On Integrating Faith and Communications Studies

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The task of the Christian scholar is to define, explain, evaluate, and interpret the data of a given disciplinary field. This is a work of stewardship in God's kingdom. Each disciplinary field works with interdependent concepts and a core of constructs that constitute its contribution to learning. In biology, the core construct the cell and the core concept life, or reproductivity. In physics, one thinks of force and energy; in music, of tone and harmony; in art, of texture, color, and representation; in history, of artifact and story.

In communication studies, the core construct is symbol and the core concept is culture formation. Christians working that territory set about the task of understanding the construction and transmission of meaning through symbol, and the subsequent use of symbol to generate culture. Symbol as an intellectual construct is shared with every academic discipline from theology to organic chemistry. Nonetheless, it is the central construct for communications research. Around symbol and culture, all communications scholarship finds common purpose and direction.

Symbols appear early in creation, according to Genesis, and persist into the eschaton. God uses symbol for the transmission of meaning, as do all other sentient beings. Humans are symbol manipulators. While other species communicate, sometimes in complex ways, only humans manipulate symbols for the purpose of inventing, narrating, and explaining themselves. As one noted scholar in the field has observed, dogs bark, but not about barking. This symbol-using capacity is reflective of the *imago Dei* granted by God to the last formed and most beloved among his creatures.

My territory of scholarship and writing within this broad domain is history, ethics, law, and more recently, international applications and developments in those areas. With respect to history, I gravitate to the story of communicative freedom. I am mentored by those who, in the interest of truth-telling, speak in relatively dangerous times and places, write in peril of government retribution, and preach against principalities. I view the Gospel as liberating and life-giving, and those who liberate participate in the trajectory of salvation history: creation, fall, redemption. When I research the freedom-rendering uses of symbol, I understand such research to be illustrative of Niebuhr's fifth model, "Christ the transformer of culture." I share this interest in the narratives of freedom with many scholars who do not identify with Christian faith. Yet theologically, I attribute their perspectives and intuitions, their impulse toward freedom (both negative and positive freedom) to the *imago Dei* of which they are unaware. I find motivation, clarity, and purpose in the biblical account of God's character and historical interventions. As a result, my approach to freedom departs from Enlightenment conceptions and embraces the Bible's term eleJeria. My read on this vital word coincides in large part with the meaning of another biblical theme, shalom. The purpose of freedom in every manifestation is not independence from, or severance of accountability to the creator God, but a relation of shalom. That relation is wonderfully expressed in the New and Old Testaments by
narratives of grace and reconciliation, by pronouncements of Paul and John and James on the great gulf that sin created and the great bridge that Jesus established. Yet the bridge metaphor is too static and mechanical. A magnet carries a fuller picture, or an irresistible aroma or captivating music. God leads people through the mystery of shared meaning to live in shalom with creation and with himself, and God makes his people into a new community through the mystery of regeneration and the fellowship and discipline of the church.

With that in view, I engage the study of communication ethics to press the issue of shared meaning which contribute, broadly speaking, to shalom and freedom, and those which do not. I engage the study of communications law (both U.S. constitutional and legal development in East Africa) to understand the boundaries of the “forbidden,” as cultures have negotiated and maintained their own systems of shared meanings. And I work at communication theory to compare the collective wisdom of our time and lace with other places, other times. Thus my work on the editorial review board of *Christian History* magazine is to me a discipline-sensitive service. And my work on the Communication Ethics Commission of the National Communication Association, a general association of scholars, is also a moment of stewardship, as I understand my calling before God.

My publications, talks, seminars, and international opportunities in media ethics and communication theory fit both the applied and advanced models of scholarship as articulated in Calvin’s Expanded Statement of Mission (49). Concerning the latter, my writing attempts to forge a response to Enlightenment liberalism, a response that takes its cue ultimately from the nature of the triune God. With a group of research colleagues, I seek a theory of media and society that articulates a communitarian view of the self and society, and leads to fresh assumptions concerning issues of freedom and responsibility of the press. We seek new theoretical ground in our discipline, to activate a new vocabulary, to elaborate a fresh set of concepts around which to discuss problems such as truth-telling, privacy, intellectual property, censorship and obscenity, and media access. This effort has been active for a decade and is ongoing.

Concerning the former, my work in media ethics has been driven by middle range concerns about professional ethics and marketplace decision-making. We have applied moral theory to a variety of dilemmas in news gathering, advertising, public relations, and entertainment programming. Much of this work seeks to conscientize (a term from Paulo Freire) rather than prescribe or stigmatize.

While new to Calvin College, I have been nurtured in Reformed faith for some time. Raised in conservative Presbyterian and Lutheran churches, trained in theology by a faculty which enthusiastically identified itself as Reformed, I have been challenged and edified (to use an ancient but appropriate word) by Reformed literature and leaders since before my professional ambitions turned academic. My first exposure to the Christian Reformed tradition came through the *Reformed Journal* and the books produced by *Journal* editors in the middle 1970s. I vividly remember meeting RJ writers and editors at various conferences and gravitating strongly toward their perspectives and critique. At the
time I was beginning to be published, and was extraordinarily delighted to have some short essays published there.

When I reflect on my theological base today, it is the broad Reformed tradition of the Neibuhrs, Bloesch, Packer, Stott, Mouw, the progressive Kuyperians (RJ writers come and gone), and the witness to faith left by the ancient Fathers, the early missionaries, to lights such as Bonhoeffer and Ellul and a long list of others whose stories are part of our Christian heritage. Other evangelical traditions have also played their parts, and I suspect that I am more a melting pot than gourmet fare. Youth for Christ, InterVarsity Christian Fellowship, the Navigators have all made their marks, still visible in my high view of Scripture and strong sense that Christian discipline involves piety and work, prayer and steam, mission and reflection. Some aspects of the Reformed tradition I have contested, some I have questioned, some I have reckoned as the mystery of God ' still to be pondered by without frustration and impatience. When evangelical friends ask why I believe in election, I reply, "Better to err on the side of God's sovereignty, where life and destiny are in the hands of a loving Creator."

My sense of Christian calling as a scholar, teacher, writer, speaker, leader of organizations, husband and father thus bear the marks of a formative and invigorating Reformed vision of faith worked out by people past and present who are struck by grace, awed by creation, and glad to be numbered among God's redeemed. I am blessed by such witnesses to God's grace, and standing in that grace myself, delighted at the privilege of joining in the project.

On teaching

"All truth is God's truth" is the opening thesis for the Christian teaching professional. God created the world, in that all things owe to God their existence and purpose, their intention and design. God redeems the world, in that all things created are distanced from the Creator by sin, yet in love God provides the effective means of reclaiming what sin has ruined. God calls his people to participate in the work of redemption. Stewards, or field hands, is the biblical analog. The Christian teacher is God's steward for the development of the person, specifically in our understanding of creation's complexity, our knowledge of creation's wonder, and our management of creation's resources.

How is a Christian teacher to engage the development of students' understanding of creation's complexities? Methodologies are numerous and each assumes a position on the nature of mind and person. The "banking method" (Freire) takes as its purpose the deposit of data in the vacant spaces of a student's knowledge base. This hierarchical, monologic transmission model has been a favorite of teaching professionals in the church and academy. It assumes a fixed universe of knowledge and a monolithic need to acquire functional capability over some part of a fixed world. It creates, conveniently, an intellectual class whose monopoly of knowledge is offered to novitiates who then are expected to conform to the system which this model of teaching perpetuates. Clearly, a
different model of instruction is needed if the teaching vocation is to reflect the character of God.

I believe that teaching is done Christianly through the dialogical process, or "problem posing" method (again, Freire's contribution). For the Christian, knowledge is the discovery of God's world, and therefore good per se. Intellectual discipleship -- the life of service and submission to Jesus Christ -- draws the learner into "care-giving" relationships with all parts of that world. Again the biblical metaphor of steward, a field superintendent whose work adds luster to the master's kingdom, captures the heart of the mission. Thus, serviceable knowledge is the keynote and goal of the teaching task, and dialogue is the person-conserving method by which serviceable knowledge is extracted from creation's mysteries and applied to the healing of creation and restoration of God's beautiful and life-affirming intentions.

For the Christian scholar at a college/university, the teaching task engages students in problem-posing dialogue that awakens the mind, shapes the contours of a disciplined understanding, advances the knowledge base, and transforms knowledge into virtuous action.

**Teaching awakens the mind.** The fall has depressed human curiosity and made the problem-poser slothful. Apathy is the cloud that darkens human discovery. Indifference to redemption is the attitude that marks the extent of sin's corruption of the human will. Under the influence of sin, the field is barren and the field-hand drowsy and careless, seemingly unaware that the misery of the field is not its essence, that the hardness of the field's surface is not its creational texture. Christian teaching takes up the shovel, as it were, and digs. The Christian teacher's hands are steady on the handle, sensitive to the soil, and purposive but not hegemonic. The instructor shares the tools of discovery, and delights when learners (with whom the instructor self-consciously identifies) upturn a new root, a different stone, an artifact and clue. Teaching awakens the mind by sanctifying (recovering the holiness of) curiosity. Learners find motive for curiosity when the care-giving impulse meets the mysteries of creation with confidence that mystery is not perpetual and discovery is not spiritually neutral. That is, curiosity is raised to a virtue within the context of God's redemptive mission in a world to be loved and understood, not taken "as is" or permitted to deteriorate by sin's virus.

**Teaching shapes the mind.** Disciplines are helpful distinctions by which learners organize knowledge and in which learners dialogue. Disciplines are not mutually exclusive or isolated domains of knowledge. A calcified discipline refuses dialogue from outside its elites and narrows dialogue to its own upper tier. But disciplines rightly function as communities of learners associated with a set of problems and engaged in a specialized methodology and language which enhances the organization and validation of discovery. Teaching shapes the mind by eliciting submission to the discoveries of the community. Learning in this sense is not individualistic rediscovery of all of creation's formulae. Teaching is not haphazard license or curiosity sans guidance. Christian teaching leads learners into a discovery-context where pride, ego, and willfulness (resistance to the
community's discoveries) is overcome in submission to the "great conversation" (to borrow from Robert Hutchins), that is, the community's best organization of the fruits of curiosity within its disciplinary field. Christian teaching introduces new learners to this conversation and elicits their participation.

Teaching advances understanding through disciplined exploration. The Christian steward is granted a remarkable responsibility in the Gospel parables: don't merely tend, make it better, improve the field's fertility, unleash its potential, conserve its life in relationship, and increase its yield. If submission to a community's discoveries is an essential step in a learner's growth, so the posing of problems is an essential step in the learner's progress. Teaching is a conserving task, but it is also discontent and explorative. Teaching overcomes creation's fallen resistance by challenging the inertia of knowledge hierarchies and moral quietude. Teaching itself resists the fatigue of discovery but insists that creational mysteries still require fresh energy and renewing collegiality. No disciplinary language is set, no encyclopedia has been published in final edition. By awakening the curiosity and guiding toward communitarian dialogue, teaching quickens the appetite for understanding and encourages novel articulation of discovery's results. Teaching moves from a disciplinary center (submission) to the frontier (exploration) with redemptive intention.

Teaching transforms by applying moral courage to discovery. The triune God reaches to all of creation, with special care (agape) toward image bearers, the human community. Of all of creations agents and actors, humans alone carry reflective capacity, a knowledge of mortality, a conscience that drives the moral sense, and responsibility for care-giving in God's world.

God in love has taught us to value life and materiality, primarily in the incarnation of Jesus Christ. The value we rightly accord is not time bound, but eternal, we learn in the resurrection of Jesus. Teaching reflects God's valuing of life and world when it brings moral courage to bear on curiosity, communal submission, and guided discovery. Moral courage applies knowledge to the service of God and world by resisting the effects of the fall in every corner of creation, and applying the fruits of intellect to care-giving in every quarter.

The Bible describes the teaching task variously: salt and light in the world (Matt. 5:13); whatever is pure, lovely, honorable (Phil 4:8); feed my sheep (John 21:17); go therefore and make disciples (Matt. 28:19); overcome (Rev 3:21). The mission of education Christianly understood is to glorify God through the discovery and application of knowledge to God's redemptive task. Responsibility for that task is articulated in the creation mandate (Genesis 1:28) and again in Jesus' call to mission to the world (Acts 1:8). In this sense, every disciple of Jesus is both a teacher and learner.

Those who teach as a life vocation are advised to soberly assess their role and humbly assert their influence in the formation of others' minds and convictions (James 3:1), encouraging curiosity, modeling submission, fostering exploration, and demonstrating the
application of knowledge through moral courage. Problem-posing pedagogy engages the learner in a process of mutual growth without presuming the final contours of the project. Christian problem-posing education develops along biblical and confessional "control beliefs," conscious of the world's fallenness, animated by the life-giving Spirit, toward the final outcome of work done well, the glory of God's name.