



**Diatribes: Laziness of Mind & Decadence in the Academy: Calvinists Have a Vocabulary Too; Parable of the Sower, Matt 13:3-8**

**Kirk, Russell. *Decadence and Renewal in the Higher Learning: An Episodic History of American College and University Since 1953.* (South Bend: Gateway Editions, 1978), ix-x; xvi-xvii; 17-19:**

Decadence occurs when people have “dropped the object” and have settled instead for the gratifications of mere “experience.” In society, the characteristics of decadence are luxury, skepticism, weariness, superstition, a preoccupation with the self and its experiences, and promoting the subjective analysis of moral and theological judgments. (pp. ix-x)

What object did we drop? Strange though it may seem nowadays, time was when certain ends, classical and Christian, were acknowledged generally in American college and university. From the first, the American college prepared young people for certain professions; yet this training for a vocation was not itself the end of the higher learning. According to Plato, the ends of education are wisdom and virtue.

Thus the higher learning, formerly, was an intellectual means to ethical objects. The disciplines of college and university were intended to develop a philosophical habit of mind of which the attributes are freedom, moderation, and wisdom.

With this high aspiration there was mingled on the American campus, from the first a large element of professional training, for the ministry, teaching, the bar, the practice of medicine, and sometimes other vocations. But it was assumed that the ethical and intellectual disciplines must inform such professions. The founders of American colleges and universities, and the great majority of professors, took it for granted that wisdom is objective, and that virtue is objective, and that the mission of the higher learning is to pursue these objects. (p. x)

Nearly half of the mass of American high-school graduates proceed to a year or more of “higher” education; nearly a quarter of the rising generation obtain, eventually, some sort of college diploma. A great many are schooled; very few educated. And who recalls Alexander Pope’s admonition that a little learning is a dangerous thing? (p. xvi)

One of my principle criticisms of current tendencies in the higher learning is that, despite much cant about democratic university and college, really our educational apparatus has been raising up not a class of liberally educated young people of humane outlook, but rather a series of degree-dignified elites, an alleged “meritocracy” of confined views and dubious intellectual and moral credentials, afflicted by presumption, puffed up by that little learning which is a dangerous thing. (p. xvii)

It is not at all my desire that university and college should train up such elites. What I am recommending is a mode of higher education which can leaven the lump of modern civilization—which will give us a tolerable number of people in many walks of life who possess some share of right reason and moral imagination; who may not know the price of everything, but know the value of something; who have been schooled in wisdom and virtue. I am suggesting that college and university ought not to be degree-mills: they ought to be centers for genuinely humane and genuinely scientific studies, attended by young people of healthy intellectual curiosity who actually have some interest in mind and conscience. I am saying that the higher learning is meant to develop order in the soul, for the human person’s own sake. I am saying that the higher learning is meant to develop order in the commonwealth, for the republic’s sake. I am arguing that a system of higher education which has forgotten these ends is decadent; but that decay may be arrested, and that reform and renewal still are conceivable. (pp. xvii-xviii)



The more people we have who are liberally educated and scientifically educated, the better. But the more people we have who are half-educated or quarter-educated, the worse for them and for the republic. Really educated people, rather than forming presumptuous elites, will permeate society, leavening the lump through their professions, their teaching, their preaching, their participation in commerce and industry, their public offices at every level of the commonwealth. And being educated, they will know that they do not know everything; and that there exist objects in life besides power and money and sensual gratification; they will take long views; they will look backward to ancestors and forward to posterity. For them, education will not terminate on commencement-day. (p. xviii)

Every right is married to a duty. That duty which corresponds to the right of academic freedom is that the scholar must be dedicated to the conservation and the advancement of the truth.

What professors mean, when they say "academic freedom", is academic power. What they desire, in their heart of hearts, is to obtain the power to bend their colleagues and their students to their own will. But the scholar is a man who professes to have given up the claim to power over men in favor of the service of truth.

In recent decades, the form which this intoxication with power assumed was the infatuation of some professors with Marxism, or at least with some form of collectivistic ideology. The Academy especially should remain upon its guard against (those) who would use his position in the Academy to subvert the moral and social order which gives him and his colleagues the freedom to speak their minds. (p. 17)

But when certain persons in the Academy abuse their power and proceed to sneer at human dignity and the whole fabric of order and justice and freedom, then the license of those persons justly may be curtailed. (p. 18)

The Academy, if it is to enjoy rights, must acknowledge some principles of truth, and not constitute itself as a mere sophistical debating-society, doubting everything, sneering at all old convictions. The Academy sins if the Academy places falsehood on the same platform with truth. And when college or university offers instruction in a subject, this implies that some truth may be found in the discipline. (pp. 18-19)

The objects of a decent society have been known for a great while, within and without the Academy: they are order and justice and freedom. But the persons whom Sidney Hook called "ritualistic liberals" had dropped those objects, and so were decadent, and involved the Academy in their decay of reason. (p. 19)

52. There are several passages that are cited by Bèza and Perkins for these ideas. We will note one:

**Matthew 13:3** - Jesus spoke many things to them in parables, saying, "Behold, the sower went out to sow;

**v. 4** - and as he sowed, some seeds fell beside the road, and the birds came and ate them up.

**v. 5** - "And others fell upon the rocky places, where they did not have much soil; and immediately they sprang up, because they had no depth of soil.

**v. 6** - "But when the sun had risen they were scorched and because they had no root, they withered away.

**v. 7** - "And others fell among the thorns, and the thorns came up and choked them out.

**v.8** - "And others fell on good soil, and yielded a crop, some a hundredfold, some sixty, and some thirty."



53. Bèza and Perkins conclude that the only believers in this parable are illustrated by those seeds that landed on good soil, i.e., the elect. Consequently, they naturally produced a crop. The others were all unbelievers because there never was any production of fruit.
54. However, the only seeds that did not germinate were those that fell beside the road. Those that fell on rocky places and among the thorns germinated and grew to a certain degree but never produced fruit due to lack of growth, or doctrine. Nevertheless, they were saved.
55. However, when the thesis contends that the only way to verify saving faith is by means of works then those who fail to produce fruit are judged as reprobates.
56. The end result of these claims is the nonbiblical and even heretical doctrine of limited atonement.
57. The point that I am making in our study is that this principle was not necessarily the conclusion of John Calvin but his successor in Geneva, Theodore Bèza.
58. Calvin is not entirely innocent in the matter since he at one point writes in support of the idea of limited atonement while on other occasions he clearly affirmed unlimited atonement.
59. What must be kept in mind, however, is that Calvin, along with almost all the Reformation's theologians, was confused. This confusion found its source in what Paul discovered in Romans 7:21, "the principle of evil."
60. Luther, Zwingli, and Calvin were all Catholics. They were reared and educated in Catholic theology which means an allegorical approach to Scripture.
61. Once they and others broke free from the chains of Catholicism's spiritual tyranny they started examining the Bible anew from a different perspective.
62. However, the frame of reference, memory center, vocabulary, categorical storage, and conscience of each was steeped in the dogmas of a religion that for over a millennium had approached the Scripture not through exegesis but eisegesis.