

THE **OUTRAGEOUS** IDEA OF
ACADEMIC
FAITHFULNESS

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INTRODUCTION

This book is the effort of two friends whose friendship was forged in large measure by the shared concerns expressed on these pages. Many voices other than our own are inked here—students, colleagues in campus ministry, and authors we have never even met. Our hope is that these voices will come together for you as an invitation to an adventure. This is an invitation that we received in college—an adventure that we both wish we would have taken up from the start.

This book isn't a map or a guidebook that can lead you from the beginning of the journey all the way to its end. The subject matter explored here is too rich, too deep, and too personal to be mapped. It is more like a sign staked in your life to point you toward this adventure that we are calling *academic faithfulness*. It is a collection of stories and suggestions that we have found helpful and that others have reported were helpful to them. Perhaps these testimonies will aid you in your journey of faith.

We hope you won't have to set out on this journey alone. We have discovered that deep engagement and lasting change come when a journey is taken with others. Some of you may have the opportunity to read this book with a friend or mentor or with a small group or a class, and you

will be able to consider the challenges raised here together and to add your own stories to those told here. For those of you who are trekking solo, we want to invite you to our cyber-spot (www.academicfaithfulness.com) so that you have a forum for asking questions, discovering additional resources, and hearing about the adventures of others.

The title of our little book isn't altogether original. George Marsden, a prestigious historian, published a thin volume in 1997 entitled *The Outrageous Idea of Christian Scholarship*. In it Marsden picks up where his former work, the award-winning *The Soul of the American University*, left off. Dr. Marsden calls on Christian faculty to be more thoroughly Christian in their own research and writing, to integrate more intentionally their own work as professors with their life-directing Christian faith. We are amplifying his call to academic faithfulness because we are convinced that this is God's call not only to professors but to every Christian student. We are writing this book to invite students into the adventure of uniquely Christian and culturally relevant learning. We believe that Christians are all called to "take captive every thought and make it obedient to Christ" (2 Corinthians 10:5 NIV). This is the adventure: putting everything that we are and have in service of the King. And during college we have a special opportunity to offer him our learning.

We also piggy-backed on the Marsden title because we liked the word *outrageous* and wanted it in our title. Many professors will think that your desire to connect learning and faith is outrageous. Your friends, even your Christian friends, may see academic faithfulness as an eccentric, even outrageous concern. Once we begin to explore what academic faithfulness entails, we imagine that even you may feel that this is a bit outrageous. In our own experi-

ence, when the topic of *academic faithfulness* or *Christian scholarship* has been raised, Christian students often see the challenge as beyond them, as a task for the stout and the wise, for the uniquely gifted. We think *every* Christian student has been called by God to think faithfully about learning. That is why we are trying to explore the connection between these two words: Christian and student.

- Does God care about academics?
- What difference might being a Christian make for a college student?
- What does faithfulness look like in the classroom?
- What is a Christian perspective, and how does one go about developing one?

In what ways does the passionate worship of God that is so prevalent among some Christian students on campus relate to the academic tasks of writing papers, reading assignments, and working in the lab?

Not everyone is ready for *outrageous*, but we are convinced that Christian discipleship calls us to just that—to live under outrageous grace, to love freely and unexpectedly (outrageous!), to celebrate and enjoy with exuberant gratitude, and to suffer and serve without regret (how so?!). While you are in college, engaged in an academic calling, we are quite sure that your work should be somehow outrageous. Academic faithfulness is outrageous, and a few of you are already beginning to discern that this is the adventure you are looking for.

We should make clear at the start that the Christian life is about much more than academic faithfulness. This is just one aspect of life that is under the lordship of Jesus Christ. All of life falls under the lordship of Christ, so hearty Chris-

tian discipleship is actually multifaceted. As followers of Christ we should be seeking together to discern what faithfulness looks like in various aspects of our lives—in our involvement in the local church, our relationships with family and friends, our care for the needy and suffering, our various roles as citizens and stewards (financial and environmental), and our enjoyment of recreation and the arts. There is a lifetime of discipleship ahead as we seek to discern the various callings of God to us for life in his world. There is great joy in discovering that, in a Christian view, every life matters, that everyday life matters, and that we are not left without some sense of what really matters in life! Our hope is that once you begin to engage in this one aspect of discipleship, *academic faithfulness*, perhaps you will begin to engage more deeply in the pursuit of faithfulness in other aspects of life as well.

We are not suggesting that attention to academics should displace other disciplines of the Christian life like prayer or studying the Bible or fellowship. In fact, we are quite sure that little growth will take place apart from earnest prayer, searching the scriptures, regular worship, and deep dialogue with a mentor and peers. A great deal of Christian nurture leads nowhere, however, precisely because it is not addressing the issues of life. Like it or not, studying is presently a central issue in your life, so developing a Christian perspective on it is an important expression of faithfulness.

Is this book for you? While any thoughtful reader may benefit from it, we have written with a certain audience in mind. We are writing primarily for Christian students, specifically those that are at the tail end of high school or early in their college experience. This is a book for disciples. A disciple is a student, a learner, and discipleship is

a lifelong role. Perhaps some of you are already disciples and you understand that all of life is to be redeemed in Christ, that he is Lord of all and has called us to be ambassadors, reconcilers, laborers, servants (the biblical metaphors abound). Perhaps you already sense that faith isn't merely part of life, a nice add-on, but the wellspring of life. This is our view, and we want to share the joy and richness of this view with you. We want you to find the deep satisfaction of pursuing your daily labors (for now, primarily attending classes and studying) as service to God. We want you to experience the unending challenge of exalting Christ as Lord of your thinking. We want you to begin now to imagine the application of your learning—your studies and plans and dreams—as an expression of love, or better yet, as a conduit for the love of God.

We've done a couple of things to keep the text of this book as readable as possible. The notes are collected together at the end of the book, and we don't cite them with footnotes throughout the text. At the end of each chapter we have included discussion questions to help you reflect on key ideas, ideally with other students. Even though the book has two authors, we've used "I" language in order to avoid confusion. Finally, while only a few students were named in the pages that follow, they speak for dozens of students that we have worked with during this project.

The outrageous idea of this book is that God cares about our academic work. God loves learning. In Colossians 2:3 we read that in Christ himself are "all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge." Christ is the very source of learning, and his disciples are the intended recipients of that wisdom and knowledge. As we learn in faith, not only will our own capacity for wonder and insight and love increase, but oth-

ers will benefit as well. Keeping these two things—faith and learning—connected is the key.

Discussion Questions

1. When you think about bringing the two words together—academics and faithfulness—what comes to mind?
2. At this point, do you believe the outrageous idea of this book: that God cares about your academic work?
3. Why do you think some people would consider academic faithfulness to be an outrageous idea? Who do you have in mind, and why might they think this way?
4. What are the implications of 2 Corinthians 10:5 and Colossians 2:3 for your academic work?

WIDE-EYED



CHAPTER 1

I don't know what the raccoon was thinking. He sat unmoving on the road, wide eyes reflecting the headlights of our VW Jetta. My daughter was driving, a rookie on the stick and big-hearted for creatures wild. Katie veered hard, banged over a six-inch curb, and blew the right front tire. Katie and I sat there, wide-eyed. Now I know what the raccoon was thinking: *My life is over.*

I was wide-eyed on the first day of college. My life was over, the first stage anyway. Sitting on a mattress in my room, waiting for some roommate to arrive, I knew I was leaving a great deal behind—home, friends, routines, and, by degrees, my family. The fear was buried deep, somewhere behind my stomach, but the uncertainty rattled around in my head.

- Where is my life going?
- What kind of person will I be here?
- Where will I fit in?
- Who was that girl with the sunglasses and arms full of boxes?

I wasn't sure who my roommate was going to be, where to go for dinner, why I was at college, or that girl's name. I only knew that something exciting and a little terrifying was beginning. I wasn't frozen in the headlights, but I knew I was on an unfamiliar road. I was ready for something new,

for the next stage in life, and I found that I was wide-eyed, not so much with fear or regret, but with anticipation.

Students come to college with all kinds of expectations about what it will be like. Some expect that it will be like high school, only without the stupid parts like homeroom and bathroom passes. I thought it would be more like basketball camp, since that was the only other time I'd ever been on a college campus. So I spent most of my first year in the gym. One college friend thought that college was a perpetual coffeehouse. He stayed up most nights playing his guitar, crooning red-eyed romantics. Expectations have profound implications on what we actually find at college, and there are two common expectations that shape the experience of many college students.

Beer and Circus

Let's call the first common expectation Beer and Circus. Once again we are borrowing a title from a book, this one by Murray Sperber. Many students come to college with expectations that come from watching countless movies like *Animal House*, *Back to School*, *Old School*, *American Pie 2* and hearing harrowing stories of kegs consumed, rules defied, and pleasures found. Life at many educational institutions would come to a grinding halt if the lubricant of alcohol disappeared. Students aren't simply drowning in beer, however. The circus show that Sperber is most concerned about is college athletics, but there are many other things under the big top that also distract students from investing themselves in education.

Beer and Circus may state the expectation of incoming students too cynically. We could describe this expectation as Autonomy and Exploration, but that's not as easy to

remember. The gist is the same, and the creed goes like this: “I am on my own, free of parental supervision and bogus limitations. I am here to make my own decisions about what I want to do and who I want to be.” I’d have to admit that I began college with a good measure of this expectation.

Tom Wolfe provides a particularly poignant portrait of Beer and Circus college life in his recent book *I Am Charlotte Simmons: A Novel*. Young Charlotte begins college to forge her own identity. She quickly discovers that her professors are largely irrelevant and that the vast majority of her time and the powerful forces of identity formation come not from the curriculum, not from some program of academic exploration, but in the context of a student culture dominated by alcohol, sex, consumption (particularly of alcohol and sex), exploitation, and, consequently, cynicism. Poor Charlotte’s identity is certainly shaped by her experiences. Unfortunately, the experiences are brutally painful. This is not a novel for the faint of heart. But then again, living in the pervasive culture of the American academy isn’t for the faint of heart either. College will change your life forever, and many leave college with deep scars.

Beer and Circus runs pretty deep on campus, even in Christian *leaders* on campus. One beautiful April afternoon I got a call in my office. At the time, I was working in campus ministry out of a religious life office. Three of my friends, student leaders of a Christian fellowship group, thought that it was a good day to meet for tennis on the courts in the center of campus. I ran to my apartment to change and then across the quad to join my friends. As my friends came into view, I thought at first that they had found matching flesh-colored tights with fig leaves strategi-

cally attached. Weird, yes, but not entirely surprising for these three pranksters. As I walked onto the court, I finally realized that they were wearing shoes . . . nothing but shoes. Others playing tennis thought that this nude exhibition was hilarious, and a crowd soon gathered outside the fence. I thought the joke was on me and that once I stepped on the court they'd scamper to cover their pride with shorts, but I guess the sunshine felt too good. The show continued until my boss, the college chaplain, walked by on his way to a board meeting. I still laugh when I think about this story, even though this was certainly lewd behavior. Unfortunately, this wasn't the only expression of their vision of college life. For them, college was simply about making memories. It was Beer and Circus all the way.

Despite the clear biblical warning regarding drunkenness, I know of many Christian students who are "three sheets to the wind" most weekends. This is true even of many Bible and student ministry majors. One student, who was teaching a junior high school Sunday school class in a local evangelical congregation, recently excused his Sunday morning bleariness to his young students: "Sorry I'm not with it; I've got a huge hangover from last night's party." He lost his internship at that church the next day.

Beer and Circus isn't just about drinking and partying, however. It is about disengagement from the central purposes of higher education. Perhaps a bigger problem than alcohol on American campuses is a pervasive disengagement with learning. Many students skip classes, scorn assignments, and tolerate poor grades. They have given up on education. This happens for all kinds of reasons. One of those reasons is the appeal of the circus. There are all kinds of things to do other than study, and many of those things are enticing and readily available.

If you come to college with Beer and Circus expectations, your expectations can be fulfilled wherever you go to school. I imagine that you can play tennis *au naturale* at just about any school in the country, at least for a few minutes. You can also skip classes and endure the parental scorn of a few bad grades. If you come with the curious naiveté of a young Ms. Simmons, chances are good that the call of the barker and the smell of the peanuts will lure you to an entertaining show—an expensive circus to be sure.

Grades and Accolades

Some students expect something completely different. Let's call this expectation Grades and Accolades. These students may be hard-wired for curiosity, and they may find that an academic setting provides stimulating academic challenges. More often than not, however, these students aren't naturally academic overachievers. Their expectations have been shaped in the competitive forge of a dozen or more years of schooling, and they are often driven by the promise of the reward that comes to those who work hard. In the movies these students are portrayed either as nerds (often physics and computer majors) or as top-notch students (generally pre-med or pre-law) struggling to succeed but crushed by the weight of their parents' high standards.

Unlike Beer and Circus, Grades and Accolades does take studying seriously. The single-minded drive for achievement fosters an academic work ethic that is in some manner constructive. Academic achievement is not enough, however—not nearly enough. Academic success can become an idol. When an aspect of life (like success and grades or, as discussed in the previous section, fun and frolic) is raised

up and given undue devotion, it becomes an idol. The idol of academic success may be widely praised and may hold out lucrative promises, but that only makes it more difficult to identify as an idol. It also makes it more difficult to despise. Spotting and despising idols is an important part of faithful Christian living. Being concerned about learning, even about grades, is appropriate, but too often students become obsessive about grades and success and begin to lose the bigger picture. Learning needs to be pursued with the right motives and applied to worthwhile purposes.

I once worked with a Grades and Accolades student, a literature major. Elizabeth (a.k.a. E) was brilliant, but the light mostly shined down, back into her books. She hadn't read everything in the world—that would be impossible—but it seemed like she had. And she didn't just read it, she seemed to understand it very well, and she could remember most of what she had read. I wouldn't say E had a photographic memory, but her ability to recall and even recite lengthy portions of literature, especially poetry, was astounding.

Let's play a little thought game with Elizabeth. And let's start by imagining an even better E, a super-clone we'll call E2. Now this E2 is everything that E is, but when it comes to academics she holds all abilities in perfection. E2 actually *has* read every piece of important literature in the world, and she has perfect recall of every word. And even more impossibly, she knows (somehow) precisely what each author intended by the words penned. E2 is beyond genius.

What would you make of E and E2 if you knew them? Would E2 make a better friend than the original E? Would she be more fun? More interesting? More responsible? I have no doubt that she could leverage her keen mind for

a lucrative academic position and dominate *Jeopardy* until she grew bored with the meager competition. But would E2 be happier, and would her work please God more than the work of the mere mortal? While I think E2 would certainly be interesting, she is unlikely to be any more fun or loving or lovable than E. E2 could leap-frog ahead of every academic competitor, yet still she might realize that her life is fractured, her relationships strained, her character twisted, and her joy fleeting. Perhaps Grades and Accolades doesn't really provide what we most desire or need. Idols never do.

All for One

Some of my Christian friends would counsel both Elizabeths to give up their intellectual hunger and to find their satisfaction in Jesus Christ. They don't literally suggest burning secular texts in a huge bonfire, but they insinuate that single-minded devotion to Jesus leaves little room for academic dedication. These Christian friends might invite Charlotte Simmons and my sun-burned tennis partners to the bonfire as well. Let the liquor burn and every silly prank. Throw every distraction that keeps us from the goal into the flames. There is something to this willingness to forsake all for the gospel. Once you find the pearl, Jesus tells us, you can't help but give everything else away (Matthew 13:45–46). Jesus should matter above every other thing. Something needs to burn, but I don't think what needs to burn are really the books or even the beer.

Let's take another image of burning fire, and this one from Romans 12:1–2.

Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God—this is your spiritual act of worship. Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind.

In this passage Paul, the author of this important letter, takes us into the temple where sacrifices are offered before God. Animal sacrifices are the usual temple offering, but here Paul recommends a better offering—offer your whole self, not some token (like beer or money), not a part or a piece (like your mind or your spring break), but all of you. This is what real spirituality and real worship is about. It is a life on fire, offered up and given over to serving the one true God. This kind of life is not puffed up by academic arrogance, and it is not distracted by the circus. It is a life set on discerning God's intentions for his creation. And that is going to require, Paul tells us, the renewing of our minds.

Here, I think, is the central challenge of this passage: *don't conform; instead, be transformed*. This phrase would serve as a good academic credo. We could print it in Latin and place it on our seal.

Or we could spell out “be transformed” in Greek letters and print them on hoodies (the nice thick kind). Of course, some marketing gimmick isn't the real deal. Paul appears to be encouraging Christians to think differently, to live differently somehow.

Expectations matter, and ours need to be altered. We cannot simply conform to dominant cultural assumptions about college. We need to develop a view of higher education that has been deconstructed (de-idolized) and redeveloped—prayerfully, thoughtfully, graciously. In this we will be swimming against the strong current of a well-

established collegiate culture. The power of the world that surrounds us, that rushes against us and flows within us, is more than considerable. Paul imagines that somehow we can swim upstream, that there is a power sufficient for our daily struggle. Is it possible, little fish that we are, that we can swim against these currents—

- a freedom-fixated, pleasure-seeking student culture
- the desire for self-advancement
- peer pressure
- the anti-intellectualism of our church traditions
- the secular assumptions of much of the academy

Paul thinks that we can, but only in Christ, and only together.

College wasn't what I expected. I thought that learning was going to be at the heart of the experience—classroom debate, late night philosophizing, engagement with important ideas. There was plenty of classroom debate, but mostly about grades. There were many late night conversations, but mostly about inane things. And of course I did encounter important ideas, but now I'm sad to report that I wasn't changed by those ideas as much as I had hoped. I don't mean to be cynical; it's just that for a year or two I lost interest. I was going through the motions, but I didn't care about my studies. Eventually something important did happen to me, but it happened late in college. I began to see things differently. And seeing differently made a world of difference.

Every student begins college wide-eyed, full of expectations. Some dream of the paradise of earthly delights, and others of the rewards of high achievement. Both of these dreams are ultimately disappointing, and it doesn't take

too much soul-searching for students to discover that they want something more. Of course the yearning for deep meaning and for lasting purpose will never be discovered in the co-curriculum or even in the curriculum itself. The real answer is relational, personal, and more real than anything that can be imagined. The real answer is Jesus Christ. He is the one who is inviting us to renew our minds and transform our lives.

Discussion Questions

1. A few expectations that students have for college were suggested in this chapter. Summarize them in your own words.
2. What are/were your expectations for college? Where did your expectations come from?
3. What is an idol? What idols were mentioned in this chapter? What other idols are found (and worshipped) on college campuses?
4. Read Romans 12:1–2. What are the far-reaching implications of these verses for your time in college?

Recommendations

Donald Drew, *Letters to a Student* (Ross-shire, Scotland: Christian Focus Publications, 2003).

Kelly Monroe Kullberg, *Finding God Beyond Harvard: A Quest for Veritas* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2006).