

2nd Edition

LEARNING FOR THE LOVE OF GOD

A Student's Guide

TO ACADEMIC FAITHFULNESS

**DONALD OPITZ
DEREK MELLEBY**



BrazosPress

a division of Baker Publishing Group
Grand Rapids, Michigan

© 2007, 2014 by Donald Opitz and Derek Melleby

Published by Brazos Press
a division of Baker Publishing Group
P.O. Box 6287, Grand Rapids, MI 49516-6287
www.brazospress.com

Printed in the United States of America

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means—for example, electronic, photocopy, recording—without the prior written permission of the publisher. The only exception is brief quotations in printed reviews.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data is on file at the Library of Congress, Washington, DC.

ISBN 978-1-5874-3350-4 (pbk.)

Scripture quotations are from the Holy Bible, New International Version®. NIV®. Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984, 2011 by Biblica, Inc.™ Used by permission of Zondervan. All rights reserved worldwide. www.zondervan.com

14 15 16 17 18 19 20 7 6 5 4 3 2 1



Donald Opitz and Derek Melleby, Learning for the Love of God
Brazos Press, a division of Baker Publishing Group, © 2007, 2014. Used by permission.

For our friend and favorite bookseller, Byron Berger,
whose love for God and learning exemplifies a life of
faithful service to the King.

Contents



Preface to New Edition ix

Introduction xi

1. Wide-Eyed 1

Beer and Circus

Grades and Accolades

All for One

2. Babylon U? 10

Daniel and Friends

Faithful under Fire

Panning for Gold

3. Believing Is Seeing 21

A Whirlwind Intro to Worldviews

Like Gestalt

C-F-R-C

The Biblical Comedy

The Re-sighting of Saul/Paul

4. A Story-Framed Life 34

Life in the Shire

Stories in Conflict

Hearing and Telling the Story

5. Fish-Eyed Learning	46
The Disembodied Mind	
Thinking Scripturally	
Creation	
Fall	
Redemption	
Consummation	
6. Four-i-ed Learning	55
Integration	
Idolatry	
Investment	
Imagination	
Herbie's Bible	
7. Embodying the Outrageous Idea	71
Connect Up, Connect Out	
Dig Deep, Dig Slow	
8. Chutes and Ladders	83
Read Twice, Write Thrice	
Dream Big, Act Small	
Work Hard, Play Hard	
Conclusion	99
Appendix I: Deeper	103
Appendix II: Liturgies for Learning	111
Appendix III: Student Responses	119
References	123
Acknowledgments	127

Preface to New Edition



“This is the book I was telling you about. It helped me to see why all of my classes matter. Even boring biology. You should read it.” I overheard this conversation while browsing at a college bookstore. The student was talking to her friend, holding a copy of the first edition of *The Outrageous Idea of Academic Faithfulness*. She had no idea I had anything to do with the book. I wanted to jump up and down, set off some fireworks, sing the “Hallelujah Chorus,” give her a big hug, and call my mom. But I just stood there, misty eyed.

We have been overwhelmed by the response to this book, first published in 2007. Our prayer from the beginning was to help students think more deeply about the intersection of faith and learning. We set out to offer guidance, tell stories, and suggest a few practices for bringing these two words together: academics and faithfulness. From our experience working with college students, we knew that many students were craving a faith that made a difference in everyday life. We also noticed that many college students were dissatisfied with the status quo, with going through the motions to get a grade, with learning for the sake of a diploma. But, truth be told, we never imagined that this book would garner such positive feedback. One student wrote this: “The book has a casual feel, without being too childish. I dreaded reading it at first but actually think the stuff in it is

pretty relevant, and put into words a lot of things I was feeling. It was good to read and know that some of the things I felt were normal!” And from another student: “I thought this book was instructive in the way it told us to evaluate the reason for our learning. As a busy college student, I can attest to the fact that it is incredibly easy to get lost in the midst of so many responsibilities and lose sight of the true purpose of our studies: to glorify Christ.”

May this new edition be used to that end, to motivate you for biology and the rest of your courses, to help you articulate your faith, and to glorify Christ the King!

For Jesus and his kingdom,
Don and Derek

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 together the challenges raised here and to add your own stories to those told.

The title of the first edition of this book was *The Outrageous Idea of Academic Faithfulness*. We wrote it to invite students

into the adventure of uniquely Christian and culturally relevant learning. We believe that all Christians are called to “take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ” (2 Corinthians 10:5). 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 still like that old title, but we think the title of this edition is more inviting.

Even though the word *outrageous* is no longer in our title, we know that some of our suggestions will sound outrageous. 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 experience, 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 God calls *every* Christian student 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, 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 seek.

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 Christian 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 and everyday life matters; a Christian view gives us 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 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 whom 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 others 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 ideas 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



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, now also 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 armful 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 romantic tunes. 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 many other things under the big top 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 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 novel *I Am Charlotte Simmons*. 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 strategically 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 blariness 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 from 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 begin college with Beer and Circus expectations, your expectations can be fulfilled wherever you go to school. I imagine that you can play tennis *au naturel* 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 hardwired 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 (such as 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 (aka 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 as if

she had. And she didn't just read, she seemed to understand 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 impossible, 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 leapfrog 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 sunburned tennis partners to the bonfire as well. Let the liquor burn along with 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 it's 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 and sisters, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God—this is your true and proper worship. Do not conform 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 are 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 worshiped) on college campuses?
4. Read Romans 12:1–2. What are the far-reaching implications of these verses for your time in college?

Babylon U?



Mrs. Burns shook the beans out of me. That’s what my sixty-something kindergarten teacher with flaming red hair called it. I guess I was still trading my lunchbox snack when we were supposed to be practicing “quiet time.” Burns was stealthy, and somehow she came up on me from behind and sank her talons into my shoulders. She shook so hard that I’m lucky my head didn’t fly off. She wouldn’t get away with this kind of abuse today, but back then we all fell prey to the talons at one time or another. And I guess we learned a lesson of some kind.

Evidently Robert Fulghum, author of *All I Really Need to Know I Learned in Kindergarten*, learned some lessons in kindergarten too, but all of his lessons are so sunny, so “Precious Moments.” Here are a few of those precious lessons:

1. Share everything.
2. Play fair.
3. Don’t hit people.
4. Put things back where you found them.
5. Say you’re sorry when you hurt somebody.

6. Warm cookies and milk are good for you.
7. Take a nap every afternoon.
8. When you go out into the world, watch out for traffic, hold hands, and stick together.

The lessons that I learned, reinforced by twelve more years of schooling, weren't so sunny:

1. Don't share, but strive to get ahead.
2. Cheat if you can get away with it.
3. Hit people hard, especially on the field.
4. When you find something, keep it.
5. If someone gets hurt, deflect the blame.
6. Cookies and milk may be good, but beer is better.
7. Sure, take a nap every afternoon, during chemistry.
8. When you go out into the world, watch out for perverts and look out for number one.

Maybe Fulghum went to better schools than I did. I don't mean to be so sour. I love school, and I loved just about every year of it. But I can't help feeling a little apprehensive about what is really going on. It sure feels like something is wrong in a setting in which violence and abuse is rampant, in which athletic prowess is celebrated more than academic achievement, and in which education for responsible action is easily trumped by education for upward mobility.

Colleges and universities aren't what they should be either. In fact, nothing this side of Eden is as God intended. Sin has twisted and hardened each of us. Even human institutions like colleges and universities have been deformed by sin. Colleges are tangled in bureaucracy. The curriculum is fragmented and, as a whole, incoherent. I had no idea why I had to take half the courses I took, and no effort was made to show me connections between courses—or for that matter, the connection between coursework

and life. Cultural idols like money and power corrupt the interests of institutional leaders and students alike. Academic ideologies mark fault lines between and within departments. Sometime during the first semester or so, students come to this realization—*It's a jungle out there!* Most students will be able to skirt the quicksand of despair, but sooner or later all of us will be scratched and tangled in the nettles of a thousand conflicting ideas and values.

In an equally confusing world, Paul provided the Colossians with sage advice: “See to it that no one takes you captive through hollow and deceptive philosophy, which depends on human tradition and the elemental spiritual forces of this world rather than on Christ” (Colossians. 2:8). We need to recognize the danger of deceptive philosophies and traditions and to undertake our collegiate journey with care and courage.

Daniel and Friends

We can learn a great deal about surviving in the jungle of contemporary American higher education by studying a student born long ago and far away. The biblical prophet Daniel was born sometime late in the seventh century BC. The northern kingdom of Israel had long before been taken into captivity by the Assyrians, and during Daniel's lifetime his own homeland of Judah too was sacked, this time by the Babylonians. Babylon was the most powerful nation of the world in that day. The Jewish people, vastly outnumbered and overpowered, could not stand up against the invading soldiers. Jerusalem was placed under siege and eventually was razed. There was one thin hope for the Jews—holding on to faithfulness as exiles in Babylon.

The Babylonian empire had spread quickly across what is today the Arabian Peninsula. In the process of rapid advancement, the Babylonians learned an important lesson in ancient warfare—that every victory could not be followed by the annihilation of the conquered. Eventually the Babylonian armies

would be depleted and spread too thin to maintain the regime. Some nations had to be conquered and left intact in order to enlarge the kingdom. Conquered nations would resume farming and trade and would pay tribute to the victorious empire.

This strategy for empire building worked particularly well for the Babylonians when the distinctive cultural identity of the conquered nation was dismantled, and the people were enculturated into the new regime. Centuries later, Israel proved to be a constant thorn in the side of the mighty Roman empire because the Jews refused to be assimilated. There is a lesson in this history, one repeated in dozens of contemporary movies: real heroes don't knuckle under. They stand for their own culture against the tyranny of invading colonizers.

The opening verses of Daniel reveal that a campaign to assimilate the Jews was already under way. Articles from the temple in Jerusalem were carried off to adorn the temple of a Babylonian god (Daniel 1:2). Young Jewish men, the best and the brightest, were also deported to Babylon (vv. 3–4). These young men were to be taught the language and literature of Babylon, and apparently to be spoiled in the process. Food from the king's chef and choice wine were provided. These students were also assured that important jobs in the Babylonian regime awaited them upon completion of their studies.

Why heap such generosity on these prisoners of war? King Nebuchadnezzar was killing two birds with one stone. At the same time that he was strengthening the administration of his kingdom with the best talent available, he was also subverting Jewish culture by removing key leaders and assimilating them into Babylonian culture. Pretty sneaky. Recruits were taught a new vocabulary and new stories and promised a better future. The new patterns of thought and life were affirmed and rewarded.

To be honest, such assimilation didn't just happen long ago in Babylon. Similar transformation happens for every student in a college setting. Students are confronted with new learning

and stories, assured that lucrative employment awaits, and socialized into patterns of thought and life that may last for years to come. People are always being “trained” for certain patterns of life by the culture that surrounds them. What you learn and how you live while in college really matters. And to the degree that your mind is not renewed by the gospel and your life is not transformed by the power of Christ, you will conform to the dominant culture. (This takes us back to the earlier discussion of Romans 12:1–2, where we were encouraged to be nonconforming cultural transformers.)

Daniel and his three friends, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah, saw through the assimilation strategy. They chose to stay true to their own culture’s dietary practices rather than to defile themselves with the royal food and wine. They convinced the official overseeing their “training” to let them eat only vegetables and drink only water for ten days. After the ten days, they looked healthier and better nourished than the other hostages, so the official let them maintain their diet. Perhaps this story about food is told because it reveals the first step in the faithful counterstrategy of the young Jewish men. Stay true in the little things, and trust in the provision of God.

Evidently, these four young men were exceedingly sharp. The text tells us that to them God had given “knowledge and understanding of all kinds of literature and learning” (Daniel 1:17). Perhaps this came mystically, God pouring these insights into their ears at night. More likely, these fellas were gifted with good minds and were provided with a good education. They were good students. Daniel was given a little something extra: the ability to understand visions and dreams of all kinds. When it came time for testing, the king himself questioned the hostage students. In every matter of wisdom and understanding, these four tested *ten times* better than all the magicians and enchanters in the entire kingdom! Now, I’ve scored well on a few tests in my day, but I don’t think anyone would ever say that I was

ten times smarter, even than a stone. Exaggeration or no, these guys were smart. And that's not the best thing about them. The best thing is that, come what may, no matter what, these guys were faithful. They stood up for what they believed.

Daniel chapter 2 sets up the memorable stories in chapters 3 and 6. In chapter 2, Daniel's special gift for interpreting dreams comes in handy. None of Nebuchadnezzar's counselors or magicians was able to interpret the king's vexing dream. Nebuchadnezzar made the task tricky by refusing to relay the dream to them, so they couldn't rely on the usual hocus pocus and symbolic assessment. Failure to interpret the dream would spell disaster for the reputedly wise (v. 5). After much prayer, Daniel stepped forward and told the king both his dream and its meaning. This miraculous revelation elicited a good confession from Nebuchadnezzar: "Surely your God is the God of gods and the Lord of kings and a revealer of mysteries, for you were able to reveal this mystery" (v. 47).

Nebuchadnezzar was either a religious grandstander or so religiously eclectic and confused that he could not live out this good confession. For all of his lavish praise of God, he had trouble staying true to his confessions. Daniel, however, was rewarded handsomely for his service to the king. He received fantastic gifts and a position of high honor as ruler over all of Babylon's wise men and governor over the entire province of Babylon (vv. 48–49).

Daniel's first order of business was to hire his three friends to govern Babylon with him. Instead of staging midnight raids or plotting a subversive coup, instead of attacking Nebuchadnezzar and his policies, what did these four exiles do? They served in the empire that had destroyed their own nation and defiled the temple of God. These four Jewish lads enacted (as we will see) bold displays of peaceful resistance when the requirements placed on them called for it, but in the meantime they applied their own wisdom to the cultural context in which God had placed them.

Faithful under Fire

When you've got more gold than you know what to do with, you can either (1) start another war to get more or (2) build something really big with it. Nebuchadnezzar must have been growing tired of endless battles, so he resorted to the second option. On the plain of Dura, he erected a golden image of himself that was 90 feet high and 9 feet wide (Daniel 3:1). It is no use making a gigantic idol unless people are going to worship it, so Nebuchadnezzar decreed that all people must fall down and worship the image of gold (v. 5). Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah (renamed by the Babylonians as Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, another sneaky ploy to distance them from their own culture and beliefs and connect them to gods of Babylon) defied the call to worship this idol, even though the fiery furnace was super-heated and open wide to receive them.

Upon hearing of their defiance, Nebuchadnezzar was thrown into a rage. "What god will be able to save you from my hand?" The three friends took the opportunity to testify: "The God we serve is able to deliver us from [the blazing furnace], and he will deliver us from Your Majesty's hand" (v. 17). They may have been shaking in their sandals, but you sure can't hear it in their words. In fact, they deliver the next line with such cool confidence that it almost sounds overscripted. "But even if he does not, we want you to know, Your Majesty, that we will not serve your gods or worship the image of gold you have set up" (v. 18). Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah were not about to be co-opted by Babylonian beliefs and laws. They would not conform, come what may.

In chapter 6, Daniel finds himself in a similar situation. Daniel, the text reveals, has excelled in unparalleled ways in all of his duties, and Darius is ready to confer upon him the administrative oversight of the entire kingdom (now under Persian rule). In their jealousy, competing administrators conspire to discredit Daniel before the king, but they can find no corruption in him. Their diabolical minds don't rest until they hatch a plan to ruin

Daniel. An evil envoy approaches the king and persuades him that the people want to dedicate themselves to a month of prayer for the king alone. They add a rider to this policy: anyone who violates this decree should be cast into the lions' den. When the feckless king goes along with the plan, the trap is set for Daniel.

Daniel's response, like his friends before him, provides wonderful insight into the priorities, practices, and character of a faithful exile. Here is the text of Daniel 6:10:

Now when Daniel learned that the decree had been published, he went home to his upstairs room where the windows opened toward Jerusalem. Three times a day he got down on his knees and prayed, giving thanks to his God, just as he had done before.

Daniel embodies for us not only courage but a deep commitment to faithful patterns of living. Come what may, he is going to be faithful.

Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah are cast into the furnace, and Daniel into the lions' den. Obviously, faithfulness was risky business back then. Faithfulness is still risky business. I know two students who failed courses because their professors were annoyed by their desire to explore a Christian perspective on the subject matter. I know another student who worked to pay for another semester of school so he could take additional Bible and philosophy courses to equip him for his ongoing work in business. Many students have sacrificed glory on athletic fields for faithfulness in the classroom. And they have become outcasts on the party scene because they weren't willing to conform to that world. This certainly isn't the kind of sacrifice described in the story of Daniel or in Hebrews 11. Some of the saints remembered there were tortured, imprisoned, stoned, and even sawed in two. But the sacrifices of these students were real nonetheless, and perhaps these are the kinds of sacrifices that we are being called to make.

Daniel and his friends are not simply faithful on the spot. They have been at it for a lifetime. Living faithfully in little

things has surely prepared them for costlier sacrifice. And it has prepared them to live in exile. Though they serve a culture not their own, the four friends are never enslaved by the idols and values of pagan Babylon. They live in hope that one day they will serve a true king in an everlasting kingdom. In the meantime, when things got hot, they are joined by one “like a son of the gods” in the fire (Daniel 3:25). And when things get wild, beastly wild, the tamer of all things wild is with them (6:22).

Panning for Gold

Life in America is a long way from life in Babylon. We could do much worse than to live in the cultural exile of our own day, but we must always keep in mind that life in a twisted world like ours is precarious and in many measures sinister. To one degree or another, every one of us has been *Babylonized*. We have been trained to fit into the dominant culture of our day and to serve its gods. Simply being a Christian does not free one from bondage to cultural idols. We need to learn how to defy the idols of our culture while, at the same time, serving within our immediate cultural context. That’s what Daniel and friends did. Obviously, it wasn’t easy.

Education has played an important role in shaping us for this dominant culture. Schools and colleges shape us to think and live in certain ways, and reinforce in us particular hopes and aspirations and attitudes. Some of these characteristics and goals are not so bad, whereas others may be diametrically opposed to God’s concerns for life in his world. We need to sift our educational experiences carefully, straining out dross and keeping the gold. As we grow in wisdom, we learn how to handle the pan, and we become better able to discern truth from lies. And this really ought to be a central purpose of our education—to grow in discernment and wisdom. “A discerning person keeps wisdom in view” (Proverbs 17:24). A wise person knows how

to sift. And in order to pan for gold, you've got to be knee deep in the water.

There is much to learn while in exile. Daniel and friends were good students of their time and context. We also have much to learn from our "Babylonian" friends and professors, from those whose learning is not rooted in faith in Christ. I have learned a great deal from professors and authors who are not Christian, and even from those who are anti-Christian. In fact, *pirating* the riches of pagan scholarship is a very old practice of Christian intellectuals. Those without a Christian perspective discover important insights into the nature of the world, of humans, and of every academic discipline.

Simply pirating pagan insights is not enough, however, not nearly enough. Borrowed ideas need to be carefully critiqued and integrated within a Christian perspective. This is one of the fundamental challenges of Christian scholarship and one of your responsibilities as a Christian student. We will provide some recommendations for this process of re-appropriating secular learning into a Christian perspective in chapter 4. But for now, this is the insight that we want to emphasize: humility must mark us deeply as we study, for "with humility comes wisdom" (Proverbs 11:2). It was once written that Moses was the most humble man to walk upon the earth. This same Moses was educated in all of the wisdom of the Egyptians, and apparently his secular training helped to equip him to shepherd Israel (Numbers 12:3; Acts 7:22). Like Daniel, Moses is a pretty good mentor for the Christian student.

Educational institutions are home to all kinds of deceptive philosophies, human traditions, and worldly principles (remember Colossians 2:8?). But educational institutions are also thick with opportunities for character formation and faith development. If God has given you the opportunity to pursue advanced learning, thank him daily as you renew your mind and grow in wisdom. Whatever kind of educational institution

you are attending, we think that God is willing to work with you right there.

Our perplexing times require that we cling to Christ in all aspects of our lives. Only in him can we live and love and think faithfully. The renewal of our minds is exactly what he has in mind. But every once in a while, if you are like me, you need to have the beans shaken out of you to awaken you to the challenge.

Discussion Questions

1. Toward the beginning of this chapter we say, “Education for responsible action is easily trumped by education for upward mobility.” What is the difference?
2. Read Colossians 2:8 and 2 Corinthians 10:5 (mentioned in the introduction). How are these verses similar? How are they different? Why are they important to keep in mind while you are learning new things?
3. Review the first six chapters of Daniel. In what ways is the story of Daniel a good example of what it looks like to be a Christian college student?
4. We suggest that, to one degree or another, every one of us has been “Babylonized.” What are some examples?
5. Pursuing academic faithfulness will require sacrifice. What sacrifices do you think you will need to make?
6. Whatever kind of educational institution you are attending, whether it be a Christian or a “secular” college, we think that God is willing to work with you right there. Are the challenges to academic faithfulness the same, no matter what kind of institution you attend? How might they be different?