

Tom Trevethan, "Recovering Our Christian Mind and Nerve: Graduate Student Ministry," *RTSF Bulletin* 12 (Sep/Oct 1996): 3-9.\*

*For though we live in the world we do not wage war as the world does. The weapons we fight with are not the weapons of the world. On the contrary, they have divine power to demolish strongholds. We demolish arguments and every pretension that sets itself against the knowledge of God, and we take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ. —2 Cor 10:3-5*

Every call to ministry, to the service of the Lord Christ, is a call to war. We live in a ferocious battle zone. This is no less true for us as we consider ministry within the university world to graduate students than it was for Paul in his tortuous, even physically dangerous ministry to the wayward Corinthians. Unless we come to our situation with a good soldier's zeal, willingness to suffer, and discipline, we will deceive ourselves about the realities we seek to understand and change.

However, this talk of spiritual conflict and use of military metaphors is thoroughly repugnant to many who love the university. Some will read no further than this first paragraph and turn aside in distaste and even disgust. So let me suggest some grounds for viewing spiritual and intellectual warfare as a fruitful foundation for thinking about Christian engagement with the university.

I begin by observing that spiritual struggle and warfare are basic Biblical categories for understanding our place as followers of Jesus in a fallen world. Both Testaments make this plain, from the conflict in Exodus to the war of the Lamb in the Apocalypse. Our Lord himself clearly was locked in a great spiritual struggle, and his life, death, and resurrection make deepest sense when seen in this light. Equally clearly, as Biblical revelation proceeds, the struggle becomes less a flesh-and-blood military encounter. "Love for enemy" is clarified as our calling as followers of the suffering Servant. And the conflict is located in the realm of the spirit, involving "principalities, powers, and rulers of this present darkness" [Eph 6:12]. But that makes the conflict no less real or present. No amount of misuse of this persistent Biblical motif (and there has been considerable misuse) should cause us to ignore it. Indeed, we ignore it to our spiritual peril.

Further, the intellectual life is inherently filled with conflict, with the struggle to understand truly. Consider these wise words of Paul Griffiths, professor of divinity and South Asian languages and civilizations at the University of Chicago:

The intellectual life is essentially and constitutively agonistic. It progresses almost entirely by struggle, by challenge and response, by

Who or what are your spiritual and intellectual opponents in the academic world?

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\* In addition to the insertion of discussion questions in the margin and some footnotes (as indicated), some minor revisions and omissions have been made to this reprint of Trevethan's article. Except for the correction of typographical errors, all changes have been indicated in the text. —*Jon Boyd, ed.*

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thesis and antithesis, by getting it wrong and then moving, always asymptotically, toward getting it right.... This sort of thing is what is meant by the word “polemics.” I take it to denote an intellectual virtue. Perhaps more precisely, I take it to denote a mode of intellectual engagement that flows directly from a proper and clear realization of what serious intellectual work is for and how it should best proceed. If you properly engage in this work, you will be interested in arriving at a position on [your subject] that is preferable to any other that you know of on that question, and you will concomitantly want to be clear as to what th[at] position...is, what it excludes, how best to show that its competitors are less adequate..., and in what sense [it] is true. “Polemics,” as I use it here, does not denote or connote simple hostility, or opposition for its own sake — even though the term has come to mean something like this in ordinary English usage. It points, rather, to the kind of engagement that does and should occur when those who take what they believe seriously encounter others equally serious about, and committed to, their beliefs.<sup>1</sup>

If the university is to be an institution that exalts and deepens the life of the mind, it must be a place of struggle and conflict. To avoid this conflict is to avoid truth altogether.

Finally, the sense of being engaged in a furious intellectual and spiritual battle does not preclude a posture of genuine respect and even love for the university and its people. [M]any fear that those who use [military] metaphors are engaged in a red-necked, superstitious crusade against elite culture in general and the university in particular. Indeed, we must acknowledge that American popular culture and fundamentalist religion, in particular, do harbor deeply and destructively anti-intellectual sentiments and forces.<sup>2</sup> So the concern about folk who talk in terms of “spiritual warfare” [against academia] is not completely misplaced. But it ought to also be obvious that not all who think in these terms ought to be tarred with the same brush. It is possible to genuinely love and honor the life of the mind and the university and still believe that spiritual and cultural warfare are central to our calling in the university under God.

...As we consider our place in the line of battle, the university world and graduate students in particular, we need to be informed by all three of these realities: The university is fallen, and incapable of realizing its true and wonderful promise as a result. In many ways it is one of the “principalities and powers,” infested as it is with evil and the evil ones. But equally the university, in its calling as an institution committed to truth and knowledge, has a continuing nobility and achieves wonderful results by God’s sovereign, persevering, and redeeming grace. Our call to

Which risk is greater: verging into “anti-intellectual” opposition to the university, or into being co-opted by the status quo?

If this is a “war of liberation,” who or what needs liberating? How can study, research, teaching be “liberated”?

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<sup>1</sup>Paul Griffiths, “Why We Need Interreligious Polemics,” *First Things* 44 (June/July 1994): 31.

<sup>2</sup>See George Marsden, *Fundamentalism and American Culture: The Shaping of Twentieth-Century Evangelicalism, 1870-1925* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980); and perhaps Richard Hofstadter’s classic, *Anti-Intellectualism in American Life* (New York: 1962). —Ed.

war is not to join the enemy in the rebellion (a mindless and unfaithful total acceptance of the current state of life in the university) nor to “nuke the whole mess” (an equally mindless and unfaithful total rejection). We are called to a war of liberation, of restoration and transformation. Indeed Paul’s description of the battle as demolishing strongholds of false argument and proud pretension and bringing every thought — not just private religious thought — captive to make it obedient to Christ has special relevance to the university world.

Looking at graduate students as a part of the university world, we need to be reminded of their importance. In the major centers of the academic world the sheer number of graduate students makes them important. At the University of Michigan, graduate students [make up] slightly more than 40% of the student population, for example. There are two further, more significant reasons for our concern for ministry among graduates. These are folks who tend to be involved and committed to the university as more than a vocational institution and party scene, and as a result, the future university faculty, administrators, and leaders are found among this group. In short, they have a large present influence and future, decisive effect on the life of the university.

In seeking to understand graduate students, I find it helpful to look at them from both a personal and professional perspective. Obviously graduate students are people with the same range of sorrows and joys, weaknesses and gifts, as any other [group]. The gospel of the Lord Jesus speaks to all sinners. Still, there are some unique personal qualities and situations we need to consider. One that has been...fruitful for me is to seek to understand the unique blend of insecurity and pride that characterizes most graduate students.

Consider first the insecurity generated by the situation of most graduate students. They enter a higher (perhaps in many cases the highest) level of academic work and competition. They are conscious that the stakes in this competition are higher; certainly they are very high on the vocational level. Furthermore, most find themselves in a new, unknown setting. The place is unfamiliar and so are the people. They need to construct a new social circle, and it is fair to note that [despite] their exceptional intellectual skills, graduate students display no discernibly greater social skills than the rest of the people in the world. Add to these real financial insecurities and the fact that many are newly married..., and you have a recipe for profound insecurity. “Will I make it?” is a very important question, which has no necessarily [affirmative] answer. Its corollary is the assertion, “You must be single-minded and even ruthless in your pursuit of academic success. No time for distractions like Christian gatherings and service. That was maybe OK for undergraduate days, but this is the real thing now!”

How much of a problem is this insecurity? Where does it come from?

On the other hand..., it is very easy for graduate students to be proud people. Some of this comes from the wider university environment. Already winners in the game of academic competition, now they are doing advanced work at the most prestigious and progressive institutions. Associating daily with the best and the brightest can easily go to your head. Add to this the spiritual reality that knowledge, necessary and foundational as it is, puffs up (1 Cor 8:1). Knowledge slips into proud achievement, and graduate students are all knowledgeable folk. So pride stalks the existence of even Christian graduate students and shows itself in an arrogant

And pride? Whom do we look down upon? How can we avoid and repent of these two “personal” errors?

superiority to undergrads, in an independent and individualistic spirit, and in the avoidance of foundational spiritual matters. Yet Christian graduate students as a group do not strike me as having any...obvious advantage over other groups in the life of prayer, or Scripture study, or fruitful community involvement, or witness, or obedience and vision related to the lordship of Christ.

Here, then, are places where the battle is joined on a personal level. We must encourage the timid and help the weak without producing pride. And we must [simultaneously] confront pride without devastating the weak. Proper and appropriate balance is no easy matter....

On the professional level, two observations seem crucial. First, the academic department or school is the central or basic social unit for graduate-student life and ministry. The first person a new graduate student is apt to meet is not a roommate (as in undergraduate years), but a faculty member from her department — or more likely, the department secretary. And a graduate student's social circle will draw very heavily, if not exclusively, on the academic setting where his work is done. So the department must be the central location for basic discipleship (both personal and corporate) and witness. This social reality, however, needs to be complemented by interaction and Christian fellowship with people from outside our academic specialties, lest we fall prey to the university's... fragmentation and loss of over-arching vision.

Secondly, we should note that the characteristic activities of graduate students are study, research and writing, teaching, and some administration. Each of these spheres of activity presents a unique challenge and opportunity to bring every thought captive and make it obedient to Christ. For example, what is our distinctive responsibility and opportunity as Christian teachers? Is this an opportunity for witness, and if so, how should I proceed in a way that is fair to my students and supervisors? Or again, what demands do the justice and peace of the gospel make on my involvement in administration? ...How ...do we propose to educate ourselves [on such problems]? Beyond foundational spiritual realities, I am convinced that these four characteristic spheres of action should be the focus of our formation of Christian graduate students.



If these comments at least begin to describe our place in the great battle, what will be required of us? Paul's statement in 2 Corinthians 10 emphasizes two [requirements]: making every thought obedient to Christ and wielding divinely powerful and divinely appointed weapons. For this to happen we must see among us a cultivation and recovery of the Christian mind, and a corresponding cultivation and recovery of Christian nerve. [T]hese statements require some considerable unpacking.

How crucial are departments and schools to our lives? Should we have separate fellowships for separate areas of study?

How are we specifically Christians in studying? in research? in writing? in teaching? in administration? Can a graduate fellowship help us in this?

First, consider the cultivation and recovery of the Christian mind. Paul speaks of making every thought captive to Christ. All of our thinking (which is the wellspring of activity) must be submitted to Christ's lordship, with no areas or concerns exempt. But it is clear that this Christ-honoring [ideal] is far from reality for us in the university. Many have lamented exactly the loss of a Christian mind, a Christ-honoring view of all of life.<sup>3</sup> Almost our whole formal education [system] has proceeded with the assumption at best of the irrelevance of Christ to learning. At worst, the secular mind sneers at this idea as mindless superstition. Our vision, however, must be of the recovery of the Christian mind to the extent that in every academic discipline there exist a body of explicitly Christian thought of such high quality and relevance that it demands to be considered even by unbelieving students and faculty.

What would such "Christian thought" look like in your discipline? Are you aware of your field's key issues for this problem? How can a graduate fellowship help us address these discipline-specific questions?

What this body of Christian thought will look like in a given discipline is largely beyond my competence to suggest. That it must exist, however, seems to be demanded by the gracious realities of creation and redemption. I would like to venture some [general] observations on how the Christian mind can be recovered. Consider these five elements which I believe would cultivate and renew the mind of the Maker in us.

1. A passion for truth. We live in a day when the norm in academic work seems to be a studied and ironic indifference to ultimate questions. Listen to how one faculty member from a state university characterizes the situation:

[W]e must be "truth-people." Our rejection of relativism in the name of our Maker and Lord must cause us to see the eternal significance of what happens in the lab or the library and lead us to the worship of the Lord, not just in the church, but in the midst of our learning and research.

What about fields where truth is especially unclear? Does subjectivism have any place?

Such a passion for truth involves at least two dimensions. The first and foundational, more focused, and intensive dimension involves a commitment on our part to a robust practice of Biblical authority. It is a basic Biblical and Christian conviction that God has spoken, using his created gift of human language to tell us the truth about himself, ourselves, and his will for our lives. Our duty and wisdom, indeed our joy and bless[ing], arise from adopting a posture of active and teachable listening to what he has said. And this posture leads us to a lifetime of learning and laboring to grasp the message of Scripture, to submit and adjust our thinking to what God has told us,<sup>4</sup> to apply its wisdom to the whole range of our lives as

How much do we read the Bible, individually and as a group? Should we increase this, and how can we encourage one another?

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<sup>3</sup>See, for starters, Mark A. Noll, *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994); Mark Noll, Alister McGrath, Richard Mouw, and Darrell Bock, "What Scandal? A Forum on the Evangelical Mind," *Christianity Today* 39, 9 (Aug 14, 1995): 21-27; and George M. Marsden, *The Outrageous Idea of Christian Scholarship* (New York: Oxford, 1997). —Ed.

<sup>4</sup>The hallmark of an authentic evangelicalism is not the uncritical repetition of old traditions but the willingness to submit every tradition, however ancient, to fresh biblical scrutiny and, if necessary, reform" (John Stott, quoted by Roy McCloughry, in "Basic Stott," *Christianity Today* 40, 1 (Jan 8, 1996): 28. —Ed.

redeemed creatures living in God's creation, and to share its truth with our neighbors.

The conception that God actually tells us things...is usually dismissed out of hand in our times. Even among professing Christians it is often caricatured and decried in favor of a more "personal" and "love-centered" version of the faith. Some argue that Biblical authority remains a reality even when revealed truth has been dismissed or relegated to a secondary, peripheral place. James Packer artfully analyzes the failure of these proposals:

...To represent biblical authority in this way, as being functional without being informational, is to turn God into a warm fuzzy. ...This burns the promise of a personal relationship with Him to ashes. Denial of the reality of revealed truth thus destroys that knowledge of God to which the Bible invites us. Paul found the Athenians worshipping an unknown God. The knowledge of God offered by much twentieth-century theology is in principle a return to Paul's Athens. We need a theology that receives all Bible teaching as God-given information to guide our steps through the dark mazes of confusion, subjectivist, relativist, and sometimes syncretist, which are created for us by theologies that do otherwise.<sup>5</sup>

So, like the Lord Jesus we must allow [the statement] "it stands written" to direct us in controversy, in temptation, in determining our life's direction and vocation. Like our Lord we must say, first and most frequently to ourselves, "You are in error because you do not know the Scriptures or the power of God" (Matt 22:29), for "the Scripture cannot be broken" (John 10:35).

The second, wider and more extensive dimension in a "passion for truth" recognizes that our Redeemer God is the creator and sustainer of the world. By his common grace that "sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous" to sustain life, we expect to encounter much of great truth and beauty in every culture. "All truth is God's truth," in that he is its Maker and the one who equips and enables human creatures to perceive and discover it. So we rejoice in truth wherever it is found and value the contributions of all to the quest for understanding and wisdom....

How have you experienced this lately? What beauty or truth have you seen from outside Christian circles and culture (in academics, in art & literature, in public life)?

2. An ability to read and study Scripture in a visionary fashion. What I intend by this phrase can be expressed by taking up Calvin's metaphor of Scripture as spectacles. Under sin, we are myopic and astigmatic, so that we cannot correctly perceive the truth of God. Scripture is like a corrective lens which focuses the knowledge of God for us, says Calvin.<sup>6</sup> Now extending the metaphor just a bit,

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<sup>5</sup>James Packer, "Theology and Bible Reading," in *The Act of Bible Reading*, ed. Elmer Dyck (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1996), 85.

<sup>6</sup>"Just as old or bleary-eyed men and those with weak vision, if you thrust before them a most beautiful volume, even if they recognize it to be some sort of writing, yet can scarcely construe two words, but with the aid of spectacles will begin to read distinctly; so Scripture, gathering up the otherwise confused knowledge of God in our minds, having dispersed our dullness, clearly shows us the true God. This, therefore, is a special gift, where God, to instruct

Scripture also focuses all of truth for us not because it speaks directly to all concerns, but because it gives us a true stance for viewing all things. Alas, our habit is to restrict its applicability to churchly or private concerns. Much, if not most, preaching we hear suffers at just this point. ...But if Scripture is the Maker's spectacles, all of life can be focused properly.

Perhaps we need [in Bible study] steps like formulation ("What truth does this passage teach and how is it related to other relevant passages?") and integration ("How does that truth fit in with other ideas and issues I am thinking about?"). These steps would lead us beyond a narrowly pietistic use of Holy Scripture and begin to appropriate its reality-focusing quality as the word of our Creator and King.

Where and how should we implement these steps of Bible study?

3. A commitment to comprehensive obedience. Because all reality springs from the Lord's will and plan, we cannot pursue the Christian mind in our academic work and refuse obedience elsewhere. All of life is interconnected. My worship life, my sexual life, my willingness to identify with the weak and needy, my witness to friends and colleagues, are all tied together with my academic life. Disobedience anywhere leads progressively to distortion everywhere.

Is this a "character test" for academics? How does our need for obedience differ from other people's?

4. When Scripture speaks of the mind of Christ, it associates it with humility. I can only suggest meditating on a passage like Philippians 2 or Romans 12 to get the force of this aspect of the mind of Christ. Humility has always been a difficult virtue. Ancient and modern paganisms regard it as a vice. It has numerous counterfeits that are destructive. But these factors only make its recovery more pressing, not least in our setting [of graduate student ministry].

5. Scripture also associates active involvement in a Christian community with the mind of Christ. Knowing, like almost every other characteristically human function, is socially conditioned.<sup>7</sup> The give-and-take of informal and thoughtful discussion is one of life's true pleasures and most certain paths to truth and holiness. "As iron sharpens iron, so one person sharpens the wits of another" (Prov 27:17, NRSV).

Where and how should we carry on such discussion?



Recovery and cultivation of Christian nerve is no less important. Soldiers need courage and a willingness to suffer ([literally,] patience). So also do we. ...I will comment on just two matters. First, Paul says, "we live in the world." Obvious! you say. But is it? Safe enclaves behind the line of battle are more comfortable, so many seek them out in one way or another. Of course such enclaves are largely an illusion. But the impulse to withdraw unthinkingly may cause us to ask whether we have

Are Christian student fellowships such illusory "enclaves"? How can we avoid this?

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his church, not merely uses mute teachers [of nature and conscience] but also opens his own most hallowed lips" (John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 1.6.1; cf. also 1.14.1). —Ed.

<sup>7</sup>For a particularly helpful discussion of this idea from a Christian viewpoint, see Mark R. Schwehn, *Exiles from Eden: Religion and the Academic Vocation in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), esp. chaps. 2 and 3, "Communities of Learning" and "Spirited Inquiry." —Ed.

the nerve to stand in the reality of the struggle.

Are we called to work and mission in the university, or is it just a place to earn a living or to [prepare] to earn a living? My observation of most Christian faculty on secular campuses suggests exactly this lack of calling. They are fine Christian women and men in many cases who serve actively in their churches. But they do not see the university as their God-appointed arena of service and battle. [With God's help, we pray that] ministry to graduate students may bear fruit in raising up men and women with a calling from the Lord Christ to serve the Kingdom of God in their work lives and in increasing numbers in the university.

Secondly, we must lay hold of God's weapons for the battle. This entails rejecting mere worldly weapons, for "we do not wage war as the world does." Indeed, our wisdom, power, and goodness are a recipe for defeat and disaster. Yet this seems to be so little understood. The temptation is ever-present to meet the challenge of the world with the world's own weapons — with human entertainment, with massive displays of organization. Such weapons fail to make any dent in the stronghold of evil. But worse, having adopted the standards of the world, a secularized church has ceased to fight and is herself over-shadowed by the powers of darkness. Woe be unto us...if all we can lay hold of are worldly weapons.

So the challenge to us on the level of Christian nerve comes in whether we are prepared to trust in God-empowered weapons and, finally, in the God who empowers. It would be fruitful for all of us to take the fuller account of the weapons of the Christian soldier in Ephesians 6 and to think on them deeply. Consider how each answers to the need of the university and how different it is to embrace and advocate them in open public view. We spoke of truth [Eph 6:14] in discussing the Christian mind [above], so now consider righteousness [Eph 6:14]: What would Amos, the Old Testament prophet of righteousness *par excellence*, have to say to our universities, to our boards of regents, to our administrators, to our department chairs? What might he say to our relativism, amorality, greed, sensuality and sexual perversion, elitism, racism, to our client status that makes us hopelessly beholden to the powers of business and government? What would a university look like where justice rolled down like a river [Amos 5:24]? Then how might we, powerless as we are to be agents of this sort of righteousness, act to be agents of change in the university world?

Mention must also be made of the "gospel of peace" as a weapon of God [Eph 6:15]. All of us ought to ponder why it is that so relatively few graduate students are converted to Christ. True, they are a harder, more sophisticated audience, more settled in their convictions than undergraduates. So we need to sharpen our weapons with a more thoughtful apologetic and a more academically relevant exposition of the Christian mind. But when all is said and done, my fear is that graduate students are not being converted because they are simply not hearing the gospel from us. Here is a topic worthy of investigation. How do we proclaim the gospel to graduate students, and how do we train graduate students to communicate to their peers?

Further, this is the gospel of *peace*, of a reconciliation with our Maker that reconciles us to one another. Absence of the horizontal dimension sheds doubts on

Do you agree that Christian faculty lack a sense of calling? Do you think we, the next generation, will too?

Can't "wisdom, power, and goodness" sometimes be useful tools, even though they're "worldly"?

What are the answers to the many questions raised in these next 4 paragraphs? How can we go about answering them?

the vertical. So what have we to say to issues of social class and race within our universities? What action can we take? [T]hese are the questions, I believe, we must begin to ask if we are to wield the Lord's weapons in the power of the Spirit.

I conclude by noting that prayer is the last weapon mentioned, not because it is least but because it is the means by which we cast ourselves on the grace and power of the Lord to activate all the other weapons. Says Paul to the Ephesians [6:18]: "And pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests. With this [the battle and our weapons] in mind, be on the alert and always keep on praying for all the saints." So I must ask how we are doing, as fellowships of graduate students, faculty, and InterVarsity staff, in the life of persistent, alert, comprehensive, Spirit-led prayer? May God give us the grace so to pray for the recovery of the Christian mind and Christian nerve in our universities.