

CHRISTIAN LIBERAL ARTS EDUCATION

Virgil Warren, PhD

People have different reasons for getting an education. (a) Education for knowledge is a German emphasis. The goal is accuracy and completeness in any field of study. If anything develops out of that knowledge, well and good; but the stress falls on knowledge for its own sake and the love for learning as such.

What has been a British emphasis is (b) education for culture. The goal consists of fulfilling expectancies associated with a person's position in the social structure. Cultured people should know their way around in the world, be able to converse intelligently about what goes on there, and be able to place themselves and their society in the proper historical niche. The upper classes serve as tradition bearers who give stability to the present social structure. As a primary function, education reinforces social position.

The American distinctive has a stronger element of (c) education for use. This pragmatic emphasis considers knowing information as it pertains to a person's vocation or impacts the "quality of life." It does not mean that everything must be directly usable to be valuable; it means that knowledge is always thought of in connection with practical ends.

Relative to these three standard categories, a Christian liberal arts education is closest to education for use. Its goal is not knowledge for its own sake, nor does it concern itself ultimately with human social agendas, particularly if they reinforce social barriers rather than remove them. Connecting knowledge with use is overridden, however, by connecting knowledge with the Source of what can be studied and his purposes for bringing it into being. Christian education brings in what may be called (d) education for appreciation. It is a God-centered approach that turns education into theology.

A Christian liberal arts education deliberately brings each discipline under the qualifying effects of God's reality and purpose. It assumes a unified "field of knowledge" that leads to integration between disciplines and calls for an interpersonal "centeredness" rather than an impersonal disorientedness. Likewise, it leads to freedom, not by disconnecting people from the rest of what is, but by properly connecting them with it; education prepares them to move freely in conformity to reality. A Christian liberal arts education looks at the disciplines, not in detached and disinterested fashion, but as occasions for involvement with the One who made them possible. That is certainly useful, but more than that it enhances appreciation for the world and its Creator.