

*“The Great Conversation, Liberal Arts Education and
Dallas Baptist University”*

“I was aware that the reading of all good books is indeed like a conversation with the noblest men of past centuries who were the authors of them, nay a carefully studied conversation, in which they reveal to us none but the best of their thoughts.”

—René Descartes

The purpose of this paper is to introduce us to the liberal arts notion of the “Great Conversation” by a reading from the first volume of the *Great Books of the Western World*, and to discuss the relationship of Evangelical Christianity in general, and ourselves in particular to this “Great Conversation.”

The *Oxford English Dictionary* suggests that the word “conversation” means “an interchange of thoughts and words; familiar discourse or talk.”¹ This same source shows that the term “great” is used to refer to things, actions, and events that are “of more than ordinary importance, weight, or distinction.”² Hence, the juxtaposition of the adjective “Great” with the noun “Conversation” must refer to some famous interchange of thoughts and words that is uniquely weighty and significant. And in the tradition of liberal arts education in the Western world, that has indeed been the case. The Great Conversation is a dialogue or discussion that has been in progress from the dawn of history (or at least for some 2,500 years beginning with the birth of philosophy in the West in about the sixth century B.C.). Its content has been the fundamental ideas and concepts that have been at the core of our civilization, especially those ideas that have been deposited in the classic books that cover almost every area of inquiry from philosophy to the arts, to politics, and science, and more.

¹ *The Compact Edition of the Oxford English Dictionary*, vol. 1; C: 546.

² *Ibid.*, G: 386.

What is of immense concern to me is that Evangelical Christendom is largely unaware of and unconcerned about the existence, nature, and content of this Conversation which has so shaped our culture, engaged the Church (at least historically), and impacted human lives, ourselves included. Furthermore, the Great Conversation has been and is at the heart of liberal arts education, and anyone making a claim to be liberally educated should be familiar with this concept and the content of the Conversation. Hence, in order to acquaint us with and to challenge us by the notion of the Great Conversation, I have reproduced below the introductory chapter from the first volume of the *The Great Books of the Western World* written by Robert Maynard Hutchins, the editor in chief of the Great Books series. I would like to read this selection to you at this time and make a few sidebar comments which are found along the way in the footnotes.³

The Great Conversation (© 1952)
 “The Tradition of the West”
 Chapter One

The tradition of the West is embodied in the Great Conversation that began in the dawn of history and continues to the present day. Whatever the merits of other civilizations in other respects, no civilization is like that of the West in this respect. No other civilization can claim that its defining characteristic is a dialogue of this sort. No dialogue in any other civilization can compare with that of the West in the number of great works of the mind that have contributed to this dialogue. The goal toward which Western society moves is the Civilization of the Dialogue. The spirit of Western civilization is the spirit of inquiry. Its dominant element is the Logos [word].⁴ Nothing is to

³ In reproducing this work, I have taken the liberty to update its exclusivist language, and have alternated the use of masculine and feminine pronouns throughout in the interest of gender sensitivity and equity.

⁴ Underlying the concept of Logos as the dominant element in the West in its spirit of inquiry is a traditional ontology which asserts that there is a determinacy and an underlying rationally apprehensible structure to the nature of things that can be understood by the human mind and adequately expressed in or by human words (logos). Postmodernity, on the other hand, has deconstructed the Western conception

remain undiscussed. Everybody is to speak his mind. No proposition is to be left unexamined. The exchange of ideas is held to be the path to the realization of the potentialities of the race.

At a time when the West is most often represented by its friends as the source of that technology for which the whole world yearns and by its enemies as the fountainhead of selfishness and greed, it is worth remarking that, though both elements can be found in the Great Conversation, the Western ideal is not one or the other strand in the Conversation, but the Conversation itself.⁵ It would be an exaggeration to say that Western civilization means these books. The exaggeration would lie in the omission of the plastic arts and music, which have quite as important a part in Western civilization as the great productions included in this set [*The Great Books in the Western World*, published by *Encyclopædia Britannica*]. But to the extent to which books can represent the idea of a civilization, the idea of Western civilization is here presented.⁶

of logocentricity (word-centeredness), and replaced it with the old sophistic (Gorgias) notion that there is no such thing as a structured, rational reality, and if there is, it is inaccessible to the human mind, and cannot be communicated by means of language. This “antilogocentric” viewpoint asserts (via language) that all language is symbolic, metaphoric, rhetorical, self-referential and tells us nothing about the nature of things. For further discussion of this theme, see James W. Sire, “On Being a Fool for Christ and an Idiot for Nobody: Logocentricity and Postmodernity,” in *Christian Apologetics in the Postmodern World*, edited by Timothy R. Phillips and Dennis L. Okholm. Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1995.

⁵ Yet the ideal is not so much the Conversation as an end in itself, but rather the purpose or end of the Conversation is the discovery of truth, goodness, beauty, and through these things, the “realization of the potentialities of the race” as mentioned in the last sentence of the preceding paragraph. Otherwise, conversation for conversation’s sake leads to the Pauline indictment of “ever learning, but never able to come to a knowledge of the truth.”

⁶ I am not unaware of the significant issues surrounding the question of the “canon” of literature that constitutes the reading list of a liberally educated person. Nor am I espousing an exclusively Western tradition to the exclusion of many other valuable traditions and texts that ought to be a vital part of contemporary educational programs. What I am concerned about in using this chapter about the great books and the Western tradition is simply to raise consciousness about the idea of a Great Conversation and the tradition of liberal arts education which has gone unnoticed for quite some time. Indeed, today the Great Conversation is global in scope, and the canon should include more than the texts of DWEMs (Dead White European Males),

These books are the means of understanding our society and ourselves. They contain the great ideas that dominate us without our knowing it. There is no comparable repository of our tradition.⁷

To put an end to the spirit of inquiry that has characterized the West it is not necessary to burn the books. All we have to do is to leave them unread for a few generations. On the other hand, the revival of interest in these books from time to time throughout history has provided the West with drive and creativeness. Great books have salvaged, preserved, and transmitted the tradition on many occasions similar to our own.

The books contain not merely the tradition, but also the great exponents of the tradition. Their writings are models of the fine and liberal arts. They hold before us what [Alfred North] Whitehead called “the habitual vision of greatness.”⁸ These books

though I am not unsympathetic to the idea of at least beginning with our own tradition and its classic texts. For further discussion, see Harold Bloom, *The Western Canon: The Books and School of the Ages*. New York: Harcourt Brace, 1994; John Guillory, *Cultural Capital: The Problem of Literary Canon Formation*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993.

⁷ What is true of Western civilization also seems true of the Judeo-Christian intellectual and religious tradition as well: Books have served as one of God’s primary tools in the history of salvation. Christians serve a talkative God who cannot seem to do without either writing or a library as evidenced in the inspiration of the canonical books of Scripture (R. Jensen, St. Olaf’s College). Indeed, the Christian faith has repeatedly been called a “religion of the book,” and in a sense this is literally true since the word Bible is from the Greek *biblos* (*Biblos*) which simply means “the book.” Next to the living Word of God in the incarnation of Jesus Christ and the oral proclamation of the gospel, God has chosen *the medium of the book* to proclaim His purposes in creation and redemption, not only in Scripture itself, but also in the great books composed by the fathers, doctors, theologians, pastors and priests of the Church throughout her history. The book has become a prominent tool in God’s plan and purposes for the world and His Church. Hence, if there is any group of people who ought to have an appreciation, nay a passion, for writing, for literature, for books of all kinds, and for ideas in books, it ought to be **BIBLOS**-believing Christians, else they betray their own literate and literary tradition. For further discussion, see Klaus Bockmuehl, *Books: God’s Tools in the History of Salvation* (Vancouver, B.C.: Regent College and Helmers and Howard Publishers, Inc., 1986).

⁸ Alfred North Whitehead (1861-1947) was a British mathematician and philosopher who, for a time, also taught at Harvard University. For an excellent take on this phrase of Whitehead’s from a Christian perspective, see Frank E. Gabelein, “The

have endured because people in every era have been lifted beyond themselves by the inspiration of their example. Sir Richard Livingstone said: “We are tied down, all our days and for the greater part of our lives, to the commonplace. That is where contact with great thinkers, great literature helps. In their company we are still in the ordinary world, but it is the ordinary world transfigured and seen through the eyes of wisdom and genius. And some of their vision becomes our own.”

Until very recently these books have been central in education in the West. They were the principal instrument of liberal education, the education that people acquired as an end in itself, for no other purpose than that it would help them to be persons, to lead human lives, and better lives than they would otherwise be able to lead.

The aim of liberal education is human excellence, both private and public (for human beings are political animals). Its object is the excellence of a person as a person, and a person as a citizen.⁹ It regards the person as an end, not as a means; and it regards the ends of life, and not the means to it. For this reason it is the education of free people. Other types of education or training treat people as means to some other end, or are at best concerned with the means of life, with earning a living, and not with its ends.¹⁰

The substance of liberal education appears to consist in the recognition of basic problems, in knowledge of distinctions and interrelations in subject matter, and in the comprehension of ideas.

Humanities and the Vision of Greatness: The Case for a Contemporary Christian Humanism,” in *The Christian, The Arts and Truth: Regaining the Vision of Greatness*. Edited by D. Bruce Lockerbie. Portland: Multnomah Press, 1985.

⁹ The sentence originally read: “Its object is the excellence of man as man and man as citizen.” The definition of “human excellence” is obviously context dependent, resting on a variety of metaphysical, epistemological, anthropological, and moral assumptions and commitments. In general, the goal of “human excellence” is surely compatible with the Judeo-Christian tradition.

¹⁰ The kind of education that treats people as a means to some other end is typically vocational, technical, and professional training, primarily in service to economic ends.

Liberal education seeks to clarify the basic problems and to understand the way in which one problem bears on another. It strives for a grasp of the methods by which solutions can be reached and the formulation of standards for testing solutions proposed. The liberally educated person understands, for example, the relation between the problem of the immortality of the soul and the problem of the best form of government; she understands that the one problem cannot be solved by the same method as the other, and that the test that she will have to bring to bear upon solutions proposed differs from one problem to the other.¹¹

The liberally educated person understands, by understanding the distinctions and interrelations of the basic fields of subject matter, the differences and connections between poetry and history, science and philosophy, theoretical and practical science; she understands that the same methods cannot be applied in all these fields; she knows the methods appropriate to each.

The liberally educated person comprehends the ideas that are relevant to the basic problems and that operate in the basic fields of subject matter. She knows what is meant by soul, state, God, beauty, and by the other terms that are basic to the discussion of fundamental issues. She has some notion of the insights that these ideas, singly or in combination, provide concerning human experience.

The liberally educated person has a mind that can operate well in all fields.¹² She may be a specialist in one field. But she can understand anything important that is

¹¹ In addition to the concern for methodology, the idea here seems to be that the person educated in the liberal arts is capable of recognizing the unity and diversity of knowledge and truth, that knowledge is interdisciplinary, and is in some sense, or by some means, a “seamless robe.” Indeed, this thought may be behind the notion of “university” itself, which recognizes both the “diversity” of subject areas that are also brought together into a comprehensive “unity.” That unity was traditionally rooted in God and in the discipline of theology as the queen of the sciences.

¹² The idea developed in this paragraph is that a central aspect of liberal arts education is general knowledge of all basic fields of study: grammar, literature, mathematics, science, history, social sciences, the arts, etc. This is the reason why DBU degree plans include a “general studies” curriculum, namely, to enable students to operate well within and understand all fields. These courses are more important than is

said in any field and can see and use the light that it sheds upon her own. The liberally educated person is at home in the world of ideas, and in the world of practical affairs, too, because she understands the relation of the two.¹³ She may not be at home in the world of practical affairs in the sense of liking the life she finds about her; but she will be at home in that world in the sense that she understands it. She may even derive from her liberal education some conception of the difference between a bad world and a good one and some notion of the ways in which one might be turned into the other.¹⁴

The method of liberal education is the liberal arts, and the result of liberal education is discipline in those arts.¹⁵ The liberal artist learns to read, write, speak, listen, understand, and think. He learns to reckon [judge], measure, and manipulate matter, quantity, and motion in order to predict, produce, and exchange.¹⁶ As we live in the

expressed by the commonplace phrase of getting a general studies course “out of the way” as if it were an impediment to one’s real purposes in education.

¹³ This sentence brings two of my favorite quotations to mind. The first from G. K. Chesterton on the importance and power of ideas. “Ideas are dangerous, but the man to whom they are least dangerous is the man of ideas. He is acquainted with ideas, and moves among them like a lion-tamer. Ideas are dangerous but the man to whom they are the most dangerous is the man of no ideas. The man of no ideas will find the first idea fly to his head like wine to the head of a teetotaler” (from Chesterton’s *Heretics*, New York: Devin Adair, 1950: 229). The thought that a liberally educated person is theoretically and practically astute reminds me of this anonymous thought: “There are three marks of a great person: one who is a greater thinker; one who is a great lover; and one who is a great doer.” The intellectual component must be combined with the volitional aspect (along with the emotional) to sustain human greatness. Either one or the other is reductionistic and will not suffice.

¹⁴ A Christian vision of education would entail an agenda for action and social justice as Nicholas Wolterstorff argues in his *Educating for Responsible Action* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1980).

¹⁵ The authentic liberal arts student is, of necessity, a disciplined student. It requires rigor, sacrifice, hard thinking, and disciplined work.

¹⁶ This sentence prompted me to consider those who believe they do not need to be liberally educated since they will not be serving in public or in the world of work—full time wives, mothers, homemakers, for example. It seems to me that of all people, mothers (and fathers) have the greatest need to be liberally educated in order to raise their children intelligently and thoughtfully, and in order to pass on to their offspring the model of human excellence as it is embodied in their own lives. A topic for a future Friday Symposium presentation might be “Motherhood, Homemaking and Liberal Arts Education.” Ministers also need to think this matter through carefully, for often they seem to believe that attention to such things as history, science, the arts, and literature

tradition, whether we know it or not, so we are all liberal artists whether we know it or not. We all practice the liberal arts, well or badly, all the time every day. As we should understand the tradition as well as we can in order to understand ourselves, so we should be as good liberal artists as we can in order to become as fully human as we can.

The liberal arts are not merely indispensable; they are unavoidable. Nobody can decide for himself whether he is going to be a human being. The only question open to him is whether he will be an ignorant, undeveloped one or one who has sought to reach the highest point he is capable of attaining. The question, in short, is whether he will be a poor liberal artist or a good one.¹⁷

The tradition of the West in education is the tradition of the liberal arts. Until very recently nobody took seriously the suggestion that there could be any other ideal. The educational ideals of John Locke, for example, which were directed to the preparation of the pupil to fit conveniently into the social and economic environment in which he found

are secular, inferior pursuits unrelated to the higher calling of the ministry. But how important, we may ask, is reading, writing, speaking, listening, understanding and thinking for a minister? The question is rhetorical and the answer obvious. Not only are these skills, which are the product of liberal education, necessary for effective ministry, but such ministers who have taken liberal arts education seriously will be more complete persons, more fully human, more attractive witnesses for Jesus Christ, and better models of an authentic Christian humanity for those in their congregations.

¹⁷ This goal of “attaining to the highest point one is capable of attaining” certainly seems to be a Christian and biblical goal. Some in combining the Western tradition of the liberal arts along with biblical faith have conceived of the notion of “Christian humanism,” a movement which points to the deep interest of the Judeo-Christian tradition in human beings and their lives, well being, culture, education, work, art, and eternal significance. Christian humanism calls for a complete restoration of the human person as the image and likeness of God. For a stimulating defense of this perspective, see R. William Franklin and Joseph M. Shaw, *The Case for Christian Humanism*. Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1991. Indeed, the question is raised as to whether or not the tradition of the liberal arts, the humanities, and the Great Conversation, apart from a religious and specifically Christian and moral base, is able to humanize and provide the means for full or complete human development. Without the context of religious faith and a moral framework, it may be that liberal arts education contributes to the making of Nietzschean *Übermenschen* who are only adept at wielding power for personal aggrandizement and profit.

himself, made no impression on Locke's contemporaries. And so it will be found that other voices raised in criticism of liberal education fell upon deaf ears until about a half-century ago.¹⁸

This Western devotion to the liberal arts and liberal education must have been largely responsible for the emergence of democracy as an ideal. The democratic ideal is equal opportunity for full human development, and, since the liberal arts are the basic means of such development, devotion to democracy naturally results from devotion to them. On the other hand, if acquisition of the liberal arts is an intrinsic part of human dignity, then the democratic ideal demands that we should strive to see to it that all have the opportunity to attain to the fullest measure of the liberal arts that is possible to each.¹⁹

The present crisis in the world has been precipitated by the vision of the range of practical and productive art [technology] offered by the West. All over the world people are on the move, expressing their determination to share in the technology in which the

¹⁸ Around the turn of the twentieth century (1900). At this time, because of the influence of the industrial and technological revolutions, education shifted its focus away from the ideal of the liberal arts and human development to vocational, technical, and professional preparation. The key question became not so much what will my education *do for me*, but what *can I do with* my education. Is the purpose of education, as someone put it, "to take a man and make him into a carpenter, or to take a carpenter and make him into a man?" Or is it "both?"

¹⁹ This paragraph brings to mind the fact that democracy, to use the American idiom, is the "rule of, by, and for the people." If such a government is to avoid anarchy and chaos, then a liberally educated citizenry is an absolute democratic requirement if the republic is to flourish. One goal, then, of liberal education is the development of productive citizens who have the capacity for orderly self-government. Liberal education contributes to democracy, and in turn, democracy contributes to the citizen in that it recognizes the right of all citizens to have access to liberal education, and to become the best possible human being and citizen. The two—democracy and the liberal arts—sustain a symbiotic relationship with each other, especially in relation to its adults. It is of interest to note (especially for the staff in DBU's College of Adult Education) that the *GBWW* program was designed chiefly for purposes of adult education since the editors of the series believed that adults were the primary players in American democracy, and since they are the ones responsible for raising the next generation of literate Americans. As the author of this volume puts it in chapter seven, "The editors believe that these books should be read by all adults all their lives. . . . What is here proposed is interminable liberal education" (52).

West has excelled. This movement is one of the most spectacular in history, and everybody is agreed upon one thing about it: we do not know how to deal with it.²⁰ It would be tragic if in our preoccupation with the crisis we failed to hold up as a thing of value for the world, even as that which might show us a way in which to deal with the crisis, our vision of the best that the West has to offer. That vision is the range of liberal arts and liberal education. Our determination about the distribution of the fullest measure of these [technological] arts and this education will measure our loyalty to the best in our own past and our total service to the future of the world.²¹

The great books were written by the greatest liberal artists. They exhibit the range of the liberal arts. The authors were also the greatest teachers. They taught one another. They taught all previous generations, up to a few years ago. The question is whether they can teach us. . . . {End}.

Now this final question is the question I would like for us to consider. *Can* these books teach us as they have taught others? *Do* these books teach us as they have taught others? Are we aware of this Great Conversation contained in these books, and do we even care about it? Do we recognize the nature and benefits of liberal arts education in its attempt to equip us with the indispensable humane skills of reading, writing, speaking, listening, understanding, and thinking, along with its purpose to impart to us a

²⁰ As for example in the realms of medical technology and medical ethics, especially in the area of bio-engineering. Also, how to deal with technology in relation to the environment is another colossal problem. The works of the French thinker Jacques Ellul have explored the are prominent in this regard. See especially his *The Technological Society* (New York: Random House, 1967).

²¹ The idea here seems to be that along with exporting our coveted Western technology, we ought also to send along with it our tradition of liberal arts education to these envious nations of the world. This piece was written in the early 1950s, and since then our educational successes seem to have been eclipsed by many other countries, in Europe and Asia. Furthermore, we cannot but detect here a certain amount of Western *hubris*, as well as a measure of Western cultural imperialism: our science, technology, and education are the best, and for the sake of the whole world, we had better impart it to others in the second and third worlds.

general knowledge of all the disciplines? What kind of relationship do we sustain to this educational vision and to this Great Conversation?

It may not be too much to say that neither our culture, nor our homes, nor our *evangelical version* of Christianity, nor our educational systems have offered us very much encouragement in regard to the life of the mind. When it comes to our great intellectual and educational traditions, most of us have little if any awareness of anything called the Great Conversation, most of us have precious little comprehension of the nature and benefits of liberal arts education, and most of us are encouraged to look upon any serious interest in such things as clearly abnormal and patently weird. Given this state of affairs, and assuming the validity of Maynard's argument above, then most of us in the West miss out on the best the West has to offer. In other words, we have been left out of "The Conversation." Recent evaluations of the Christian (or evangelical) mind and American culture suggest why this may indeed be the case.

For example, as far back as the late 1940s, Christian author Dorothy Sayers in her classic essay "The Lost Tools of Learning" observed what she called the "artificial prolongation of intellectual childhood and adolescence into the years of maturity." This educational plight, she bemoaned, was largely due to the *failure* of the school systems to teach students how to think and to impart to them the tools and art of learning. In 1963, British evangelical Harry Blamires wrote in his now classic volume *The Christian Mind* that in his day, there was "no longer a Christian mind" for any vestige of such an entity had "succumbed to the secular drift with a degree of weakness and nervelessness unmatched in Christian history."²² In 1973, British pastor and theologian John R. W. Stott penned a brief essay entitled *Your Mind Matters* in which he spoke of the nearly omnipresent "malady of anti-intellectualism" among Christians in the churches. Thus he proposed, on biblical and historical grounds, a response to what he

²² See his *The Christian Mind: How Should a Christian Think?* Ann Arbor, Michigan: Servant Books, 1963, 1978.

called “the misery and menace of mindless Christianity.”²³ More recently in 1994, Professor Mark Noll, the McManis Professor of Christian Thought at Wheaton College, published a work provocatively titled *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind*. In this volume, he noted that “modern evangelicals are the spiritual descendants of leaders and movements distinguished by probing, creative, fruitful attention to the mind.” His research led him to posit that “most of the original Protestant traditions (Lutheran, Reformed, Anglican) either developed a vigorous intellectual life or worked out theological principles that could (and often did) sustain penetrating, and penetratingly Christian, intellectual endeavor.” Closer to home here in America, Christian leaders in the past, he argues, “all held that diligent, rigorous mental activity was a way to glorify God. None of them believed that intellectual activity was the only way to glorify God, or even the highest way, but they all believed in the life of the mind, and they believed it *because they were evangelical Christians.*” What happened to this history and heritage of robust Christian thinking and learning? Something, he concludes, has gone wrong, and he reproaches the present day evangelical generation with these words: “Unlike their spiritual ancestors, modern evangelicals have not pursued comprehensive thinking under God or sought a mind shaped to its furthest reaches by Christian perspectives” (4). In the rest of the book, he explores why this has happened and what can be done about it.²⁴

A work that I find especially helpful in its analysis of this continuous malady of Christian mindlessness is a volume also published in 1994 by Os Guinness titled *Fit Bodies/Fat Minds: Why Evangelicals Don't Think and What to do About It*.²⁵ In part one of his work, Guinness presents eight reasons for the phenomenon of what he calls “a ghost mind”—a metaphor for something empty and deserted. And this particular “ghost”

²³ See his *Your Mind Matters*. Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1973.

²⁴ See his *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind*. Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1994.

²⁵ See his *Fit Bodies, Fat Minds: Why Evangelicals Don't Think and What to do About It*. Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1994.

is no Casper—anything but friendly to the life of the intellect. Of Guinness’ eight reasons for the demise of evangelical thinking, I will mention only a few in the interests of time.²⁶ First is the *polarization* of truth in the sense of a false antagonism between so-called head knowledge and heart knowledge in which the latter counts, and the former is denigrated as secondary. Second is *pietism* which is the unfortunate reduction of Christian life to devotional practices and subjective experiences to the neglect of the life of the mind. Third is *pragmatism* in which a concern for the practical has overtaken any concern for truth and rigorous thinking about it. As Guinness puts it, “The concern ‘will it work’ has long overshadowed ‘is it true’? Theology has given way to technique. Know-whom has faded before know-how. Serving God has subtly been deformed into servicing the self” (59). Fourth is *philistinism* which describes one who is crucially uninformed in a special area of knowledge, or one who is openly disdainful of intellectual, cultural and artistic values. Fifth and finally is *premillennialism*, especially in its dispensational variety, which reinforces some of the preceding problems, and which, by its apocalyptic orientation, (rapture, etc.) reflects a general indifference to serious engagement with culture. For these reasons and more, Guinness argues, evangelicalism flounders in an intellectual wasteland.

In the second part of his book, Guinness blames what he calls “an idiot culture” for the loss of a rigorous Christian mind. Here he attributes the ruination of a transformative intellectual life to a number of socio-cultural factors. These include (1) America’s preoccupation with entertainment as we seek to “amuse ourselves to death”; (2) the impact of advertising and the quest for the materialistic good life which negates attention to the things of the mind; (3) the triumph of images and the humiliation of the word resulting in the victory of the visual over the verbal;²⁷ (4) the postmodern embrace of

²⁶ His eight causes leading to the “ghost mind” are polarization, pietism, primitivism, populism, pluralism, pragmatism, philistinism, premillennialism.

²⁷ Our day marks the end of the “Gutenberg era,” with its emphasis on books and words, and the advent of the omnipotent media and the electronic age with its pervasive and powerful images.

relativism and skepticism, and the concomitant denial of the ideals of truth, goodness and beauty; (5) the preoccupation with tabloid truth and gawk “let it all hang out” TV talk shows; (6) the impact of communications technology which engenders a new kind of mindlessness and more cultural trash as has also happened in television since its inception. As we can see from Guinness’ astute analysis of the “ghost mind” and the American “idiot culture,” there is little support or encouragement for involvement in the intellectual and educational heritage of our culture. All of these writers—Sayers, Blamires, Stott, Noll, and Guinness—help us to recognize the present intellectual predicament, and enable us to understand why it is that evangelical believers (and Americans in general) have failed to give much attention to such ideals as the Great Conversation and the Western tradition of liberal arts education.

What is to be done?

There is no way for me to develop in a short space a complete response to this unfortunate situation—a situation which perhaps until now we have not been particularly aware of or concerned about, and one which we may find difficult to admit, especially since it may apply to ourselves. If nothing else, perhaps a knowledge of the very existence of the Great Conversation and of the liberal arts educational tradition, and an awareness of the forces that have kept us from it is a step in the right direction. In any case, I will make just a few suggestions and then turn it over to you for discussion.

Perhaps the first thing to be done is *repentance*, confessing and asking God for forgiveness in our failure to love Him, not only with all our hearts, soul, and strength, but also with “all our minds” as the greatest of all commandments requires. Second is the necessity to work out and think through a set of biblical and theological principles that “could sustain penetrating, and penetratingly Christian, intellectual endeavor” (as Noll put it). Many of our contemporaries have done this, and I also have attempted to grapple with the issue in another paper entitled “On the Moral Obligation to be Intelli

gent.”²⁸ In this regard I would like to quote the words of Gene Edward Veith for what might serve as a cogent summary of such a project. In his work *Loving God with all Your Mind*, he writes,

Christians should use and develop their minds [Duh!]. The mental faculties of the human mind—the power to think, to discover, to wonder, and to imagine—are precious gifts of God. The Christian who pursues knowledge, seeks education, and explores even the most 'secular' [that is, academic] subjects is fulfilling a Christian vocation that is pleasing to God and of great importance to the church. The Bible, by precept and example, affirms this and opens up the whole realm of human knowledge to the Christian (9).

Thirdly, we must learn to pay attention to the Great Books and the Great Conversation and seek to participate in (and perhaps even make a small contribution to) this dialogue and discussion. C. S. Lewis, in his essay “On the Reading of Old Books,” bewails the neglect of ancient books and classical texts in favor of contemporary secondary resources. He notes that as a teacher, it had always been one of his policies “to persuade the young that first-hand knowledge is not only more worth acquiring than second-hand knowledge, but is usually much easier and more delightful to acquire.”²⁹ This is good advice, and it essentially constitutes an invitation to join in on the Great Conversation up close and personal!

While I would like to propose that our own institution consider the possibility of emphasizing the concepts of the Great Conversation and the tradition of liberal arts

²⁸ This title is stolen from John Ruskin’s work by the same name. In addition to the works mentioned in this paper, the following works have sought to establish a biblical foundation for a vibrant Christian intellectual life. See Harry Blamires, *Recovering the Christian Mind: Meeting the Challenge of Secularism*. Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1988; James W. Sire, *Discipleship of the Mind: Learning to Love God in the Ways We Think*. Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1990.

²⁹ See his “On the Reading of Old Books,” in *God in the Dock: Essays on Theology and Ethics*. Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1970, p. 200. Interestingly enough, Lewis goes on to state that “this mistaken preference for the modern books and this shyness of the old ones is nowhere more rampant than in theology” (201).

education during SWAT week and in freshman orientation, and while I think it might be an excellent idea to explore the possibility of establishing a Great Books program here at DBU, or at least incorporating these and similar works from other traditions into already established programs of study, chances are that the primary means we have of gaining access to the Great Conversation embodied in the Great Books is by personal decision and commitment. If all education is ultimately self-education (as someone once said), and if we don't want to be left out of the Conversation forever, we best pick up the books and read them for ourselves individually, or maybe in community with someone else or as a part of a group.³⁰

Barry Bowling, a policeman on the beat in the City of Grapevine and an adult learner in DBU's College of Adult Education, is an outstanding example. After being exposed to some of these ideas in a history of philosophy class a couple of semesters ago, Officer Bowling's mind was set on fire. This summer I found this note waiting for me under my office door:

I'm still in the Great Conversation. Finished Descartes. Read Nietzsche's *Zarathustra* and *Twilight of the Idols*. Brushed up on my Kierkegaard and read some on Hegel, Hume, and Locke. I've also been reading some of Dr. Francis Schaeffer. Good stuff. The only obstacle I've hit is Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*. He's a tough read for me. Hope to see you soon. . . . Thanks. Grace and Peace. Barry Bowling.

Officer Bowling is indeed a *rarae aves*, but his transformed intellectual experience is exemplary, and one which needs to be repeated all over this and other cam

³⁰ The *GBWW* program has developed a ten year reading program that is set forth at the end of the first volume from which we have read today. They have also crafted a series of ten volumes that provide outlines of the Great Books and study questions to enhance understanding. Finally, the *GBWW* program has established small reading groups around the country that are committed to the reading and discussion of the works in the series. These are often listed in the "Weekend Guide" in your local newspaper.

poses. Sadly, however, we will not find much encouragement or support for this either in our homes, our churches, our schools, and certainly not from our culture until there is a considerable change in what we value, the things we love, and the way we think. We need a transformation of our affections.