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My Philosophy of Education and My Method of Teaching at a Christian University

Dr. Fettke

He answered: “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your *mind*”; and, ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ ”¹

Introduction—the problem

For many North American Christians, loving God is a private, individual experience. As noted in recent published articles, many Christians prefer their faith to be expressed as a solitary exercise.² Because we North American Christians are so well trained to be individualists, our thinking has been highly influenced to the point that even our internal dialogue has been trained to focus on me, myself, and I. What is best for *me*? What do *I* get out of this? I have to watch out for *myself*. What has reinforced this selfishness is two items from our culture: (1) the American “ideal” of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness (personal happiness), and (2) the language used in so many evangelical and Pentecostal churches. “You can have a *personal* relationship with God.” “*You* can pray and have *your* needs met.” “God has the very best in store for *me*.” Of course, no one gets around to asking, what is the *nature* of my relationship with God? What do *I really* need? Who defines what is *the best*? Finally, and certainly very high on North Americans’ priority list, we have to mention that we are *radical* utilitarians. We prefer to pay attention *only* to that which we perceive *works* and *works for us*. Otherwise, we often dismiss ideas or activities as a waste of time and energy, or, even more troubling, we dismiss ideas or activities because they are “boring.” Perhaps you have read the book, *Entertaining Ourselves to Death: the crisis in Christian Youth Culture*.³

There is nothing inherently wrong with individualism in its healthy expressions. After all, North Americans are famous for their individual effort in exploring and establishing successful cities in the wilderness, creating new products used by people the world over, and accomplishing great things in every field imaginable. The weakness of such an individualistic culture can be its contempt for the weak, its arrogance in believing themselves to be superior to all, and a stubborn refusal to learn from others and find ways to draw strength and energy from each other in a vibrant community.

In terms of education, North Americans often idealize those who learned “on their own.” We often read of brilliant people who were self-educated and very successful. We have to admire those who are so gifted that they can easily master complex issues and create amazing things or live a very productive life or engage in successful political careers with very little formal training or education. Is this ideal dream of being “self-educated” behind the surge in online education? Is this a combination of North Americans’ utilitarianism and individualism gone viral?⁴ Are many saying, “Just give me the information via the internet and I will figure it out myself and get a good grade and be successful”?

What can happen in a university is that if enough faculty and students become focused only on the “useful,” the “exciting” (versus “boring”), and on only personal pursuits, personal likes and dislikes, or self-help, there can arise an atmosphere of disengagement with the whole educational process as traditionally understood. The traditional university setting can be reduced to a Vo-Tech experience in which no theories, no stories, no experiments, and no extended dialogues are allowed. Everything becomes focused on personal performance and “usefulness.” Paul Corrigan has written eloquently about the problem of disengagement.

Engagement versus Non-engagement

¹ Luke 10:27 (emphasis mine).

² Butcher, Andy. “When Christians Quit Church” in *Charisma Magazine*, February 2005. **An analysis of people deciding they no longer need to attend local church services.** Daniel, Lillian. “You Can’t Make this Up: the limits of self-made religion.” *Christian Century* (September 20, 2011): 32-34. **A analysis of how people shun church and develop their own “definition” of spirituality.** Kimball, Dan. *They Like Jesus but not the Church: Insights from Emerging Generations*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007. **This book addresses the common complaint nowadays that the local church is irrelevant, somehow, and lists both the complaints and the possible responses to those complaints.**

³ Andrew Strom. *Entertaining Ourselves to Death: the crisis in Christian youth culture*. New Zealand: Revival School Publishers, 2008.

⁴ Jordan Weissmann. “Why the Internet Isn’t Going to End College as We Know It.” *The Atlantic*. (July 2012).

Academic non-engagement often happens in seemingly small things, here and there. But these little things tend to add up and significantly detract from how much and how well students learn... What are the little things? Coming to class late, texting in class, writing a paper the night before it is due, skimming a complicated text, writing fluff in a journal entry, not being prepared and present for class. Each time students do these sorts of things they undermine their calling and the calling of their neighbors. When students are unfaithful in these small things, they are being unfaithful in something big because all the small things are pieces of something big. When enough students do these things enough times, the university culture becomes damaged.⁵

And to these comments I might add that because of a regular practice of non-engagement students can also form very bad habits that can reduce or put at risk their future effectiveness in their chosen profession. Here is how one writer put it, “For the teaching profession to remain a profession in any genuine sense, its practitioners must see to it that schools remain the kinds of communities that form human beings into *more than the sum of their preferences*.”⁶

A Solution to the Problem—Education as a Community Experience

Meaningful Dialogue

In a university setting it is important to have both strong individual effort as well as humble participation in life-giving community gatherings. Consider this, “People are social creatures who best mature intellectually in a particular social environment. At the center of an effective educational system is a vibrant community in which learners not only think together but also engage in learning practices together.”⁷ In his commentary on 1 and 2 Samuel, Walter Brueggemann notes the power of speech expressed *in community* in the stories in the Samuel narratives, “People talk to one another, and their talking matters. The playful possibility of speech is at work in the public process of Israel. People listen and are changed by such speech, and God is drawn deeply into the conversation. That is how Israel discerns what has happened in its memory and in its life.”⁸ At the center of my philosophy of education is a concerted effort to talk with one another.

Having significant and meaningful dialogue does not often come naturally or easily, especially when human communication has been greatly reduced by a twitter emphasis and utilitarian concerns for time. Significant and meaningful dialogue does take concerted effort and time. Informed opinions are sometimes hard to find because so many do not take the time to read, reflect, and process important information related to a truly informed opinion. Many would rather have others do the work for them, get the information in very condensed form, then shout down those of differing viewpoints.

Meaningful dialogue about important issues begins by being well informed on each issue. That means one has to engage in the hard and sometimes tedious task of reading, reflecting, and processing information, information that might be brand new. In addition, meaningful dialogue requires of Christians an openness to the voice of the Spirit. Perhaps God is breathing life into ideas, concepts, issues heretofore unknown or little emphasized. Would we be able to hear what God might be saying through each other, through important written works, through significant and informed speakers?

Any dialogue that does not deteriorate into monologue and demagoguery has to have an element of humility. Even if one’s views do not change through the dialogue, perhaps one’s attitude or approach might be changed in regard to a particular issue or idea. Dr. Rickey Cotton likes to encourage students to “come to voice” on issues in dialogue. That means people need to sense that others are listening and that one’s views are important to the discussion. We are humble enough to listen to others as they also listen to us.

⁵ Paul Corrigan and Rickey Cotton. “College in the Spirit: Christian Higher Education as a Calling.” Published at Southeastern University, Lakeland, Florida, Fall 2012.

⁶ Mark R. Schwehn. “Teaching as Profession and Vocation.” *Theology Today* (October 2002): 402. Emphasis mine.

⁷ Darryl Tippens. “Technology Has Its Place: Behind a Caring Teacher.” *The Chronicle for Higher Education* (August 6, 2012).

⁸ Walter Brueggemann. *First and Second Samuel*. Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching. Louisville, KY: John Knox, 1990, p. 5.

Human, not technological, communication

In a tech-happy, tech-saturated world, meaningful speech—true dialogue—has been reduced to the number of characters allowed in a tweet or text (140 characters?). Cartoons are now popular that feature younger folks sitting at the beach or sitting around a lunch table or even sitting across from each other in the same room and not looking at each other. Their faces are down, focusing on their cell phones as they text rather than talk to one another.

I have heard some say that cell phones are so prominent among younger ones that they have become like an extension of one's hand. I understand how the habit of texting and tweeting can be so habit-forming that it can threaten normal human interaction as people have known it for centuries. And, to be fair, cell phones are very handy for various reasons.⁹ Nevertheless, there is still a kind of “magic” when people actually speak to one another face-to-face without the aid of technology. It is what many have called “being fully present” to the other when he/she is speaking. In such communication, there is a dynamic missing from a reliance on technology. My philosophy of teaching thus **forbids the use of cell phones in class**. Does that make me ancient and out of touch?¹⁰ Perhaps, but I still believe that the Spirit can work in amazing ways in the midst of deep dialogues of meaning and purpose. I also agree with the sentiment expressed by Brueggemann: God is, indeed, drawn into the conversation. In fact, we want to invite God to participate in our dialogues in ways we might never have dreamed before. I want us to be willing to be surprised and enthralled by God's Presence as God is revealed in the speech of all of us.

Fully Present to God and to the Other

However, to be able to be sensitive to what God might be saying in and through each other, we will want to be fully attentive to God's Presence and be fully present and attentive to one another. Distractions of any kind can hurt our attentiveness and openness to what the Spirit might be saying. It is often said about the younger generation that they are able to multi-task successfully and expect to do that all the time. No doubt that is true for the most part; however, I must insist that we do not allow ourselves to multi-task and thus risk distraction when others are speaking. We might miss out on the Spirit-inspired dynamic that can occur when fully focused people engage in meaningful dialogue.

Deep Reading

In addition, my philosophy of education insists on *informed* dialogue. This means that adequate preparation must be done prior to any meaningful dialogue. Reading correctly and well is at the core of the kind of preparation I have in mind. Again, I borrow from a fine essay by Paul Corrigan to describe what I want reading to mean to us.

Reading is about more than collecting information. It is about formation and transformation. Reading is more than looking at words in the order they appear on the page. It is about thinking, dialoguing, relating, coming to understand someone different from you, and coming to understand yourself. What you get out of your reading depends on how you read. Reading well usually means reading deeply and carefully. There are occasions when it is appropriate to skim while reading, depending on the kind of text being read and the reason for reading it. We might skim, say, if we are looking up answers in a textbook to study for an exam or browsing a magazine for entertainment or looking through a large amount of research to find pertinent information. But skimming should not be our main or

⁹ The whole issue of *Time* magazine (August 27, 2012) is devoted to “The Wireless Issue: 10 ways your phone is changing the world.” It has many articles describing the many benefits of cell phone use and how technologies related to the use of the cell phone is changing business and social culture in amazing ways. I do not dispute the value of the technology centered in and around the use of cell phones. My concern is that no matter how advanced is the technology surrounding cell phones, it can never replace face-to-face meaningful human interaction and communication (communion/fellowship).

¹⁰ Jeffery R. Young. “A Tech-Happy Professor Reboots After Hearing His Teaching Advice Isn't Working.” *The Chronicle of Higher Education* (February 12, 2012).

only way of reading. We need to regularly engage in deep reading. Deep reading is particularly important when it comes to texts that are difficult, complex, or full of meaning.¹¹

To add to the thoughts above, I would say that deep reading is a kind of “dialogue” with the author of the assigned reading. As we read, we have a pencil at hand so that we might write down questions we have about the reading, or we write our comments or responses to the reading in the margins, or we highlight words or passages that are especially meaningful to us. We can also summarize in a kind of journal entry or summary paragraph what we have read as we reflect on how the reading has affected us. Finally, it can be very meaningful if, on occasion, we were to read in community, or, at the very least, to discuss with classmates outside of class the way(s) readings have impacted our thinking. Sometimes others can help us process the information in informative ways.

Prayer, Communion with the Spirit—the Essence of the Spiritual Disciplines

In conclusion, I want to emphasize the importance of finding our center in God and what God might be doing through our interactions. Often we miss important things God is doing by our failure to read and study properly, by our deafness to the views of others, and perhaps even our own selfishness and laziness. In developing excellent study habits, we want to put at the very center of our efforts our deep dependence upon God and God’s sustaining strength to make the changes we need to make and to perceive the things God is saying and providing. Since the way we form our lives as life-long students is key to our calling and spiritual discipline, we should always make this a matter of prayer. Here is a prayer from Thomas Aquinas that has deep meaning for me. Perhaps you would want to pray it, too.

Grant me, I beseech You, O merciful God, prudently to study, rightly to understand, and perfectly to fulfill that which is pleasing to You, to the praise and glory of thy Name. Amen.

¹¹ Corrigan and Cotton, *Ibid.*