

WHAT IS TO BE DONE?:
The Christian Professor in the Academy

The main title above is the name an infamous book by Vladimir Ilyich Lenin, the organizer of modern communism (Lenin, 1902). Lenin sought to turn the world upside down with his utopian vision.¹ As a Christian professor, **would that I might have the same vision, only biblically-minded instead of utopian.** What must be done to implement this vision?

To begin, I must go back to first principles. *A professor is one who professes.* What do I profess? My basic need as a Christian professor is to answer this question.

I NEED TO PROFESS CHRISTIAN ESSENTIALS

I need first to profess the biblical fundamentals of the Christian faith, including belief in Christ as God, as virgin born, as sinless and as having died on the cross for my personal salvation, as having risen from the dead and living today, and as having revealed Himself not only in His life but also in the written Word which is infallible and inerrant.²

If I do not profess these truths, a Christian professorship is a sham in which I am trafficking with the eternal souls of those I teach.

What I must do as a Christian professor extends beyond the essentials of Christian profession, however. A college or university is a community of professors engaged in the *vocation* of scholarship.³ The proximate end of my profession is to reflect the unity of truth that the Creator reveals generally in His Creation and specifically in His Word. The ultimate end of my profession is to glorify God and to enjoy Him.⁴

In order to accomplish this profession, all of my being needs to be aligned with the Creator Whom I profess to glorify academically.

I NEED TO PROFESS THAT GOD IS GOOD

Alignment with the will of the Creator begins with the elimination of pride. Pride is endemic in the academy, yet as C.S Lewis wrote:

"... As long as you are proud you cannot know God. A proud man is always looking down on things and people: and, of course, as long as you are looking down, you cannot see something that is above you. That raises a terrible question.

"... How is it that people who are quite obviously eaten up with Pride can say they believe in God and appear to themselves very religious? I am afraid it

means they are worshipping an imaginary God" (Lewis, 1943, p. 111).

Then I need to learn to be grateful (Phil. 4:6; Col. 4:2). I also need to profess continuously that God is good.

Positive affirmation of God's character engenders gratefulness in my heart.

I NEED TO PROFESS THAT I AM CALLED

I need to acknowledge that the Christian academic profession is a vocation. For the Christian, the call to the academy is a call from God. I must remember that I have been so called. This vocation is not really a career.⁵

I need to remember that I do not teach because it is "fun" -- though it *is* enjoyable most of the time. I need to remember that as a Christian I can nevertheless focus on my gratification and my pleasure -- all sinful reasons for teaching. Ken Lay used to say, "It's widely known that I have a very strong Christian background and Christian faith" (Seay and Bryan, 2002, p. 46). Lay, who was CEO of Enron before its collapse due to debt and corruption, would also say (Seay and Bryan, 2002, p. 46):

"Throughout my life, things have fallen into place that turned out the right thing to do at the time. Looking back, this door opened, then this door opened, and maybe then that door closed. I always picked the thing that seemed the most interesting, the most fun." Those who knew Ken Lay well possibly could have predicted Enron's fall because Lay was pursuing gratification, not a call.

Since eradication of pride, gratefulness to God, and awareness of God's calling are impossible for me to attain in my natural body, I need to pray without ceasing (1 Thess. 5:17) to allow God to bring them to pass within me.

I NEED TO PROFESS GODLINESS

As I strive for a proper alignment with my Creator's will and purpose, there is hope that I can profess effectually a biblically-founded academic practice for my students. A biblically informed academic practice includes my *attitude* toward my students as well as the content and the mechanics of writing and lecturing.

I need to be patient and compassionate as I hold high academic expectations before my students. Compassion and expectation of performance must be balanced in a godly mentoring of my students. **To be godly, I need to exhibit kindness and love toward my students as if**

they were my children. The concept that the godly person is a harsh evaluator has no place in the Christian classroom. Neither is the traditional Prussian model of harsh academic discipline a Christian model.⁶

Nor is there any place for me to make my discipline appear so esoteric, arcane or obscure that my students must conclude that I am one of the intellectual elite and that they are clearly not.

My students must not see or hear me talking inappropriately about them or anyone else. Gossip has no place in the Christian academic profession. If an imperfection needs to be righted, I need to remember that **my constructive and positive response is part of the solution.** I do not need to complain that no one is responding to the problem. **I can do something,** but complaining is not a solution. **The first thing that I need to do about any problem is to pray.**

I need to remember that happiness lies within me as the Lord teaches me to be content with my state (Phil. 4:11), and that "godliness with contentment is great gain" (1 Tim. 6:6). **Contentment does not arise from the actions of students, peers, or administration.**

Impatience and arrogance have no place in the Christian classroom. I need to remember the golden rule (Matt. 7:12).⁷ Neither is there any place for self-aggrandizement. I need to avoid calling attention to my academic achievements and allow God to exalt me in His own time.

I need also to resist the temptation to jump on fashionable "band-wagons" in launching personal attacks on Christian brothers deemed out of step or old fashioned. I need to avoid the "firehouse effect," the situation of "firemen with much downtime who talk to each other for too long [and] come to agree on many things that an outside, impartial observer would find ludicrous" (Taleb, 2005, p. 85). I am to bear my brother's burdens (Gal. 6:2), not add to them.

In contrast, before Enron's demise, number-two man Jeff Skilling and his followers "held the old in contempt" (Seay and Bryan, 2002, p. 24). This contempt led to their fall. There is reason "to value distilled thought over newer thinking, regardless of its apparent sophistication" (Taleb, 2005, p. 59).

Academically or otherwise, an elitist, harshly critical "gatekeeper" mentality has no place in Christian scholarship, and I need to be careful not to model such an attitude to my students.⁸ I "must not strive; but be gentle unto all men," including my students and peers (2 Tim. 2:24).

I need to remember the baptistic legacy of soul liberty, and, within the constraints of doctrinal

essentials such as those mentioned above, accept with gentleness and grace that views of students that differ from mine.

I NEED A PUBLIC PROFESSION CONSISTENT WITH MY PRIVATE LIFE

My private/secret life needs to be characterized by what people see publicly in me -- Bible study, prayer, research, ministering to others. My private/secret accomplishments need to remain unknown forever except to God, Who receives my conscious worship in each aspect of my private/secret life.

What others see of my externals needs to be the tip of a deep substructure, not gaudy papier-mache masking a hollow emptiness, or worse, a private/secret life of presumptuous sin (Ps. 19:13).

I NEED TO PROFESS BIBLICAL SUPREMACY

My teaching of critical thinking needs to be kept within biblical constraints. **To the world, critical thinking is too often a cover for skeptical thinking.** I need to be careful that my students do not reach this conclusion. Therefore, I need to go beyond saying merely that the Bible is infallible and inerrant, and really treat it as my rule of faith and practice when I lecture and counsel.

I need to remember the Reformed rallying cry, Sola Scriptura! When the words of man and a normal, straightforward reading of the Bible conflict, I need to put the words of man aside.

In contrast, a "long-time friend and coworker" of Enron CEO Ken Lay claimed, "When it comes to faith, Ken's a schizophrenic" (Seay and Bryan, 2002, p. 60). "Sola Scriptura" was not an operating principle for Lay.

I need to evaluate carefully the world's models of critical thinking curricula that may in fact be schools for skepticism. It has been observed that we are characterized by "our inability to think critically -- we may enjoy presenting conjectures as truth. It is our nature" (Taleb, 2005, p. xlii). One might add that it is our *sinful* nature to do so, apart from biblical constraints on our thinking and a resultant renewal of the mind (Rom. 12:1-2).

The Bible presents man as a lie-seeker rather than a truth seeker (Prov. 14:12, 16:25). Luther said that the schools would become "great gates to hell" if the Bible were not handled seriously and reverently.⁹ However logical or reasonable human theory may appear, I need to let the Bible speak for itself even though all human authority be contradicted thereby.

I NEED TO PROFESS TRUST IN GOD'S GOVERNANCE

I need to model before my students a confident trust in the God Who rules the world. I need to avoid teaching my students to be fearful of many of the things the world fears. I need to remember that the crises of today will probably be the humorous anecdote of tomorrow. I need to study history to keep this fact fresh in my mind.

On the other hand, I need to emphasize to my students that God does indeed work through the foibles, mistakes, and sins of humanity. **To this end I need to study the Word, where I am reminded that God's governance is sure (Ps. 19:1-6).** I also need to remember that God "formed [the earth] to be inhabited" (Isa. 45:18), a purpose that cannot be overturned (Ps. 19:1-6), even by man's stupidity (Ps. 73:22).

I NEED TO PROFESS INTEGRITY IN RESEARCH

I need to model before my students everything that I expect of them, including disciplined preparation and clear presentation. I need to stay informed of the newest developments in my field. I need to read regularly, emphasizing history, which is "information," and avoiding an excessive reliance on journalism, which is "noise" (Taleb, 2005, p. 58).¹⁰ I need to pray without ceasing to accomplish these objectives.

I need to follow the standards of academic research that I expect of my students. Except for facts considered to be common knowledge, I need to use primary sources in my research, not secondary sources, hearsay, or anecdotal evidence. If any such inferior source is temporarily employed, I need to consider myself under an obligation to verify my facts at the earliest possible time.

If verification from a primary source is not possible, I need to eliminate the claim from my lectures and writings, or label it as unverified opinion.

I NEED TO PROFESS THAT MY STUDENTS CAN FOLLOW ME

I need constantly to hold before my students the dream that they can realistically aspire to do the things I am doing -- and even greater things -- as God calls them. In John 14:13, Jesus said that His works on earth would be followed by "greater works" on the part of believers in Him. It is therefore reasonable to expect that my students can surpass my works.

A college or university can be no greater than the sum of its parts. As a faculty member I am one of those parts. May God enable me to fulfill my profession for His glory.

Notes

1 A measure of Lenin's influence worldwide is that among the few thousand students I have taught, several have come from communist families in Europe, Asia, and Latin America whose ideological lineage traces back to Lenin. I have had more than one student named after Lenin's only niece Olga (Lenin had no children; Volkogonov, 1994, p. 34), and one of these had a brother Vladimir named after Lenin himself.

In *What Is To Be Done?*, Lenin "created the idea of the 'professional revolutionary'" (Volkogonov, 1994, p. 64). It presented "Lenin's grand plan to create a conspiratorial organization" (Volkogonov, 1994, p. 65).

2 The "fundamentals" of the Christian faith include biblical doctrines such as (1) the divinity of Christ; (2) His virgin birth; (3) the shedding of His blood and His death on the cross; (4) His bodily resurrection from the dead; (5) the inspiration of the Bible; and (6) the infallibility of Scripture. Each of these doctrines affirms the power of Christ to save the soul eternally. Faith in Christ alone for personal salvation cannot be exercised if one consciously rejects these fundamental doctrines.

3 The concept of the *university* extends back to the universities of the 1100s in Paris and Padua; the notion of a unified disclosure of truth revealed in a diversity of disciplines was strengthened by Thomas Aquinas (1227-1274) in his seminal work *Summa Theologica* (Singer, 1955, pp. 118-119; Morris and Petcher, 2006, p. 121).

4 This phraseology is from *The Westminster Shorter Catechism*, Question 1: "What is the chief end of man? Answer: Man's chief end is to glorify God, and to enjoy Him for ever" (Whyte, 1949, p. 1).

5 A *vocation* is a *call* (Webster, 1828). The meaning of *career* as a noun was originally "a rapid running"; as a verb, *to career* meant "to move or run rapidly" (Webster, 1828). In our modern cultural shift away from God and any notion of His call directing our lives, career has become synonymous with vocation, and both are considered to be based on choices -- presumably running more or less randomly -- made without Divine guidance.

6 After the destruction of Prussia in the Napoleonic wars, the Prussian government launched a program to determine (1) why Prussia had been vulnerable to Napoleon's attacks, and (2) what could be done to prevent another military defeat. The philosopher Hegel concluded that Prussia had been defeated because the citizenry did not sufficiently obey the state. He asserted that the Prussian educational system must be used to

condition the people to follow the state in perfect, blind obedience. This, he said, would produce an invincible Prussian fighting machine. Hegel was therefore the originator of the Prussian educational system as a human conditioning agent. History reveals that Hegel's philosophy of blind obedience to the state led to a crushing defeat of Hitler's Germany in the twentieth century.

Unfortunately, Hegel's philosophy of education as a conditioning agent survives in America. This movement was spearheaded largely via Unitarian influence emanating from Harvard University (Blumenfeld, 1985, pp. 36, 138-139, 153). Not only did Harvard University foster this system, but the "normal schools" founded throughout the nation beginning around 1845 were the precursors of other post-secondary schools in America (Blumenfeld, 1985, pp. 154-155, 195, 213, 216).

7 "... [W]hatsoever ye would that men should do to you, do ye even so to them ..."

8 It is not uncommon for academic types to see themselves as "gatekeepers" of their discipline. A gatekeeper takes on the "responsibility" of policing what is taught and written, and driving those with whom he disagrees from the field. The gatekeeper may be a Christian, but the gatekeeper is not acting as a Christian professor.

9 The full quotation is as follows: "I am much afraid that the universities will prove to be the great gates of hell, unless they diligently labor in explaining the Holy Scriptures, and engraving them in the hearts of youth. I advise no one to place his child where the Scriptures do not reign paramount. Every institution in which men are not unceasingly occupied with the word of God must become corrupt" (d'Aubigne, 1853, ch. 3, 140.5).

10 Taleb (2005, p. 61) comments: "It takes a huge investment in introspection to learn that the thirty or

more hours spent 'studying' the news last month neither had any predictive ability during your activities of that month nor did it impact your current knowledge of the world."

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