

# THE ACADEMY AND JESUS

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The conventional talk about Christianity in academic life that I often encounter is, “What does it mean to do biology or philosophy or economics or French literature from a Christian perspective?” David Dockery once wrote that Christian higher education meant not only an integration of faith and learning, but an integration of faith and living. I want to present what it might mean to be a biology teacher, or a philosopher, or an art history professor or a political science teacher and want to teach like Jesus. My topic is on modeling oneself after Jesus as a teacher or, if you like, as a rabbi.

The particular connection that concerns me is not the Christian scholar and his or her discipline, but rather the Christian professor and his or her students. My thinking on this was profoundly affected about twenty years ago when the faculty at the University of Virginia was asked to write out a teaching philosophy. I am at an institution where virtually all of my paycheck is based on my research productivity, and this attention on the teaching caused quite a stir among the faculty. To write out a teaching philosophy was seen as a threat to the research agenda of the university, even though the exercise was totally voluntary.

I sat down to write, and since I claimed to want Jesus to be Lord of my life, I wanted Him to be the Lord of my teaching philosophy. I wanted this not to be an “add-on” or an addition to the house; I wanted it to be at the very foundation of the house.

Let me read the first two paragraphs of my teaching philosophy statement, from my UVA homepage—so this is digitally quite visible, and it’s not buried somewhere in an administrator’s file cabinet:

*“My colleagues in the department of religious studies might contend that the most prominent image or picture of the Christian faith is the crucifix. For me as a teacher, it’s the picture of Jesus washing the feet of His disciples. The scene illustrates the upside-down and paradoxical Biblical principle of leadership—the one who leads should be willing to serve. If you want to be first, you line up last. I endeavor to apply that picture to my teaching; if I want best to lead a class of students, I should be willing to serve them. My authority as a teacher is linked to my willingness to serve my students.*

The development of a Christian teaching philosophy that focuses not so much on the nexus between me and my discipline, but rather between me and my students turned out to be a very important event in my professional life. There are many times when I am about to short-change a student, or take an action that builds me up or makes my life easier—and then I am convicted by this image of Jesus washing His disciples’ feet. To me, one of the most profound and sobering teachings of the Christian faith is that unable to serve Jesus my Lord directly, my students, among others, become the appointed agents authorized to receive what I owe my Master.”

I’d like this discussion of the professor as a servant to be practical, pointing not to myself as an example, but rather to the fact that I have now some 40 years of experience, mixed with many mistakes and transgressions to share.

## ✧ THE CLASSROOM ✧



*I find in teaching economics that I can reference scriptural principles in a way that signals to students that I take the Bible seriously, or at least I don't consider it to be a dead and worthless book. If I can do this in economics, you can, I suspect, do it in your field.*



I'm going to go to the toughest one head-on by talking about serving students in the classroom. It probably goes without saying, but I'll say it anyway, we serve our students in the classroom (and I include the laboratory here) by a mastery of the material—by thoughtful, if not winsome, presentations of the material, and a desire to see our students learn. All of this is part of the Biblical principle of “Whatsoever you do in word or deed, do it as unto the Lord.”

No matter what I teach, I think it's possible to serve my students and to let them know that I'm a follower of Jesus, without calling in the ACLU or the administration. At least that's been my experience. Let me use two strands to tie this particular lesson together. The first is the strand of example. I find in teaching economics that I can reference scriptural principles in a way that signals to students that I take the Bible seriously, or at least I don't consider it to be a dead and worthless book. If I can do this in economics, you can, I suspect, do it in your field.

I will mention this example: in economics, we have a theory, or principle, of diminishing marginal utility. The principle is kind of a common sense one—if I were to serve you more and more dishes of ice cream, the enjoyment you would get from successive dishes of ice cream would diminish. Economists believe that's the way rational consumers are wired. Often I use Biblical illustrations in contrast to economic principles. An obvious one here is the parable of the lost sheep. I tell the students that in the gospel according to John, there was a shepherd who had 99 sheep safely in a fold. There was one sheep that was out there somewhere. This one hundredth sheep, the incremental one hundredth unit, when the shepherd already had 99. According to the Bible, the shepherd rejoiced more over finding this incremental one hundredth unit than all of the 99. It's as if the one hundredth dish of ice cream brought more pleasure than all of the original first 99.

Two things are happening when you use examples like this: non-Christians note that you take the Bible seriously. The Christians in the class are encouraged that you take the Bible seriously. To them, it's like being an insider. That's a pleasant experience for them because so often in classrooms at the University of Virginia they're the outsiders. As a bonus, I think it's appropriate to use Biblical illustrations because they are part of good teaching. It's a way of serving students.

If I'm in an impish mood at the end of the semester, I will tell my students when they're filling out course evaluation forms that I've been asked by the department of religious studies to tell them what the Bible says about filling out course evaluation forms. This intrigues them. If I'm really in an impish mood, I'll pull out a pocket NEW TESTAMENT, and I'll tell them that if they want to follow along, I'm going to read from I Peter 3:8-9, which is what the Bible teaches about filling out course evaluation forms. Everyone's attention is—I won't say “glued” on me, but they're certainly paying attention. And then I read a paraphrase of I Peter 3:8-9, which says, “Finally, let all of you...”—and I stress that this is not just female students or first-year students, or prospective econ majors—“all of you be sympathetic, be loving; do not repay evil for evil or insult with insult. But instead retaliate with compassion so that you might inherit a blessing.” And then I hand out the course evaluation forms.

What this does is it signals that I take the Bible seriously, but it's not something I'm so somber about that I can't use it with what I hope is appropriate levity.

The second strand I use is testimony. It was a Jewish colleague of mine, a very dear friend, who, early in my career, told me that I owed it to my students to let them know what made me tick as a professor. He said, “You have colleagues who are avid sailors. And the students know that eventually through the semester, just through the way that professor teaches. Professors who are avid musicians—students come to know that. And he said to me, ‘Why should Christians be exempt from that?’”

I could think of two reasons. One is that it’s scarier for some of us to concede that we follow Jesus than telling students that every summer we take a sailboat down the intercoastal waterway. Boating seems like a hobby, or maybe an eccentricity. Being a born-again Christian to some people seems like insanity, or at least a short-coming.

The second reason, I told him, is that nobody complains if you tell your students that you’re a sailor. There’s no constitutional separation of sailing and state the way there is of church and state. But he pressed me on this, and he succeeded. Therefore I would say to you that if you’re at a secular institution, and the institution is paying you to teach molecular biology, it would be wrong in my opinion for you to teach systematic theology—no matter how good you are at it. But I do think, and in my instance particularly at the end of a course, if you’ve taught molecular biology, and the students see that you have worked hard, and you have desired to be their servant, and you have a concern about them, they would be upset—they would be concerned—if they thought you believed you could not share something personal with them. I let students know that I’m a follower of Jesus on the last day of a large introductory class that I teach of over 1000 students. I know there are people who would say to do it on the first day, but I choose to do it on the last day.

I have said this very brief and carefully-thought-out testimony to over 20,000 students. And I’ve never had a student complain to me. On the other hand, I haven’t seen hundreds of students come forward and accept Christ, like at a Billy Graham crusade. But, I have had people tell me of how touched they were by this. More than once, I will get an e-mail or a letter from a student—it might be five, six, or seven years later—that said, “I became a Christian, and I thought you would want to know about that, because I know you are one.” I’ve had students tell me that they have been left in tears by this very brief testimony that I give on the last day of class.

What I do at the start of a class is I tell students basically what my teaching philosophy is, but I don’t use the word “Jesus” and I don’t use the word “Christian.” I tell them that I’m going to teach out of a Biblical model of leadership. And that Biblical model means that I’m to be their servant, and they have every right to expect that of me, and they can call me on that if I’m not doing that. I tell them that’s what the Biblical model of leadership is all about.

## ✧ OFFICE HOURS ✧

How else do we serve our students and “wash their feet?” Let me mention the office, and in particular bring up office hours. At many colleges and universities, there are faculty members who can restrain their enthusiasm for office hours. You can recognize this immediately when you see a door that reads, “Office Hours: 8:00 a.m.–9:00 a.m. Friday morning.” Or just “Office hours by appointment only”—that’s a real signal that students are not welcome there, that this is not a foot-washing professor.

So some years ago, I began praying about my office hours: that I would see them not as a necessary evil, but as an opportunity for foot washing.

I found myself falling into the academic pattern of seeing office hours as an interruption. So some years ago I began praying about my office hours—that I would see them not as a necessary evil, but as an opportunity for foot-washing. And this remains one of the most difficult areas of connecting Jesus with my work. I’ve found it helpful to pray before office hours begin that the Lord would bring one student to my office that day with whom I could share the Gospel—either through specific evangelistic witness or through something of what Jesus means to me, and serving a student in a special way that I know I wouldn’t do if I weren’t a follower of Jesus.

Again, it would be an exaggeration to say that this has led to hundreds of conversions, but it has led to many conversations, some of which have led to conversions. In my own heart, I know that when I let the Spirit lead, I can now have a sense of anticipation about my office hours that was absent when I was a younger faculty member at Virginia.

I don’t know if your experience parallels mine, but about half the students who come to my office have questions that are not narrowly concerned with the course material. Often those who are in academic difficulty aren’t in trouble because they don’t have the intellectual horse-power to do economics. Their underlying problem is with broken relationships or broken lives. Their problem is not with economic theory; it’s with the fall of Adam. Often their problems are beyond my human ability to come up with solutions. When this is the case, I simply tell them that from my faith perspective, when I face a problem that I can’t just solve off the top of my head, I pray about that matter. I ask them if they would mind if I prayed for them. I’m not talking about praying for them after they leave—I mean right then and there. No one has ever demurred. No one has ever said, “No, I don’t think so.”

Let me be clear on this. I do not know whether these students are Christians. I presume that most of them are not. If you’re thinking, “What choice do they have?” It’s a vertical relationship; I’m the authority figure, and I’ve asked “May I pray for you?”, they may just say “Yes”, thinking “How do I get out of the room from this religious nut?” That’s a possibility; I can’t discount that. But frankly, I don’t think that’s what happens. To the extent that I can read faces, the student who says “Yes” is not saying “I’ll humor this guy”, but instead, “Would you really? Would you be willing to do that?”

I don’t pray with every student who comes to my office with problems. It’s only a minority. But I do now pray with every student who comes to my office who I believe or know to be a Christian. I honestly think that some students are disappointed if they come to my office and I don’t pray for them. I have many Asian-American students and for them, an older person praying for them is a form of a blessing. I’ve had Jewish students for whom I’ve prayed come back and ask me to pray for them again, because they didn’t know any Jewish professors who would be willing to pray for them. I suspect that I would pray for most every student who came to my office if I were at a Christian school. Korean-American students at my university, many of whom are believers, truly relish being prayed for. I’ve actually had students make up excuses about economics to come to my office in the hope that I would pray for them. They’re such sweet kids that they feel guilty then, and they tell me sheepishly, “You know, I really just wanted to be prayed for.”


I’d like to address those who are assistant professors. I can imagine your hesitancy about praying with students, especially if you’re at a state-supported institution or a secular school—and especially one where the forces of political correctness are robust. Let me suggest that you ask God for wisdom about this. Ask the

Lord to give you wisdom to discern when such prayer is appropriate. The student who wants to know when the next test is, or whether chapters six and seven are really required reading, is not one to pray with or for. You say that for a particular student in an unusually difficult situation when your own wisdom is constrained. Or for the student you know to be a follower of Jesus, and for whom praying is encouragement and affirmation.

So why do I pray for my students? Because Jesus taught His students how to pray and His disciples often saw Him at prayer. They were sometimes invited to be with Him when He prayed. I want my students to know that I pray. It's OK for my students to see that I'm broken at times by prayer. And I, in a halting way, believe in the efficacy of prayer, though often, to my shame, haltingly. I pray because it reminds me that the world I live in and the time that I've been given, even my office hours, are territories that Jesus stakes out as being His territory. I just can't imagine the impact if faculty regularly prayed, not only for, but with their students.


### ✿ BEYOND THE CLASSROOM ✿

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Now let me discuss foot-washing and servanthood outside the office, the classroom, and the laboratory. Other ways you do this, if you are a decent public speaker, is to give talks to student Christian groups. If you're not a decent public speaker, learn to be one—and then give talks to Christian student groups. Let me give you three reasons for giving these talks.



You may have students who enjoyed you as a professor of 18th century English literature, and they're curious to hear what you have to say about the Christian faith in the 21st century. You may have something to say to Christian students who may be edified by the content of your talk, based on your wisdom and your faith and your skills in Biblical exegesis. Even if they don't remember the talk, your student audience may be encouraged that you took a stand; that you as a faculty member were willing to identify with them; that you're willing to give an imprimatur to what they're doing in a Cru meeting, or an InterVarsity meeting, or an FCA meeting.

I'll be really frank with you: I know how little I retain from listening to some of the best preaching in the country, so how can I expect students to retain what I have to say about the Christian faith? But this I know: Christian students at the University of Virginia inhabit an institution where the major problem that they face is not that their professors have set their minds against the God of the Bible. They teach as though the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob just simply didn't exist. In a way it's worse than saying Christianity is false. It's saying that Christianity is irrelevant. So if you are available to Christian students, they realize that you're a professor for whom the whole apparatus of Christianity is not irrelevant; it's your focus. It's the anchor of your life. It's the gospel; it's good news.

### ✿ THE HOME ✿

Let me briefly mention the home. What does it mean, at least for me, to “wash my students' feet” with regard to where I live? For many professors, their home is their castle. The bridge is up, the moat is filled, and students are not welcome there. When I was an undergraduate at Kalamazoo College, a professor invited me to his home. I was really scared going to his home. I was from a family background where



  
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nobody had been to college, and I didn't know what you did in a professor's home. I thought you'd have to talk at some elevated level. But instead he just had me to his home with some other students. I never forgot it, and that's been decades ago.

Jesus didn't have a home as we think of a home, but we know that His students, His disciples, were with Him not just when He formally taught them as a rabbi. For me, this aspect of Jesus' life has come to mean making my home a welcome place for students. I learned this from my first wife, who, before she died of cancer, often opened our home to students. And what further provoked the practice for me was the example of James Huston. I knew him when he was a professor at Oxford—he's the guy who later founded Regent College in Canada. I observed him having students over to his home. I never forgot his telling me one time that he and his wife Rita did not really believe they owned their home. They had title to it, but that was just formalistic. It was the Lord's, and theirs to share.

Many students like to be in a home, because they miss theirs—or because their own home life is a mess. So how do you open a home? Well, you let the word out. Students have used rooms in our home for everything from Bible studies to fellowship groups. In one season of our life, on Saturday nights there was an international teahouse that met at our home—where international students would come for games, and entertainment, and English lessons. ISI staff and local churches staffed the event. Most of the time my wife and I were not even there . . . or we might stop in during the evening.

My wife and I have found that having students over around 9:00 p.m. for a one-hour brownies and milk study break fits their schedules, and it's a great way to show Christian hospitality. Every Thanksgiving I extend an invitation to all my students to have dinner at our home if they're not going elsewhere. Thanksgiving is a great time to have international students over to explain why our nation is thankful. You can't do that without presenting the gospel.


What does all this mean in the long-run? I hope that students themselves, when they become home-owners someday, might think about how Jesus might call them to use this particular asset for Kingdom purposes. I must tell you in addition that whatever value and convenience our home has been to others, opening our home in this way has taught my wife and me to keep a looser hold on our possessions than we otherwise would. In the process some of our selfishness has been beaten out of us.

Here's a very practical and affirming thing to do: have leaders of Christian student groups to your home and treat them to a dinner. If you don't want to cook, bring in Chinese food or pizza. But entertain them just like you were entertaining colleagues and honor them in that way. My wife and I are privileged to have a lake house, and it's used often by student groups—oftentimes the exec groups of student para-church ministries meet there for a weekend retreat or a mid-week getaway during the school year when we're not there. So if you have a home, or a cottage, make it available to student leadership groups for retreats.

## THE WEBSITE


Most faculty now have a website or a home page. Through Faculty Commons Ministry we've been encouraged to participate in "MeettheProf.com". I have a homepage, something that was done for all the members of my department of economics at UVA. This happened several years ago, but I still remember my grad-

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uate student, who was very web-savvy, and was hired to set up a homepage for all the faculty members. She came up to me in the basement of our building and said she was completing mine, and part of the format was to list interests of the faculty members. She came up to me and said, "Mr. Elzinga, I just about have your homepage done and under interests, I'm going to list Jesus Christ and water-skiing." Slalom skiing is my recreational passion—I still love to water-ski. She knew that about me, and she knew that Jesus Christ was an interest of mine. So she just put them both down there. I'm really a shy person, and that just struck me as really bold. I decided to let Monica run with that, so you can go to my homepage, and you can click on waterskiing and join the American Water-ski Association; and you can click on Jesus Christ and go to a variety of things about the gospel.

Have you ever wondered if Jesus had a website, what that would be like? Think how many links there would have to be. I would encourage Christian faculty to have websites that in some way identify themselves as followers of Jesus. There's a link on my webpage to a place where you can do daily devotions. I had a grad student in my department who was an atheist question me about why I was a Christian. Unbeknownst to me, she had been visiting my web page, and using the link there, she was regularly reading a Bible verse and a lesson for the day. She would not have known the term devotions, but she was doing devotions every day off of my website.

I had a girl stop me one time outside my office who said, "Thanks for having devotions on your webpage. I make my boyfriend do devotions with me off your webpage."

All of this is something I never would have thought of because I don't spend time looking at these things. But students have a different cost-benefit calculus than most of us do, and if you're a teacher or have some other position of leadership in a university or college, don't "hide your light under a bushel" by concealing from others that the very focus of your life is that you see Jesus as rabbi or master teacher. You can be bold here—topics that it would be inappropriate for you to talk about in class, you can have links to from your homepage.

May I reveal how antiquated and aged I am by moving from digital communication to hard copy communication. For years it was my practice to write a personal letter of congratulations to every student of mine who got an A<sup>+</sup>. I don't give out a lot of A<sup>+</sup>s, but these were students I was proud of. They made me look good. I still do this; but now I write a letter to every student who fails my classes. Last fall I wrote 30 of these letters. I suspect Jesus would have thought first to write the "F" students. The "A<sup>+</sup>" students, at my university at least, already get lots of strokes. It took me about 20 years into the academic life to catch on to writing the young women and men who failed my class and perhaps I had failed them as their servant. Letters to students can be a powerful avenue of service, of "foot washing," in part because so few letters are written by faculty to students, at least at my institution. I now make it a practice to write every student of mine when I am informed by the dean's office that one of them is ill or when there has been a death in the family. Often mine is the only letter they receive from their school. Professors have abdicated so much of what professors used to do to professional administrators. And we complain about it. We don't have to abdicate concern to the various deans and counselor professionals. We can do this foot washing of our students ourselves.

I end most of my professional letters and e-mails with the expression "under His mercy." As I've indicated, I am by nature shy, and originally this seemed very bold

to me—to have a Christian way of ending my letters. But that expression has encouraged believers. It's also prompted some recipients to ask me to give a defense of the hope that is within me. I've had professors—a very distinguished one—write to me and say, "I wish I could end a letter like that. I wish I had the faith to believe that my life is under somebody's mercy."

Other people totally misconstrue it. At one time I lived under a very totalitarian chairman, one of these guys who just loved power for the sake of power, and inflicting pain of others. I actually had a colleague at another school who thought that "His" referred to my chairman. Even there, you have a chance to explain the gospel, and say "No, no, it's not Professor Selden; it's the Lord I'm talking about here."

## ✿ CREDENTIALS ✿

Let me mention one other thing. I'm trying to learn how to de-emphasize credentials as foot washing with my students. I know that much of my propensity is to emphasize academic and financial and institutional credentials; and that comes from my own deep insecurities. Credentialing can be a barrier between professors and between professors and students. The business world emphasizes credentials, and the professions of law and medicine emphasize credentials, but in the academic world, we really emphasize credentials. We put them before our name; we put them after our name. We calibrate; we quantify performance; we rank people all the time. We look up and down at people according to performance-based credentials or titles.

One of the cool traditions at my university goes back to the founder, Thomas Jefferson. He wanted all the faculty, which at that time were all male, to only use the title "Mr." before their name, and not "Professor" or "Dr." That tradition today is largely ignored, but I sometimes ask my students not to use my title.

When I think about the apostle Paul, with all of the credentials he had from "Gamaliel University" and his great scholarly ability, the credential that he most often cites is right up front in his letters: "I'm Paul. I'm a servant of Jesus Christ." And in some translations, it's "I'm a bondservant, or a slave, of Jesus Christ". That's my credential. If I could fully capture, or as economists like to say, internalize, Paul's insight about credentials, I would make another big step forward in teaching as foot washing. And maybe some of you would as well.

## ✿ CONCLUSION ✿

Sometimes my students ask me how long I've been teaching at the University of Virginia, and when I tell them that I joined the faculty right out of graduate school in the fall of 1967, the look on their face is really interesting for me to observe because they're either thinking, "Boy, that's longer than I've been alive." Or they're thinking, "Gosh, you'd think after all these years he could have gotten a different job by now," because these econ majors figure they are going to have five or six different employers in their lifetime.

But I will tell you that after more than 40 years, one might expect boredom to set in, or at least this economic law of diminishing marginal utility to take its toll. But teaching continues to be fresh; it continues to be challenging; it continues to



be scary; it continues to be rewarding. And I think that's because by God's grace, I am accompanied by the Master Teacher. And I've come to experience, haltingly and with many shortcomings, the paradox of the teacher who leads by serving. For me, this has become a central theme of the connection between Jesus and the academy. †



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