



Inaugural Address
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Title: Why Is Sterling College Important Today and Tomorrow?

Intro

I like questions. I like to ask questions. I always have. My dear and wonderful departed mother thought I asked too many of them. There were plenty of times at home and beyond that I got in trouble for wanting to know the answer to the question “why?”

I also like clarity. I like to know the reasons for things, and I like to know that the reasons are both logical and coherent.

You can quickly begin to see that I irritate a lot of people. And you can also quickly understand why one of my wife’s favorite books is entitled “Marriage to a Difficult Man.”

But the purpose of my address is not for you to feel sorry for my wife. You can do that on your own time.

The intent of my address is to answer a simple but weighty question: “Why is Sterling College important today and tomorrow?” An inauguration is a time to reflect, give thanks to God for his faithfulness over all these years, and celebrate a new beginning. But most importantly, it is a time to focus on the future.

So why is Sterling College important? Why is it important today, and more importantly, why is it important for tomorrow?

I would offer three answers to this question.

I. **Sterling College is important because, in the midst of the moral confusion that permeates our nation and global society, it is rooted.**

- a. **Humanity has replaced God** – The most basic question of morality is the question of who possesses final authority. Put another way, it is the question of “who determines right and wrong?” or “who sets the rules for life?” Beginning with the Enlightenment in Europe and the United States in the 18th century, man’s use of reason became the highest and primary source of authority for life. God was replaced by reason. Human intellect was seen as the highest possible way to establish morality.
- b. **Human nature** – Putting man above God changes the way people think about human nature. Today there are widely divergent views about human nature. The dominant view that emerged from the Enlightenment is that humans are innately good. Those who ascribe to the natural goodness of human nature have a rough time reconciling their views with history. A quick review of the past century of world events reminds us that we have had two world wars, the rise and fall of imperialistic Soviet communism, the rise of Chinese communism, and tyrants who massacre and oppress the world over including Pol Pot, Adolf Hitler, and Joseph Stalin.

In the Academy, the prevailing contemporary view is that there is no such thing as human nature. That is because there is no God, and no moral natural order. According to this view, there is no universal right and wrong, even at the most basic level. God and morality are mirages, created by humans who are soft and weak.

Sterling’s 4th president, William McCreery, put it this way in his inaugural address in 1946: “We need therefore to recognize that man is in rebellion against God, and that no amount of education will rectify the resulting conditions unless something is done at the same time to correct his relationship with God. Too long we have scoffed at the Christian teaching of the fall of man, and have built our educational theories and practices on the false assumption that there was nothing inherently wrong with man’s nature that could not be cured by a process of enlightenment.”¹

- c. **Morality rooted in Revelation** – We at Sterling College do not believe that all moral issues are simple and straightforward. Life is complex and moral and ethical issues sometimes require careful and nuanced thought. But Sterling begins these discussions with the belief that: 1) God is real; 2) All humans are created in God’s image and; 3) The Bible is God’s revealed Word, authoritative and infallible in all matters of faith and practice. The Bible offers not only an understanding of human nature, but also the means of redemption for humanity.

I am fully aware that so-called cosmopolitan observers, particularly in the Academy, look upon this rootedness with bemusement and scorn. They consider it mindless and naïve. My response to them is the quiet confidence

that we live in a created order, and an encouragement to read Pascal's Wager. God is *not* dead. The tension between Athens and Jerusalem is alive.

Sterling College is important because it is rooted, and in turn offers roots to its students.

II. Sterling College is important because, as higher education has lost its way, Sterling is renewing itself while remaining true to its original purpose.

- a. **The Academy shapes culture** – Since Plato founded the first one in Athens in the 4th century BC, the Academy has been an instrument of influence to students who go forth to shape the culture around them. There are few institutions more important to civilization than colleges and universities. Those who pursue higher education shape our world politically, economically, and morally. Sometimes this is for the good, and sometimes for ill.
- b. **American higher education was founded to shape students' souls** – The history of American higher education began in 1636 with the founding of Harvard. Harvard's founders built it around a simple premise: that higher education was primarily to shape students' souls. Above all else, college was a place to mold character, and to nurture the intellectual and moral habits that form the basis of a life of discernment and godliness. And while their graduates would become ministers, lawyers and teachers, preparation for a vocation was *not* the primary purpose. Creating an educated person of godly character *was*.ⁱⁱ

This idea of higher education permeated the founding of hundreds of other schools, and dominated the educational landscape for 250 years.

- c. **Today, most of higher education has a hollow core** – But the landscape of higher education changed dramatically. Colleges began moving away from educating with a biblical worldview around the time of the Civil War. And while the change was gradual, it ultimately changed the very nature of American higher education.

In recent years, elite secular educators have joined the voices of Christian educators in claiming that American higher education is in crisis. There is recognition that without moral instruction, education is no longer three-dimensional. The transmission of knowledge and vocational preparation are not enough. Some have recognized that the stronger prey on the weaker, and without morality, these natural tendencies go unchecked.

In 1951, William F. Buckley, Jr., a newly minted graduate of Yale, published *God and Man at Yale*, criticizing his alma mater for taking God out of the curriculum and teaching atheism.

In 1987, University of Chicago professor Allan Bloom wrote *Closing of the American Mind*, seminal for its argument that higher education has lost its way. Not only are students coming to college less prepared than previous generations, but colleges and universities further impoverish them by no longer teaching in the great tradition of philosophy and literature that makes them aware of the order of nature and man's place within it.

In the past decade, numerous books have been published that build on the themes of Buckley and Bloom. And since 2006, two works in particular have raised the profile of this argument. Harry Lewis' *Excellence Without a Soul*, argues that Harvard does little to foster personal and moral growth among its students. Lewis should know: he is the former Dean of Harvard.

- d. **A monopoly for Christ-centered higher education** – And another former dean, this time of Yale Law School, persuasively argues that the faculty in liberal arts programs at colleges and universities throughout the United States have lost all ability to teach the meaning of life to its undergraduates. The author is Anthony Kronman, a humanities professor at Yale. Kronman does *not* argue this from a Christian perspective. Rather, he is a champion of secular humanism, which makes his conclusion all the more fascinating. He concludes *the church* now possesses a monopoly regarding instruction on the meaning of life.ⁱⁱⁱ

What professor Kronman fails to see are the schools that remain intentionally Christ-centered. It is here, at Sterling College, that the meaning of life is still taught.

Sterling's first president, Dr. Francis Marion Spencer, made clear in *his* inaugural address that Sterling was to be a Christ-centered liberal arts college.^{iv} And as Sterling has renewed this commitment in recent years, we have seen enrollment rise and the entire institution strengthened. I believe our rootedness, and this renewal, are at the core of Sterling's bright future.

III. Sterling College is important because it provides a *certain kind* of education that helps its students become *certain kinds* of people.

- a. **Sterling provides a certain kind of education** – When Sterling was founded in 1887, it joined a long line of colleges founded by the Presbyterians. The Presbyterians possessed a high view of education and aggressively pursued it both before and after the American founding. They founded dozens of biblically-based colleges and precollegiate institutions, some of which later became colleges.

But the Presbyterian vision of Christian education was not without opposition. Most notably, Thomas Jefferson vigorously advocated an alternative vision and strenuously opposed the Presbyterians, whom he considered his principal rival to his republican dreams for higher education. Jefferson's vision was not only nonsectarian, but secular. But in the 1820s, as Jefferson was in his eighties and nearing the end of his life, the Presbyterians were the leaders and gaining strength.^v

Jefferson's vision of secular education eventually prevailed and today is dominant is American higher education.

When Sterling was founded 122 years ago, Sterling's first president reported that there were 400 colleges in the United States. Virtually all but 27, which were controlled and supported by the state, were founded by or supported by the church.^{vi}

Today there are nearly 5000 colleges and universities in the U.S.^{vii} Seventy-four percent of all students in college and graduate school attend a state run institution.^{viii} And while only 2%^{ix} of American undergrads are enrolled at schools that are members of the Council for Christian Colleges and Universities (CCCU), the growth at these schools has far outpaced its counterparts. Between 1990 – 2004, public four-year campuses grew about 13%. Independent four-year campuses, including many schools with broad religious or denominational connections, grew about 28%. CCCU schools grew by nearly 71%.^x Sterling's enrollment has increased 40% since 2005, and is currently at an all-time high. Sterling now serves students from 32 states and international students from 7 countries.

Why this dramatic growth? Historian George Marsden cites the growing academic strength, coherent educational experience, and supportive community found at these schools. In short, Marsden says these schools offer "the sort of well-rounded collegiate experience that one might imagine was more characteristic of Harvard and other liberal arts institutions of half a century ago."^{xi}

These are the qualities that set Sterling College apart. And they are the qualities we will build upon for tomorrow. Academic strength. A supportive community. A coherent educational experience. With these commitments,

Sterling offers what T.S. Eliot called the purpose of Christian education: to “teach people to be able to think in Christian categories.”^{xii}

Sterling College offers the finest kind of education available to humanity: A liberal arts education with a Christian worldview.

- b. **Sterling College seeks to help its students become certain kinds of people** – Our goal is to help students become certain kinds of people. Knowledge and professional competency are necessary, but not enough. Yes, we want all of our graduates to possess the liberal arts competencies; to communicate well verbally and in written form; to know how to think critically about life’s important issues; to get along with others and know how to be part of a team and a community.

But we want more. We want our graduates to walk into adulthood with a larger vision for life. We want for the liberal arts competencies to be integrated with the larger spiritual questions of the meaning of life. We want our graduates to grasp an understanding that they have an eternal purpose to pursue and fulfill; to grasp that they can live an abundant life; to grasp that life is to be lived in community; to know they are loved and; that as they love God and others, they fulfill their highest purpose.

Make no mistake: we are proud of the alumni of this institution. We are proud of the five college presidents and three interim college presidents that have graduated from Sterling; we are proud of the long and plentiful history of Sterling grads who are physicians that serve both urban and rural settings; we are proud of the vast number of pastors and missionaries that serve nearby and on five continents around the world; we are proud of the thousands of alumni who are educators; we are proud of the unbroken string of Sterling graduates who have served for nearly seventy years on the Wichita district court bench. We are proud of our 9,200 living alumni.

And as a school that emphasizes and overtly teaches servant leadership, we are proud of our alumni who manifest this at home and in the marketplace.

But our deepest sense of satisfaction is with those who have grasped the meaning of life and experience the abundance that comes with it.

My first truly powerful glimpse of this was at Sterling’s final chapel service of the spring semester. Called “Cardboard Testimonies,” thirty graduating seniors each had a piece of cardboard, roughly 2 x 3 feet in size. Using a black marker, they had written something on both sides, large enough for the audience to read. On one side, a few words described a great struggle or pain they possessed when they entered Sterling. And on the other side, they wrote words of healing and redemption. One at a time, these thirty seniors stepped in front of the audience, first holding up the side that described their struggle or hurt. After a few moments, the student flipped over the cardboard so we could read their message of redemption.

One student held up a sign that said “Bitter and angry” on one side and “Forgiven and able to forgive” on the other.

Another’s said “Longing to be loved” on the first side, and “Fully satisfied” on the other.

A young woman’s read: “Father’s death made me hate God.” She flipped it over and it said “Now I’ve never been closer to him.”

Another young woman wrote: “Slave to perfectionism.” And with a proclamation of victory, wrote: “Freed! God loves me... even all my imperfections.”

A young man wrote: “Road to destruction.” “Abundant life in Jesus.”

One after another. Thirty of them. Some were *very* personal. *All* were vulnerable. I don’t think there was a dry eye in the house.

These were silent testimonies of the life-changing nature of what happens on this campus. And so it happens every single day, year after year, in the quiet life-giving community that has been created here.

The students that come to Sterling are filled with tremendous potential. *Our message* is that God loves them and wants great things for them.

I stand before you today to proclaim that Sterling College’s best days are ahead of it. Sterling College is on the rise. And that is because Sterling has never been more important to the world that surrounds it.

Sterling College is important because, in the midst of the moral confusion, it is rooted.

Sterling College is important because, as higher education has lost its way, Sterling remains true to its original purpose.

Sterling College is important because it provides a *certain kind* of education that helps its students become *certain kinds* of people.

Sterling College is important, today and tomorrow, because on the most important questions of the meaning of life, Sterling has something to say. And as we *remain rooted*, and as we *renew* our commitment to our core purpose, Sterling College will continue to rise.

And as that happens, we will give thanks to God.

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- ⁱ McCreery, William M., Sterling College Inaugural Address, October 18, 1946, p. 4.
- ⁱⁱ Kronman, Anthony T., Education's End: Why Our Colleges and Universities Have Given Up on the Meaning of Life, Yale University Press, New Haven and London, 2007, p. 49.
- ⁱⁱⁱ Ibid., p. 197.
- ^{iv} Spencer, Francis Marion, Sterling College Inaugural Address, September 4, 1889.
- ^v Marsden, George, The Soul of the American University: From Protestant Establishment to Established Nonbelief, Oxford University Press, 1994. Chapters 3 and 4 provide background on the Jefferson v. Presbyterian situation.
- ^{vi} Ibid.
- ^{vii} Chronicle of Higher Education, Almanac Issue, August 28, 2009, p. 5. The Chronicle lists 4,861 total colleges and universities. This stands in contrast to what is listed by Anthony Kronman in Education's End, where he cites 6,814 institutions as recognized by the Council for Higher Education as accredited by it or by organizations approved by the United States Department of Education. Kronman's description can be found on page 269.
- ^{viii} Ibid.
- ^{ix} According to the central office of the Council for Christian Colleges and Universities (CCCCU), an estimated 325,000 students are enrolled at member institutions. The 2009 Almanac edition of the Chronicle of Higher Education reports undergraduate enrollment in the United States as 15,603,771.
- ^x Marsden, George, "Why Christian Colleges are Thriving," <http://www.orthodoxytoday.org/articles-2009/Marsden-Why-Christian-Colleges-Are-Thriving.php>, January 6, 2009.
- ^{xi} Ibid.
- ^{xii} Dockery, David, and David Gushee, The Future of Christian Higher Education, Broadman & Holman Publishers, Nashville, TN, 1999, p. 9.