Personal Biography (as it relates to being a Philosopher at a Christian university)

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Why I am a Philosophy Professor

As you can see I have lots of degrees, but I didn’t pursue higher education to get degrees and become a professor. My academic pursuits are motivated by a quest for intellectual integrity—an open, honest, rational, and noble integration of my deep convictions as a Christian with the human search for wisdom. This helps explain my pursuit of philosophy and my broad academic interests within the liberal arts outside of philosophy, including theology, history, literature, politics, psychology, and general science. Inside philosophy I seek to understand all major issues and areas. Thus, my “specialties” are broad: the history of philosophy, ethics, philosophy of religion, and existentialism. I’ve found the writings of Soren Kierkegaard, in particular his understanding of the role of imagination in the formation of ethical and religious beliefs, have helped my quest for intellectual integrity and I’ve gained some expertise in that area.

Throughout my studies, I’ve become convinced that the human search for wisdom is fueled by an inherent, although often unidentified and repressed, drive to personally experience—to know—God. Thus, as a teacher of philosophy, I strive to spark that drive, arousing the mind and the imagination, awaking profound possibilities and desires, which may lead students towards a rich existence.

My Teaching Philosophy

I embrace the ancient definition of philosophy as the love of wisdom. I strive to awaken that love in my students. I inform them that I consider a philosophy course a quest for wisdom undertaken by instructor and student together. I expect to learn from my students, and I expect them to find their own answers to the perennial questions raised in the discipline of philosophy. I do not expect them to mirror the results of my quest; I trust the truth to survive without my aid. Indeed, pushing my beliefs upon them would not only be disrespectful, but unproductive—it cannot result in legitimate beliefs (i.e., beliefs held with integrity). Occasionally I present the results of my research, but when doing so instruct the students to treat it as they would any other source. Most often my personal views are presented along with other conflicting views without any special emphasis. I also stress that I am not impressed by students who agree with me, but rather by those who articulate sound reasons for their views while appreciating the difficulties and subtleties.

I present every thinker or position sympathetically before engaging in careful critical examination. I often argue passionately for views that I do not hold. I expect my students to be uncomfortable, and I want them to learn to live with that discomfort without giving up the
quest for wisdom. This combination of discomfort and idealistic seeking presents the occasion for unearthing wise beliefs. I strongly believe that any legitimate belief must be the result of painstaking personal reflection. Thus my most important task is to enable students to reflect upon noble ideas and decide for themselves—via self-examination and rational dialectic—which ideas are reasonable and noble enough to be worthy of belief.

I also strive to awaken a passion for excellence. I challenge--and expect--my students to accomplish more than they think possible. Thus I place a strong emphasis upon academic achievement. (My exams are notoriously difficult, but many students exit my courses excited about their ability to deal with difficult and complex issues.) I believe excellent scholarship (clear, careful, and informed presentation of ideas) is a necessary part of the quest for wisdom, but I also believe that excellence is its own reward.

To sum up, I love teaching and consider it a most noble calling. It is a great and humbling privilege.

My Relationship with Christ

As a Christian committed to intellectual integrity I believe it is crucial to be able to distinguish Christian faith from other faiths. A key feature of non-Christian religions is a demand for extensive self-effort in order to achieve the ultimate goal--some sort of liberation from the travails of life. Even many of the present day "Christian" organizations and doctrinal systems focus on controlling behavior, i.e., eradicating sin, rather than embracing Grace. Secular attempts at salvation (politics, ethics, science, etc.) also require a mastery over our self and world through control of our actions (sometimes through the auspices of a powerful government). All these efforts have the underlying conviction that if we could just learn to master ourselves bliss will ensue. I believe Christianity is fundamentally different. In my teaching I often try to explain this difference by defining Christian faith as "giving up the dream of self-mastery for the infinite relation of love with your Creator." Any system of belief that proclaims that the ultimate answer is found through self-improvement, through human effort, is not Christian.

Christ asks that we stop trying to make our lives happy and fulfilling through personal or collective efforts. He says "give up trying to master yourself and accept my infinite love, stop trying to be what you are not, stop trying to be the Creator and enjoy being my beloved creation." By "giving up the dream of self-mastery" we open ourselves to the possibility of experiencing Grace. This is the "free choice" or human side of salvation. The infinite love of Christ is always raining down upon us but we fail to experience it until we see ourselves as we really are, until we see ourselves as incapable of achieving happiness through our own efforts. We must lose the egocentric dream of saving ourselves and be willing to be loved and accepted as the fallible and finite creatures that we are. So "giving up the dream of self-mastery for the infinite relation of love" is the ultimate act of honest self-acceptance. We painfully recognize our weakness but we are lovingly affirmed through Christ's infinite and unconditional
acceptance of us which is demonstrated through his life and death amongst us as one of us—through what in Christian terminology is called the Grace of God manifested through the atoning death of Christ, of God Incarnate.

What prompts me to give up this dream of self-mastery? I have been blessed with better than average intelligence, appearance, self-discipline, athleticism, and ambition. I was raised in a loving and supportive family. It would seem that I have all the tools to be very successful, to live a happy and productive life. Indeed for the most part I have done so. But one cannot run from the despair, the dread and anxiety, deep within. All the best efforts do not ultimately satisfy. However, a loving relationship with Christ turns that despair into joy. One is no longer afraid to fail once the dream of self-mastery is given up, one is free to "naturally" respond to love, free to act so as to please the Beloved. Therefore I live under the joyous freedom of Grace rather than under the bondage of trying not to sin. I am motivated towards good works and righteous living by a loving relationship with my Creator rather than by guilt or self-justification. Certainly it is "for freedom that Christ set us free."

The historical aspects of my personal Christian experience are unexceptional. I was raised in a Christian home; I believed and made a personal commitment to following Jesus Christ at an early age. As I grew up and began to read widely I had serious intellectual doubts and spent many hours contemplating whether I should continue to believe in something so seemingly impossible to demonstrate. I discovered that I could not stop believing. I also came to realize that certain epistemic assumptions (Cartesian rationalism, naturalistic empiricism) ruled out an authentic evaluation of religious and ethical beliefs—indeed the evaluation of any deeply meaningful belief. This freed me to pursue my commitment to Christ with intellectual integrity. It also prompted me to pursue a practice of Philosophy (in particular, an understanding of epistemology) that is open to the possibility of genuine faith and to the authority of Holy Scripture. In sum, I am a born again believer, transformed by the Holy Spirit, saved by Grace through faith in the atoning work of Jesus Christ, committed to glorifying and enjoying God forever.