

Campus Christianity

Spiritual Wastelands 101

In the fall of my junior year in college, I had been a Christian for only a year. Since I had been involved in a Christian group on campus, however, I felt I had learned a great deal about my faith. As a science major I had completed most of my requirements for my degree, and I was looking forward to taking electives in my major of animal ecology. However, I still had a couple of hours in humanities to fulfill, not my most favorite subject. While I was looking for a humanities elective, I came across an English course entitled “Spiritual Wastelands.” I remember thinking to myself, “That looks interesting. I wonder what spiritual wastelands this course is about?” With my newfound interest in spiritual things, I decided to enroll.

On the first day of class, I was horrified the minute the instructor walked into the room. He wore an old Army fatigue jacket, a blue work shirt open to the middle of his hairy chest, ratty blue jeans, sandals, long tangled hair, and a beard. He punctuated his appearance with a leather necklace containing what looked like sharks’ teeth. To make it worse, he proceeded to go around the room and ask every student why he or she took this course. I don’t really remember what the other students said but when he got around to me, I sheepishly replied that I was a Christian and that I was interested in knowing what kind of spiritual wastelands he was going to talk about. Immediately, with a look of malevolent glee, he exploded: “You’re a *Christian*? I want to *hear* from you!”

Needless to say, if there had been a place to hide, I would have found it. As you may guess, the only spiritual wasteland he wanted to talk about was Christianity. I was like a babe who had been thrown to the wolves. Our class discussions, more often than not, were two-sided: the instructor versus me. Hardly anyone else ever spoke up. To say that I found myself floundering like a fish out of water would be an understatement. Occasionally my questions and comments would hit the mark. But I am convinced, as I look back, that even that degree of success was purely the grace of God.

Since that time, I have spent twelve more years in the university environment as both an undergraduate and graduate student. I have learned a great deal about how a Christian student should relate to the academic community, and I would like to share with you four principles for effective Christian witnessing in that setting. I think you will also find that these principles will prove to be an effective guide in any sphere of life.

Approach your studies from a Christian worldview. We need to think Christianly. The only way to accomplish this is to be continually involved in the process of knowing God.

Realize that the job of the student is to learn—not to preach. A teachable spirit is highly valued. This may seem obvious to you, but believe me, it isn’t obvious to everyone.

Pursue excellence. Every exam, every paper, every assignment must be pursued to the best of our ability, as unto the Lord.

Be faithful to the task—leave the results (grades) to God. Do not get hung up on the world’s definition of success.

Think Christianly

All of our thoughts are to be Christ-centered, including those expressed in a university classroom. Paul tells us in 2 Corinthians 10:5 that “we are taking every thought captive to the obedience of Christ.” All knowledge is to be encompassed by a Christian worldview. In other words, we should try to see all knowledge through the eyes of Jesus. This all sounds well and good, but how do we do that?

The only way to think and see as Jesus does is to know Him. This brings us to the basics of the Christian life. There are numerous demands on the time of a student. There are always experiments to do, books to read, papers to write, exams to study for, assignments to turn in, classes to attend. This is doubly true for graduate students, who spend their entire time seemingly three steps behind where they are supposed to be. Let’s not forget the demands of a girlfriend or boyfriend, family, exercise, and just plain having fun. How is one supposed to find time for regular personal devotions, worship on Sunday mornings, fellowship with other believers, and the study of God’s Word? These activities can all take a serious bite out of the time the university demands from a student. But this is the only way to draw closer to God and to understand His ways.

By being faithful in spiritual things, we trust God to honor the time spent and to bring about His desired results in our academic pursuits despite our having less free time than most non-Christians. Christian campus groups can be of tremendous help in these matters through training, Bible studies, and fellowship with believers who are going through the same struggles you are.

For those times when trouble does arise in the classroom, and you feel that your faith is being challenged and you are confused, an enormous amount of assistance is available to you. The manager of your local Christian bookstore can be a great help in finding books that deal with your problem. Organizations such as Probe Ministries can also help steer you in the right direction with short essays, position papers, and bibliographies. Dedicated and highly educated Christians have addressed just about every intellectual attack on Christianity. There is no reason to feel like you have to do it on your own. That was my mistake in the “Spiritual Wastelands” course. It never even occurred to me to seek help. I could have represented my Lord in a much more credible way if I had only asked.

There are no shortcuts to living the Christian life. We cannot expect to emerge from the university with a truly Christian view of the world if we put our walk with the Lord on hold while we fill our heads with the knowledge of the world. Remember! We are to take every thought captive to the obedience of Christ. In order to do that, we must know Him; in order to know Him, we must spend time with Him. There were many times in my college career when higher priorities prevented me from spending the amount of time I felt necessary to prepare for an exam, paper, or presentation, but I always found God to be faithful.

During my doctoral studies, we moved into a new house and the boys were ages 4 and 2. The room they were going to share desperately needed repainting and we were having new bunk beds delivered on Monday, the same day of an important cell biology exam. The professor writing this exam was the one in whose lab I had hopes of working for my doctoral project. So I needed to do well.

The room was small and the beds were large, so they needed to be constructed inside the room. This meant the room had to be painted before the beds arrived. If I paint, I lose critical study time for an important exam. If I study, the room goes unpainted and I have an unhappy wife and a difficult task getting to it later. I chose to paint the room. I had a total of three hours of study time for the exam! I entered the exam free of tension knowing I did my best and it was in God’s hands. I had no idea how

I did on the exam, but when the grades came out, I received the second highest grade in the class and the best exam score in my tenure as a graduate student! The professor was impressed enough to allow me to begin working in her lab.

Cultivate a Teachable Spirit

I have run across numerous professors whose only encounters with Christians were students who simply told them that they were wrong and the Bible was right. Most professors do not have much patience with this kind of approach. It is a great way to gain enemies and demonstrate how much you think you know, but it does not win anybody to Christ.

Some Christian students have the impression that when they hear error being presented in university classroom, it is their duty to call out the heavy artillery and blast away. This is not necessarily so. As a student, your job is to learn, not to teach. In my education, I reasoned that in order to be a *critic* of evolution, I needed to first be a *student* of evolution and demonstrate that I knew what I was talking about. Once professors realized I was serious about wanting to understand evolution, when I began to ask questions, they listened. In the end my professors and I often had to agree to disagree, but we all learned something in the process, and I built relationships that could grow and develop in the future.

The most effective tactic in the classroom is the art of asking questions. This approach accomplishes three things. First, you demonstrate that you are paying attention, which is somewhat of a rarity today. Second, you demonstrate that you are truly interested in what the instructor is talking about. All good teachers love students with teachable spirits, but not students who are so gullible as to believe unquestioningly everything they say. Third, as you become adept at asking just the right question that exposes the error of what is being taught, you allow the professor and other students to see for themselves the lack of wisdom or truth in the idea being discussed. Truth is truth, whether expressed by a believer or a pagan. However, non-Christians will believe other non-Christians much more readily than they will a fanatical Christian waving a Bible in his hand.

As a graduate student, I was in a class with faculty and other graduate students discussing a new discipline called sociobiology, the study of the biological basis for all social behaviors. One day we were discussing the purpose and meaning of life. In an evolutionary worldview, this can only mean survival and reproduction. Disturbed at how everyone was accepting this, I said, "We have just said that the only purpose in life is to survive and reproduce. If that is true, let me pose this hypothetical situation to you. Let's suppose I am dead and in the ground and the decomposers are doing their thing. Since you say there is no afterlife, this is it. It's over! What difference does it make to me now, whether I have reproduced or not?" After a long silence, a professor spoke up and said, "Well, I guess that ultimately, it doesn't matter at all." "But wait," I responded. "If the only purpose in life is to survive and reproduce, and ultimately-now you tell me-that doesn't matter either, then what's the point? Why go on living? Why stop at red lights? Who cares?!" After another long silence, the same professor spoke up and said, "*Well, I suppose that in the future, those that will be selected for will be those who know there is no purpose in life, but will live as if there is.*" What an amazing and depressing admission of the need to live a lie! That's exactly the point I wanted to make, but it sank in deeper when, through my **questions**, the **professor** said it and not me. When Jesus was found by His parents in the temple with the priests, He was listening and asking them questions-probably not for His benefit, but for theirs (Luke 2:46).

We are all familiar with 1 Peter 3:15, which says, "Sanctify Christ as Lord in your hearts, always being ready to make a defense to every one who asks you to give an account for the hope that is in you, yet with gentleness and reverence." This verse is a double-edged sword that most of us sharpen only on one side or the other. Many are prepared to make a defense, but they leave destruction in

their wakes, never exhibiting gentleness or reverence. Others are the most gentle and reverent people you know, but are intimidated by tough questions and leave the impression that Christianity is for the weak and feeble-minded. The latter need to go back and read a few important passages:

2 Corinthians 10:3-5

For though we live in the world, we do not wage war as the world does. The weapons we fight with are not the weapons of the world. On the contrary, they have divine power to demolish strongholds. We demolish arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God, and we take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ.

Colossians 2:8

See to it that no one takes you captive through hollow and deceptive philosophy, which depends on human tradition and the basic principles of this world rather than on Christ.

Acts 17

(The story of what happened when Paul boldly proclaimed the gospel in Thessalonica, Berea, and the Areopagus in Athens.)

Paul was a firm believer in the intellectual integrity of the gospel. The “staunch defender” needs to remember that Jesus told His disciples that the world would know that we are Christians by the love we have for one another (John 13:34-35) and that we are to love our enemies (Matt. 5:43-47). Paul exhorted the Romans not to repay evil with evil, but to repay evil with good and to leave vengeance to the Lord (Rom. 12:17-21). Finally, the writer of Proverbs tells us that a gentle answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up wrath (Prov. 15:1), and that the foolish man rages and laughs and always loses his temper, but a wise man holds it back (Prov. 29:9,11).

Pursue Excellence

Nothing attracts the attention of those in the academic community as much as a job well done. There is no argument against excellence. In Colossians 3:17 Paul tells us, “Whatever you do in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks through Him to God the Father.” If we are to do everything in Jesus’ name, He deserves nothing less than the best that we can do. How many of our papers and exams would we be comfortable stamping with the words, “Performed by a disciple of Jesus Christ”? I think I would want to ask if I could have a little more time before I actually handed it in! Yet Paul admonishes us to hold to that standard in all that we do. This does not mean that every grade must be an A. Sometimes your best is a B or a C or even just getting the assignment done on time. The important thing is to try. It’s important to be able to tell yourself that, with the time, resources, and energy you had available to you, you did your best. The road to excellence is tough, exhausting, and even frightening. It is hard going. But our Lord deserves nothing less.

Ted Engstrom, in his book *The Pursuit of Excellence*, tells the story of a pastor who spent his spare time and weekends for months repairing and rebuilding a dilapidated small farm in a rural community. When he was nearly finished, a neighbor happened by who remarked, “Well, preacher, it looks like you and God really did some work here!” The pastor replied, “It’s interesting you should say that, Mr. Brown. But I’ve got to tell you—you should have seen this place when God had it all to Himself!”

It is certainly true that God is the source of all our strength, and all glory and honor for what we may accomplish is His. But, it is no less true that God has always chosen people to be His instruments—frail, mistake-prone, imperfect people. His servants have not exactly enjoyed a life of ease while in His service. Striving for excellence is a basic form of Christian witness. We pay attention to people who always strive to do their best. In the classroom, people may not always agree with what you say, but if they know you as a person who works diligently and knows what you are talking about, they will give your words great respect. And, if there is enough of the Savior shining through you, your listeners will come back and want to know more.

I am reminded of the impact of four Hebrew youths in the Babylonian culture during the reign of Nebuchadnezzar: Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah (whom you may recognize by their Babylonian names: Meshach, Shadrach and Abednego). They entered the prestigious secular institution, “Babylon University,” and were immersed into an inherently hostile atmosphere. But Scripture says that

And as for these four youths, God gave them knowledge and intelligence in every branch of literature and wisdom; Daniel even understood all kinds of visions and dreams . . . And as for every matter of wisdom and understanding about which the king consulted them, he found them ten times better than all the magicians and conjurers who were in all his realm (Daniel 1:17, 20).

You can be sure they were instructed in Babylonian literature and wisdom, not Hebrew, yet they excelled. If our God is indeed the King of Kings and Lord of Lords, then He can not only protect us as we enter the university, but He can also prosper us. Imagine the testimony for Jesus Christ if the best philosophers, the best doctors, the best poets and novelists, the best musicians, the best astrophysicists, and on and on, were all Christians. That would be a powerful witness!

As you pursue excellence, do not be deterred by mistakes. They are going to come, guaranteed. The pursuit of excellence is an attitude in the face of failure. Thomas Edison, the creator of many inventions including the light bulb and the phonograph, was never discouraged by failed experiments. He simply reasoned that he now knew of one more way that his experiment was not going to work. Mistakes were his education. The wise man admits and learns from his mistakes, but the fool ignores them or covers them up. We all admire someone who freely admits a mistake and then works hard not to repeat it.

Strive for Faithfulness, Not Success

As students in the university learn to approach their studies from a Christian worldview, as they grow to appreciate their place as people who are there to learn and not necessarily to confront, and as they begin to pursue excellence in everything they do, it is tempting for them to believe that God will bless whatever they set out to accomplish. Their primary focus becomes whether or not all of their efforts are successful. It can become depressing if they do not see the kind of results they expected God to bring about.

Soon after Mother Teresa received the Nobel Peace Prize for her work among the poor in Calcutta, she was asked by a reporter in New York City how she could dedicate herself so completely to her work when there was no real hope of success. It was obvious she was not going to eliminate hunger, poverty, disease, and all the other ills of that densely populated city in India. In other words, he asked, if you can't really make a dent in the conditions these people live in, why bother? Her reply was simple, yet profound; she said, “God has not called us to success, but to faithfulness.” How many

times have we heard in witnessing seminars that our job is to share the gospel and leave the results to God? What I hear Mother Teresa saying is that our responsibility is the same in everything we do.

Oswald Chambers, in his timeless devotional book *My Utmost for His Highest*, caused me to recall Mother Teresa and reflect on my own expectations. He said,

Notice God's unutterable waste of saints, according to the judgment of the world. God plants His saints in the most useless places. We say—God intends me to be here because I am so useful. Jesus never estimated His life along the line of the greatest use. God puts His saints where they will glorify Him, and we are no judges at all of where that is.
(August 10)

The main point here is that we should be faithful to the task God has given to us rather than worry about whether or not we are achieving the results we think God should be interested in. When we begin thinking that "God is wasting my time and His," we have probably stepped over the line. I spent five and a half years in the laboratory on doctoral experiments in molecular biology, experiments that never accomplished what I had planned. The most frustrating aspect was that these experiments did not result in work that was publishable in the scientific literature, which is the ultimate goal of any scientist. I had a great deal of confidence when I started this difficult research problem that the Lord and I would work it out. Well, we didn't. I never dreamed how much Mother Teresa's words concerning the value of faithfulness over success would be lived out in my own life. It has been a hard, hard lesson. And I don't believe I have a complete answer as to why God chose to deal with me in this way. Scientific publications seemed not just desirable but necessary in my future career; yet God is sovereign and He apparently has other plans. During those years, I learned a great deal about living the Christian life in the midst of difficult circumstances. I can only pray that I will not forget what was so painful to learn.

Conclusion

In summary, orient your studies according to a Christian world view. Your main job as a student is to learn and to develop the skill of asking questions, and to keep the boxing gloves at home. Pursue excellence and remain faithful to the task to which God has called you, and leave the results to Him.

Suggested Reading

Oswald Chambers. *My Utmost for His Highest*. Westwood, NJ: Barbour and Company, 1963.

Ted Engstrom. *The Pursuit of Excellence*. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 1982.

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