



Faith in Academia

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Professor John Lister

Ecclesiastes 12: 8–14 1 Corinthians 1: 17–25

Thank you very much for this invitation to speak tonight. As a mathematician, I feel a bit naked without a blackboard and piece of chalk in my hand. The Newton Institute famously has blackboards everywhere – even in the lift and the toilets! But there is no blackboard in this pulpit, and you'll be relieved to hear there will thus be no equations. Neither will I attempt to answer the philosophical question once put to me at church by a very serious undergraduate: Did God create mathematics, or has it always existed? My concerns tonight will more down to earth, personal, spiritual.

I want to reflect on aspects of faith in the University, thinking both of the students who study here, and of the postdocs and academics who research and teach here. What is this peculiar workplace, academia, like as a community? What and who is valued? What then are the challenges for someone with Christian faith in this environment? And how does the Gospel impinge on academic life?

There are many things that can be said about Cambridge, and indeed Trinity, but let me start with its reputation for being an elite university, as seen in its high rankings in university league tables for teaching and research, a hopefully well-earned reputation which influences the University's self-image and its internal culture, and which shapes the expectations, and self-expectations, of all those who come to work or study here.

This reputation, and the culture of striving for excellence that underpins it, is a positive thing that brings many benefits. We are very fortunate to attract many of the best and brightest students in the country, and indeed from around the world. It is a stimulating, exciting place to be, where brains are stretched, courses can be pitched at a high level and move rapidly, and it's fun for us to teach such bright, receptive students. Your undergraduate friends are smart interesting people, who possibly share your passion for mathematics, or perhaps can tell you what they've been learning in genetics or history. It is a tremendous opportunity to learn, and to grow as a person.

But the intensity of this experience can have a downside. When you are surrounded by the best and the brightest, which of you will turn out to be *really the* best and the brightest? If you are used to coming top in your school and always getting A*s, how do you react to being one of the crowd, and the distinct possibility that you will not get a First? (Despite grade inflation, most students don't.) If your sense of identity and worth is built around being an academic success, self-doubt and worry can easily set in quickly in such an environment.

Ten years ago, I had just given a couple of mathematicians their first ever supervision, which I thought had gone well and they'd done well. I asked them if things were going OK in general, and one of them said, "I have a syndrome." I asked her what she meant and she said, "I am very worried. I am very worried that Cambridge is going to discover it has made a big mistake in accepting me and you will throw me out." An unusually vivid and honest admission perhaps, but the heavy load on the University Counselling Service suggests that she is not alone in struggling with such thoughts.

What may not be evident to the undergraduates as they look up at Fellows and eminent professors, is that some sense of competition and peer-group comparison, and hence the possibility for insecurity, continues right up the academic ladder. Students with Firsts who continue on to PhDs worry if they have enough results for a thesis, the postdocs worry how many papers they need to have published for a faculty post, faculty worry if their grant applications will be successful to maintain their lab, and so on it goes, through promotions, and prizes, and election to fellowships and honorary degrees. Academia might loosely be compared with a competitive sport like tennis from club level upwards, with perhaps someone like Roger Federer at the top of his game being the equivalent of a Nobel Prize winner.

Unlike tennis, success in an academic career is closely associated with developing a *personal* reputation for the work you have done and recognition for that work from the rest of the global academic community. What others think of you and your work – these are not always carefully distinguished! – matters for continued academic success. [And Cambridge's world-wide reputation derives from individuals within it having acquired world-wide reputations – no pressure there then!]

Constant peer-appraisal is integral to quality control in the system, from papers to promotions. It is how that striving for excellence is cultivated, recognised and rewarded. But in a fallen world with human failings there are pitfalls. A pure pursuit of excellence in learning and research can slip sideways into pursuit of the reputation itself, and thence towards naked competitiveness, selfishness, or short-cuts. Thankfully, this is much rarer than it might be. And, if my sense of identity – who I am – becomes too closely associated with my work and what others think of me, dangers await of slipping into puffed-up pride or hollowed-out insecurity.

What place then for Christian faith in a world that makes so much of personal reputation and academic ability? We turn to tonight's readings to add a little Biblical perspective.

In a talk on Faith in Academia it was impossible to resist including the Teacher's admonition in Ecclesiastes that 'of making of books there is no end; and much study is a weariness of the flesh'! This passage is from the final chapter in the book. Back in the opening chapter, the Teacher describes how he set his heart on seeking and searching out wisdom regarding things done under the sun (i.e., in this world), and he was very successful, acquiring more wisdom than all before him in Jerusalem. But he also found that 'in much wisdom is much grief'. But, despite appearing jaded at the end, he does not regard his gaining of wisdom and learning as valueless, without any good effect: the start of our passage affirms that he still taught the people knowledge, he sought to set that knowledge in order, and what was written was upright, words of truth. But in the Teacher's thinking, that gaining of wisdom, and indeed all other human achievements 'under the sun', are overshadowed by the fact of man's mortality when, as he puts it, 'the silver cord is severed, or the golden bowl is broken, and the dust returns to the ground it came from'. 'Vanity of vanities', says the Teacher repeatedly, or in modern translations, 'meaningless, meaningless, a chasing after the wind'. His final words are therefore an injunction to fear God, who shall bring every work into judgement, whether it be good or evil.

At the start of the second reading, Paul describes his mission in Corinth as ‘to preach the gospel, not with wisdom of words, lest the cross of Christ should be made of none effect’. In the next chapter of the letter, he expands on this thought – I switch to a modern translation – ‘when I came to you, I did not come with eloquence or human wisdom as I proclaimed to you the testimony about God. For I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified. I came to you in weakness with great fear and trembling’ (perhaps like your preacher tonight). ‘My message and my preaching were not with wise and persuasive words’, (definitely like me tonight) ‘so that your faith may not rest on men’s wisdom but on God’s power’. Paul could have been eloquent and sophisticated, but he chose not to be.

Paul is unapologetic that his message, the preaching of Christ crucified, is so counter-cultural that it seemed like foolishness to many that heard it. The problem he said was not with the message, but with the hearers: they had the wrong expectations and asked the wrong questions. The Jews demanded miraculous signs, and looked for a political Messiah to liberate them from the Romans – *they did not expect a crucified Messiah*, though, ironically, His resurrection is the greatest sign of God’s power, and His rescue of us from sin and death is the greatest liberation on offer. The Greeks, on the other hand, exalted human wisdom and philosophy, and valued gifts of rhetoric and oratory, and the power of human reason to determine knowledge – *not the revelation of God’s power through weakness on a cross*. Perhaps these Greek attitudes bear some similarity to the modern academy? But, Paul says, ‘the world by wisdom knew not God’, and worldly wisdom at its best, for all its intrinsic value and usefulness and truthfulness, can be a barrier to knowing God, if that worldly wisdom becomes worshipped as a God in itself.

As a teenager, I thought God was a delusion. I was of course good at maths and science and, with the arrogance of youth, I asserted that science was the only means to answer big questions. If God cannot be proved then he cannot exist. If I want proof then the place to look is whether God is logically necessary to set off the big bang or to explain the origin of life. I was looking in the wrong place, and asking the wrong questions. This is not the time to describe in any detail how, during my student days, I moved from where I was then to where I am now, but I will identify two essential ingredients. First, I began to consider the Biblical testimony regarding the person of Jesus Christ, his death and resurrection. Second, I was confronted by the evidence of my sin, and selfishness in the way I related to others. With these ingredients, the cross made sense to me, and the cross made sense of me. As Paul later wrote to the Corinthians, ‘God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God’.

The message of the cross is deeply humbling. As we confessed earlier, ‘we have followed too much the devices and desires of our own hearts, and there is no health in us’. It is also profoundly uplifting. There is no condemnation remaining for those who are in Christ, and if God is this much for us, to give his one and only Son, then nothing shall separate us from the love of Christ.

Despite whatever preconceptions they may have had, there were in Corinth both Jews and Greeks who found that Christ is indeed the power of God, and the wisdom of God. Despite public perceptions, influenced in part by media attention to polemical atheists, science and faith are not in fact incompatible, as shown by the empirical evidence that there are many scientists and mathematicians who, like me, have found, while still continuing to be active scientists and mathematicians, that Christ is salvation to all them that believe;

indeed I am far from alone among my colleagues in that very distinguished Department of Applied Mathematics and Theoretical Physics of the University of Cambridge. There are, of course, also many for whom this is still foolishness and, as Paul experienced among the intellectuals of Athens, some of those will undoubtedly mock. Be prepared!

What then are some of the implications for an academic life? I make no apology for their simplicity and directness, since here I am preaching very much to myself, because I know I need to be reminded of these things daily. There is so much to say, and only a short time left to say it, so I will focus on issues of identity and worth.

I am to look at myself, and others, as someone who has been created in God's image for relationship with Him. I may have defaced that image, but now I have been redeemed by Christ, and am adopted in His family. I do fall short in many, many ways, but I am secure in God's love, which depends not on my performance, but on His settled and unconditional grace. So in an environment where wisdom, learning and knowledge are so highly exalted and often used to measure a person's worth, I should step back, look at things differently, and measure my worth, and that of others, by God's love for us. I am to live my life in humble dependence and trust in Christ, and to cast my anxieties on Him.

To the extent that I can be described, but not defined, as a mathematician, it is because God has gifted me with more than the usual ability in mathematics, and blessed me with an excellent education, mentors, and opportunities for my career to prosper, and all this is now something to be used in His service and for His glory. As Paul said to the Corinthians, "For who makes you different from anyone else? What do you have that you did not receive? And if you did receive it, why do you boast as though you did not?"

To misquote Jesus, I am to keep telling myself that 'a man's life does not consist in the abundance of his publications' and 'you cannot serve both God and reputation'. As Paul wrote to the Ephesians, knowing the comfort of Christ's love, I am to 'do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than myself'.

There is so much more that could be said and, even more importantly, to be lived out.

But I want to return to a student voice, by finishing with a quote from another undergraduate. This is an extract, but you can find the full version by Googling 'real testimonies Cambridge'. After describing his tendency to worry about feelings of constantly having to succeed, that upcoming exams are what will really count, of always wanting to be seen as strong, capable, clever, funny and attractive – but never under-average – he writes:

God's approval isn't based on how lovable I am, but on how loving He is. And because that doesn't change, and I can't screw it up, a big pressure is lifted from my shoulders. Sometimes I might slip back into caring what others think too much, and worrying again, but in that situation I'll remember that God has definitively expressed his opinion of me by giving up his life for me. What others think just doesn't compare to that.