

FAITHFUL LEARNING

SERIES

AN INVITATION TO
**ACADEMIC
STUDIES**

JAY D. GREEN



AN INVITATION TO ACADEMIC STUDIES

THE FAITHFUL LEARNING SERIES

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INTRODUCTION

This booklet is a modest attempt to review and rethink some traditional Christian responses to modern academic study. There is a long and sturdy tradition of good thinking about what was once commonly called the “integration of faith and learning.” This integration seeks, in various ways, to inform—and even transform—the various disciplines of the academic curriculum with insights drawn from a Christian worldview. Few have enjoyed the blessings of this tradition more than I. As the product of a Christian college, and a faculty member at another, I have had my sense of God’s world shaped by pursuing knowledge refracted through the prism of a Christian theological and philosophical framework. But I have begun to wonder whether pursuing integration in this way actually produces what we hope it will: that is, faithful learning. Yes, we have done a lot of theological and philosophical thinking about our work in the academic disciplines, much of it good and helpful. But little in this model urges us to consider the potential good implications of traditional academic study *upon our faith*.

Faith perspectives should inform and shape learning. But have we ever carefully considered the ways in which academic study might cultivate and nourish our faith in Christ? In my experience as a Christian educator, the “worldviewish” disciplines of philosophy and theology have tended to play the role of schoolmaster over the rest of the academic curriculum, and the task of integration has been thereby governed by bottom-line philosophical and theological imperatives. In other words, philosophers and biblical scholars are typically empowered to determine the faithfulness of ideas emerging from other academic

disciplines, but insights from the disciplines are rarely given the same standing that acceptable Christian belief and practice are given in those same settings.¹ The entire academic curriculum certainly needs these theological insights to aid the work of faithful learning, but they alone are not enough. I worry that the “integration” project may be producing young scholars who can explain a Christian *theology and philosophy* of their disciplines (which is appropriate in itself), but who are much less well prepared to draw helpful, challenging insights from the disciplines *as disciplines*. As a result, I fear that they miss vital opportunities to explore how the rigorous practice of these disciplines might lead to new understandings of how we think about God’s kingdom and live faithfully as its citizens.

In the pages that follow, I argue for a vision of faithful Christian learning that endeavors to find some balance by pushing the conversation back in the direction of the disciplines. I contend that modern fields of academic study are sophisticated and time-honored crafts that, when thoughtfully practiced, hold enormous potential for cultivating a deeper love for God and our neighbors. I do not believe that academic study is something Christians should merely endure, as if it is a necessary evil, or merely reflect on theologically, as if it holds no merits in its own right. I would invite Christians of all ages to take up the study of God’s world by means of resources provided by the modern academic disciplines, doing so as faithful stewards of his creation with confidence that the Spirit may use these endeavors to shape our hearts and minds to make us more like the Lord Jesus Christ.

1. For example, see Vern Sheridan Poythress, *Redeeming Sociology: A God-Centered Approach* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2011) or Wayne Grudem, *Politics According to the Bible: A Comprehensive Resource for Understanding Modern Political Issues in Light of Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing, 2010).

CHRISTIANS AND THE MODERN UNIVERSITY

American evangelicals have an uneasy relationship with the modern university. On one hand, we recognize that higher education is an unavoidable, even necessary, part of our cultural and economic lives. For the vast majority of Christian families today, sending children to college remains a central dream and the most viable path to socioeconomic success. Yet on the other hand many traditional Christians have come to see university classrooms as little more than incubators for left-leaning radicalism and secular humanism, to say nothing of college dorm life with its rampant alcohol abuse and sexual promiscuity. Many evangelical parents wonder how their children can realize the benefits of higher education while simultaneously maintaining their faith and integrity.²

Tensions between Christian faithfulness and academic learning are real, but they are not new. In fact, there is a long history of Christian hand-wringing over serious engagement with “worldly wisdom.” Some have even suggested that we avoid higher learning altogether as a dangerously unbiblical use of our time and resources. The original idea of formal schooling is much older than Christianity and was already under some suspicion by the time Jesus walked the earth. The term *Academy* originally referred to Plato’s school of philosophy and research founded in Athens around 385 BC, but it gradually came to describe all schools that practiced teaching and produced scholarship. By the first century, the Academy had been around for almost 400 years.³

The New Testament in various places expresses hesitation about what it calls “the wisdom of the age.” John

2. See Thomas Albert Howard, “Should I Send My (Christian) Child to a (Secular) State University?,” *The Anxious Bench*, February 16, 2014, <http://www.patheos.com/blogs/anxiousbench/2014/02/should-i-send-my-christian-child-to-a-secular-state-university/>.

3. Arthur F. Holmes, *Building the Christian Academy* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), 8–21.

sets the tone for many later Christian warnings about the university when he writes in his first epistle,

Do not love the world or anything in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For everything in the world—the cravings of sinful man, the lust of his eyes and the boasting of what he has and does—comes not from the Father but from the world. The world and its desires pass away, but the man who does the will of God lives forever. (1 John 2:15–17 NIV)

Texts like this one seem to provide plenty of reasons to resist the draw of world-affirming institutions like the modern university.

The apostle Paul was himself a learned man who appears to have had few equals throughout Israel. He was the recipient of one of the best educations available to someone of his time and place (see Phil. 3:4–6). But his cautionary words to the Colossian church are striking, even today, and have prevailed as a stern admonition to future Christian generations attracted to formal schooling. Paul writes: “See to it that no one makes a prey of you by philosophy and empty deceit, according to human tradition, according to the elemental spirits of the universe, and not according to Christ” (Col. 2:8 RSV). He would appear to be saying that worldly wisdom runs directly against the wisdom of Jesus Christ.

These misgivings were perhaps most famously expressed by the second-century church father Tertullian, who put the matter plainly: “What has Jerusalem to do with Athens, the Church with the Academy, the Christian with the heretic? . . . After Jesus we have no need of speculation, after the Gospel no need of research.”⁴ Athens, as we have

4. Tertullian, “Prescription against Heretics,” trans. Peter Holmes, in *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, ed. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1994), 3:249.

seen, was the ancient seat of secular learning and human wisdom; Jerusalem was the ancient seat of divine revelation and supernatural wisdom. Why should those who possess the eternal wisdom of God trifle with the transient learning of men? Why should those who have the infallible Word of God settle for the mere thoughts of foolish mortals? Perhaps, if Tertullian is right, we should content ourselves with the learning we receive from our Bibles and the wisdom drawn from Sunday school teachers and pastors.

It is easy to see why Christians in every generation have questioned the validity and advisability of academic learning. Our generation is no different.⁵ For instance, freelance writer Marsha West insists that Christian parents who send their kids to college are naive about what they will confront when they get there. “Young people who’ve been raised with moral values will go behind the fortified walls of Babylon, pretty much unarmed. And the barbarians are prepared to chew them up and spit them out.” She cannot understand how “once protective parents are allowing liberals to shape their teenagers['] minds with an anti-God worldview.”⁶ What is an earnest Christian parent or high school senior to do?

THE TERTULLIAN CONUNDRUM: THREE STRATEGIES

Among Christians who agree with Tertullian that a chasm divides Jerusalem and Athens (or Babylon, if you wish), several different responses to modern learning have been tried. One fairly obvious option is to *avoid* higher education altogether. There are many thoughtful, contemporary

5. The title of David Wheaton’s 2005 “guide” for students heading off to college expresses the common worry many families have about modern higher education: *University of Destruction: Your Game Plan for Spiritual Victory on Campus* (Minneapolis: Bethany House, 2005).

6. Marsha West, “More Dangerous on College Campuses Than You Thought,” *Worldview Weekend*, July 19, 2007, <http://www.worldviewweekend.com:81/worldview-times/print.php?&ArticleID=2306>.

“We were not wrong to learn the alphabet just because they say that the god Mercury was its patron, nor should we avoid justice and virtue just because they dedicated temples to justice and virtue. . . . A person who is a good and a true Christian should realize that truth belongs to his Lord, wherever it is found.”

—ST. AUGUSTINE, *On Christian Doctrine*

FAITHFUL LEARNING IN ACADEMIC STUDIES

Why study academic disciplines like history, literature, biology, philosophy, chemistry, and computer science? Why even study secular subjects in the first place—especially since we have the Bible to learn from? God has made us to be nonstop learners—and what we learn can actually strengthen our faith! What will you learn, and why?

Jay Green invites you to explore the world of academic study, where you will discover vital opportunities to understand and expand God’s kingdom. Learn how the church and the academy intersect, and find out how you can cultivate your mind for the glory of God.

The Faithful Learning series invites Christian students to dive deeper into a modern academic discipline. The authors, scholars in their fields, believe that academic disciplines are good gifts from God that, when understood rightly, will give students the potential to cultivate a deeper love for God and neighbor.

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