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The First Year: A Journey of Meaning, Formation, and Substance

A Review Essay by Brad A. Lau

The following review essay examines the texts “Foundations of Christian Thought: Faith, Learning and the Christian Worldview” by Mark Cosgrove; “Gracious Christianity: Living the Love We Profess” by Douglas Jacobsen and Rodney J. Sawatsky; “The Outrageous Idea of Academic Faithfulness” by Don Opitz and Derek Melleby; “Str8t@lk: Clear Answers about Today’s Christianity” by Jerry Pattengale; and “Engaging God’s World: A Christian Vision of Faith, Learning, and Living” by Cornelius Plantinga.

We want you to find the deep satisfaction of pursuing your daily labors (for now, primarily attending classes and studying) as service to God. We want you to experience the unending challenge of exalting Christ as Lord of your thinking. We want you to begin now to imagine the application of your learning – your studies and plans and dreams – as an expression of love, or better yet, as a conduit for the love of God (Opitz & Melleby, 2007, p. 11).

These poignant words written to the first-year college student challenges new learners to press deeply into their college experience as a spiritual pursuit. Much has been written about the first-year experience for students. There is little doubt that this year is pivotal for students as they form friendships, develop study habits, learn about themselves, select a major, and develop a vision for the future. Critical questions are asked that begin to shape an individual’s future commitments, goals, and aspirations. What does it mean to live in community? How do I connect my interests and passions with meaningful work? What (or who) will give my life meaning and purpose? Questions such as these are compelling for students on all campuses, but carry a unique character and flavor on Christian campuses.

This essay seeks to examine the approaches taken in five books as they relate to the first year of college. While these books are not all written with the first-year experience in mind and while all are relevant beyond the first year, the focus of this essay will be planted in that early college experience. In particular, what are the unique issues that need to be reflected on by students at Christian colleges and universities? This important question is at the heart of what should draw students to a distinctly Christian educational experience.

Because of the consumer culture in which we live, students (and parents) are “shopping” for the right college and those institutions are certainly marketing themselves to students in a variety of ways. In a recent issue of *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, there was an article about a college in North Carolina that seeks to attract students with ice cream trucks, valet parking, a concierge desk, and a large hot tub in the middle of

campus (Bartlett, 2008). Of course, all institutions hope that the attraction to their respective campus goes beyond the amenities they provide! This is particularly true of Christian campuses that hope to instill a Christ-centered vision that begins in the first year and carries throughout college and beyond.

While the five books reviewed for this essay are very unique in their individual approaches and emphases, there were eight clear themes that emerged (among others) as important and essential components of the student experience in a Christ-centered educational environment. These themes will be explored in the pages that follow as they relate to the first-year student experience.

Academic Engagement and Integration

Clearly, one of the most basic and fundamental challenges for students at any college or university is to be engaged in the learning process. On one level, this is assumed as the primary reason why a student is a student in the first place. However, there is growing concern that students arrive more disengaged than ever. There are multiple “distractions” that take many different forms. Opitz and Melleby (2007) make academic engagement the central theme of their work, *The Outrageous Idea of Academic Faithfulness*, and an especially important theme for the Christian college student. Academic faithfulness, they argue, is not only possible, but an essential aspect of following Jesus.

In fact, the integration of faith and learning has been a key argument for Christ-centered education for a long time, as well as providing a connection between faith, learning, and *action*. Plantinga (2002) acknowledges this in *Engaging God’s World: A Christian Vision of Faith, Learning, and Living* when he writes, “One way to love God is to know and love God’s work. Learning is therefore a *spiritual* calling: properly done, it attaches us to God” (p. xi). Thus learning is attached to faith in strategic and important ways; however, it is also connected with action, a reality that will be discussed more fully later.

The first-year student at a Christian university should begin to develop an appreciation for the breadth and depth of learning as a spiritual activity. As such, academic life is not compartmentalized as a secular activity, but one that is consistent and necessary for the life of faith. Cosgrove (2006) spends a lot of time on issues pertaining to the integration of faith and learning, devoting a whole chapter to the topic and weaving it throughout his book, *Foundations of Christian Thought: Faith, Learning, and the Christian Worldview*. He argues that the Bible and “human, academic subject matter” (p. 38) are both important sources of knowledge and further asserts that “Faith without learning can never be tested for truth, and learning without faith assumptions tends to study the trivial” (p. 48).

In discussing academic engagement, all of the books reviewed noted the importance of reading and studying works with which one might not always agree. Faith and learning is not just about reading books written from a Christian or faith perspective. In fact, to paraphrase Augustine and quoting Arthur Holmes (1975) “all truth is God’s truth” (p. 17). Pattengale (2004) in *Str8 T@lk: Clear Answers about Today’s Christianity* has the most skeptical and cautionary attitude toward the life of the mind and its limits. He notes that “In many cases you will find that the greater the mind, the greater the possibility for error (embedded in skillful communication and deceptively attractive

falsehoods)” (p. 25). As such, there was a slightly anti-intellectual flavor in Pattengale that is reminiscent of old-style evangelicalism.

Clearly, a vibrant Christ-centered education will ask important questions and seek out truth where it can be found. This integrative work should be introduced in pivotal ways during the first year of college and modeled throughout the Christian university educational experience. The pursuit of truth should not be characterized by rigid dogmatism. Neither should a Christ-centered education deconstruct without a corresponding effort to reconstruct a framework that will lead to coherence between life, learning, and faith. It is to this important topic that we now turn.

A Christian Worldview

Another key theme in the books reviewed related to the formation of a worldview to frame all of life. This language was especially characteristic of those books written from a more Reformed perspective, including Cosgrove (2006), Plantinga (2002), and Opitz & Melleby (2007). Pattengale (2004), and Jacobsen and Sawatsky (2006) in their book *Gracious Christianity: Living the Love we Profess*, tend to use different language but express some of the same guiding principles. For example, Jacobsen and Sawatsky emphasize grace as the central theme of a Christian “worldview” without using the corresponding language. Their argument is that faith should be “fleshed out” in a spirit of graciousness expressed meaningfully in relationships. As such, “faith is a verb, not a noun. Faith is more relational than rational. Especially faith is incarnational” (p. 13).

A Christian worldview places Christ at the center of all of life by understanding and articulating clearly that “He is before all things, and in Him all things hold together” (Colossians 1:17, TNIV). Opitz and Melleby (2007) acknowledge this when they write that “the yearning for deep meaning and for lasting purpose will never be discovered in the co-curriculum or even in the curriculum itself. The real answer is relational, personal, and more real than anything that can be imagined. The real answer is Jesus Christ” (p. 23). Thus, the framing reality for the first year of college and beyond is how a Christ-centered worldview interacts with and engages other worldviews and speaks meaningfully and holistically to the critical issues of our time, lives, and communities.

Plantinga (2002) offers a compelling discussion of the Christian worldview by organizing his comments around the great theological truths of creation, fall, redemption, and consummation (which he actually calls “vocation in the Kingdom of God”). Several of the books reviewed spend considerable time discussing the hope upon which the Christian worldview rests. Opitz and Melleby (2007) talk about the “already, not yet tension” recognizing that the kingdom of God is here in Christ, but that there is a much fuller reality that is still ahead. While this could have been developed more fully by them, it introduces an important component of worldview. Jacobsen and Sawatsky (2006) express this in a more nuanced way by stating that the Christian hope is “ultimately about long-term outcomes, not short-term optimism” (p. 115). Plantinga (2002) offers a similar perspective stating that “Christians live by faith in Jesus Christ, and when their faith leans forward toward the coming of the kingdom, they call it hope” (p. xiii).

A Christian Apologetic

A third theme relates to the role of apologetics in Christian higher education. This is connected closely to the previous discussions about academic engagement and the Christian worldview. It is developed to varying degrees in each of the books reviewed as the authors utilize a variety of approaches.

Cosgrove (2006) reads a little like a philosophy text and goes so far as to outline several “tests” of a worldview (and references those “tests” throughout his book). He writes, “By the time readers turn the last page of this book, they should have a well-built foundation for thinking ‘Christianly’ about their lives and culture. The Christian mind is needed in a world that tends to label people of faith as those who have kissed their brains good-bye” (p. 10). He goes on to state his apologetic even more clearly: “To defend our faith, we need to show that our worldview is superior rationally, morally, and existentially to any alternative system of belief” (p. 26).

Moving in a different direction than Cosgrove, Jacobsen and Sawatsky (2006) argue convincingly for a winsome faith that will be centered on Christ’s gracious work in our lives and lived out in grace toward others. Thus, our greatest apologetic is the way we live, and not solely what we believe. This truth is stressed by all the authors, though with different emphases.

One of the most interesting related themes played out in the various approaches had to do with one’s understanding of modernism and postmodernism. Pattengale’s (2004) emphasis is on *answers* as shown even through the title of his book, *Str8talk: Clear Answers about Today’s Christianity* (emphasis mine). The cover portrays a fairly postmodern look and feel as does his effective use of story throughout. However, the majority of the content is clearly written from a more rational, modern framework. In fact, Pattengale writes, “Years from now, when my personal stories are a bit dated, the key doctrines represented in this text will still be current. The Scriptures and their applications are solid for all generations” (p. 193). However, he goes on to affirm this truth that core doctrines don’t change “even if presented in the wrappings of the early ‘80s” (p. 193). While one may understand and agree with what he intends to communicate, it is difficult to comprehend why you would not seek to package Biblical material in a way that is culturally relevant and speaks to the student of today. Every missionary has to take this approach if he or she is to be effective in extending the Gospel message cross-culturally. These cross-cultural communication principles should be applied to college work as well.

While Cosgrove (2006) is less obvious in this regard and provides a helpful chapter on modernism and postmodernism, he is too dismissive of the latter and fails to recognize its contributions (while appropriately recognizing its limitations). Opitz and Melleby (2007) are more balanced in their approach, acknowledging the strengths and weaknesses of both modernism and postmodernism as accounting for “aspects of reality, but not the whole of reality” (p. 63). First-year students at Christian colleges and universities need a Christian apologetic and worldview that is both relational and rational.

Social Justice and *Shalom*

A fourth significant theme has to do with the notion of *shalom* and social justice. Plantinga (2002) provides an excellent definition of Biblical *shalom* writing:

In the Bible, *shalom* means universal flourishing, wholeness, and delight – a rich state of affairs in which natural needs are satisfied and natural gifts fruitfully employed, all under the arch of God’s love. *Shalom*, in other words, is the way things are supposed to be (p. 15).

The clarion call for the Christian college student, then, is to work diligently toward the “ought.” The fact is that “Our imaginations need to be liberated from status quo aspirations and dreams of self-fulfillment. We need to look beyond the way things are toward the way things may be” (Opitz & Melleby, 2007, p. 93). Jacobsen and Sawatsky (2006) further affirm this by noting that “Christians are called to holy impatience in their efforts to promote peace, righteousness, and justice” (p. 119). Certainly, this call to social justice resonates strongly with today’s college students, whether Christian or not. However, framing this desire as an essential expression of genuine Christian faith and commitment is an important task for the Christ-centered institution.

Both Plantinga (2002) and Jacobsen and Sawatsky (2006) articulate a strong passion for social justice from very different theological traditions. The former writes convincingly from a Reformed perspective while the latter do so from their “Anabaptist, Pietist, and Wesleyan” roots. In fact, Jacobsen and Sawatsky (2006) affirm that it is out of their tradition that they “are committed to peace as a gospel imperative, to faith as necessarily lived in community, to the importance of a personal relationship with Christ, and to a spirituality that emphasizes justice and ethical decision making” (p. 25).

Further, a truly integrated approach to Christian education will ask important questions, open dialogue about significant societal issues, and express itself actively as Christ’s hands and feet in a fallen world. This means that our students should not blindly follow the prevailing notions of our culture or even the Christian community, but should seek to exercise what Opitz and Melleby (2007) call “third way thinking” (p. 88) which seeks simply to be faithful to God’s call on our lives and communities. They articulate this well by writing:

Instead, we live each day enjoying the blessings of the gospel and pursuing the hope that has been revealed. We live to see the international reach of the gospel, to imagine local economic development programs, to protect biodiversity from environmental contamination, to nurture loving families and churches, and to enjoy the arts in full bloom of color and sound and movement (p. 78).

A perspective informed by and centered in *shalom* will also have an appropriate humility that should characterize Christ followers as it did and does our Master Teacher. Each of the books reviewed noted the importance of this central Christian virtue in the life of faith. The first-year student will benefit greatly from seeing this modeled both inside and outside the classroom. While a little incongruous with some of his other remarks, Cosgrove (2006) goes so far as to say that “humility of knowing should be the trademark of true knowledge” (p. 164). This is an essential mark of those seeking to pattern their lives after Christ!

A Moral Compass

Another theme is grounded in living as morally responsible beings. The reality and pervasiveness of sin in our world is easily recognized and a person does not need to search too long before finding many examples to prove it! While a little cliché in discussing the topic, Pattengale (2004) dedicates an entire chapter to Christian morality and sexuality and encourages students (and others) to “live in a manner that promotes a consistency between what we do in private . . . and our public persona” (p. 83). Unfortunately, while providing many helpful insights, Pattengale tends to be too black and white in his presentation and some of the material may be better for a high school rather than college audience.

Jacobsen and Sawatsky’s (2006) emphasis, on the other hand, is on grace as the controlling paradigm for morality. At times, they do make clarifying statements so that they are not misunderstood as antinomians. For example, they acknowledge that “While the Spirit enhances life, the Spirit does not sanction everything we want to do. Yielding to the Spirit does involve putting some limits on our wants and desires” (p. 81).

It is a good thing that each writer goes beyond the obvious and external measures of morality (sexuality, for example) to discuss broader virtues and beliefs that define the Christian commitment (e.g., honesty, compassion, forgiveness). The Christian student has experienced the transforming work of Christ which should be “fleshed out” in tangible ways as they live out their faith commitments. This is a central and important conversation in the first year of college.

Vocation

A sixth theme has to do with one of the most significant discussions introduced during the first year of college. Seeking to know and understand one’s calling is a key developmental task that can be framed in a number of different ways. Frankly, the treatment of this topic by most of the books under consideration is more cursory than it should have been. Opitz and Melleby (2007) discuss the interplay between work and leisure and the pursuit of vocation, but only briefly. Cosgrove has a great discussion of worldviews, but fails to connect that discussion with relationship and passion. Jacobsen and Sawatsky (2006) touch on this theme periodically. However, they fail to do so in a holistic and consistent manner. While issues related to vocation were not intended as a key theme by any of these authors, they are certainly important to the first-year experience.

Pattengale (2004) offered some good insights into this area by writing that,

. . . a calling involves a clear sense of being commissioned by God for some task. It is your pursuit of the sovereignty of God over who you are and what you are doing with your life. It is the sense that God’s hand is on you and that he has a sense of genuine pleasure in what you are doing (Pattengale, p. 118).

Embedded in this statement are many notions that are helpful for the first-year student as he or she begins to identify passions and interests and identify how those intersect with life, relationships, career, and faith.

Plantinga (2002) provides the best discussion of vocation as it relates to God's Kingdom priorities by devoting an entire section to the topic. His treatment is fairly comprehensive and seeks to align personal priorities and passions with Kingdom priorities and passions, a fundamental alignment for the committed Christ follower. In fact, he offers the following illustration of a person with a genuine sense of calling:

In her best moods she longs not just for happiness, but for joy; not just for joy, but for God; not just for God, but also for the kingdom of God. Because of her enthusiasm for the kingdom, she doesn't merely endorse justice in the world; she hungers and works for it. She doesn't merely reject cruelty; she hates and fights it. She wants God to make things right in the world, and she wants to enroll in God's project as if it were her own. She 'strives first for the kingdom' in order to act on her passion (p. 108).

The Compelling Nature of "Story" and Community

A seventh theme relevant to the first-year experience has to do with the power of story and creating meaningful connections with others. The Christian story is presented in various ways as it undergirds the individual search for meaning and significance. Cosgrove (2006) writes, "Christianity says that life is not a series of disconnected moments but is a whole story and our lives and sufferings fit into the whole of the drama in an important way" (p. 173). Our lives are a part of "the Grand Story" of creation, fall, redemption, and consummation that was discussed previously. The heart of discipleship is loving God and loving others as we live out our lives. Jacobsen and Sawatsky (2006) repeat this core truth many times throughout their book as the defining principle for one's life and relationships. Opitz and Melleby (2007) provide numerous Biblical and personal stories and Pattengale (2004) begins each chapter with a poignant story to launch further conversation.

The notion of connection with others in community is also increasingly important in the "wired world" of college students and is noted frequently by these authors. According to Jacobsen and Sawatsky (2006), this fundamental reality of love in community is rooted in the "doctrine of the Trinity [which is] the defining core of Christian ethics" (p. 36). The power of journeying in community as part of His Story is modeled throughout Scripture, weaving an intricate and complex struggle toward wholeness.

Practical Christian Discipleship

A final theme relevant to the first year has to do with the way the Christian student is encouraged to practice disciplines that are important for spiritual growth and maturation. *Str8t@lk* is clearly written with the goal of practical Christian discipleship covering topics such as evangelism, discipleship, sanctification, prayer, Bible reading, and sexual morality among others (Pattengale, 2004). While sounding a little cliché at times and not providing enough contemporary context and language, Pattengale's treatment of these core principles is helpful and necessary.

Ultimately, a significant part of the purpose of college is to encourage growth in wisdom, discernment, and insight as classes are meaningfully connected to the Christian life and experience. Thus, "[t]he Christian mind is connected to Christian character and action" and is expressed through service, Bible study, prayer and other core disciplines

(Opitz & Melleby, 2007, p. 72). This is a vital connection for college students to make and extends beyond merely “doing” to issues of “being.”

All of us are called to pursue a deeper walk with Christ and be formed “in Him.” A significant theme of the early college experience (and beyond) needs to focus on what this “growth” looks like. Equipping and preparing students for the life of faith needs to move beyond theory to practice in strategic and important ways. This is an essential component of what it means to live in Christian community as colleges facilitate this process of spiritual maturation and encourage spiritual disciplines as central to the life of faith.

Summary

Each of the books reviewed for this essay has unique features that would be particularly helpful tools in using the material with first-year college students. Pattengale (2004) begins each chapter with a story connected to the content for that chapter and also has a section with frequently asked questions and recommended reading and resources for that chapter’s topic. Especially helpful is the section in each chapter that has several questions for reaction and reflection as well as a substantial glossary of Christian terminology at the end of the book. Opitz and Melleby (2007) use very contemporary language and style to present their material and have excellent discussion questions and recommended reading at the end of each of their chapters. They also include a section at the end of the book that contains student responses to the topics under consideration.

While Jacobsen and Sawatsky (2006) do not include tools and supplemental materials in the book itself, they do point the readers to a website (www.graciouschristianity.org) that has ample resources for group study. Cosgrove (2006) includes gray boxes throughout each chapter with significant questions and answers related to the topics being discussed. There is also a section at the end of each chapter listing key terms and their corresponding definitions. At the end of his book, he includes a helpful annotated bibliography for further study and exploration. Plantinga (2002) has an exceptional writing style and includes gray boxes throughout each chapter that highlight significant quotes by notable Christians (and others) throughout history. At the end of the book is a very good section with talking points and questions for discussion.

While the themes presented are certainly not exhaustive, the five books reviewed in this essay contribute meaningfully to conversations that are important during a student’s first year of college. It must be noted again that not all of these books are written purposefully with a narrow “first-year college student” audience in mind. As such, some of the limitations and deficiencies, noted throughout this essay, are referenced from the vantage point of the first-year experience and should not be applied more broadly as pertaining to all audiences. Similarly, it should be noted that there are many other topics not dealt with by these authors that are absolutely essential to the first-year experience. Diversity and inclusion is just one significant example of a topic that could have been addressed more substantially. Ultimately, these authors provide excellent introductory material for the first year of college and a meaningful and significant lifelong journey of faith.

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