

Personal Statement from Greg Welty

I'd like to say a brief word about my personal faith, sense of vocation, and philosophy of teaching.

Personal Faith

I was born in Los Angeles, California, and then adopted and raised in a home that would be considered very ethical by modern standards. As a family we attended church twice a year (at Easter and Christmas), at a liberal Methodist church that only preached the social gospel.

In second grade I was handed a Gideon's New Testament and Psalms in the parking lot outside my dentist's office, and I promptly stored it in my desk at home, where it stayed (unread) for the next nine years. In high school I began to be rebellious against my parents. Essentially I was a Pharisee, believing that no one really appreciated what a great person I was. I thought that I was the best son, brother, friend, that a person could have. Though I had been an agnostic for all my life, I was suddenly seized with the conviction that God must be 'on my side' (even if no one else was). And though I had never read a Bible before in my life, I found that Gideon's Bible in my desk and started to read it, thinking in my self-righteousness that I would find God's reward for the good, moral life I had led up to that point.

I didn't understand what I read; King James English didn't come naturally to me. But at this same exact time, a friend in a math class invited me (out of the blue) to come to church with him that Sunday, where Dr. John MacArthur Jr. pastored. I also began attending the church's high school group on Wednesday nights. They quickly discerned that I wasn't a Christian; I think it had to do with my cussing and spitting. I was put into an 'intensive care unit' in which some of their college students started witnessing to me. They soon asked me to pray a prayer. I did it, but only because I was in this nice environment in which everyone wanted to see me every week. I prayed it with no conviction of sin, no sense of the Lordship of Christ, no belief that I really deserved divine judgment. When they said, "Hallelujah, you're a Christian!", I hid my disappointment. Nothing had changed.

Still, I continued attending church. And then something amazing happened. I read another translation of the Bible, a Living Bible a young woman gave me for my birthday. I started with the gospel of Matthew, which was smooth sailing through chapter four. But then I read the Sermon on the Mount, and it hit me like a ton of bricks. My life and my conception of myself were turned upside down. "I don't know who this Jesus is, really, but he knows who I am, and I know I fall far short of his standard, and that I will stand before him on the final day." This late 20th-century American had the same reaction as the original hearers in Jesus' day: "This man speaks with authority." Conviction of sin shot straight to my heart, and I knew I was undone, deserving of hell, and needing a divine Savior. All my righteousness was as filthy rags. I could not explain at the time why the Word of God hit me with such conviction, though now I would describe it as the drawing and convicting work of the Holy Spirit, who blessed the Word that he inspired. And it was at that time that the true "sinner's prayer" poured out of my heart, and I had no need for someone to tell me what to say to God. His Spirit had so broken me down, it was all I could do to cling to what Christ did on the cross, and pledge to a gracious and loving Savior an entire life of grateful obedience.

I was soon baptized by immersion on my profession of faith at Grace Community Church (again, MacArthur's church). I grew to love hour-long sermons, old-time hymns, and classical music in worship (still do). My faith was particularly strengthened by reading C. S. Lewis's *Mere Christianity*, which had an impact on my thinking that endures to this day. In those early days I was discipled for several years by an elder at a subsequent church (Placerita Baptist Church, next to The Master's College). He was a man who modeled for me what it meant to have a faithful Christian commitment, and a Christian marriage and Christian home. During my college years I bought hundreds of Christian books through the mail. My mom wanted me to branch out into another religion, like Buddhism. I said no. I had found the pearl of great price, the treasure hid in a field, and I had no desire for anything else.

Sense of Vocation

With my Christian conversion came a sense that I should serve Christ faithfully wherever he should place me. After leaving Grace Community Church for Placerita Baptist Church in Newhall, CA (a smaller church with greater opportunity for accountability and genuine discipleship, in my view), I served as a deacon for five years. Early in this period the associate pastor led a men's accountability group and asked us to prepare short Bible messages and teach them to the others in the group. (We took turns.) After a few messages he took me aside privately and said, "Greg, if you don't end up teaching in the local church for the rest of your life, you're going to be in sin!" I was somewhat shocked at his forthrightness, but the Lord used this to make me open to a call to the ministry in some way.

For the rest of this five year period at Placerita, I not only served as a deacon but also taught the College/Career Sunday School class. One year I helped to plan and lead a college age retreat. After I taught on Jesus's servanthood in John 13, one of the elders took me aside (again, privately) and asked if I had ever considered seminary, because in his view I had gifts that could and should be cultivated. I had never thought seriously about this particular path before, but I was beginning to be convinced by others in the church. I went on to preach a few sermons in evening services, and received further confirmation from members of the congregation about my teaching gifts. Slowly I began to be convinced that I was indeed helping others to understand the Scriptures verse-by-verse, and their confirmation in turn spurred me on to a greater passion to be useful in kingdom work.

When the time came for me to declare a major in college, I chose philosophy. First, because I saw it as an appropriate pre-seminary degree. Second, because my conversion out of a non-Christian home had always led me to think through various apologetics issues. (For instance, from the very beginning of my Christian life I would give away copies of books by C. S. Lewis and F. F. Bruce to my unbelieving co-workers, seeking to engage them in discussion.) Essentially, I not only had a passion to teach the Bible, but also to bring out the implications of the Bible for the rest of human thought, and I believed that philosophy could provide me with argumentative and translational 'tools' to help me accomplish this latter task.

While in seminary in Escondido, CA, I was a pastoral intern at my new local church (Grace Bible Church) for five years (three years of seminary, two years thereafter). I preached morning

and evening services, preached at weddings, led Bible studies, and so on. Learning Greek, Hebrew, systematic theology, and church history only spurred me on to ministry in a local church context. And yet alongside this was always the additional passion for apologetics and Christian philosophy (nurtured in me by John Frame at Westminster, for whom I served as a teaching assistant for five years). Essentially, I was wrenched in two: I greatly desired pastoral ministry in the local church, but I also desired to make a contribution to Christian witness by way of philosophical scholarship. Many had urged me to seek the latter, and I was deemed too young by some to take up the pastorate at my then-current church. And so I made my way to Oxford, earnestly praying that God would show me during those years which path ultimately to take. I felt I had to choose – pastoring, or academic scholarship/teaching – but I needed wisdom from God.

In Oxford, however, my vocational dilemma continued. I met success in my master's and doctoral programs, and in my year's lectureship at Regent's Park College. But at the same time, I attended a small Baptist church in the center of Oxford, and after two years the congregation called me to be one of their pastors, in which office I was to serve for the next three years. Essentially, I was guided by the conviction that no matter where in the world I was, physically or academically, my life would be a failure if I was not ministering in the local church in some substantive way. Accepting this brief pastorate did indeed delay the completion of my studies. But it was also a source of great joy, and of a clear conscience before God. This sense of a 'double calling' from God – to be used of God both pastorally and academically – endures to the present day. My life would be simpler if I had just a single passion, and I have often wished for this. But we do not choose the deepest passions that God puts into the hearts of his children. And I have received sufficient confirmation from those who have sat under my ministry over the years (from people in the pew, and from student evaluations), to know that God has fashioned me and called me to do both.

Philosophy of Teaching

My philosophy of teaching the Bible is quite simple, perhaps too simple. When I am done expounding the text I should have accomplished four things that enable my hearers to have a fourfold response. State it – “I heard what you said.” Explain it – “I understand what you mean.” Illustrate it – “I can picture it in my mind.” Apply it – “I know how God wants me to respond.” At the same time I am also concerned that they get a sense of the unity of Scripture (by its focus on the plan of redemption), the consistency of Scripture (because breathed out and authored by the God who cannot lie and cannot deny himself), and the clarity of Scripture (at least on the 'big points' of creation, providence, fall, redemption, gospel, Christian life, church community, and eternity).

In addition, it is extremely important that my proclamation of the Word provides for the congregation not only truth from the Scriptures, but a model of how to get truth from the Scriptures. If my method of interpretation is so obscure, or if my thought process is so tangled, that my hearers cannot understand how I got what I got from the text, I have done them a great disservice. To make disciples is in part to make learners, in particular those who can learn on their own, and be self-feeders. If my messages are unclear, my language is vague, and my inferences are mysterious, I will only frustrate my hearers, and lead them to despair that they can

ever understand the Bible or discover its truth on their own. I want them to gain the skills necessary to follow the Lord Jesus in his Word. Those skills are only developed and nurtured when the very method of teaching places the Bible in their hands, rather than keeping it out of reach, locked away for study by scholars alone.

Unsurprisingly, my philosophy of teaching philosophy – (is that philosophy squared?) – is somewhat similar. My goal is to make the subject accessible while also cultivating intellectual skills that are useful for Christian life and ministry. Philosophy is a hard subject, but it is also an extremely useful subject; evangelicals only hurt themselves and others when they pretend otherwise on either count.

I have a fourfold goal in teaching philosophy to my students.

First, I want them to develop intellectual skills. The greatest commandment God ever gave was to love him with all of our heart, soul, mind, and strength. But in the church, we've largely lost this skill, this discipline, this virtue of loving God with all of our mind, of using our reasoning powers to their fullest extent in analyzing and thinking through the implications of fundamental religious claims. God calls us to respond to his truth with all of our minds, and so my students need to learn not to bypass their hearers' rational faculties when they seek to minister to them. Jesus employed logical reasoning and rational reflection in his teaching ministry (cf. his response to the Sadducees in Lk 20:27-40), and we shouldn't be ashamed of our Master and of what he exemplified for us in this respect. Likewise for Paul, who reasoned in the synagogue with the Jews, and in the marketplace every day (Ac 17:17), and whose writings are full of 'therefores' (25x in Romans, 37x in the Corinthian epistles), that is, reasoned argument. Studying philosophy provides an occasion to develop the very intellectual skills modeled by Jesus and the apostles. Can I get my students to reconstruct someone's position with charity and clarity? Can I help them to assess someone's argument by developing a relevant response? If so, I may have helped them to love God better, by obeying his greatest commandment.

Second, I want them to acquire intellectual insight, by continually reflecting on the relationship between someone's theological conclusions and his philosophical precommitments. Many who hold that 'we cannot say what God is, only what God is not' (Maimonides) sound pious and humble, but they may hold indefensible views in the philosophy of language or in the metaphysics of perfect beings. Some who decry Christian faith as irrational are presupposing a classically evidentialist epistemology that is subject to critique. Agnostics who say that God is not all-powerful unless God can sin may be assuming (quite implausibly) that sinning is a 'power' of some sort (rather than a falling short in power). Practicing the discipline of philosophy can give my students intellectual insight into these and other crucial connections between assumptions and conclusions. It can train them to be on their guard against false philosophy, and to pass these skills on to others in their Christian community. Future pastors will be called upon to give advice in all sorts of situations in the future. The more clearly they can think through those situations, reason from the Word of God, and understand the world and its arguments, the better the churches will be served.

Third, I want them to encounter their Christian heritage. My goal is to make future Christian pastors, educators, and church leaders aware of the rich heritage of Christian thought on

questions such as these: What is the proper relationship between faith and reason? Are there any good arguments for God's existence? Does the existence of evil pose a good argument against God's existence? Are the divine attributes consistent with each other, such that the claim that there is a God makes sense? How well can religious language convey truth-claims? Many of our students who have attended large secular universities are utterly unaware that there is even such a thing as our 'Christian intellectual heritage' on each one of these questions. But Christian philosophy (better: thinking hard about theology) has been practiced continuously by Christians since the time of Christ, and names such as Augustine, Boethius, Anselm, Aquinas, Pascal, Kierkegaard, C. S. Lewis, and Alvin Plantinga need to become household names among those who seek to reach the lost in our time.

Fourth, I want them to prepare for a Christian defense. Peter exhorted us to be ready to give a reasoned defense ('apologia') of the hope that is in us (1Pe 3:15). Our students should not be naïve about the range of criticisms against Christian thought which have become influential in our day, in one form or another. How can they protect their flocks from heresy and the onslaught of unbelief if they are not aware of the specific dangers? The apostle Paul was well aware of the intellectual thought-currents of his day, and so should anyone training for the ministry in our day. Speaking of Satan and his strategies, Paul said that "We are not ignorant of his devices [methods, schemes]" (2Co 2:11). Paul was only able to combat heresy in his letters to the churches, because he knew what the heresy was (proto-Gnosticism at Colossae and Corinth; the Judaizing heresy at Galatia). Likewise, our future ministers need to be aware of objections by atheists, agnostics and liberals like David Hume, J. L. Mackie, William Rowe, Stephen Jay Gould, Richard Dawkins, and John Hick. These objections often filter down from the academy into the broader culture to the man or woman in the pew, to the churches in which our students minister (or will minister). This is why I'm firmly committed to there being in our philosophy classes a significant proportion of primary readings written by non-Christians, or by those who claim Christ's name but are opposed to the orthodox Christian faith. Considering their claims in the 'safer' context of a believing Christian seminary community will help students to become inoculated against these forms of unbelief, as they actively develop 'intellectual antibodies' in a constructive, supportive environment.