

Maintaining Spiritual Health in Graduate School Urbana 2006 – St Louis, MO

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Dallas Willard has declared that Jesus is the smartest man that ever lived, “If we truly see him as the premier thinker of the human race—and who *else* would be that?—then we are also in a position to honor him as **the most knowledgeable person in our field**, whatever that may be, and to ask his cooperation and assistance with everything we have to do” (1999, p. 611).

Later, Willard goes on to say that Jesus is the smartest man that has ever lived and He knows more about your discipline than you do.

One aspect of maintaining spiritual health in graduate school is seeing your life—all of your life through a Christian worldview lens.

One aspect of that is confirming that all truth is God’s truth.

The great Dutch Reformist and former 20th century Prime Minister of Holland, Abraham Kuyper said, “In the total expanse of human life there is not a single square inch of the entire universe of which the Christ, Who alone is sovereign, does not declare, ‘That is Mine! That belongs to me!’” (Vanden Berg, 1978, p. 255).

In an attempt to live out a Christian worldview as graduate students we must grapple with the concept that our study, research, writing, relationships with advisors and committee members, our teaching if we’re doing that, as well as our academic disciplines, matter to Christ.

We must contemplate the implications of what it means when Jesus says of our lives, ‘That is Mine!’” And more particularly what it means when Jesus says of our areas of study, ‘That belongs to me!’”

Os Guinness says, “Calling is the truth that God calls us to himself so **decisively that everything we are, everything we do, and everything we have is invested with a special devotion and dynamism lived out as a response to his summons and service**” (p. 4, *The Call*).

Your time in graduate school is a holy calling and each of us must invest a special devotion and dynamism to that calling. We must be Christ honoring as well as Christ focused.

Christian scholarship should be focused on glorifying God. Martin Luther referring to the “I am the Vine” passage in John 15:5 wrote,

“There is a big difference between a believer’s works and an unbeliever’s works—even if they do the exact same thing. For an unbeliever’s works don’t spring from the vine—Jesus. That’s why unbelievers cannot please God. Their works are not Christian fruit. But because a believer’s works come from faith in Christ, they are all genuine fruit.”

If Luther is right, then there should be no dichotomy of sacred and secular work (or in your case scholarship) for the Believer.

Christians are exhorted in scripture to do all for the glory of God, “And whatever you do in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through Him” (Col. 3:17).

“And whatever you do, do it heartily, as to the Lord and not to men, knowing that from the Lord you will receive the reward of the inheritance; for you serve the Lord Christ” (Col. 3:23-24).

Christian scholarship, for all disciplines, should be an act of worship in which the Living Christ who is Lord of all and the Premier Thinker of all is at the center prompting the student, inspiring the researcher, and leading the scholar into truth (Willard, 1999). This approach can truly be referred to as a calling.

Do you see your study as holy? Do you see your discipline as a calling? Or are you in graduate school simply by default to postpone decision making a few more years? Are you getting your graduate degree as merely a means to an end?

Part II - The Seven Deadly Sins of Graduate School

The seven deadly sins in Christian tradition are:

Pride Lust
Envy Anger
Gluttony Greed
Sloth

Proverbs lists another seven things the Lord hates (that are detestable to Him):
Proverb 6:16-23

^{PR 6:16} There are six things that the LORD hates, **seven** that are an abomination to him: ^{PR 6:17} haughty eyes, a lying tongue, and hands that shed innocent blood, ^{PR 6:18} a heart that devises wicked plans, feet that hurry to run to evil, ^{PR 6:19} a lying witness who testifies falsely, and one who sows discord in a family.

Proverb 6:17-19,

- 1) Haughty eyes, (a “proud look” says the KJV);
- 2) a lying tongue,
- 3) hands that shed innocent blood,
- 4) a heart that devises wicked schemes (KJV = imaginations),
- 5) feet that are quick to rush into evil, (or run to mischief);
- 6) a false witness who pours out lies and
- 7) an individual who stirs up dissension among brothers (“sows seeds of discord among people”).

Both of these lists start with the word pride and the Seven Deadly Sins of Graduate School should as well. So sin #1 is:

1. Pride

The national average of doctoral students who drop out of their programs is 50% (**Council of Graduate Schools, 9/2006**). At my university the attrition rate was seven out of ten. Seven out of ten doctoral students end up ABD.

Knowing this can infect us with a kind pride – an elitism that is deadly.

Pride is belief in one’s own abilities; it is vanity and it is a result of me forgetting God’s grace and mercy in my own life.

It manifests itself in speaking down to others and using language purposefully to sound knowledgeable; it is a type of elitism.

Do I do this with my parents? Am I trying to show siblings and grandparents how much smarter I am than they?

Antidote – humility and brokenness; remember that smart ≠ arrogant.

As followers of Christ it is wrong for us to be arrogant, conceited, self-important, snooty, stuck-up, puffed-up, and overconfident.

Next is

2. **Dishonesty in scholarship.** A lying tongue is from the seven things God hates listed in Proverbs 6. Combine that with sloth from the original seven deadly sins and you have a tendency to not cite your work.

Sometimes plagiarism and not citing a source comes from just plain laziness. When I don't take the time or make the effort to cite every source, even if it is not a direct quote, it is dishonest.

Even if the source just inspired me or put me onto something I should refer to it. Carefulness takes time and energy – truthfulness is an effort.

We must not steal other people's work and claim it as our own. When in doubt, cite the source.

A great example of doing this right comes from Cornelius Plantinga, Jr. in his book **Engaging God's World**. Plantinga footnotes "Henk Aay reminded me of this point and of its relevance here." (p 32, footnote 18). Plantinga credits a friend for reminding him of his own writing – the original thought was Plantinga's but it is in another book/article and it is Aay who reminds him of it and he credits the guy for reminding him (Plantinga) of his own words and how they work well in this part of his new book.

So we must guard our hearts and minds against, Proverbs 6:17, "...haughty eyes and a lying tongue."

3. **Competition** is our third deadly sin. It lines right up with envy (desiring other's traits, status, situation, abilities).

It is "I want what you have and I'll take it if I have to."

Ask yourself, "How do I ask questions in class?"

"How do I relate to my advisor?" And if you are in a cohort, do you help others?

Do I want to show my professor my "intellectual prowess?" (blog cite). I believe this is part of the "feet that rush to do evil" and "stirring up dissension among the brothers."

4. **Self-centeredness** – my work is the only thing that counts. Your thesis or dissertation topic becomes a kind of idolatry.

Am I worshipping my dissertation topic? Idolatry is believing an object is worthy of your devotion.

For example, does all conversation have to be about me and my research and my work and my discoveries?

Am I able to ask others about themselves and what issues they are working through? Remember **centering on others is not a "cultural" thing, nor is it a "male vs. female" thing. Centering on others is a characteristic of Christ and we are commanded to follow His example. "I am crucified with Christ nevertheless I live yet not I but Christ that lives in me.**

5. **Weariness** – we must finish the task; remember this doesn't have to be your magnum opus – good work, thorough investigation and reporting, rigorous research – yes, but it doesn't have to end world hunger. Guard your heart against apathy and disillusionment .

6. **Isolation (Insulation)** – it can be deadly. Keep community. Keep devotional time; keep accountability partners. Don't separate yourself from others.

7. **Greed** – I'll get all the grant money; I'll get a great job; I'll have all the attention; I'll get all the respect; I'll get a promotion; I'll get a coveted professorship; Greed for recognition, greed for money, greed for

Greed is defined as a desire for material wealth or some type of personal gain. Covetousness is a partner to greed.

^{PR 6:20} My child, keep your father's commandment, and do not forsake your mother's teaching. ^{PR 6:21} Bind them upon your heart always; tie them around your neck. ^{PR 6:22} When you walk, they will lead you; when you lie down, they will watch over you; and when you awake, they will talk with you.

^{PR 6:23} For the commandment is a lamp and the teaching a light, and the reproofs of discipline are the way of life.