

Being Open About My Faith Without Turning People Off

Mr. Elzinga shared these encouraging words about witnessing without offending with attendees of the Emerging Scholars Network Day Ahead at Following Christ 2008.

We are privileged to have Prof. Ken Elzinga share his thoughts with us. Dr. Elzinga is a faculty of long standing at the University of Virginia where he has been a living example of being “salt and light”. He has served both on InterVarsity’s Board and as a faculty advisor to campus groups. Over the course of his tenure Dr. Elzinga has served that university community with a faithful presence as a Christ-following professor. In this article he reflects on how Christian faculty can let the light of Christ shine through their work and through their lives on campus.
--Debra Clark, Interim Director of Faculty Ministry

The University of Virginia, where I serve on the faculty, was founded by Thomas Jefferson. As one might expect, the separation of church and state is taken very seriously at my institution. But for faculty members who are followers of Jesus at any college or university, it is prudent to think through what it means, in St. Peter’s words, “to give a defense of the hope that is within you, doing so with gentleness and reverence,” and not being counterproductive and turning people off in the process.

I would like to be exceedingly practical about doing this. I point not to myself as an example, but rather to my 40 years of experience, mixed with many mistakes and transgressions.

Letting Your Light Shine in the Classroom

Let’s go at the toughest one head-on by talking about letting your light shine in the classroom. If you are before students, no matter what you teach, I think it is possible to let them know that you are a follower of Jesus without calling in the ACLU or the administration. At least, that is my experience.

Let me use two strands to tie this particular lesson together. The first is the strand of example. I find, in teaching economics, that I can make references to Scriptural principles in a way that signals to students that I take the Bible seriously, or at least do not consider it a dead and worthless book. If I can do this in economics, you can do it in your field.

For example, economics has a law of diminishing marginal utility: the more dishes of ice cream you consume, the less is the amount of satisfaction (or utils) that you derive from each successive unit of consumption. Economists believe that is the way rational consumers are wired.

Often, I use a biblical illustration in contrast to an economics principle. An obvious one here is the parable of the lost sheep, in the Gospel according to John (and I would tell the student where it is): where the shepherd has 99 sheep safely in the fold, and goes out to search for the 100th

sheep, the 100th incremental unit of sheep, when the shepherd already has 99. According to the Bible, the shepherd rejoices more over finding that 100th sheep than the all of the 99 — as if having a 100th dish of ice cream brought more satisfaction than the first 99 dishes.

Two things are happening here when you use biblical examples:

1. Non-Christians note that you take the Bible seriously.
2. The Christians in the class are encouraged that you take the Bible seriously. To them, it is like being insiders, and that is pleasant because often they feel like the outsiders in the classroom.

Here's the second strand: I use testimony. It was a Jewish colleague and very dear friend who, early in my career, told me that I owed it to my students to let them know what made me tick. He told me that professors who are avid sailors make that known to their students. He asked: Why should a Christian be exempt from this?

I could think of two reasons.

One is that it is scarier for some of us to concede that we follow Jesus than telling students that, by the way, every summer we take a boat down the inter-coastal waterway. Boating seems like a hobby or maybe an appealing eccentricity. Being a born-again Christian to some seems like insanity, or at least a shortcoming.

The second is that nobody complains if you say you are a sailor. There is no constitutional separation of sailing and state the way there is church and state.

Let me be very clear on what I am saying here. If you are at a secular institution, and the institution is paying you to teach molecular biology, it would be wrong, for you to teach systematic theology, no matter how good you are at it.

But I do think, particularly at the end of the course, if you have taught molecular biology well, and the students see that you have worked hard and care about them, they probably would be concerned if you believed you could not share something personal with them. I let students know that I am a follower of Jesus on the last day of a large introductory course that I teach. I have given a brief testimony to thousands of students. The results I do not know, except that:

1. I have never had a student complain, at least not to me.
2. The remarks have not led hundreds to come forward at the end of class, like a Billy Graham Crusade.

But I have had people tell me they were touched by what I said. The most dramatic instance I can recall is a young woman, who was not then a believer but now is, who told me several years later that she was left in tears by what I said. So that's the classroom. It could as well be the laboratory.

Now let's talk about letting your light shine in your office.

Office Hours

How else might we serve our students — wash their feet as it were? Let me bring up *office hours*. At many colleges and universities, there are faculty members who can restrain their enthusiasm for office hours. You can recognize this immediately by the office door that reads, “Office hours by appointment only” or “Office Hours: 8:00-9:00 a.m. Monday morning.”

I found myself falling into the academic pattern of viewing office hours as an interruption. Some time ago, I began praying about my office hours: that I would see them not as a burden but as an opportunity for foot washing. I began to pray, before office hours began, that the Lord would bring to my office that day one student with whom I could share the gospel, either through specific evangelistic witness or through sharing something of what Jesus means to me, or helping in some special way.

It would be an exaggeration to say that this has led to hundreds of conversions. But it has led to many conversations, some of which have led to conversions. And in my own heart, when I let the Spirit lead, I discover a sense of anticipation about my office hours that was absent when I was a young pup on the UVA faculty.

About half the students who come to my office have questions that are not narrowly concerned with course material. And often those who are in academic difficulty are not in trouble because they do not have the intellectual horsepower to do economics. Their underlying problem is with broken relationships or broken lives. Their problem is not with economic analysis; it is with the fall of Adam.

Often their problems are beyond my human ability to solve. When this is the case, I may simply tell them that within my faith perspective as a follower of Jesus, when I confront major problems, I pray about them, and then I ask them: would they mind if I prayed for them? Right then and there. No one has ever demurred.

Now let me be as clear as I can. I do not know *ex ante* whether these students are Christians. Many are not. And if you are thinking, “well sure, they say yes; what choice do they have, and they really can't wait to get out of the office door.” Well, maybe. But I don't think that is the case.

I do not pray with every student that comes to my office with problems. It is only a minority. But I now pray with or for most every student who comes to my office who I know is a committed Christian. I honestly think some students are disappointed if they come to my office and I do not say a brief prayer for them.

I suspect I would pray for most every student who came to my office if I taught at a Christian school. Korean-American students at my university, many of whom are believers, in particular, relish being prayed for. I have had students make up excuses about economics and come to my

office in the hopes that I would pray for them. I have had Jewish and Muslim students return to my office against the chance I would pray for them again.

Now for those of you who might be assistant professors: I can imagine a hesitancy about praying with students, especially if you are at a state-supported institution, and particularly one where the forces of political correctness are robust. Let me suggest that you ask God for wisdom about this. Ask the Lord to give you wisdom to discern when such prayer is appropriate. A student who wants to know when the next test is, or whether chapters six and seven are really required reading, is not one to pray with or for. Perhaps prayer is reserved for that particular student in an unusually difficult situation where your own counseling wisdom is constrained; or for the student you know to be a follower of Jesus for whom a prayer is an encouragement and an affirmation. Now why do I pray for my students?

Because Jesus taught His students how to pray – and His disciples often saw Him at prayer and were invited to be with Him when He prayed. I want my students to know that I pray. I want my students to see me broken before them as a man of prayer so that they know it is OK for them to petition God. I also believe in the efficacy of prayer, though often, to my shame, haltingly. I pray because it reminds me that the world in which I live, and the time I have been given, even my office hours, are claimed by my Lord and this is one way that He has staked out this territory as His.

I cannot fully imagine the impact if faculty regularly prayed not only for, but with, their students.

Shining Your Light on Campus

Now let me talk about letting your light shine on campus generally. How do you do this?

If you are a decent public speaker, consider giving talks to Christian student groups. If you are not a decent public speaker, learn to be one, and then give talks to Christian student groups.

There are three reasons to give such talks:

1. You may have students who enjoyed how you taught 18th Century English Literature, and they may be curious to hear what you have to say about Christianity in the 21st century.
2. You may have something to say to Christian students: they may be edified by the content of your talk, based on your longer experience in the faith, your wisdom, and your skills in Biblical exegesis.
3. Even if they never remember the talk, your student audience may be encouraged that you took a stand; that you, as a faculty member, were willing to identify with them; that you were willing to give an imprimatur to what they are doing, in their IVCF chapter meeting, their FCA large group meeting, their Cru meeting.

I will be frank with you: I know how little I retain from listening to some of the best preaching in the country. How can I expect students to retain what I have to say about the Christian faith?

But this I know: Christian students at the University of Virginia inhabit an institution where the major problem they face is not that their professors have set their mind against the Christian faith; it is that their professors teach as if the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob did not exist. In a way, this is worse than saying Christianity is false; it is to signal that, Christianity is simply irrelevant.

If you are available to Christian students, they realize that you are a professor for whom the whole apparatus of Christianity is not irrelevant. It is your focus; it is the anchor of your life; it is what gives your life meaning in the here and now; it offers the future you call the blessed hope. It is the gospel; good news.

The Home

Let me also mention the home. What does it mean, at least for me, to wash my students' feet with regard to where I live? For many professors, their home is their castle: and the bridge is up and the moat is filled. Students are not welcome there.

Jesus did not have a home, as we think of "a home." But we know that his students, his disciples, were with him, and not only when he formally taught them as their rabbi. For me, this aspect of Jesus' life has come to mean making my home a welcome place for students.

My wife and I have found that having students over at 9 p.m. for a one hour brownies-and-milk study break fits their schedules and ours and is a great way to show Christian hospitality. Every Thanksgiving, I extend an invitation to all of my students to have dinner at our home if they are not going elsewhere. Thanksgiving is a great time to explain to foreign students why we, as followers of Jesus, are thankful.

The classroom (or laboratory), the office, the home and the campus generally: these are all arenas where Christian faculty can "be ready to give a defense of the hope that is within you, doing so with gentleness and reverence."

One of the upside down aspects of my life as a professor is that, when I am faithful in little things, God seems to protect me with big things.

In the academic life, little things in my office typically involve processing data: on paper, by voice, or in digital form. This is your fate as well.

If students ask you to write letters of recommendation, be faithful to that task.

If students write you a letter, send you an email message, ask you to call: do so. I frequently do this in the evening, and students seem grateful that I took the time to do this.

I would encourage you to initiate correspondence. Even hard copy. Because we live in a world where so few hard copy letters are written, they stick out.

If I learn of a student in my class who has a serious illness or a death in the family, I try to write them a letter of consolation and concern. Professors have abdicated so much in colleges to the professional administrators, and we complain about it. We don't have to abdicate concern to the various deans and counselor professionals.

For years I wrote a personal letter of congratulations to every student of mine who got an A+. I was proud of them. They made me look good too. I still do this. But now I write a letter to every student that fails my classes. One fall I wrote 30 of these letters.

I suspect Jesus would have thought first to write the F students. The A+ students already get lots of strokes. It took me about twenty years to catch on to writing the young men and women who failed my class, and whom, perhaps, I had failed as their servant.

Let me add, as a footnote, that letters to students can be a powerful avenue of service: in part because so few letters are written by faculty to students, at least at my institution. I make it a practice to write every student of mine when I am notified by the dean's office that one of them is ill or has had some sad event take place in their life. Often, mine is the only letter they receive from their school.

I end most of my letters and emails with the expression, "Under His mercy." I am by nature shy and this, originally, seemed bold to me. But the expression has encouraged believers and prompted some recipients "to give a defense of the hope that is within" me (to them). One prominent economist acknowledged to me how he wished he could end his correspondence this way.

Bottom Line

Bottom line: you probably won't offend or turn others off by your Christian witness, even your evangelistic efforts, if everyone knows you care. You genuinely care. You care, whether they become Christians or not. If you have a servant's heart, if you are kind, if you are generous, if you praise the work and accomplishments of others, if you show concern not only for the chaired professors and deans, but for the custodians and secretaries, you will not have to hide the light of the gospel under a bushel.

Conclusion

Sometimes my students ask me how long I have been teaching at the University of Virginia. When I tell them I joined the faculty right out of graduate school in the fall of 1967, some hardly know what to say. They are either thinking to themselves: "that's longer than I've been alive," or they are thinking, "gosh, after all these years, you'd think he could have gotten a different job by now."

But after more than forty years, when one might expect boredom to set in, or at least the economic law of diminishing marginal utility to take its toll, teaching continues to be fresh, challenging, scary, and rewarding. And that's because, by God's grace, I am accompanied by the Master Teacher. I have come to experience, haltingly and with many shortcomings, the paradox

of the teacher who leads by serving. And for me, this has become a central theme of the connection between Jesus and the academy.

[Kenneth Elzinga](#)

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An expert in antitrust economics, and he has testified in several precedent-setting antitrust cases, including three Supreme Court decisions. As the author of more than seventy academic publications, Mr. Elzinga also is known for his mystery novels, co-authored with William Breit (under the penname Marshall Jevons), in which the protagonist employs economic analysis to solve crimes. Mr. Elzinga has a B.A. and honorary doctorate from Kalamazoo College and a Ph.D. from Michigan State University. He has been a member of the faculty at the University of Virginia since 1967.