the Interim Committee in faculty debate feared the destruction of the spirit of the Interim. However, the Committee recently encouraged faculty to explore this promised land by inviting faculty to volunteer to join teams on designated topics but, of course, with no promise that these team-taught issue-oriented courses would meet core credit. Without it, such courses would give small aid and comfort to core revisionists like myself and would give the pragmatist cause to continue to languish in the wilderness of idiosyncratic choice by both faculty and students.

I append a final note to those who are wary of these winds of change. Lest those who think that a pragmatist curriculum model for the core signals the demise of the disciplines, I would remind all that, in addition to a general education, every Calvin graduate also should be trained in the disciplines in their major and in electives. The disciplines, both introductions and advanced work, are necessary to a Reformed vision of higher education. About that there is no debate. However, the core's the thing in which we must catch the consciousness of the Kingdom for all young Christians entrusted to our care.

Only the future will reveal whether these straws in the wind will build momentum for official change or whether they will continue to make us only uneasy.

* His list, for the record, is: Hunger, Poverty and Development; Political Oppression: Left and Right; Women's Roles, Needs, Accomplishments; War and Peace in the Nuclear Age; Stewardship of Natural Resources; Technology and the Christian Life; Social Oppression: Racism and Sexism; and CPOL for seniors (in each Department). I applaud them all and the model which most have in common.