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Christ in the City: Showing Spiritual Truth to Deconstructed Lives

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Very little in life goes as we planned no matter how much effort we invest to maintain perfection, so we need to expect that hard times in our lives will occur. When relationships are good and we have the friendship and support of a best friend, the future can only be bright; but what resources have we to draw on when the going gets tough? Is there any true need to look beyond ourselves? Where do we go?

The responsibility put on the shoulders of the Christian professor is to permit opportunities to discuss within the classroom community relevant and commonly asked questions as “Why do bad things happen to good people?”, “Is there a God?”, and “Who do we turn to for support when things go wrong?” Creative ways of presenting absolute truth which offer solutions to those spiritually decayed, deconstructed lives is a challenge placed before us by the Creator, and when we look for opportunities to teach truth, God places His great I Am on our lives; He is assured to make our witness, restricted within academic settings, as great as He determines it to be. When we take that existential leap and teach Truth, we find it is impossible to step off of the foundation of Christ that sustains us. As a Christian professor, my question becomes, how can I share Christ to the city I have been given, the students sitting before me, eyes and faces upturned to the information I will share with them? In an informal setting apart from the classroom, I can learn to know an individual, identify the point of tension in that person’s life, and

then discuss Christ with that person according to that need. Francis Schaeffer develops this strategy in his book, Trilogy. Schaeffer explains that

modern man ... is aware of one thing, and that is that he is dead. It is our task to tell him that the present death he knows is moral death and not just metaphysical lostness, and then to tell him God's solution. But we begin with the present lostness with which he wrestles [and] communicat[e] the gospel ... in terms that [he] can understand. (142, 153)

If we take a poll of what occupies our students' thoughts and time, many will respond with answers that include some form of video game, listening to popular music, or going to movies. While these activities may integrate them into their culture or even develop a particular skill, the accumulated time invested gives little or no opportunity for personal reflection. In fact, most activities help people escape the tension or frustration of not knowing answers to life's questions or where to search for those answers.

But what of the group of students sitting in our classes in the secular environment? Without knowledge of their individual needs or the sanction of administration, how can the Word of Truth be shared in the classroom? Where is the common point that permits spiritual entry into their lives? Schaeffer writes, "[N]ote with care that God's promise, 'He that believeth on the Son has everlasting life,' rests upon: God's being there ..." (147). In an environment that enables learning, students are willing to listen to and often challenge information put before them; but, as Schaeffer writes, most carry with them a sense of the truth that there is a God. Here is the point of entry: whether consciously or unconsciously, they consider that God is "there," somewhere.

Approaching any classroom needs to begin with prayer. Discovering classroom content for teaching and selecting textbooks are topics to wrestle over in prayer. Although it may appear to be a rote gesture, especially when some departments assign specific course content and texts, the ways in which we choose to use the resources when developing our lessons need to be reflected in prayer as is prayer for the students God leads into taking our courses. These prayers are the offerings of sacrifice to the Lord for His guidance; they become the sweet-smelling savor He responds to with His blessing. Student lists, either as developing for the course or when finally published are then meant to become prayer lists for specific requests, even though we may not know the people or what to ask for regarding them. But then, that knowledge is not our responsibility; ours is only to pray. In the book of Romans, the Apostle Paul recorded, "...he who searches our hearts ... intercedes for the saints in accordance with God's will" (Romans 8: 27). Through the Holy Spirit, the necessary requests of the students we pray for are placed at the throne of the Father; specifics for them are His responsibility, not ours. This arrangement is something like receiving an assignment from the Department Chair. We do the task we were assigned then place the information "back on the boss's desk" and we don't need to worry about it any more. The next step is taken care of without our involvement or control, and we can expect it will be accomplished as necessary. Thankfully, the Holy Spirit completes our specific prayers for the students, although we need to continue to put their names before Him with each class we approach and every paper we grade. But, prior to the course, our responsibility fervently continues with the preparation and presentation of course content, and often God has something amazing in store for us as we put Him first in our teaching.

Without a doubt, every course has a lot of content to teach in a few months, sometimes to many students. There is no debate there; yet, the focus needs to remain on the fact that *all* information to be presented has root in the knowledge of God as Supreme Authority and Creator of all humanity. As the Source of all that is human, all information presented through teaching and lecture can be directed toward Him at some point in the semester, and when those opportunities present themselves, whether directed or spontaneous, we need to immediately, silently, pray for the Spirit's leading and guidance of that discussion.

While a regular call to prayer for our classes and students may not seem to be unique, as some Christian educators undoubtedly already follow this process, when molding a new course, we need to be ready to seek God's guidance and depend on Him to enable us to follow through with its development, even as we examine ourselves for all we know on the subject and make decisions on the choice of content we will present. We may muse, "What do I know of this material to develop into a new course?" And then, we may reflect, "What gifts or insights has God given to me that may be appropriate to teaching this material?" Mustering up all potential ability is what can be amazing: how can I stretch and use the knowledge God has given me for this new opportunity? How am I prepared for the challenge placed before me and what am I expected to do with it? These are questions that can be put before God through prayer, the answers for which lie at the very heart of God and His creation in me. As I reflect on *all the ways* God has worked in my life, I can only return to the most profound of all revelations: "In the beginning...." God has created and given to me all that I need. As with other philosophical questions, the answers only lie with the Eternal One, and after a time of deliberation I can *only* step

out in trust that God has brought me to a special purpose. After all, I was not present when the foundations of the earth were fastened (Job 38: 6). As the Book of Job explains, I do not know His timing or His purposes, so my questions of “how am I going to ...?” or “am I ready to...?” need to cease; I can only be available to the ever-present I AM. “Be quiet! Just trust me,” He says. “Be still and know that I AM God” are the words of the psalmist, and the promise to stillness follows: “I (God) will be exalted among the nations, I will be exalted in the earth” (Psalm 46:10). The great I AM will accomplish his plan when we bring our requests to Him in prayer.

While living a life in the country, Moses met God who challenged him to return to Egypt for a visit with Pharaoh. We may be settled into our experiences when God meets us, so as Moses, I might say, “How can you use me?” “I am slow of speech and slow of tongue,” Moses argued. “And the Lord said unto him, ‘Who hath made man’s mouth? ... Have not I, the Lord? ... Now therefore go, and I will be with thy mouth and teach thee what thou shalt say” (Exodus 10-12). As human beings we are destined to work and study, but our only mission is to point others to God. God has called us to be ready and available, but how do we know how to accomplish the task of His calling? If we know how God is working in our lives, if we recognize the ways He is answering daily prayer, we can talk about those experiences, but are our personal points of miracle appropriate to share in the classroom? Is it permissible to share those demonstrations of God’s work in our lives in a public setting, and are they understood by secular students? Finding ways to answer the eternal questions of humanity within our course content is appropriate to the setting. Using them to develop a new course is priceless.

Returning to school while my children were young has given me the privilege of teaching transfer classes in an undergraduate setting. Through these years I have continued to study and creatively develop coursework and prepare new courses. A few years ago I was approached to teach an Introduction to Humanities course to honors students with the requirement that it draw its material from most or all of the eight arts genres; I was asked how I might approach the course, initial dialogue followed, I was awarded the course section. Immediately, I began to pray through the options, consider the audience, and research materials. During the time of course development, I took my working outlines and textbook list to follow-up meetings. I was excited to share them and learn how my decisions fit in with others in the fledgling program, but no one seemed to want to know what I was preparing. Perhaps the Lord had placed a hedge of protection around me.

The center for my course had become the Book of Job, a literary art form, and it was supported by other genres: William Blake's illustrated images of The Book of Job (pictures) and Archibald MacLeish's play, "J.B." (theatre). Within this content we could discuss life's great unanswered questions and there was room enough to point the students towards God, recognized by the three monotheistic religions of the Jews, Muslims, and Christians. It seemed only obvious, then, that the founding father of these religions, Abraham, needed to be introduced, and the text that emerged as the most appropriate for teaching that content is Abraham: A Journey to the heart of Three Faiths by Bruce Feiler. Within his text, Feiler takes us with him on his journey for answers, beginning with conventional library research and interviews, then to religious sites and into war zones, and finally before leadership of faiths who would never permit his

presence, except that he asks the right questions. What a fabulous introduction to the process of research, and what a marvelous experience for students who never imagined themselves beyond their families and community and home state. To help cement this book as a core text, a field trip to the University of Chicago's Oriental Museum to view a documentary (cinema) and study of the Mesopotamian river valley, its history and architecture, maintains focus on the art forms. "How did people learn to live back then" is a question explored and answered in this field trip's experience.

With the course bathed in and prepared with prayer, potential students were added to the supplication, and I expected the Lord to fill the seats as He desired. The initial group was small which suggested that I could not prepare a public production of "J.B.," an option I had hoped for, and most of this group was also the college's young "scholars" assigned to the class. I began to pray for students who would independently opt into the course, and at the last moment, a young mature Christian married father joined the class. He was a Sacred Music major at a neighboring university, challenged to study the content he saw in this section's course materials. Everything was in place for the course except me. As a by-product of secular training, I felt tongue-tied with this idea of manipulating Christian teachings in the academic setting, but as God had given Moses his brother to speak for him, the music major became *my* Aaron, and the course proceeded well, its finishing touch an invited-guest reader's-theatre presentation of an abbreviated "J.B." A shocked administration asked a few questions, were given the correct answers from my conversational students, and left the course content unchanged. I thanked "Aaron" for his contribution and we went our separate ways. Sometime I hope to learn what direction his

life took following that course; as for my life, God was only beginning to loosen my tongue.

For two years I had known from my med student daughter that I was growing an acoustic neuroma (non-malignant) brain tumor, but with weddings to prepare for two daughters, identifying the repercussions of that news was not priority. Yet, two months after the second wedding, and the end of my class on Job, I had the appropriate appointments to put me in the best direction for medical care. During the week between the MRI and the doctor's visit scheduled on the last day of the semester, something popped out of my neck that made me think of a hernia. It went away, but I commented on it to the physician. Although I knew I wasn't ill, I accepted ten days of antibiotics and then returned to her office for what became two biopsies that showed a significant amount of non-Hodgkins lymphoma trying to explode from my neck. In two weeks, I learned that I had debilitating cancer that should have already killed me and a massive brain tumor that was pushing against my spinal column, readying for hydrocephalus. Remarkably, I hadn't known I was sick, but I did know that I was in Great Hands—those of the Creator! And, after finishing a teaching experience on the Book of Job, I wasn't about to ask, "Why me?" With prayer and support of others, I readied for submission to the lessons I was to learn, and I suppose there were many.

Certainly, my life has changed; God has determined it. I've matured from the person I was thirty years ago and I've matured from the person I was three years ago. What God has given me is the voice to teach His truths to the student community and the opportunity to share the message of Christ. Again, with the privilege of teaching the

honors Intro to Humanities class, I continue in prayer for the course, textbooks, and students.

To enable this study and meet the requirements of transfer for the course, I have selected the core text, The Art of Being Human by Janaro and Altshuler, which makes several references to the Book of Job within the chapters. The first half of the text discusses myths and struggles of the humanities and distinct art genres; Part III introduces the “Themes of the Humanities” and begins with a chapter on religion, so we pause there for the developed study. Initial lectures cover the maps and land of the Middle East, the Mesopotamian River basin and a specific Genesis account of Creation, which demonstrates God’s order and challenges modern interpretation. The students’ assignment is to read Feiler’s book on Abraham and write an essay in response, which encourages classroom discussion and supports directed thoughts from my lecture on the importance of keeping a covenant, which I liken to marriage.

Some students require a better balance to the Christian-Judeo content with Islamic study, so I share with the class Dr. Daniel Shayesteh and his DVD testimony as he explains his militant past and how he became a Christian. Of course, there is bias, but this is a humanities class and not a class on comparing religions, so I take license, and have collected from students a list of questions to which Dr. Shayesteh has graciously responded through email.

For the basic study of the Book of Job, students find, read and bring their print or printed from on-line versions to class along with a response journal and we review incidents in the story. As part of my teaching, they learn to know the patriarchal system

and the responsibilities of the male leadership for their families, which becomes the segue into the study of Job.

We then read, they journalize, and discuss Edinger's comments on C.G. Jung and their explanation of William Blake's illustrations on the Book of Job. The students comment that the images and commentary helps them understand even more of the biblical story. This follows with their assignment to read MacLeish's J.B., and then in class we assign parts and read portions and discuss that interpretation of the story. In preparation, students either write a character analysis or create a mask for either Mr. Zuss (God) or Nickles (Satan). In one of the ending class sessions on this work, students write quick answers to questions I give them, and we read the passages and discuss the lessons from the play. (Questions: What is a question Job/J.B. asks in the literature, and what answer is he given? Include page numbers from the script.)

For the last part of this unit, students watch the film "Lawrence of Arabia" in class, and my introductory notes include an overview of the unit. I remind them that God's plan has unfolded carefully across history. God ignited His plan through the events of creation and to Abraham, and God promised to carry out His eternal purposes to all mankind. God blessed Abraham so he could be a blessing to all the families on the earth, and we have inherited that blessing. As a country, we have been given much wealth, and we share that throughout the world; as individuals, we, like Abraham, are expected to give of our abilities and gifts to help others. That's part of the inheritance we have received from Abraham, and it is our responsibility to share those blessings we have received. "To those who have much, much will be required" (Luke 12:48).

Reflecting on a previous handout (Islam), I remind them that Muslims believe that Allah wills whatever He wishes on humankind. “What is written cannot be changed” is a center thought in the film “Lawrence of Arabia.” The Muslims understand that this “that is written” is a pre-ordination by Allah. Lawrence challenges that philosophy; he states and shows that events of the future can be determined through personal choice. Even so, he doesn’t have control over everything; other human choices—and even God’s perfect or permissive will—enable the events.

In the film, characters interact and confront several different Arabian tribes, and the tribal leaders demonstrate differing responses of interest in the Koran. In Prince Feisal’s tent, the Koran is recited and conversation reflects that spiritual tone, which is reinforced at other times through interaction and conversation. Yet, in Feisal’s tent, there is a specific message that is suggested by the choice of reading, and students are requested to listen and note its theme.

As an Oxford scholar, T.E. Lawrence studied Arabic and the tribal cultures. As part of his dissertation, he spent much time in the Arabian Peninsula, going from home to home and visiting families and asking questions as part of his research. This background becomes the point that draws Lawrence from his military career as map maker and places him back into the desert. He knows more about and has a stronger understanding of the Arabians than any one else. Within the film, Lawrence interacts in Arabic when among the tribes, not in English, and he gains immediate respect by his ability to speak the language, recite the Koran, and engage within the cultures. A singular, personal note on T.E. Lawrence that needs mention is that he was always ashamed of the fact that he was a bastard child, a point identified in the film that becomes a turning point. The emphasis

on family is very important to those in the Middle East, and men will take multiple wives for the purpose of child-bearing. Lawrence's father didn't share this view of family, and this point became even more obvious to Lawrence as he studied the Koran and immersed in the Middle Eastern traditions.

By the end of the film, students have responded to several questions that point them to realizing that Lawrence was given a great opportunity by God to help the Arabian people. Yet, T.E. Lawrence never gave God praise for his providence and protection but took on himself all glory, which, in the end, forced God's hand to end his life. This is a point I encourage students to discover.

As a product of a Christian home and education, it astounds me that some students have never heard the Gospel or even the classic Old Testament Bible stories, and only consider evolution as life's initiation with perhaps some passing thought toward the term, Creation. God has blessed me with the opportunity to bring Christ to this city of students, and He has performed His miracle through my life so that others can see Himself demonstrated in me.

The Apostle Paul took a tour of the sculpture gardens in ancient Athens and concluded that these images were not simply works of art but were being worshipped as gods. So,

Paul reasoned in the synagogue with the Jews and the God-fearing Greeks, ... and said: 'Men of Athens! I see that in every way you are very religious. For, as I walked around and looked carefully at your objects of worship, I even found an altar with this inscription: TO AN UNKNOWN GOD. Now what you worship as something unknown I am going to proclaim to you... God who made the world and everything in it ...' (Acts 17: 16, 17, 22-24).

Paul's motto was "anyone, anywhere, any time" and he looked for the contact point that afforded the beginning of discussion about Christ. He demonstrates that we need to get someone's attention in order to help them open up to discussion. We may ask, "What makes a perfect life?" The answer may include kindness to and from others and it is enough money to live on; but as Christian professors with a heart of compassion for our students, the answer is so much more, and we need to be quiet, listen, and let God speak through us. "But I know the plans I have toward you, says the Lord, plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future. Then you will call upon me and pray to me and I will listen to you. And you will seek me and find me when you search for me with all your heart" (Jeremiah 29: 11-13). We need to remain at peace and accept that God is Sovereign; nothing is out of His control.

Hopefully, the students will continue to learn from the information I present to them in my courses, as it is always exciting to me to be able to point them toward spiritual truth embedded somewhere within the content. But even more, I now have Job's witness and God's hedge of protection appears to be thicker. Francis Schaeffer writes,

We cannot [share the gospel] until we have personally faced the question as to whether the Judeo-Christian system is true.... When we are certain about this for ourselves, then if we love [others] we will have the courage to ... expose them to ... the questions: Does God exist? Is the content of the Judeo-Christian system truth? The more comprehending we are..., the worse the man will feel if he rejects the Christian answer. In a fallen world, ... if a man rejects it he will be miserable. It is dark out there.... Men must know that with integrity we have faced the reality of the dark path they are treading. (143-44)

God expects us to speak about Christ in the classroom and when we seek the opportunity and retain honesty in our voice and mannerisms, God will speak through us. We can trust Him for that. And in order to help reconstruct the spiritually deprived in our cities, we need to spend time in prayer for the students, for the course minutiae, and expect God to do the rest. That is the challenge.

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