

Christians and the academic task

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This article has arisen out of a request to reflect on the role of Christians in the academic world.¹ In thinking about this formidable commission, it has seemed to me that it might be useful if I offer a few fairly straightforward reflections that can contribute towards a general and simple sketch of the Christian academic task. This will not amount to anything like a complete picture. But I hope that it is a sketch that we can develop by further discussion—a sketch that we can extend, to which we can add detail, and within which we can locate particular issues. I start, then, with some very basic questions. What is our role as Christian academics? What should distinguish us as Christians in the academic world—if, indeed, there ought to be anything that distinguishes us from our non-Christian colleagues?

Those questions are hardly new. They have been discussed for many centuries. And in fact they are certainly not new in our own experience. They were the subject of lively discussion when some of us were students, thinking and arguing about these questions as members of the various Christian student groups on the campuses.² Some of those groups were affiliated with the Australian Fellowship of Evangelical Students, and in those days the AFES headquarters were particularly insistent on propagating the view that our dominant and pressing duty as Christians in the university—almost, the message seemed to be, our sole duty—was the business of evangelism. Some of us were uneasy about that message. We recognised, of course, that evangelism is a hugely important task of the whole body of Christ, and that any one of us can be called upon to provide explicit as well as implicit witness to the truth of the Gospel. But we felt that the message was unbalanced

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and incomplete. Neither the New Testament picture of ministry nor our own inclinations and experiences convinced us that each one of us had the same gift for, and therefore the same ministry of, evangelism. And we were worried that this message would have a harmful effect upon proper academic work, in one or other of two possible ways. Suppose that we accept that message and wish to do faithful Christian work in our scholarly discipline. Then we may seek to force our work into an evangelistic mould into which it does not properly fit, thereby *distorting* the work. Proper academic work in mathematics, or music, or chemistry, or archaeology, is not, and cannot properly be made to look like, an exercise in evangelism. But alternatively, suppose we accept the message but recognise that much scholarly work is not properly evangelistic. We may consequently feel that our Christian duty is done simply by attending to extra-curricular evangelistic activities. We thereby leave our scholarly work *uninfluenced* by the Christian infiltration, the Christian *transformation*, that it may well require.

You perhaps know the story about a fellow who has recently arrived in a city and finds that he needs some dental care. He's attending his local church, and so he asks the minister to recommend a dentist. "You should see So-and-so," says the minister. "He's a lovely Christian man—deeply involved in the Church, sits on the Parish Council, teaches Sunday school, attends all our prayer meetings, a great supporter of our missionary work." "Well that's all great," replies the newcomer, "but is he a good dentist?"

What the man needs is a good dentist; and if we're Christians engaged in dentistry, we surely ought to be good dentists. If we're Christians engaged in statistics, or physics, or history, or English literature, then surely we ought to be good at our academic discipline—or at least as good as we can be. And our being good at our discipline is not—at least in any straightforward or direct way—a matter of our being involved in evangelism.

Well that may be right, but it raises further questions. First, *what is it* for a Christian to be good at his or her academic discipline—good in the ways properly required? Is the measure of success, here, the same measure as is applied by our non-Christian colleagues? Secondly, the claim that we ought to be good at our work presupposes that we ought to be doing that work in the first place. Is that presupposition true? Do we have any right to be Christian academics *at all*? Indeed, how can we justify the investment of our time and energy in this kind of work when it is weighed against the enormous urgency of the task of evangelism, or, more generally, the urgency

of the spiritual and physical needs of this fallen and broken world? At least the dentist can be engaged in the Christian ministry of the alleviation of suffering. What can justify our devoting the better part of our lives to academic work that may have no clear practical contribution to make towards those spiritual and physical needs? If we take seriously the urgent demands of the kingdom of God, what can possibly justify our immersion in higher mathematics, or astrophysics, or mediaeval literature, or musical criticism?

Let's take that second question first. A version of it is discussed by C. S. Lewis in his wonderful sermon "Learning in War-time." He points out that intellectual enquiries and cultural activities are inevitable, natural aspects of human life. The question is not whether they are to occur, for humans engage in these activities under all circumstances—even during a war. The question is whether these naturally occurring activities will be performed badly or well. Now our religion, our submission and obedience to God, must "occupy the whole of life", as Lewis puts it. But this does not mean that it excludes our natural human activities. Nor does it mean that we simply find a comfortable compromise between the claims of God, on the one hand, and our natural human activities, on the other. Rather, our submission to God must *rule* those activities:

There is no question of a compromise between the claims of God and the claims of culture ... or anything else. God's claim is infinite and inexorable. You can refuse it: or you can begin to try to grant it. There is no middle way. Yet in spite of this it is clear that Christianity does not exclude any of the ordinary human activities. St Paul tells people to get on with their jobs. He even assumes that Christians may go to dinner parties, and, what is more, dinner parties given by pagans. Our Lord attends a wedding and provides miraculous wine. Under the aegis of his Church, and in the most Christian ages, learning and the arts flourish. The solution of this paradox is, of course, well known to you. "Whether ye eat or drink or whatsoever ye do, do all to the glory of God."³

And that, of course, has been the spirit in which so many Christian scholars and scientists and artists have sought to pursue their activities. Some of them have affixed to their work the epigram SDG (*Soli Deo Gloria*,

“to the glory of God alone”) or AMDG (*Ad maiorem Dei gloriam*, “to the greater glory of God”) or DOM (*Deo optimo maximo*, “to God, the best and greatest”). And that, it seems to me, ought to have been the primary message from the AFES, or from other Christian bodies, to Christians in academia: Whatever you do, do it to the glory of God.

But what does it mean, in practice, to be doing academic work to the glory of God? One thing that it obviously means is that we must not be working to our own glory, or to the glory of any other creature, including our academic managers. Like all Christian workers, we are servants—slaves—of Christ, working heartily “as to the Lord”. God is the person to whom we are accountable; God is the person to whom we offer our work; God is the person whom we seek to please. And this is itself sufficient reason why we need to be good at our work—why we need to be good dentists, or good biologists or geographers or linguists. We do not bring shoddy or mediocre work to God. We offer Him our best—the best we can do.

Furthermore, we will be concerned to recognise the proper part that our work can play in God’s scheme of things, so that we can ensure that our work *does* play that part, and that we thereby obey God. We’re engaged in the advancement of learning, the pursuit of truth. Christians sometimes say that all truth is God’s truth; and no doubt this is, at some appropriately fundamental level, correct. But we can say it a little glibly, as if we suppose that we are simply discovering the truths due to God, truths that God has established. There are many academics who will rightly have difficulty in understanding their task as the pursuit of God’s truth. Consider, for instance, the physician describing the terrible symptoms of some incurable illness, or reflecting upon the fact that even where she can provide a cure she is offering only temporary help because she is unable to heal the patient’s mortality. Or consider the student of jurisprudence discussing the fact that the rule of law depends upon the provision of punishment and of possibly violent means of control, or the political scientist thinking about how the current effective political order has been founded in grave past injustices. Or consider the historian discovering the way in which a certain enterprise was established through corrupt business transactions, or analysing the way in which the Nazis could exercise political control because many of their followers were engaged in self-deception. Or consider the economist describing how the prosperity of a society, and therefore its capacity to provide social-welfare support for those in need, depends upon a market driven not by love for

one's neighbour but by the forces of aggressive competition. Or consider the social scientist analysing how various arrangements required for the public good will work only if they are not open to the public gaze, or how such arrangements are in fact governed by a complicated web of vested interests. Or consider the student of international relations describing how national security and effective diplomacy depend upon intelligence gathered by underhand and deceptive methods. All these scholars should baulk at the suggestion that they are simply reporting God's truth. And yet, like the natural scientist, they are engaged in a kind of enquiry which God has made possible and for which humankind has a mandate. How is this so?

The Book of Genesis depicts man as being given the task of naming all the living creatures. This is not just a labelling exercise. It's an exercise in classifying, in taxonomy. We sometimes think of naming in a way that doesn't adequately capture what's involved here. The Hebraists may need to correct me, but it does not seem to me fanciful to understand this naming task as the core of science. For the Hebrew notion of a name is a much richer notion than ours. We may think of a name as a mere *label* for identification and re-identification. But the Hebrew notion of a name was that of a *description* of the thing—a description of what is distinctive about that thing, of what makes it the particular thing that it is. The Hebrew name stands for something more like the *essence* of the thing; and the essence of something helps us to understand why it is as it is, why it behaves the way it does, and so on. In other words, it helps us to *explain* the thing and its behaviour. And when we name things in the natural world we are in fact doing more than merely labelling them: we are classifying them according to their *natural kinds*. Elephants are one kind of thing; eucalypts are a different kind; electrons are another kind. In giving these names to those things we are classifying together things *which share the same properties and behave in the same consistent ways*. Their shared properties and behaviour allow us to provide *general descriptions* of those things—descriptions which can be formulated as *natural laws*. And the formulation of natural laws, and the use of these laws in accounting for what goes on in nature, is of course the business of natural science. Explanations in natural science consist of general descriptions using names for kinds of thing. These naming descriptions are at a level that helps us to understand, to explain, the goings-on at the level we observe. In making progress from one naming description to another we

advance our scientific explanations of natural things: we discover levels of truth—truth that enables us to add to our understanding of God’s creation.

Thus, for instance, consider the following outline of an advance in scientific understanding. Question [concerning an observable event]: Why did that fragment of stuff burn violently when I threw it into the water trough? Answer [explanation]: Because the stuff was sodium [name for natural kind] and it came into contact with water [name for natural kind], and there is a law of nature that when sodium comes into contact with water it burns violently [general description of the consistent interactive behaviour of things of those natural kinds]. Further question: But why does sodium burn when it comes into contact with water? Answer [explanation at deeper level]: Because sodium consists of atoms [name for natural kind] which have such and such a structure [descriptions of the relevant sub-atomic particles (further natural kinds) and their numbers and charges and bondings], and water consists of molecules [name for natural kind] composed of bonded atoms in such and such structures [descriptions of the relevant atoms (further natural kinds) and their bondings], and there are natural laws that when things of these different kinds interact, then ... [descriptions of the consistent ways in which the relevant particles interact with one another, given their numbers and charges etc.]. And so on.

So the business of scientific explanation depends on our being able to name—to classify—things in nature. Now this ability to name things seems like a simple ability. Certainly it is a competence that we just take for granted in our common-sense and scientific activities. But I want to pause here for a few minutes to look at it; for, as we reflect upon it, it turns out to be a quite astonishing ability, and one which, it seems to me, is powerfully suggestive of the truth of the Genesis picture.

We tend to think that we classify items in nature simply by observing them and *seeing* the kinds into which they fall—kinds of thing that possess the same properties and behave in the same consistent ways. And at one level what we do is as straightforward as that. But this process can occur only because there is, as I shall try to show, an astounding connection between the way our minds naturally work, on the one hand, and the way nature unfolds over time and space, on the other. We classify together things that share the same properties—that are *like* each other. But things are like or unlike each other *in an indefinite number of respects*. Take the items in some particular room. There are the items that are like one another

insofar as they are made of wood. There are those that are like one another in having a mass greater than one kilogram. There are those that were in the room before today. There are those that are sitting on the top of some pile of other objects. There are those that are green. There are those that were purchased. There are those that have existed for less than one year. There are those within *this* square metre of floor area *here*. There are those within *that* cubic metre of space *there*. And so on, *ad nauseam*. And the things that are like one another in *those* respects are *also unlike one another in an indefinite number of respects*. The water vapour and the paper and the coffee table that are like one another insofar as they are within *that* cubic metre of space are unlike each other in certain other ways. Two elephants are like each other in various ways, but they are also unlike each other in many respects: one has a mass greater than *n* kilograms, the other does not; one is male, the other is female; one is here, the other is there; one existed before the year 2000, the other did not ... So, when we classify things together as like one another we are grouping them according to some *particular* respects in which they are alike, and we are effectively ignoring their other particular likenesses and unlikenesses. And so we *could*—logically speaking—classify things in an indefinite number of different ways: we could classify them according to an indefinite number of different shared respects or likenesses (each of which in effect ignores the indefinite number of unlikenesses and of other likenesses). The items in the room do not *determine* the way they are classified: they *could* be classified in any of those possible but different ways. The way they are in fact classified is up to us, the classifiers.

But *very few* of these different possible classifications would support useful general descriptions of ongoing consistent behaviour—the sorts of descriptions that allow us to formulate explanatory natural laws. If last night I had classified together the items that were like one another insofar as they were within *that* cubic metre of space—the coffee table and the paper and the cigarette smoke and the whisky glass with ice cubes in it, etc—and, working with that classification, had expected the same ongoing behaviour from those items, then this morning my expectation would have come a cropper. That classification would have been quite unhelpful as the basis for any explanation of those things. How is it, then, that our classifications *are* helpful? How is it that they *do* tend to support natural laws—general descriptions of the shared consistent behaviour of the things to which we

give the same name? How is it that we manage to classify together those things whose *yet unobserved* behaviour *will turn out to be the same*?

It won't do to say that the usefulness of our classifications is due to the fact that they are sensitive to the input we receive from the world. For—to repeat the point—our classifications of things are not dished up to us by the world. They are dependent on us. *We* have to perform the mental operation of classifying things together. And any particular way in which we *do* classify things is only one amongst an indefinite number of logically possible ways in which those things *could* be classified. But this means that if a particular act of classifying is performed on the basis of some randomly selected likeness then this classification is desperately *unlikely* to match a natural kind—a group of natural things whose properties and behaviour can be counted upon to unfold across space and time in the same consistent way.

And yet, very often, we *do* manage to classify things into their natural kinds. Our minds *just naturally* lead us, time and time again, to the very classifications that allow us to formulate natural laws—laws on the basis of which we can explain and predict natural events. There is an inexhaustibly vast range of possible classifications of things, but only a vanishingly small proportion of that range is occupied by classifications that support real natural laws. Most of the possible but—as it turns out—unhelpful classifications simply don't occur to us; and if they did occur to us we would reject them as too bizarre to be considered. Our minds are so constructed that somehow they naturally latch on to just the right classifications; we naturally classify together the things that will turn out—in what will happen beyond anything that we have yet experienced—to behave in the same consistent ways.

One might protest. One might claim that it is hardly surprising that we grasp the right classifications because we *learn* these classifications by observing the behaviour of the items in the world. Over time I *experience* the differing behaviour of the chair and the paper and the ice and the water vapour and the cigarette smoke, and I thereby recognise that these items are to be classified differently. It is true, of course, that we do learn such things. But this cannot be an adequate account of how we hit upon the right classifications, for *however many* unhelpful classifications we can eliminate through experience over time, there still *remain* an *indefinite number* of logically possible but different classifications into which the things we observe can fit. “Things within that cubic metre of space” might this morning have turned out to have been an unhelpful classification. But that was only one possible

classification: there are countless others that would not have been shown by today's events to be unhelpful. And even if that particular classification turned out to be unhelpful this morning, this doesn't rule out the possibility that it would be a helpful classification *from now on*. The behaviour of the things in the room *could* unfold in such a way that this is a *useful* classification for predicting future events. Of course, we *naturally expect* that this classification will be quite the wrong basis for future prediction. But that is because we naturally expect that the future behaviour of things will track *different* classifications (e.g. "things that have been solid up until now"). And *those*, naturally expected, classifications represent only a minute proportion of the logically possible classifications we could now make. Experience might have shown such classifications to be useful concerning the past behaviour of things. But there has been *no* experience that could *determine* for us the usefulness or otherwise of these classifications in describing and predicting and explaining the *yet unexperienced* behaviour of things.

Our observations, however many, are finite. And any finite collection of observations falls within an infinite number of possible classifications—classifications from which indefinitely many *differing* extrapolations could be drawn. So, our limited experience can never, by itself, provide an adequate basis for the elimination of all the logically possible but (as it will turn out) unhelpful classifications.⁴

Let me repeat and summarise the point in the following way. When we name things in the natural world, when we classify these things, we expect them to carry on behaving in the same way. But there is an indefinite number of different possible classifications of any group of observed items, and these different classifications would be allied to very different expectations concerning the behaviour of those items. The classifications we apply to the natural world are *up to us*; they are not read off the world. The world cannot determine how we classify it, for it cannot determine that we employ one rather than any other of the possible classifications. But the way the world turns out to behave is *not up to us*. Our classifying of things cannot determine the way those things will behave. Whether our expectations turn out to be true will depend on *the world*. Hence, if the classifications we employ were randomly selected from the indefinite number of alternative possibilities available to us, there would be no reason to expect that they would give rise to *true* expectations concerning the future behaviour of things in the world. And yet, time and time again, the classifications that

just naturally occur to us *do* turn out to give rise to true expectations; they support general descriptions which can be formulated as natural laws on the basis of which we can correctly predict further events.

This is a very great marvel. And in referring to it some commentators are tempted to use the word “miracle”, though they use that word to mean simply an utterly improbable and inexplicable phenomenon. But those who accept the truth of the Genesis picture will here apply the word more accurately—to refer to some great wonder that reveals the particular working of God. For we have reason to expect that the classifications that just naturally occur to us will lead us to formulate what will turn out to be true laws of nature only if we have reason to believe that *there is the right kind of fit* between the way our minds naturally work, on the one hand, and the way the world is actually ordered across space and time, on the other. This fit can be brought about only from a position that transcends both the human mind and the natural world, and only by a power able to order both the human mind and the natural world, and to connect them to one another in the required ongoing way. It is exactly the kind of connection we would expect if the Genesis picture were true.⁵

For mankind to be given the task of naming the creatures, this wonderful connection between world and human mind must be in place. In establishing this connection, God does us the very remarkable honour of putting us in touch with His own mind, for our minds must here track God’s word—the word by which God creates and orders and sustains the world. We have enormous reason to praise and thank God for this great honour. We have reason to marvel at the very fact *that* we can understand the world.

And then, of course, we also have reason to marvel at *what* we understand. For in our progressive discoveries of the layers of truth concerning this dynamic integrated system that we call the universe—its sheer magnitude, the awesome power of the forces at work within it, the amazing intricacy and beauty of its structures and processes, the exquisite fine-tunings upon which life depends—we are very properly moved to express our wonder and our delight in the whole of God’s creation, and to praise Him for all that He has made. With the Psalmist we declare: “Great are the works of the LORD, studied by all who have pleasure in them” (111:2), and “The heavens are telling the glory of God; and the firmament proclaims his handiwork” (19:1). And let’s note: if this is part of the *truth* concerning the world we study—if the truth about that world is that it *is* God’s wondrous creation,

if the heavens really are *telling* the glory of God—then it is truth that we *ought* to declare. Certainly we can distort our academic activities by trying to force them into an evangelistic mould. But surely we can also distort them by being silent about this truth concerning the subject matter of those activities. Our academic activities are enquiries in pursuit of truth. Those activities can hardly remain undistorted if we are, in effect, suppressing the most important truths of all.

I am not advocating that we proceed naïvely. It of course goes without saying that the truth to which I am here referring is *hotly contested*. The academic milieu in which we operate is far from receptive to the claim that we are disclosing the wonders of God's creation. We need to be shrewdly aware of the forces of resistance. But we can also be intellectually prepared to engage those forces. We can surely strive to be *properly equipped, able* witness-bearers to the truth.

But let's return to humanity's mandate from God, as reported in the Book of Genesis. That mandate is not merely to name, and understand, the creation. It is to act as the *steward* of the earth—filling and subduing it, tilling and keeping the garden. These tasks of course depend upon our correct understanding of the creation. And our practical abilities to perform these tasks require the technology which science makes possible. But they are tasks which we need to direct with the greatest care, for the flourishing of the earth is very largely our responsibility. Whether some part of the earth is healthy or unhealthy, well-ordered or disordered, is largely up to us. And we cannot exercise that responsibility unless we are able, not merely to understand what we observe, but to discern *whether it is as it ought to be*. We need to be able to make not merely descriptive but *normative* judgements. Is this part of the garden properly fruitful, or unfruitful, and what can we do to enable it to flourish? Is this creature healthy or unhealthy? Is this organ performing its proper function or is it malfunctioning? Is this a good or a bad state of affairs? God must enable us to make such critical judgements if we are to be equipped to act as responsible stewards of His creation. And of course much academic work is properly directed towards sound normative judgement of these many kinds—normative judgement concerning the natural world but also concerning the world of human society and culture. We analyse the difference between good reasoning and bad; we evaluate personal performances and social goings-on; we assess legal arrangements and political policies; we pursue questions concerning aesthetic excellence.

I have taken some time to point out how remarkable it is that we can make properly descriptive judgements of the world. It is a further very remarkable fact that we can make proper normative judgements. Explanatory classifications of natural things cannot be read off the world. Even less can normative truths be read off the world, for these truths are not about what *is* but about what *ought* to be the case. In making normative judgements we are assessing what is going on in the world against a standard which may or may not be represented anywhere within the world—a standard of which we are somehow aware even if we cannot see it on display. Some of our normative judgements, it is true, can be grounded in comparisons between what we do see in the world. We can judge something as plain because we can compare it with something else we have seen that is beautiful; we can judge this creature as unhealthy because it is functioning less well than the vigorous members of its species. But there is more to our normative judgements than merely such relative comparisons between what we see; for we can conceive of something more beautiful than anything we have yet seen, and we can contemplate the possibility that the most vigorous observed members of a species may themselves be diseased or disordered in some way. In other words, we can conceive how the *best* of what we have seen *may or may not* come up to the real standard. Proper normative judgement depends upon our awareness of a standard that logically transcends what we observe in the world. Here too God has done us the very remarkable honour of allowing us contact with His own mind—contact with the word that declares His purposes for the world, the word by which the world is to be judged.

And the Christian has particular reason to testify to the importance of this distinction between God's purposes and the relative standards of the world. The world we evaluate by our critical judgements is no longer the world as it came from the hands of God. It has been fractured and distorted by the rebellion of humanity. It is a world in which the picture presented by the first chapters of Genesis has been grievously deformed. The unsatisfactory condition of the world is obvious to those scholars, such as the historian analysing the rise of Nazism, whose task is to describe truths that are due to particular human wickedness. But the Christian is aware that even the best of what the world displays is in many ways deeply inconsistent with God's proper purposes. When Jesus is challenged concerning the lawfulness of divorce he draws a distinction: he distinguishes between

the Mosaic provision of divorce for us hard-hearted persons, on the one hand, and God's original purpose for indissoluble marriage, on the other.⁶ Christian scholars in many fields will discern the need to draw a similar distinction between God's proper purposes and his provisions for a fallen world. God does not abandon this world to the death and destruction we have let loose; He preserves and protects it, so that life can go on in a relatively ordered way while He unfolds His redemptive purposes. Under some of God's preservative measures the destructive forces unleashed within the world are turned against themselves as a check upon their own power. Thus, for instance, government is authorised to rule "by the sword", and it might function as a legitimate authority even when its own past history has been steeped in injustice. Destructive aggression and various other forms of wrongdoing might be resisted by hidden or deceptive defence. The forces of egoistic competition might, when sufficiently regulated, work towards the common good. And so on. Nevertheless, the fallen world and its preservative measures are subject to God's judgement. This world and its order is to be assessed against the standards of which we see biblical glimpses—the standards represented by a redeemed humanity within a restored creation, in which death and destruction are no more, in which love and truth are the powers of order under the properly intended rule of God. So, when considering whether things in the world are as they ought to be, the Christian scholar will often need to distinguish between what is required or at least permitted as a preservative measure within this fallen world, on the one hand, and God's proper requirements, on the other. Our normative judgements will be incorrect if we simply take our standards from the world, failing to recognise that those standards are themselves to be assessed against the requirements of the kingdom of God. But our normative judgements will lack their required nuance or qualification if we overlook the fact that the standards and promises of the kingdom of God are for the time being—until the kingdom comes in its completion—refracted through the fabric of this fallen world.

Humanity's proper care of the creation depends on our ability to make good normative judgements, and normative criticism is the business of many academic disciplines. If the Christian is equipped with the particular wherewithal to make sound normative judgements then this would seem to be a reason why he or she can play a particularly responsible role within one or other of these disciplines. And just as we need to be prepared to declare

the truth disclosed by our scientific investigations of the world, we need to be prepared to express the critical evaluations proper to our discipline. We shall have plenty of scope to lift into prominence those things which the Apostle Paul says we should think about: whatever is true, honourable, just, pure, lovely, gracious, excellent, worthy of praise. It may be that some excellence is despised, and it is our duty to praise it. It may be that some injustice or disorder or perversion is celebrated or glorified, and it is our duty to name it for what it is. And we shall frequently be offering intimations of how the best of this world is judged and needs to be replaced by the real good under God's proper rule.

As we connect these considerations the theme of service keeps cropping up. We are servants of Christ working heartily "as serving the Lord." The human playing his ordained role on the earth is a servant—God's steward caring responsibly for the creation. The steward needs to be equipped with the judgement required both to understand the creation and to assess and evaluate it, and also with the know-how to perform his or her effective stewardly work. In the most central academic disciplines we pursue knowledge as such—not knowledge for its instrumental value. Or better, as C. S. Lewis puts it, we pursue "knowledge and beauty, in a sense, for their own sake, but in a sense which does not exclude their being [pursued] for God's sake,"⁷ for we do this to the glory of God. But pursuing truth to the glory of God entails that we do so as servants always concerned for the ways in which our academic and cultural activities can serve our fellows. We wish to share what we study in a way that enables it to be appreciated and enjoyed by humans in their immense variety—by the young and the mature, the learned and the unlearned. We are deeply concerned to share our academic work with our students, training them—*disciplining* them—in our discipline. And though many of these disciplines properly pursue truth with no instrumental purpose in mind, we never close our eyes to the question whether our discoveries might be used for the benefit of others. But of course some of our academic disciplines, though they are founded in the knowledge gained through pure enquiries, are *essentially* instrumental, for purposes of proper stewardly service. The engineer, the medical doctor, the nurse, the physiotherapist, the psychologist, the teacher, the social worker, the lawyer, the accountant, the member of the security forces, the public servant, and so many others—all these need to be equipped with the knowledge and training essential to their very important service. We

can surely work heartily as to the Lord when we are offering proper work within one or other of these arenas of service. And of course the explicitly Christian ministries of evangelism and preaching and teaching need to be nourished by such academic disciplines as linguistic and literary studies, history, philosophy, and theology.

Thus these activities—our seeking to understand the world, our seeking to provide sound evaluations of what goes on in the world, our pursuit of cultural excellence, our learning how to care for the creation and for our fellow humans—are all activities which have their proper place in God's scheme of things, and they are all inevitably tied to academic work. They can, like any other proper part of human life, be performed to the glory of God. But because they are natural human activities, we shall not be surprised if we find that some of our non-Christian colleagues perform these activities as well as or better than we do. And we will give thanks to God for the fruits of their good work.

However, we would be very deeply foolish if we imagined that the world of academic activity is not itself disturbed and disordered by different spiritual allegiances. I have already mentioned the obvious fact that contemporary academic culture is deeply resistant to the idea that natural science discloses the wonders of God's creation. And such conflict infects the whole range of academic pursuits. Each of us in our own discipline studies some aspect of the world. But Christ and his apostles forbid us to forget that in some sense the world which we study and the world in which we ourselves operate in performing our studies—indeed, the world of which we are ourselves a part—is a world to which we must not be conformed. We are commanded to be transformed, by the renewal of our mind. We are engaged in an immense spiritual battle, a battle not of flesh and blood. The academic enterprise is devoted to the pursuit of truth, but we operate in a world—inside and outside the university—in which truth is distorted or perverted; in which truth is suppressed in unrighteousness; in which minds have become futile and senseless. The ruler of this world is a liar and a deceiver. The wisdom of this world is folly with God. This is all part of the biblical picture, and it can be recognised in practice; for, as our minds begin to be renewed, we can see that much that emerges from academic activity does deny or distort or suppress the truth about God and about His creation, and that it does issue in unsound critical judgements—judgements that would pervert our service. This is the environment in which our task is the pursuit

of truth. So our work is a *battle*: we need to be *warriors* for truth. We need to discern and discover and declare truth in an environment in which the truth, while professedly pursued, is in so many ways opposed—opposed by others working within that environment, but opposed also by our own unregenerate minds.

The conflict here is not just a battle of ideas, of world-views, though it is certainly that. It is a conflict of *motivations*. Many people want it to be the case—they very powerfully want it to be the case—that the Christian view of things is *false*. And much academic work is motivated and directed by that desire. I have in a number of places quoted a very revealing, and in that respect a very useful, observation by one of the most eminent contemporary philosophers—Thomas Nagel, an atheist, whose work I greatly respect. The observation occurs in a passage in which Nagel is discussing the question of the kind of metaphysical picture that would be required to make sense of the possibility of genuine human knowledge and scientific enquiry—the kind of picture we would need if we were to be able to understand how it could be true that the natural reasoning of the human mind is in such harmony with the fabric of the independent world that the one can lead us to objective knowledge of the other. I have spent a little while discussing that very question with you, and have suggested that the Genesis story provides exactly the sort of picture that is required. Nagel is very worried by this. He reports that he is alarmed by the suspicion that the required metaphysical picture will be “religious, or quasi-religious”. And in this alarm he perceives what he calls a fear of religion:

In speaking of the fear of religion, I don't mean to refer to the entirely reasonable hostility toward certain established religions and religious institutions, in virtue of their objectionable moral doctrines, social policies, and political influence. Nor am I referring to the association of many religious beliefs with superstition and the acceptance of evident empirical falsehoods. I am talking about something much deeper—namely, the fear of religion itself. I speak from experience, being strongly subject to this fear myself: I want atheism to be true and am made uneasy by the fact that some of the most intelligent and well-informed people I know are religious believers. It isn't just that I don't believe

in God and, naturally, hope that I'm right in my belief. It's that I hope there is no God! I don't want there to be a God; I don't want the universe to be like that.⁸

Nagel does not only give voice to his anti-God desire. He points out that his attitude is widely shared, and he offers some shrewd suggestions about its influence. He believes that this attitude motivates unreasonable theoretical views; indeed, he believes that it “has large and often pernicious consequences for modern intellectual life.”⁹ He guesses that it “is responsible for much of the scientism and reductionism of our time,”¹⁰ and in particular that it supports “the ludicrous overuse of evolutionary biology to explain everything about life, including everything about the human mind.”¹¹ And he points out that this is “a somewhat ridiculous situation,”¹² for “it is just as irrational to be influenced in one's beliefs by the hope that God does not exist as by the hope that God does exist.”¹³

Nagel's testimony is surprising only for its remarkable candour. We need not be surprised, and few of us in the academic world will be surprised, by his suggestions about the incidence of this anti-God attitude. It is very common. And what Nagel is suggesting is that in the contemporary intellectual world there is, because of this attitude, a good deal of what philosophers call *motivated irrationality*. That is, the anti-God inclination is moving people—motivating people—to engage in irrational intellectual activity. This would be an instance of what Pascal is talking about when he refers to the *reasons of the heart*. Pascal's famous remark—“The heart has its reasons of which reason knows nothing”—occurs within a note in which he is referring both to deep inclinations *against* God as well as to those for God.¹⁴ And here, in what Nagel is describing, we see a heartfelt *aversion* towards the possibility that God exists, an aversion of which reason may not be conscious, but which is irrationally influencing our use of reason—governing the direction in which our enquiries are permitted to travel and the conclusions which they are permitted to draw.¹⁵

The conflicting motivations are powerfully at work in the academic battles over truth, though they are more or less evident in the different disciplines. Those of us who work in philosophy are well aware that many of our colleagues are engaged in a crusade to purge the intellectual world of any vestiges of Christian influence. But because our discipline addresses very basic questions as its subject matter—What is the fundamental nature

of reality?, What is the nature of the human person?, Does God exist?, and so on—the conflict can at least become fairly transparent. And because philosophy insists upon explicit critical evaluation of the reasoning underlying this or that view, we have a professional brief to expose the motivating presuppositions at work. But similar critical examinations need to be performed in other disciplines, even though the battle lines may be less clear there. It can be harder to recognise that, for instance, a theory in the human sciences may be motivated by the desire to deny *both* that the human person has been distinctively and wondrously made in the image of God, *and* that all human activity is infected by sin. The battles can be discerned even in the natural sciences—when, for instance, one eavesdrops upon debates in contemporary cosmology, or upon discussions of the kind of explanatory models that can be permitted within biology.

I have been concerned to stress that much scholarship and science is not evangelism. But as we think about it, it turns out that there is a very important connection between our work and the gospel. As a battle for truth, our academic work can be a handmaiden to, a necessary preparation for, and a bulwark to support, evangelism. The gospel is hardly likely to be warmly received within a culture in which the very possibility of God has been excluded. And those who have received the gospel, or who are wondering whether they might receive it, need to be able to see proper replies to the intellectual attacks upon Christian belief. This is itself sufficient reason for much academic work. C. S. Lewis again:

If all the world were Christian, it might not matter if all the world were uneducated. But, as it is, a cultural life will exist outside the Church whether it exists inside or not. To be ignorant and simple now—not to be able to meet the enemies on their own ground—would be to throw down our weapons, and to betray our uneducated brethren who have, under God, no defence but us against the intellectual attacks of the heathen. Good philosophy must exist, if for no other reason, because bad philosophy needs to be answered. The cool intellect must work not only against the cool intellect on the other side, but against the muddy heathen mysticisms which deny intellect altogether. Most of all, perhaps, we need intimate knowledge of the past.

Not that the past has any magic about it, but because we cannot study the future, and yet need something to set against the present, to remind us that the basic assumptions have been quite different in different periods and that much which seems certain to the uneducated is merely temporary fashion. A man who has lived in many places is not likely to be deceived by the local errors of his native village: the scholar has lived in many times and is therefore in some degree immune from the great cataract of nonsense that pours from the press and the microphone of his own age.¹⁶

(Lewis wrote those words in 1939. One wonders what he would say about the tidal wave of nonsense that pours from today's cultural loudspeakers.)

But perhaps our most important battle against an anti-God inclination is a battle we need to be fighting within ourselves. For in doing our work to the glory of God, we need *not* to be doing it with the motivation which does in fact, I'm afraid, spur on so much academic work. For us the question must not be "how can I get *my* paper published?", "how can *I* be the first to make this discovery?", "how can *my* book be well received?", "how can the excellence of *my* teaching be recognised?", "how can *my* academic reputation be enhanced?" The pride and self-glorification which infects and drives forward the whole contemporary academic enterprise must be the deadly enemy of the servant of Christ. We pursue truth for its own sake, valuing it whoever discovers it—and we do all of this to the glory of God.

So, in what I have said in answer to the question of whether we are entitled to be occupied in academic work at all, I have also said something in answer to that other question—about what, for the Christian, good academic work consists in. I have not, of course, said whether academic work is the vocation of *you* or *me*. That is a question each one of us needs to determine, under God, with the help of those who know and love us, as we consider the gifts bestowed upon us and the duties before us. But I think that we can see that academic work *could* be the vocation of any of us and *should* be the vocation of at least some of us.

Much more could be said, but you will certainly feel that I have uttered enough words here. We could identify and tease out various battle lines in particular academic disciplines. We could explore how our academic work can be a *corporate* exercise, in which diverse members of the body of Christ

encourage and assist one another with their complementary offerings. We could talk about the fact that our academic work is *provisional*: it is all subject to revision; much of it consists of rubbish removal; and even where it seeks to establish something positive, it does so in a world that is passing away. We could discuss the *virtues* by which our work ought to be infused—including humility, courage, hope, and especially love, which does not pass away. I think that there is a particular need in these days for Christian academics to display courage—the courage to stand up for a clear-sighted commitment to the proper academic task and to probity within our institutions. For it seems to me that many of our academic leaders and managers are confused about what true academic service consists in, or predominantly concerned about their own self-interested ascent of the professional ladder—an ascent not to be impeded by scruples about personal propriety or caring service. These and other matters can be subjects of further discussion. But I hope that the sketch I have offered here can provide some useful framework against which such matters can be discussed—perhaps, indeed, as we gather together to chat and eat and drink and do whatever we do to the glory of God.

Endnotes

1. This article is an expanded version of a talk I was invited to give for the Simeon Network—a network of Christian academics and graduate students, which operates under the aegis of the Australian Fellowship of Evangelical Students. The talk was given first in Melbourne and then in Sydney in the latter part of 2014. I am grateful to Lewis Jones and Sandy Clarke for inviting me to give the talk.
2. In those discussions many of us were greatly helped by the work of the Foundation for Christian Scholarship, and particularly by its leader Stuart Fowler.
3. C. S. Lewis, “Learning in War-Time,” in *Fern-seed and Elephants* (Glasgow: Fontana, 1975), 26–38, at 31.
4. Many of us will have seen a related point while noting that for any finite number of observed data that we might seek to plot as a graph on a set of co-ordinates, there are infinitely many different possible curves that fit those data. Each of those curves represents a possible general relation between the variables being measured, and so each represents a possible

way of classifying what has been observed. (One curve represents the observed goings-on as being classified as falling under *this* relation, another as under *that* relation, and so on.) Most of these curves do not even occur to us; if we *did* consider them, we would reject them as too irregular or too exotic to be regarded as candidates for the *true* general relation. We naturally and unquestioningly plump instead for the simplest curve. (Or at least, for what we naturally and unquestioningly *think of* as the simplest curve, for it may be that there are different axiomatic systems in which our preferred relation is *not* the simplest.) Nevertheless, every single one of the infinite number of different curves that fit our observed data represents a *logically possible* general relation between the variables. But now, can we eliminate all those ridiculous-seeming alternatives, and show that our preferred curve is the correct one, by performing further observations—by learning more about the world? No, we cannot. It is true, of course, that we can eliminate *some* curves by further observation. Any curve which fits our first set of observations but fails to fit our new observations is of course to be eliminated. But however many more observations we manage to perform, there will *still* remain an infinite number of possible curves that fit all our finite data. Further experience can *never* be enough (by itself) to justify our choice of curve.

And yet we do—very naturally—choose the curve we believe to be correct. This curve may formulate for us a natural law, on the basis of which we predict further events. And time and time again our predictions turn out to be correct. Somehow our minds are so programmed that we naturally select just the right relation from the infinitely many different possibilities on offer.

Scientists will recognise the connection between this general point and some of the phenomena referred to within the discussion of what, since Wigner, has been called the unreasonable effectiveness of mathematics in the natural sciences.

5. There are powerful reasons for believing that the required mind-world connection cannot be accounted for in materialist evolutionary terms. Some of those reasons are discussed by atheists, e.g. Thomas Nagel, in *Mind and Cosmos: Why the Materialist Neo-Darwinian Conception of Nature is Almost Certainly False* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012); some are discussed by Christians, e.g. Alvin Plantinga, *Where the Conflict Really Lies: Science, Religion, and Naturalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

6. Mark 10: 2–12.
7. Lewis, *op. cit.*, 33.
8. Thomas Nagel, *The Last Word* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 130.
9. *Ibid.*, 130.
10. *Ibid.*, 131.
11. *Ibid.*
12. *Ibid.*
13. *Ibid.*
14. Blaise Pascal, *Pensées*, Translated by A. J. Krailsheimer (London: Penguin, 1966), 154, n. 424. (The notes in this translation follow the order of the Lafuma edition.)
15. I have discussed the anti-God desire described by Nagel, and its influence, in “The Imagination of Our Hearts”, *St Mark’s Review*, No. 221 (September 2012): 1–13; and in “The Futility of Our Minds”, *St Mark’s Review*, No. 227 (February 2014): 75–93
16. Lewis, *op. cit.*, 34–5.