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Character, Vocation, and the Christian Academic

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Abstract: While I deeply value and devote considerable time to scholarship, in this more personal and reflective essay I focus on the Christian philosopher as teacher in a secular setting. A primary manner in which (I hope) my Christian faith is manifested in teaching as a philosophy professor in the context of a secular institution is through a focus on character, both in the classroom and in my life.

Since the time that I committed myself to being a follower of Christ, I have had a handful of experiences in which it seemed to me that God was providing clear guidance. One of the most significant of these experiences occurred in the summer of 1996. It was then that I first came across these words from Dallas Willard, in his classic book *The Spirit of the Disciplines*:

As a response to this world's problems, the gospel of the Kingdom will never make sense except as it is incarnated...in ordinary human beings in all ordinary conditions of human life. But it will make sense when janitors and storekeepers, carpenters and secretaries, businessmen and university professors, bankers and government officials brim with the degree of holiness and power formerly thought appropriate only to apostles and martyrs.¹

When I read this passage, the words “university professors” jumped off of the page; something inside of me clicked. In retrospect, I recognize certain phenomenological features of the experience which I now take to characterize the guidance of God in my life. Since then, both as a graduate student and a philosophy professor at secular institutions, I've sought to understand and exemplify the incarnated gospel of the Kingdom as a university teacher. In this essay, I will reflect upon two areas of my vocation as they relate to the incarnated gospel of the Kingdom: teaching and character.

¹ Dallas Willard, *The Spirit of the Disciplines: Understanding How God Changes Lives* (New York, NY: HarperCollins Publishers, 1991), pg. 243-244.

My university is a comprehensive regional public institution in the southern United States. While it is true that Christianity is in some ways more prominent in this region, I find that it is often a shallow or nominal form of Christianity that prevails. There is a Christian veneer here that is not present in some other parts of the country, but it has seemed to me that many of my students with some sort of Christian background do not think Christianly about everyday life nor their particular field of study.

In such an environment, I have often thought that Søren Kierkegaard is a good model of what a Christian philosopher should be and do, in the following sense. Kierkegaard is harshly critical of the misguided beliefs of the non-religious as well as the misguided beliefs and especially the hypocritical actions of those who claim to be Christians. Put simply, Kierkegaard perturbed everyone, both the religious and the non-religious. I think this is something that good Christian philosophers should aspire to do with appropriate tact, sensitivity, and respect.

This of course does not mean that I accuse students of hypocrisy in the classroom, but it does mean that I seek to challenge some of their beliefs, even ones I may ultimately share, in order to help them develop as critical thinkers in pursuit of wisdom and truth. At times I will share my own views, while at other times I will refrain from doing so. But even when I do share my views on a particular controversial issue, I often note that my view is a minority position in philosophy if that is the case, or that there are very intelligent people on the various sides of any issue. I hope this communicates respect as well as intellectual humility.

My focus in both teaching and scholarship is ethics, but I am not interested in the “culture wars,” in part because I think this paradigm of engagement is ineffective and also because it is problematic in a variety of other ways. So when I teach a hot-button issue such as abortion, I not only explain and discuss the arguments with my students, but I spend some time explaining what I hope we gain from the discussion. In this particular case, I do not share my own view, but I do share with them what I take the central question in the abortion debate to be, and try to equip them to think about and answer that question for themselves based on good argumentation and evidence.

More generally, as a Christian philosopher teaching in a secular environment, I will bring different perspectives, including a variety of Christian ones, into the discussion. However, I don’t believe that I should use my position to somehow coerce students or unduly influence their views on philosophical or religious issues. I do not think my colleagues who adhere to other religions or to no religion at all should exploit their position in this way, and so by parity of reasoning the same applies to me.

I think it is important to attempt to engage students at a heart-level with ideas that touch on their present and future lives. With this in mind, in recent years I have given more attention to character and everyday ethics in my introductory courses, in part because I think that the study of ethics is not merely about knowledge, but also practical wisdom, or prudence. Ethics as a field of study is not merely concerned with controversial social and political issues, but also about the character of the individual. If I can get my students to thoughtfully consider the connection between character, human happiness, and the common good, then I have accomplished something significant. I genuinely believe that my classes can play a role, even if only a small one, in encouraging a concern for and even growth in character in my students. Most philosophers don't seek or even concern themselves with this, at least at secular institutions, but I take philosophy to be a helpful aid in the pursuit of a fulfilling human life, rather than a mere body of abstract knowledge. As a Christian, this is one way I can show love for my students and perhaps help them to appreciate the good, the beautiful, and the true. As a follower of Christ, I believe this can help them in many ways.

I also seek not only to teach about and discuss character with my students, but also to exemplify moral and intellectual virtue. While I certainly fall short in a variety of ways—a fact that my colleagues and students can attest to—my vision and my hope is nevertheless to exemplify in some manner the character of Christ on my campus. In practical terms, this means doing my best to avoid the cynicism that is so pervasive in academia.² It means doing more than “my share” of service to my department and university. It means trying to be patient and gracious with students who are apathetic, or suffering, or struggling, or overly demanding. And it means being intentional about encouraging and affirming them when they do good work, rather than focusing solely on criticism.

My hope for my students is not only that they would see that Christianity is a live intellectual option, whatever their own views are (or turn out to be in the future). I also hope that they see it is an existentially viable and good way of life, as God enables me to in some way, as an ordinary human being, incarnate the gospel of the Kingdom in my ordinary life.

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²This is especially challenging for me. One of my middle school football coaches called me “Austin the Cynic.”