



INTERSECT

Thoughts and Themes on Teaching the Two Kingdoms

Found in Translation

In a recent piece of writing for one of our colleagues, the student indicated with regard to a particular ethical issue, “I don’t really think I’m a Christian person.” Are we reading a confession? A statement about convictions? Ambivalence? The student’s disagreement with some perceived “Christian” norm on this issue? Doubt? Apostasy? Our colleague wasn’t sure how to take this statement. Perhaps the student wasn’t sure, either.

However, our colleague was not alarmed. Instead, he regarded the student’s admission as an opportunity to explore further with the student any of these possibilities, that is, as an opportunity for undergraduate ministry.

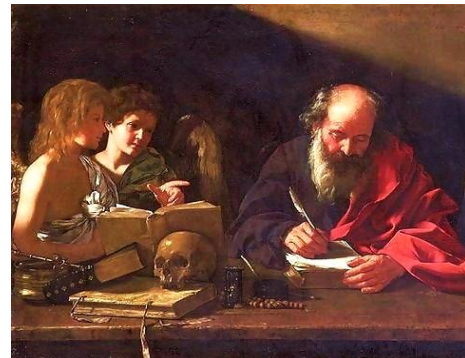
Undergrad ministry is about our exploring with young adults matters of purpose, meaning, life choices, our relationship with God and how all these matters are located under the grace and redemption of Christ. These are matters we all consider as Christians. Nevertheless, examining these matters with undergrads (and graduate students, but that’s another essay) does call for certain competencies beyond instruction in our disciplines. Different periods of development need certain capacities—early childhood needs a different skill set than the adult Bible class—and this is true for a teaching ministry with our students. Doing this work does require a certain cognitive and spiritual aptitude.

A capacity for Christian higher education can be expressed for us in this way: we are the translators. And we “translate” in two important and two-kingdoms ways.

Much has been written about faculty workload as teaching, research, and service. While our vocation includes elements of all three, our ministry plainly and chiefly is in teaching. We attain expertise and maintain currency in our disciplines well beyond that of our students. We then cull and refine the content of this expertise to selectively and effectively communicate it, moving the student from knowing *about* the content to genuinely knowing it. We induct the student into that domain of knowledge not to our extent of expertise but to the extent that they can connect that knowledge to

other domains and pursue it further according to need or interest. We are the translators, interpreting God’s left-hand kingdom for students.

Much has also been written on bringing together course content and matters of faith. The different modes for this capacity for Christian higher education are generally summarized as: integrating the faith; allegorizing the content; personalizing the course; and intersecting the two kingdoms. (See [Intersect Essay 7, “Christ and Curriculum: An Intersect Approach”](#) for a brief discussion of these four.) But however one goes about bringing content and faith together, we again are the translators, devising ways to help students interpret their conventional lives in the left hand kingdom in terms of God’s larger purposes at work in his right-hand kingdom. Translating, then, is key to our vocation.



Jerome translates the Vulgate (Cavarozzi, 1617)

We borrow this teacher-as-translator image from C.S. Lewis. In discussing his own efforts to communicate the hope and grace of Christ in the dark days of World War II and following, he says this:

When I began, Christianity came before the great mass of my unbelieving fellow-countrymen either in the highly emotional form offered by revivalists or in the unintelligible language of highly cultured clergymen. Most men were reached by neither. My task was therefore simply that of a translator — one of turning Christian doctrine...into the vernacular, into language that unscholarly people would attend to and could understand.... [And] if the real theologians had tackled this laborious work of translation about a hundred years ago, when they began to lose touch with the people (for whom Christ died), there would have been no place for me.¹

Philip Melancthon, a professor of humanities, not of theology, wrote the chief Reformation statement, the Augsburg Confession.² In similar vein it was Lewis, a humanities professor, who became the chief spokesperson for the Christian faith in the 20th century. The work of both these teachers prompts us to continue that effort. Each for his time presented the timeless Gospel in ways that their readers and students found accessible and meaningful. As Lewis says, the task is not to teach detached, astringent doctrine textbooks but to “turn Christian doctrine into the vernacular”—work that the clerics and theologians had failed to do.

Of course to do that, we need to know what Christianity actually teaches. The point is not so much “to teach right doctrine” (*docere*, L. to teach; *doctrina*, L. teaching, learning) as if talking out of a dogmatics text will fill the bill. The point is that as translators, part of our preparation and vocation is to know the dogma and doctrine, that is, to know the Biblical texts and what they teach. (We generally call that “orthodoxy,” more Latin for “the straight scoop.”)

We pursue this preparation so that we can fulfill our vocation by “teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you” (Mt. 28:20)—teaching these things to undergrads, who come to us without a scholarly background, in ways they can attend to and understand. Paul may well have had such preparation in mind when he writes to Timothy, “And what you have heard from me in the presence of many witnesses entrust to faithful people who will be able to teach others as well” (2 Tim. 2:2).

Among the challenges we face as translators are pop Christianity and technical theology. As creatures of their culture, our students come to us front-loaded with lots of folk religion, versions of spiritual-without-being-religious, and Christian bookstore theology. The oversimplifications they bring challenge us to listen carefully and decode what they are thinking and trying to say. We appreciate their sincerity and so we exercise patience. But sincerity often deviates from validity, and so we also work hard to translate some notion from pop Christianity into a more Biblically sound understanding and application of the Gospel.

Meanwhile, we bring into the room our own seasoned Biblical literacy and a robust set of insights about the Gospel. The church’s academic theology does the heavy lifting on weighty matters of exegesis and doctrine, and we are blessed by that work. We

understand that the church and our theological tradition have already worked out the ideas that many students have only recently encountered. But this orthodoxy is often baffling or even off-putting to the student who still wants to “keep things simple” and to prize a “faith as of a little child.” Here again we must translate, finding a vernacular but this time upgrading their ideas, yet without losing touch with them (much as with our disciplines), for this is the vocation of Christian higher education.

Whoever marries the spirit of the age will soon find himself a widower in the next. - William Inge, Dean of St. Paul’s Cathedral

Thus we create and cultivate a zone of proximal development for faith and life, raising the bar above pop Christianity while lowering the threshold of academic theology. As we assist students with “being in the zone,” we give them the opportunity and the tools to explore such ruminations as “I don’t really think I’m a Christian person” and “Doesn’t the Bible say we’re just supposed to have a childlike faith?”

William Inge, Dean of St Paul’s Cathedral and Lewis’s contemporary, said, “Whoever marries the spirit of the age will soon find himself a widower in the next.” Today, ours is an undergrad ministry to students sorting out same-sex marriage in an emotivist culture with no canon for measuring ideas, no orthodoxy for level concepts, and no lexicon for common terms. They also read daily about assisted suicide, gender dysphoria, ISIS beheadings, and ebola. This is not a zeitgeist to marry—but that’s true of every age. This is, however, the age in which we are called to bring to our students a Gospel that can be found in translation, using the means and opportunities God has entrusted to us. In this way, we equip our students to do that translating on their own and for others.

-R. Moulds

1. *God in the Dock* by C.S. Lewis (Eerdmans, 2014) p. 199.
2. Philip Melancthon, a colleague of Martin Luther, was a professor of humanities at Wittenberg University and was accorded the honorary title, *Praeceptor Germaniae*, Teacher of Germany, for his constant work with students of all ages.