



Mark Strand

Student and Early Career Forum

A Compass for Christian Graduate Students

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When I began my PhD studies, I made a covenant with God to keep practices and beliefs that I hoped would not only sustain me spiritually through graduate school, but would allow my faith to flourish and grow in ways I deeply needed at that time.

Many sincere and faithful Christian students find graduate school to be challenging to their faith. Christian fellowship groups to support graduate students are fewer than for undergraduate students. Graduate school is busy and generally quite intense so it is harder to find time for Christian fellowship and Bible study. Graduate school also involves focused thinking which asks graduate students to process what they know and believe. This challenge to integrating their faith with learning can be overwhelming for some students.

When I began my PhD studies, I made a covenant with God to keep practices and beliefs that I hoped would not only sustain me spiritually through graduate school, but would allow my faith to flourish and grow in ways I deeply needed at that time. In this paper, I would like to introduce what I did, not to be woodenly copied, but as a conceptual challenge to other graduate students who would also like to walk faithfully and humbly with God as they complete their graduate studies.

Discernment

First I wanted to acknowledge my limitations and approach learning with a proper attitude. Ecclesiastes 8:16–17 says,

When I gave my heart to know wisdom and to see the task which has been done on the earth (even though one should never sleep day or night), and

I saw every work of God, I concluded that man cannot discover the work which has been done under the sun. Even though man should seek laboriously, he will not discover; and though the wise man should say, "I know," he cannot discover.

These words helped me approach my learning with humility. I did not casually disregard what I was taught, and I worked hard to suspend judgment, but this perspective helped me to approach my professors' knowledge with circumspection and modest expectations. I was less intimidated by my classmates and professors. Though I worked very hard and pushed my mind to its known limits, I maintained a healthy skepticism about what I was learning.

One of my mentors in the school of integrating faith and science is ASA (American Scientific Affiliation) legend Richard Bube. In his very helpful book *Putting It All Together*, he wrote about the caution we must use in banking on our scientific knowledge. He wrote that we must remember "the triple relativizing of scientific knowledge as: 'an approximate description of a limited number of physical phenomena which in their turn are only a limited part of our human experience.'"¹ I did not give up my commitment to reason, but neither did I place false confidence in it. While I worked hard to understand and absorb what I was learning, I was reluctant to allow the content I was learning to become the basis for a worldview. For example, we spent a lot of time studying sociobiology and altruism from an evolutionary perspective. I had previously considered sociobiology to be ethically irrelevant, but these discussions pushed my understanding of altruism to new depths. So whereas I became more conversant and appreciative of the discipline, I was yet reluctant to make it the basis for ethical decision-making.

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Some of the books that were helpful to me in spiritual formation and integrating academics and faith during graduate school are listed below:

- Bryant L. Myers, *Walking with the Poor* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1999)
- Mark A. Noll, *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1995)
- Ronald L. Numbers, *The Creationists* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1993)
- V. Samuel and Chris Sugden, *Mission as Transformation: A Theology of the Whole Gospel* (Oxford: Regnum Books, 1999)
- James W. Sire, *Habits of the Mind: Intellectual Life as a Christian Calling* (Downers Grove, IN: InterVarsity Press, 2000)
- Harold Turner, *The Roots of Science: An Investigative Journey Through the World's Religions* (Auckland, New Zealand: Deep Sight Publishing, 1998)
- Ian G. Barbour, *Religion and Science: Historical and Contemporary Issues* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1997)
- Charles Habib Malik, *A Christian Critique of the University* (Downers Grove, IN: InterVarsity Press, 1982)
- George M. Marsden, *The Outrageous Idea of Christian Scholarship* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997)

Personal Humility

"The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, and the knowledge of the Holy One is understanding" (Prov. 9:10). No academic knowledge could bring me closer to God, so I did not boast in my learning. Rather, I sought to fear and know God as the path to true wisdom and understanding (Ps. 119:97-100). This was a precious reminder to me as I struggled to use my mind to its full capacity, and also to walk humbly with God. Augustine said, "Unless you believe, you shall not understand." It is not through a complete understanding that we come to know God; rather, as we come to know God through faith, we have a grid by which to understand the things we learn and experience. I cannot claim to have come to understand all things, but my faith commitment has given me a cornerstone upon which to build my growing structure of knowledge and faith.

It is essential that one have a strong support network during graduate studies. I was married and we had children during my PhD studies, so family and church were my most important support. Most graduate students are single, and likely find their graduate student fellowship to be of greatest value in helping them stay spiritually strong during graduate school. Groups such as the InterVarsity Graduate Ministry provide excellent fellowship and the opportunity to work through issues unique to graduate students (www.intervarsity.org/gfm/).

One area where a strong graduate student fellowship can help the Christian graduate student is deciding on a direction for their research and future career. I began my PhD studies with the intention of returning to my same job, but most students will make these decisions as they are in the process of their studies. Being involved in a strong fellowship will help you to make these decisions in a supportive environment and without ignoring your spiritual calling as you look to your future.

Spirit-Guided Intellect

Paul's commitment in 1 Cor. 14:15 has become mine too: "I shall pray with the spirit and I shall pray with the mind also; I shall sing with the spirit and I shall sing with the mind also." This reminder gave me courage to bring my mind to church on Sunday and to pray and sing with my mind. It also gave me confidence to bring what I was learning with my mind into my daily devotions and spiritual disciplines and into my worship of Christ. This verse also gave me comfort in the other direction as I felt the presence of God and the wisdom of the Holy Spirit filling my mind and my spirit as I wrestled with my studies. Over time my faith grew and my thinking changed, even as I remained rooted in Christ.

Practical Disciplines

I was committed to maintaining a twenty to thirty-minute personal quiet time each day, no matter how busy or how tired I was. This discipline allowed me to daily draw on God's Word and his Spirit to guide me.

I did not study on Sundays. That time was reserved for worship, rest, and family time (Exod. 31:17). The pressures and busyness of graduate studies need to be balanced with regular rest and renewal. Working hard through the week, and then resting on Sundays, allowed me to wake up Monday morning with my work done and a refreshing day of fun and family time behind me. It is no loss to sacrifice Sunday for true Sabbath rest. It is gain all the way around. Sunday was my time to let studies and worldly pressures reassume their proper size in my life. It was my day to stunt my ambitions and competitiveness and to rest before the Lord.

I made it my habit at all times to be reading one Christian book alongside my studies (some of the more influential books I mentioned above). Some of the books were related to my discipline and a help to the challenge of integrating faith and science. Other books were a diversion from my studies and meant simply as spiritual food or as recreation, such as the fascinating book by Kosuke Koyama titled *Water Buffalo Theology* (New York: Orbis Books, 1999).

I actively sought for ways to merge the Truth with what I was learning at the time. Many of us in the ASA

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are familiar with James Clerk Maxwell, physicist and theologian (1831–1879). He was a model Christian in science. His practice was to spend Sundays studying theology, seeking to relate his faith and his science. It has been said of Maxwell that through this process of disciplined study of theology, “basic structures in his theology and his science began to match, and he assimilated them from his theology before he began to pursue them in his science.”² It was said of him that his “mind was stored with Christian theology,” and when he turned to his science, he was able to rely on his theological convictions to guide him. This is an admirable approach worthy of modeling by us in the ASA.

I maintained active membership in the ASA and regularly attended ASA meetings and events. The ASA not only provided me with resources to guide my thinking, but also, through meetings, I was able to come to know living models of how to do it.

Personal Pursuits

I sought to never deny my faith in God or the authority of his Word in my life. This was a true step of faith, for I found many things I was learning that were in conflict with my faith. I agreed to hold on to my faith, trusting that God would give me understanding over time. I also accepted that some aspects of my faith would be forever in tension with human reason or knowledge. It also meant taking the risk to identify with Christ in class. I did this with care and patience, and it was largely a satisfying part of my graduate school experience. But it was challenging as well. I met with unfair generalizations made about the Christian faith. For example, one professor argued that because Christians believe that sin has cursed women with pain in childbirth, therefore Christians have a morbid desire for women to suffer and a reluctance to relieve women of unnecessary suffering. This myth had long since been disputed.³

The unique contributions that Christians and the church have made in science and in health services were often ignored, or at times delegitimized because they have a

faith basis. In these situations I chose to speak up with confidence, but with humility. I found that both professors and fellow students responded favorably to this approach. I believe they were most interested in whether my arguments were made with sincerity and with sound thinking, and less so with the exact content of my beliefs or arguments.

In order to help with processing and integrating faith and learning, I started a file of my observations, struggles, and new thoughts. By the end of my PhD program, the file was a thorough summary of my philosophy of faith and science and I have turned to it often since then.

Conclusion

The process introduced in this paper allowed me to enjoy intellectually rigorous, professionally satisfying, and spiritually invigorating graduate school days. I was able to be successful in my studies, I grew in my faith, and I believe my approach was a positive influence in an often contentious environment. It is my hope that Christian graduate students will be excellent in their academic performance, and still enjoy a robust and growing spiritual life during graduate school. The personal compass introduced here is a personal testimony of my experience in graduate school in hopes that other students might be able to think of similar or related ways to walk humbly with God during their graduate school days. Maybe you could create your own compass to guide you forward in your studies and in life. ♦

Acknowledgments

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Notes

¹Richard H. Bube, *Putting It All Together: Seven Patterns for Relating Science and the Christian Faith* (New York: University Press of America, 1995).

²Raymond J. Seeger, “Maxwell, Devout Inquirer,” *Journal of the American Scientific Affiliation* 37, no. 2 (1985): 101–2.

³A. D. Farr, “Religious Opposition to the Obstetric Anaesthesia – A Myth?” *Annals of Science* 40 (1983): 159–77.

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