

Be Transformed by the Renewing of Your Minds

I was delighted to be asked to speak on the theme of this assembly: Loving God with All Your Mind. That biblical exhortation is closely related to the biblical verse I have chosen for the title of my talk: be transformed by the renewing of your minds (Romans 12:2). The renewing of my mind according to the Christian intellectual and moral tradition—and then relating that tradition to worldly affairs—has been a lifetime pursuit of mine. I am going to have it on my tombstone. It is on the plaque that was given to me when Roanoke College renamed its Center for Religion and Society in my honor.

I am also delighted to speak to this particular group—the Society for Classical Learning—because I have been involved in the Christian classical school movement in Roanoke since the turn of the century, first as a commencement speaker for one of Faith Christian School’s first graduating classes, as a former member of its board, as an ongoing member of one of its committees, and as a friend of headmasters like Sam Cox, Eric Cook, and Peter Baur, and of many faculty, some of whom are here. I am also pleased to note that number of them were and are fellow members of St. John Lutheran Church in Roanoke, Virginia. Some of them even come to my adult Sunday School classes, which signals a great deal of virtue on their part...especially wisdom.

The Problem

In my years of teaching—54 to be exact, I have met way too many faculty at the University of Chicago—in whose neighborhood I lived and taught for 17 years—and at Roanoke College—where I have been for 36 years—who have been brought up Christian but who lost their faith somewhere along the way, primarily in college or graduate school where some compelling secular view of life surpassed their Christian view. Some of those faculty remain friendly to the Christian faith—mainly because of its ethics of love—while others are openly hostile. Ex-Catholics who came of age before Vatican II and ex-fundamentalists are the most cranky. They resist any public role for the faith in education in general and Christian higher education in particular. One of my proudest badges of honor occurred when I was hired by a former Roanoke College

president to help make the Christian heritage of the college more publicly relevant. A short time after my arrival, one of the grumpy ex-Catholics spread the word that I was “the most dangerous man on campus.”

Exceptions to the rule

But another thing I have noticed all these years is that our Lutheran colleges have been blessed by a goodly number of faculty who came out of the Christian Reformed Church, especially its Calvin College. It didn't take me long to figure out that almost all those faculty went to Christian Reformed schools at the elementary and secondary levels, and then proceeded on to Calvin. There they were taught by faculty who had—by virtue of school policy—integrated their Reformed theological vision with the secular field they were teaching. Not only did that faculty have a sophisticated Kuyperian theological worldview, they had also integrated it with the field they were teaching. After four years their undergraduate students were armed with weapons of the spirit—their minds had been renewed by a strong immersion in Christian scholarship—so that when they hit graduate school they not only could smoke out the implicit secular worldview of their erstwhile professors but could also find sophisticated ways to counter it. They survived because they had earlier been taught to “love God with all their minds.” Appropriation of the Christian intellectual and moral tradition was an essential.

Calvin College—and the Reformed tradition—are not the only place where you can learn a sophisticated Christian perspective and engage it with worldly affairs. I was intellectually awakened in a Lutheran college back in the late 50s. A brand new Ph.D. came to teach the required courses in Christian doctrine and Christian ethics. He had us read the reigning neo-orthodox theology in doctrine and Reinhold Niebuhr's *Interpretation of Christian Ethics* in the ethics course. I was swept away by Niebuhr. He showed how the radical ethic of Christian love was relevant—indirectly—to the world of economics and politics. He showed how a Christian biblical anthropology was a lot more plausible than the psychological and sociological schools of the time. It still is! That engagement of the Christian theological and moral tradition with contemporary life touched

me deeply and I have worked at that engagement my whole life....and I am not tired of it yet!

From that awakening I went to the University of Chicago Divinity School where a good deal of that prized engagement was going on. The Div School had just developed what were called “dialogical fields” in which students were required to apply Christian theological principles to the fields of psychology, literature, world religions, and contemporary society. I took the field called “Ethics and Society” and did my dissertation on a Christian critique of four theories of mass society. It exhibited my engagement of Christian theological ethics with the reigning political theories of the time.

So I got my training in Christian faith-learning engagement in a graduate school dominated by liberal theology. The school had a long history of relating Christianity to the process philosophy of Alfred North Whitehead and Charles Hartshorne. As you might guess, Christianity had to accommodate to Whiteheadian philosophy. If the incarnation or resurrection didn’t fit with Whiteheadian metaphysics, so much for those classic Christian doctrines.

But there was a counter-attack going on at that time. More traditional Christians—Lutheran and Reformed (Catholics had not yet arrived at the Div School)—began doing faith-learning engagement with faith (the great tradition of Christian thought) playing a stronger role in the engagement. Indeed, the Reformed wanted to integrate faith and learning so fully that you could talk of a Christian sociology or Christian economics. Lutherans were more dialectical, finding ways that Christian thought and secular claims might converge and diverge, but assuming that there would be no complete integration this side of the eschaton. I found myself operating in a Lutheran manner....and still do, witness a recent book of mine: *Good and Bad Ways to Think of Religion and Politics*. I do not think there is a “Christian politics” or economics.

I have practiced that sort of Lutheran faith-learning engagement my whole life. When I came to Roanoke College many years ago I started a series called the Faith and Learning Series. In it we ask faculty to relate their deepest religious convictions to their teaching and research. We lure them to the lecture by plying

them with a terrific meal and lots of wine and beer. In the many years it has been going there have been only a few stars. Over half the faculty never attend because they have no interest in what we ask them to do. Some have no religious faith and are either apathetic or hostile, Some are pietist Christians who believe that Christianity is purely a religion of the heart...which is expressed on Sunday, not Monday through Friday.

Of those who have accepted the offer to speak, some just want to tell their “spiritual story” and never get around to relating it to their secular field. No one ever asked them about their religious convictions. Others have a woeful command of the faith. They have not had their minds renewed by the great tradition of Christian thought. Thus, they can make only a few connections. They mostly talk about their motivations, not their thinking. Not only have they not gotten a command of the faith, but they have been taught in graduate school to keep their religious convictions out of their secular field of study. The Enlightenment tradition, which reigned in the great universities a couple of generations ago, assumed that religion was irrational and contributed nothing to serious thought. Reason and science were the only sources of reliable knowledge so religion—if you have one—ought to be kept private. The University of Chicago in my day was such a school. The Divinity School, shall we say, was not considered queen of the sciences. Yet, we were doing more interesting things than many students and faculties in the other divisions.

Later in history, those faculty who have been educated in graduate institutions in the post-modern period also were encouraged to keep their secular studies sanitized of religion because it was retrograde: hegemonic, patriarchal, homophobic, and, more recently, transphobic. A few classic Christians, of course, keep their heads down and survive, but have had no chance to relate their Christian perspectives to their field of study. That is forbidden. But, as I said earlier, our Lutheran schools do get a few faculty who went to Calvin and have continued their faith-learning engagement. Also, some graduates of robust Catholic schools have also been encouraged to relate their faith to their learning. They are the stars, but very few in number. The general story is one of failure. The Christian churches have lost many who were brought up in the

church and those who do survive more often than not have weak intellectual formation in the faith and therefore cannot relate faith to their secular field of study. And Roanoke College would not be weaker than most Protestant and Catholic colleges in this regard. Indeed, most of them would not even have anything like the Faith and Learning Lecture/Dinners.

What is Needed and What Christian Classical Schools Can Supply

Why do I tell this story of woe? Because it demonstrates that we need Christian classical schools!!!! These schools—our schools—do precisely what the Christian communities in America need: they arm young Christians with an age-appropriate Christian vision. They give them a rather exalted—yet humble—version of human reason, one that can grasp the good, the true, and the beautiful. They immerse them in an ethos in which important human virtues are practiced and appropriated. And they surround them with teachers and administrators that not only support those positive features, but model and communicate them. We need Christian classical schools!

The Christian Vision

Now I want to unpack the key concepts in that paragraph. First, vision. By that I mean a biblical/theological perspective on reality that is central, comprehensive, and unsurpassable. The great biblical story of redemption from the creation to the eschaton has been reflected on by believing Christians for over two thousand years...and they built on rabbinical thinking of another thousand years or so. Of course, the Bible itself contains profound theological reflection (Gospel of John, Pauline letters) on the startling revelatory events to which the Bible reliably witnesses. The church has built up an incredibly rich and varied intellectual and moral tradition, sometimes called the Great Tradition. (My friend Robert Wilken has made a wonderful contribution to understanding that tradition in his book: *The Spirit of Early Christian Thought: Seeking the Face of God*). That tradition of thought—or vision—is central, comprehensive, and unsurpassable.

Its Centrality

It is central in that it addresses the central questions of life: where did we come from? Who or What threw us into existence? (H.R. Niebuhr's famous question.) What is our nature? What is our great problem, bondage, or illusion? How is that overcome? How are will liberated from that condition? How are we to conduct ourselves? What gives purpose and meaning to our lives? Where are we going? And what is the nature of the Great Beyond in which we live and move and have our being?

The Christian vision offers compelling answers to those questions that we must embed in the minds of our young people. Right now, a particular Christian truth is under huge cultural pressure. That is our nature as created beings. Male and female he created them, and meant them for each other in holy matrimony, with the accompanying summons to multiply and replenish the earth. We cannot avoid taking up this challenge or we shall surely fail in arming our young people with the weapons of the spirit and mind that can withstand the challenges they will meet in college and graduate school, let alone their lives in their worldly vocations where they are called to express their Christian convictions and practices publicly.

Other central Christian teachings are also under severe threat: that Christ is the only way to eternal life; that we are to share the Gospel with those who have not heard it; that our lives are not ours to begin and end as we please; that there are commandments that we are to guide our private and public lives; that there are eternal stakes to how we respond to the Gospel; and that we are to live lives theonomously, not autonomously. I could go on, but you get the point. We need to redouble our efforts to form the minds of our young people in the Christian vision because the culture is increasingly hostile to these central teachings. The vague Judeo-Christian culture—the one I grew up in—that once supported those teachings has dissolved.

Its Comprehensiveness

If the Christian vision is central, it is also comprehensive. This does not mean that it has all the answers to the issues posed by the fields of the natural and

social sciences or the humanities. Nor does it have all the answers to issues raised by politics, economics, sports, and the manifold events of our lives. But we are called to extend the canopy of meaning of the Christian vision over all those areas of life. We try to extend the central meanings to all the peripheries. We are to try to make sense of all of them in the light of the Christian vision. We are to emulate the fine motto of Valparaiso University: In thy light we see light. What a wonderful motto for a Christian school!

Regarding the life of the mind, this effort to apply the comprehensive nature of the Christian vision leads to faith and learning engagement: that which I talked about earlier in my reference to our college's Faith and Learning Lecture/Dinners.

By the way, "faith and learning" are really not the right words. This faulty combination sounds as if faith has no learning and that learning does not involve faith. More accurately, we Christians are talking about a vision of life in which rational reflection on revelation leads to a coherent intellectual and moral vision. Not only that, we believe that the faith built upon that revelation is reasonable, and we use reason to elaborate and extend the meaning of revelation. Nicholas Wolterstorff wrote a book in which he cleverly reversed the famous Kantian argument: Kant argued that religion should be within the limits of reason alone. Wolterstorff countered with: reason operates within the limits of religion alone. In that he meant that reason does not provide its own starting point or set of substantive meanings; it relies upon a grand religious tradition to elaborate its rational understandings. It is not autonomous reason. In the West this means that reason operates within the meaning system of the Christian tradition. Without that tradition it becomes weak and reductive.

On the other hand, fields of worldly learning always have some deep running assumptions that rely on faith rather than demonstrative evidence. Math relies on a faith in the orderliness of the cosmos. Economics relies on the assumption that humans are utility-maximizing creatures. And so on. So one can say that when we do faith/learning engagement we are engaging two different

approaches based on faith, both of which use a lot of reason to elaborate what they have founded on faith.

Christian classical schools, it seems to me, are fully aware of two important truths: first, that reason is not fully autonomous and must be corrected and fulfilled by Christian truth. Second, that reason is not simply technical or utilitarian, that it actually can aspire to the good, the true and the beautiful....and catch wisps of all three through the use of reason. Grammar, dialectic, and rhetoric actually lead somewhere, not to the disintegration of learning. Our schools, it seems, are deeply influenced by the Catholic/Anglican Platonists who surrounded CS Lewis. For them, reason, properly exercised fits and is completed by Christian truth. So...there is a literature, drama, music, science, psychology, and philosophy that are compatible with and fulfilled by Christian truth. The challenge is to find them and work them together creatively.

Big question: how much can we expect of the faculty and students in our schools to teach and learn this sort of faith and learning engagement? When I see how poorly it is done by Roanoke College faculty—all of whom have Ph.D.s—I tend toward despair. But when I look at what is going on at our schools I am encouraged. Faculty and students are encouraged to find that sort of fittingness between faith and learning. Some approaches are perhaps too simple-minded. After all, few faculty have been trained to do this sort of thing. But some approaches are more sophisticated because bright and interested faculty have done this on their own. Then they offer it to students who are nourished by such endeavors.

Perhaps one of the most important challenges a Christian classical school can take up is to help faculty engage in faith and learning engagement. First, of course, faculty have to possess or be trained in a Christian vision that addresses the central questions of life. And then they can be helped in making that vision more comprehensive, embracing the fields of learning we offer at the elementary and secondary levels. Calvin College, for example, has workshops for its college faculty to appropriate a fairly sophisticated Reformed Christian

vision. And then that faculty must work on how that vision relates to their secular field, finally aiming at an integration of the two. So Christian classical schools have to engage in similar training at an appropriate level. If not, they will not succeed in the kind of faith-learning engagement that will train students to critically participate in the college and university education they will soon experience.

Its Unsurpassibility

I have spent a good deal of time on the centrality and comprehensiveness of the Christian vision. Lastly, I want to say a few words about its unsurpassibility for serious Christians. We have wagered our lives that the Christian argument about the meaning and values of life is true. Obviously, that argument is not the only argument around. There are other competing visions.

Perhaps the main competing comprehensive vision is that of evolutionary environmentalism. Those who join it are called to be saviors of the earth, though that means exalting the fecundity of the environment over the fecundity of humans. It tends to value animal life over nascent human life. It promises neither heaven nor hell, but one unfolding impersonal process, one to which the faithful are mystically committed.

That astringent vision is not very attractive. Better to pursue individual happiness liberated from the constraints of traditional religious visions. But that gets lonely quickly, as the growth of loneliness in our society clearly indicates. Suicide—either the quick or slow kind—accompanies that loneliness. One temporary shelter from atomistic existence is identity politics, where one can band together in groups who claim victimization and find meaning in expressing grievances. Other shelters are in resurgent nationalism and populism. To these cohorts politics becomes a substitute religion.

Compared to these, the Christian vision is glorious and alluring. We only have to give our students a thorough education in it. Just think, it has been handed down to us from generation to generation from the apostles to the present day. It has survived and flourished over many movements—Islam, the Enlightenment, Communism, Nazism—that promised to bury it. We must pass

it on so that students can love the Lord with all their minds, which then will not be conformed to this world, but will be transformed by the renewal of their minds.

There is an urgency to our task. What I encountered in college—an intellectual awakening in the Christian faith—and then in graduate school—faith and learning engagement—has to be encountered much earlier, at the high school level. Why? Because the culture of my formative years supported my simple Christian beliefs and values and I could take my time to appropriate and strengthen them. That is no longer the case. The current culture is likely to undermine a simple but intellectually underdeveloped faith.

Ethos and people

I have spent much time on imparting the Christian intellectual and moral vision because that is the focus of our time here. But ethos—the way of life of Christian classical schools—is equally important. Our schools believe in forming students in important virtues—honesty, courage, compassion, respect, modesty, diligence, and genuine piety. One can teach about them, but real formation takes place by repetitive practice so that virtuous behavior becomes second nature to the person. He or she finds satisfaction in exercising those virtues and needs no further external incentives or disincentives.

Such formation cannot happen without a virtuous community. That's where virtuous faculties and staffs come in, led and modeled by the head of school. So Christian classical schools have a great challenge in the area of "hiring for mission." Not only must faculty and staff have a strong commitment to and passible knowledge of the Christian vision, a yearning to engage it with secular learning, classical and Christian virtues, an understanding and commitment to the mission of the school, and also a willingness to pursue all this with meager pay!!!! What a daunting challenge! To do this we must draw from the roughly 20% of the population that is serious about its Christian faith. That's sector of the population from which we draw out students from also.

The departure of the elite....

That challenge is magnified by the slow decrease of those in America who identify as Christians, but even more so by the departure of the elite from the guidance of the Judeo-Christian tradition. Most of us are quite aware that the “commanding heights” of the culture are hostile to the Christian faith—especially its moral vision—and would like to force it out of the public sphere, including education. By “commanding heights” I mean the entertainment and news media, the giant technological conglomerates who dominate the internet, many government bureaucracies, higher education (especially the elite universities), the artistic world, and increasingly big business, which is terrified of offending the politically correct views of the rest of the elite. Think of Starbuck’s irrational response to the mistake of one of its employees.

How did this come to be? After all, the great Christian sociologist, Robert Bellah, argued in his famous book, Habits of the Heart, that America was unusually fortunate in that what he called “biblical virtue” and “republican” virtue combined in American history to provide a coherent guidance system for American life, one that was unusually coherent and dominant in the post WWII years, the ones in which I grew up. The Christian churches were the obvious bearers of biblical virtue while the elite—those especially groomed for public service by the aristocratic families of the Northeast, especially—provided the “republican virtue.” That elite was deeply embedded in mainline Protestantism—the Congregationalists, Presbyterians, Episcopalians, and to some extent the Methodists. Though often only casual practitioners, they were deeply affected by and friendly toward the Christian tradition.

No more. The 21% of the society that make up the elite, what the University of Virginia study of American family cultures calls “engaged progressives,” no longer participate seriously in those mainline traditions. The elite’s secular educations finally weaned them from Christian claims. Now they eschew any transcendent sources of truth and distrust anyone who is guided by them. They believe that those who believe in such retrograde notions should not express them in public life. Keep them private or be punished or ignored. That threat

leads to a lot of self-censuring among Christians. Surprisingly, the elite live rather conventional lives but actively deny the traditional norms that undergird them. Public promotion of those norms would erode their commitment to diversity and inclusivity. Ask Prof Amy Wax of the University of Pennsylvania Law School what happens when one publicly extols the bourgeois virtues that are necessary for any student to get into that elite law school. She almost lost her job by doing so.

This contrast between what the Virginia study calls “the Faithful 20%”—who do believe in transcendent norms for truth and morality—and the “engaged progressives” accounts for a lot of the polarization in our society. A cultural war underlies a political war.

The practical challenges before us:

I have gone into some detail about the current warp of our society because I think it is very instructive for Christian classical schools. Our recruitment must find ways of tapping into that 20% cohort of the faithful. We must find the ways to survive and flourish in an increasingly hostile elite culture. But, above all, we must find ways to arm our students with “weapons of the Spirit”—Christian minds and hearts—that will not only withstand the hostility but engage the larger culture positively on behalf of Christ. It is not time to retreat into enclaves; that is not our mission.

I am convinced that the current trajectory of our confused culture will not be able to withstand the challenges we will face as a country—both internal and external challenges. Our history has been one of religious revivals, the most recent probably being in that post WWII period. We must pray for and await another revival. But we in the Christian classical school movement cannot be passive until that day comes. We must teach and learn and engage.

Practical proposals:

So I will conclude with some practical proposals. They are shaped by my experience with well-prepared orthodox Christian students who have fared well at Roanoke College, which is hardly a robust Christian school. One of those

students was Samuel, the product of a Christian classical school, and one of those was my granddaughter, Linnea, who had mysteriously prepared herself in the Christian faith pretty much on her own. (I think she read all my books!)

So, here are some proposals to form students like Samuel and my granddaughter:

1. We probably need more theological formation—including Christian ethics—for our faculties. My sense is that we have some pretty sophisticated theologians on our faculties already, but that depth and sophistication needs to be broadened. Internal resources can also be supplemented by orthodox theologians from nearby schools and churches.
2. We definitely need practice in faith-learning engagement. How do orthodox Christian theology and ethics relate to historical studies, to English literature, to the natural sciences, to the social sciences, to art, to economics. This is a huge intellectual problem that cannot be avoided. I would not expect a Ph. D. level of faith-learning engagement, but one that at least conveys some capacity for critical participation in the fields of secular learning. We have to avoid the wooden and triumphalist “trumping” of secular knowledge that is characteristic of fundamentalist schools. But we also have to avoid the uncritical capitulation to secular claims characteristic of public and many private schools. (Story of Sam M. at Roanoke College)
3. It will be important to focus on Christian ethics, especially Christian sexual ethics, which revolve around the Christian teaching on marriage. The area of sexuality and sexual ethics is where the Christian faith and ethic are being most sharply challenged by the secular elite. Most colleges—except for robustly Christian ones—assume—and even tacitly encourage—sexual promiscuity. The best they can do is offer what I call the “public health ethic,” i.e., assume the students are like rabbits so the most we can do for them is to protect them from each other by encouraging “safe sex.” In the classroom students will meet the assumption—no argument for it needed and no argument against it allowed—that gay marriage is just as valid as heterosexual marriage. That pre-marital sex is perfectly OK as long as it is consensual. That the nuclear family is one among

many configurations. That so-called “reproductive rights” are sacrosanct. That we should be able to end our lives when we wish. That there are no significant differences between the sexes....whatever differences there are are socially constructed, generally to the benefit of straight, heterosexual men. That transgenderism is chic.

Christian young people who are well-equipped with Christian teaching and formation can survive all this with their ethics intact, but they have to be well-prepared, not only to resist the darker parts of campus life but to find companions who will support them. Perhaps they can even find a professor or two who might privately agree with them.

I have assumed here that most of our students will not be going to robustly Christian colleges and universities. If they do consider going to Christian colleges, more power to them.

4. We need to teach them the difference between benign and malignant forms of “diversity” and “multiculturalism.” It is no secret that “diversity” and “inclusion” are the god-words of the culture over which the secular elite preside. They are omnipresent and seemingly omnipotent. They trump everything. But they are fuzzy and our students need some clarity about them.

Christians certainly want to prize racial, ethnic, and economic diversity in our schools, and in our society. We ought to respect and learn about other cultures at home and abroad. Such diversity is God’s gift to us. When it was time for graduate school I wanted to go to Chicago and escape the mono-cultural background from which I came. I wanted to engage blacks, Hispanics, the many European cultures of Chicago. All that is wholesome, it seems to me.

But we don’t want our students to fall for a malignant type of “diversity” that is dishonest: it doesn’t prize ideological or political diversity but rather shuts conservatives out. (That is the current kind of phony diversity we have in most colleges and universities. Happily enough, a recent book has shown that robustly Christian schools have more political diversity than their secular counterparts.)

Nor do we want them to fall for an approach to diversity and multiculturalism that is morally relativistic. In this approach radical equality prevails. All sexualities, all cultures, all aggrieved groups, all nationalities, all religions are included and affirmed...no judgments made. All are celebrated and woe be to him or her who makes judgments about them. Coincidentally, or not so coincidentally, the only culture deserving of criticism is the normative one from which the student comes. Classical Christians or overtly patriotic Americans are ones most susceptible to heavy disapproval, if not banishment, if they do indeed make judgments.

5. In spite of all these headwinds, we want ourselves and our students to be happy warriors. Our ultimate worth or destiny is not dependent upon our success in these ventures. That issue was settled when we came to believe in the promises of Christ. We are only required to be faithful, not successful. I love the wise words of Einar Billing, who wrote a fine book on "Our Calling." He writes: "We can never see the results of our acts completely, least of all when the goal is the Kingdom of God. To maintain that our feeble deeds do serve this infinite goal is and remains a matter of faith; God builds his kingdom through the centuries and ages. God has called us also through the forgiveness of sins to have a part therein, through his providence. He has given us our calling. How our insignificant deeds can contribute to his purposes is something it is very seldom given us to see beforehand. We have to begin in blind obedience. There lies the day's work ahead of us. It seems small and inconsequential. But God who gave it to us must also know its value. So go to it!"

So let us go forth to love the Lord with all our minds, and to pass that treasure on to our students. Let us help them to avoid having their minds be conformed to this world, but rather have them be transformed by their renewal, so they might discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect.

That is our calling. So go to it.

Robert Benne, Jordan-Trexler Professor of Religion Emeritus and Research Associate, Roanoke College, and Professor of Christian Ethics at the online Institute of Lutheran Theology

