

THE CHRISTIAN TEACHER/SCHOLAR AS AN AGENT OF REDEMPTION

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All Christians are called to be agents for God's redemptive purposes. The reflections that follow flow from this fundamental premise.

I will elaborate on what this common calling may mean for that subset of Christians who are Christian teacher/scholars.

But, there are obvious prior questions that must first be addressed. What are God's redemptive purposes for Creation? Who, or what is it that God intends to redeem? Christians disagree in their responses to these questions. I will lay bare my responses through some autobiography that reflects my own pilgrimage from a narrow to a broad view of redemption.

God's Redemptive Purposes

In the pietistic Christian tradition in which I was raised in Brooklyn, New York, in a non-liturgical Lutheran church (if you can imagine that not being an oxymoron), redemption was viewed almost exclusively in terms of the need for individual persons to be "saved" through the person and work of Jesus Christ. I certainly believe that to be one extremely important facet of God's redemptive purposes. But, I now also believe that God has other redemptive purposes, in addition to, not in place of, the salvation of individual persons.

In brief, as suggested in Romans 8, all of God's Creation "groans" for redemption. Therefore, in addition to being called to be agents for the redemption of individual persons, Christians are also called to be

- *agents for peace and reconciliation* between persons and groups in conflict, in our homes, places of employment, churches, communities, and beyond – situations of conflict

groan for redemption.

- *agents for social justice*, working for a more equitable distribution of goods and rights to the marginalized, the poor and oppressed – unjust societal and political structures groan for redemption.
- *agents for the flourishing of the natural Creation* by wise stewardship of natural resources and concern for a healthy physical and ecological environment – a polluted earth groans for redemption.
- *agents for beauty*, showing appreciation for beauty, both in God’s Creation and in the artistic creations of humans, and fostering the creation of such beauty – ugliness groans for redemption.
- *agents for knowledge*, for greater understanding of all aspects of the created order, that we may live in proper relationship with that order – ignorance groans for redemption; inadequate perspectives in the academic disciplines groan for redemption.
- *agents for the growth of persons*, with each person growing in accordance with her special gifts – persons whose growth has been stifled through neglect or abuse groan for redemption.

I could go on, for as Abraham Kuyper once proposed: “There is not one square inch on the whole plain of human existence over which Christ, who is Lord, does not proclaim: ‘This is mine’.” The biblical support for such a broad view of redemption is compelling for me, for I read in Colossians 1: 19-20 that “God was pleased to have his fullness dwell in him <Christ>, and through him to reconcile *all things*, whether things on earth or things in heaven” (italics mine). To be sure, such redemption will be fully realized, in ways I cannot imagine, only at the end of times, But, in the meantime, Christians are called to create intimations of that full glory to come, like a sunrise gives a partial glimpse of what the full noonday sun will be like.

My proposing this broad view of God’s redemptive purposes does not mean that each Christian is called to concentrate on all of these redemptive ends. God’s call for such agency is directed to the collective body of Christians, with each Christian contributing in accordance with her particular gifts and social location.

What, then, is the particular calling of the Christian teacher/scholar as an agent of redemption? I will propose three categories for such redemptive activities, *personal Christian living*, doing *Christian scholarship*, and orchestrating *respectful conversations* to disseminate the results of Christian scholarship. The first of these categories, *personal Christian living*, is the most obvious and least debatable (I will come back to this first category in my devotional tomorrow morning). The second and third categories are more nuanced and debatable, and I will address them in some detail -- in this presentation and my next talk. But, for the sake of coherence in this presentation, let me now say a few words now about

Personal Christian Living

This aspect of redemptive activity for Christian scholars is shared by all Christians. Each of us is called to be an agent for redemption by the witness of personal Christian living; the witness of a holy life. This will include seeking to foster God's redemptive purposes in our daily personal engagement with those whose paths we cross; modeling the highest moral standards and aspirations for spiritual growth; caring deeply for the well-being of others; and witnessing to others about the saving grace of God in your life and the "good news of the Gospel", as opportunity presents itself.

Such personal Christian living should not be thought of as just doing certain things at selected times. At its deepest level, this ministry of personal Christian living involves being characterized, at all times and in all places, by those enduring dispositions that the Bible refers to as the "fruits of the Spirit": love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self control (Galatians 5: 22). Since our enduring dispositions influence what we notice, or do not notice, around us, our personal Christian living will often involve our responding sensitively and compassionately to our students and faculty colleagues.

I cannot overemphasize the importance of such personal Christian living in my agency as a Christian teacher/scholar. But, I now believe it doesn't completely define my responsibility. I am also called to "do Christian scholarship" (the subject of the remainder of this presentation), and

to orchestrate respectful conversation to disseminate the results of my Christian scholarship (the subject for my next presentation later this afternoon).

Christian Scholarship

The Meaning of Christian Scholarship

My presentation on Christian scholarship will be sub-divided into two parts: first, what is the meaning of “Christian scholarship?” Second, how can a Christian college facilitate and support the work of its faculty as they seek to do Christian scholarship.

First, the meaning of “Christian scholarship.” I have proposed that Christian teacher/scholars are called to be agents for God’s redemptive purposes by doing “Christian scholarship.” But, what is it, if anything, that makes scholarship “Christian?” Does “Christian scholarship” just refer to any kind of research that happens to be done by professing Christians? Or, does the research itself have to be influenced by a Christian faith commitment for the results to qualify as “Christian scholarship?”

In brief, I now embrace a definition of Christian scholarship that is a variation on a proposal by Stephen Evans, a professor of philosophy at Baylor University: *Christian scholarship is any creative work (breaking new ground) that fosters God’s redemptive purposes for Creation.* This definition encompasses a wide variety of research projects. I can best illustrate this variety by introducing the idea of scholarship being “perspectival”. In brief, scholarly work is “perspectival” when the research is influenced by the particular worldview beliefs of the scholar, be they Christian or otherwise, as well as other elements of the scholar’s social location.

George Marsden has proposed that there are three ways in which the particular perspective of the scholar can influence her research. For the time being, I will limit myself to the first two influences. First, the perspective of the scholar can influence the choice of a topic to be researched. Second, the scholar's particular perspective can influence the questions she decides to ask about the chosen topic. Allow me to illustrate with an example.

Consider research by biologists on the nature of the mechanism of photosynthesis. There is no such thing as "Christian photosynthesis", or "Muslim photosynthesis", or "atheistic photosynthesis". This is "technical" scholarship for which the perspective of the scholar, Christian or otherwise, makes no difference in the actual results of the research, as far as I can tell. Any biologist, whatever her religious or secular worldview commitments, will obtain the same research results as any other biologist, provided they both adhere to research methods deemed acceptable to the guild of biologists.

Yet, this is Christian scholarship, according to my definition, if the research is done by a Christian motivated to seek greater understanding of one aspect of God's Creation, which I have suggested is one of God's redemptive purposes.

But, note carefully that in this example of "Christian scholarship" that illustrates Marsden's first two perspectival influences, the actual results of the research (after the topic and questions have been chosen) will not, as far as I can tell, be influenced by the worldview perspective of the scholar. In other words, a hypothetical non-Christian biologist, using the research methods appropriate to her academic discipline, should obtain the same research results as a Christian biologist. I will from now on refer to Christian scholarship that is "only" influenced by a Christian perspective in Marsden's first two ways (the choice of research topic and the research questions asked about the topic) as "weakly perspectival." The use of this awkward phrase is not meant to denigrate this important form of perspectival Christian scholarship. Rather, it is meant to indicate that while these two perspectival influences are operative, their influence does not

extend to the actual results of the research. A non-Christian scholar choosing to explore the same topic and questions should arrive at the same answers as a Christian scholar.

In contrast, I believe there is a category of Christian scholarship that can be called “strongly perspectival,” meaning that not only is the choice of topic and questions influenced by the Christian commitment of the scholar, but so are the actual results of the research. One subcategory of such strongly perspectival scholarship is captured by Marsden’s third proposal for perspectival influence: Christian perspective makes a difference when Christian scholars do the theoretical work of proposing or evaluating theories to explain observed phenomena. I will illustrate this form of strongly perspectival theoretical Christian scholarship by noting the scholarly work of Jim Waller, professor of Psychology at Whitworth College (WA), in Holocaust and Genocide Studies. Waller focuses on the timely question of why ordinary people sometimes do extraordinary evil.

Waller notes that in the contemporary scholarly debate in Holocaust and Genocide studies, alternative theories as to why ordinary people come to commit extraordinary evil typically propose what is called an “alteration process,” which can take one of two forms.

One view of the alteration process includes “divided-self theories” which hypothesize that an ordinary person can only commit extraordinary evil by creating some other self to do that evil. An alternative theory about an alteration process rejects the idea that a person can create a second self. Rather, an alteration process that takes place is that the primary, and only self, is fundamentally altered as a result of the power of potent social forces, like those unleashed by Hitler in Nazi Germany.

Note that different theories can be proposed to explain the same observed data. Waller has proposed an alternative theory on evil-doing that is deeply informed by an Orthodox Christian

belief that our present human nature is flawed or fallen. Put simply, this implies that any one of us is capable of committing extraordinary evil under certain conditions (Waller, *Becoming Evil*. Oxford 2002). But it is not only Waller's theory that is informed by a particular worldview commitment. I believe that if one digs beneath the surface of the alternative alteration theories, one will also uncover assumptions as to the nature of human nature.

So, I take the position that there should be room in the academy for Christian scholarship that is "strongly perspectival." This is a much disputed belief. The most cogent defense of this belief is presented by George Marsden in his book *The Outrageous Idea of Christian Scholarship*, which also helpfully provides a number of other examples from a variety of academic disciplines. I now embed what we did together this morning into this presentation. When you do scholarly work dealing with any "integrative question," you are doing "strongly perspectival" Christian scholarship, in which the actual results of your scholarship are informed by your Christian faith perspective.

So much for what I take to be the meaning of "Christian scholarship." Let me now proceed to consideration of the ways in which Christian colleges can facilitate and support the work of their faculty as they do Christian scholarship.

Christian Colleges Supporting Christian Scholarship

I first need to clear out some underbrush, weeds that grow because of the position Christian colleges typically take that they are "teaching institutions." On the surface, to be a "teaching institution" is laudatory in light of some of the excesses that can occur at "research institutions." Anyone who has studied in graduate school probably knows of at least one professor who has advanced through the scholarly ranks because of exemplary scholarly work, but has little commitment to teaching and to the well-being of students, with the possible exception of his

dissertation advisees. An acquaintance of mine who taught at a research university was called into the office of his Department Chair one day shortly after students in one of his classes had completed course evaluation forms. Since the evaluations were excellent, he anticipated that the Chair intended to commend him for his evident teaching ability. Rather, the Chair cautioned him that such fine evaluations may indicate that he was committing too much time and energy to teaching, which could keep him from the scholarly work he needed to do for faculty advancement.

I do not wish to generalize concerning the commitment of faculty teaching at research universities. I have been exposed to a number of excellent teachers at such high quality universities. I am simply pointing to some possible excesses at the research university end of the higher education spectrum.

But, while I am dwelling on excesses, let me tell you about the excesses at the “teaching institution” end of the spectrum, like at Christian institutions of higher education. I have seen too many potentially productive Christian scholars dry up because they accepted appointments at Christian colleges and universities. The teaching loads and institutional service assignments are simply too heavy to allow much time for concentrated scholarly work. This does not necessarily mean that such colleges are hostile to scholarly work. It’s often more like “scholarly work is fine, in your spare time, after you’ve done the really important work of teaching and serving the institution.”

The secondary importance given to faculty scholarship at many Christian colleges reflects unambiguous value commitments that are prevalent in many Christian subcultures, especially those with an evangelical bent. We often highly value activities that promise immediacy of results that are, hopefully, easily measurable. Therefore, many applaud church growth in terms of membership, or the number of persons who have made a commitment to Christ in an

evangelistic campaign. But scholarship doesn't fit that mold. It is arduous, long-term work, the results of which cannot be easily foreseen or measured. There is a cadre of Christian historians, including George Marsden, Nathan Hatch, Mark Noll, and Joel Carpenter, whose painstaking scholarly work over many years has literally transformed the way the larger academy views the role of religion in American history. If they had sold out to the lure of immediacy of results, they would have given up many years ago.

And don't be fooled by anyone who tells you that the reason many Christian colleges don't place high value on faculty scholarship is that they don't have the money to do so. Nonsense! Even struggling colleges manage to find the money for that which they consider to be most important. I remember sitting around a table with other Chief Academic Officers trying to encourage each one to devote a total of \$5000 (a pittance!) to support faculty scholarship for the next academic year. One CAO said that his college just didn't have the money to do that. It was only after the meeting that I found the words I should have said to him: "Show me your college's budget for next year, and I'll find \$5000." It would only take relatively minor adjustments in a few line items.

Be assured that budgeting, in colleges and elsewhere, is always a matter of assigning value priorities. And, if you want to ascertain a college's real priorities, it is better to read its annual budget than the first few pages of its catalog. In a plenary session in a national meeting at Wheaton College (IL) a number of years ago, I dared to propose that a substantial program for faculty scholarship (for summer research grants and some released time from teaching during the academic year) could be fully supported by the funds that even struggling colleges devoted to one major intercollegiate sport. That raised more than a few eyebrows. It isn't that I'm against college athletics (I played varsity basketball in college). I'm all for it. My point was that colleges do find funds for that which they highly value, and too often, faculty scholarship is not one of the high priority items.

Now, if you believe what I just said about the importance of supporting faculty scholarship, and you obviously don't have to, the first step is to codify its importance in your college mission statement. I believe that the typical mission statement for Christian colleges is truncated. My own succinct version of the typical Christian college mission statement is that such colleges intend to prepare students to be agents of redemption, who are committed to fostering God's redemptive purposes for all aspects of life. And that is a marvelous mission as far as it goes. But, I now contend that in addition to, not in place of, this first time-honored aspect of mission, Christian colleges should embrace the mission of enabling its faculty to be agents of redemption through their scholarly work.

But, a mission statement that is expanded to recognize the importance of faculty scholarship will be empty rhetoric if the college does not create institutional structures that will enable faculty to flourish as both effective teachers and productive scholars. Of course, that is much easier said than done, especially given the limited resources of most Christian institutions of higher education. Administrators and faculty will have to be extremely creative. For beginners, Christian colleges have to avoid the easy path of simply adding new expectations for faculty scholarship on top of already stringent expectations relative to teaching, such as large teaching loads. I recall consulting at one Christian university that had recently revised its expectations for the granting of tenure to include enormous expectations for both teaching and scholarship. My immediate gut level reaction was to say that "only God need apply." Something in our current institutional structures "has to give" to enable faculty to be both teachers and scholars.

What I personally think has to be relaxed are the inordinately heavy teaching loads at most Christian institutions of higher education. If I could design a Christian college from scratch, my "ideal" for faculty workload would be as follows: I would expect each faculty member to teach five course during the academic year, give each faculty member a twelve month contact (which doesn't mean pay for nine months of work spread out over twelve months), expecting faculty to devote their summer months (except for a one month vacation) doing scholarly work, and developing criteria for faculty advancement (promotion and tenure) that hold faculty accountable to demonstrate that they are both effective teachers and productive scholars. Lest you think that

is an impossible wish, there is at least one institution of Christian higher education, the King's University College in Edmonton, Alberta, Canada, that instituted such a set of faculty expectations a number of years ago.

Of course, one does not have to be a rocket scientist to figure out that such a plan for faculty assignments and expectations for performance comes with a considerable price tag. If it is judged that the "ideal" faculty workload I propose is too expensive, more Christian colleges could implement some modest initiatives that already exist at a number of Christian colleges, such as faculty summer research grants, awarded on a competitive basis, and selected released time from teaching during the academic year to pursue approved scholarly projects.

But, as I have already argued, the bottom line question is whether a given Christian college judges that the goal of faculty being both effective teachers and productive scholars is of sufficient value to warrant the cost, even if it means that costs have to be cut in other areas of the college operation. Furthermore, significant steps have to be taken to convince the college's supporting constituency that faculty scholarship is important in light of God's redemptive purposes. As I have provocatively claimed, colleges do seem to find the money and raise the money for that which they consider to be important. To date, not many Christian colleges have accepted this considerable challenge. I hope that changes.

In addition to the modest initiatives I have already hinted at (faculty summer research grants, and selected release time from teaching during the academic year to pursue approved research projects), I will close with a much more ambitious model for your consideration, a model that I initiated at Northwestern College (IA) in the mid 1980s. It was a program for "individualization of faculty responsibilities" that gained some recognition beyond Northwestern. In brief, it allowed a faculty member each year to sign a contract for the next year that stipulated one of four types of faculty assignments: a standard assignment (prescribed normal expectations in the major areas of teaching, scholarship and institutional service); a teaching emphasis; a scholarship emphasis; and an institutional service emphasis. For the latter three categories, one contractually

assumed an increased expectation in the chosen area of emphasis, with a corresponding decrease in assignment in one of the other two categories. The strength of this more individualized approach to faculty assignments is that it recognizes the differing gifts of faculty, creating the possibility for each faculty member to focus more on that area where she is most gifted.

As you can imagine, this approach to faculty assignments is not as easy to administer as the usual “cookie-cutter” approach. But, I am told that it is still alive and well almost twenty years after it was instituted. I left Northwestern College the year after this individualized strategy was initiated (no cause and effect).

So, in conclusion, I encourage LeTourneau University to encourage its faculty to be agents for God’s redemptive purposes by *doing Christian scholarship* and to take creative steps to provide the time and resources needed to make that possible.