



James R. Nichols

Communication

The Science Professor as Pastor?

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University professors attempting to use their professor roles as a ministry must adopt some approaches that allow them to deal appropriately with their academic responsibilities toward students while, at the same time, incorporate spiritual formation and soul care in the classroom, laboratory, or studio. One helpful model is to view the professor as having a pastor role, at least some of the time. Whether with individual students or groups of students, the professor as pastor should anticipate opportunities to introduce spiritual reflection incorporated with the academic material. Although the specifics will differ with each academic discipline, every academic course includes specific topics that lend themselves to spiritual reflection, if only briefly. The goal is not to turn the classroom into a pulpit, but to legitimize the professor and student activity as being of concern to God.

There are two groups of people that I envy. They are caricatures, I understand. But they do set some extremes for me. The first group consists of my preacher friends. Spiritual matters are not all they think about, of course, but it looks attractive to me to have a life in which my job is to study scripture, study those who study scripture, and to try to make sense of it all so that God uses me to draw others to him. And, I get paid for that—maybe not get rich, but I do not have to satisfy some other job-related performance responsibilities. It looks like the good life.

On the other hand, I envy some of my science friends who do not make any Christian claim. These friends get to plan experiments, collect data, read, write papers, and apparently do so without thinking much (if at all) about implications and conflicts other than science

disagreements. They do not have any apparent spiritual misgivings or church battles to fight. It looks like the good life.

Caricatures, yes, but these two groups do highlight the life of academic and spiritual tension for those of us who have chosen to try to live in both worlds.

I am nearing the end of my fourth decade as a full-time university biology faculty member. The first ten of those years were at a public institution, and the remaining years have been at a Christian university. During those years, I, like all others, have tried to figure out how to do my job well.

The first task has been to identify what my job really is. This is a fundamental concern. My academic responsibilities have been fairly clear. Appearing in my classes semester after semester are students either (1) interested in biology or something about science or (2) needing to fulfill some university science requirement. The course content

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for the two groups will logically differ: a student wishing to go to medical school needs information different than a music major taking his or her only science course. Furthermore, the nonscience major will probably enroll in a class with me only once—this is my only shot with this student. A science (or biology) major, however, may encounter me more than once before graduation. But my task with each student type is to combine my science background and my view of the current world in order to offer a course that includes some helpful, stimulating and, perhaps, convicting information, regardless of the student's goal in taking my class.

More perplexing, however, is how I am to function as a spiritual person in the student's life. Whether the student is a fellow believer or not, I have a responsibility from God to play a role in that student's life that draws him or her closer to God. Do not recoil from that statement as being too evangelistic. That is not the point. For every person I contact, I believe that I have a responsibility to leave that encounter with the person closer to God than before the encounter began. If they are in the same place with reference to God, I am troubled by that. And if they are farther from God after dealing with me, that is a serious criticism of my behavior.

As a Christian academic, regardless of my academic discipline, I am in the business of spiritual formation and soul care with my students. It is not sufficient for me to be simply a biology professor. It is not sufficient for me to be simply an educator, even an effective educator. Somehow I must include aspects of my instruction, guidance, and mentoring that surpass the academic discipline and reach into the eternal, even if only in a barely perceptible amount. Perhaps we need to move into the world of metaphor to investigate this tension.

Many potential metaphors have been proposed to describe the complexities of being an academic leader in a classroom or lab and, at the same time, being a person of faith. With each metaphor the roles of the instructor and student drop out in different ways. If we see the instructor as a guide, the student becomes a wanderer or searcher. If we see the in-

structor as a gardener, the student becomes a person of potential who requires nurturing and care as he or she grows. One of the common metaphors today (and most troubling to me) is the corporate model of education in which the instructor is preparing and delivering a product and the student is a customer. Spiritualizing that relationship is a real challenge for me.

If we take seriously the spiritual requirements of the academic life, the professor as pastor may be a helpful metaphor. Metaphors are just that, however—metaphors. They can be stretched to the point of being unreasonable, but there are aspects of the professor as pastor that may be instructive.

I make here a plea for a reflective life. I make here a plea for thinking before we act. Each one of us leads a life that involves far too much reaction rather than reasoned response. We just buy stuff; we just go places; we just say things; we just read, watch, listen to, and digest without appropriate reflection. As we encounter, especially, university students living in an instantaneous world, what can we do that will allow God to "filter in," in a palatable way? This is not a peripheral concern; it is fundamental to our role as adult Christians dealing with those not so far along the journey. And, for those of us in academia, this occurs with the backdrop of student concerns for career, grades, finances, and relationships.

My goal is to be more intentionally pastoral with my students. How this manifests itself, of course, depends on what I define as pastoral. The word "pastor" is a big word in scripture, encompassing such subideas as prophet, teacher, priest, witness, and shepherd. Trying not to be overwhelmed by the gravity of these images, those of us concerned about helping to spiritually form our students (in addition to instructing them in academic disciplines) search for some ways in which our own personal Christian stance fits into the word "pastor." This will take different individual forms, but it represents a unique role and opportunity to offer some soul care to students who have come (not by accident, I believe) under our influence.

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Pastoral Care and Students

Pastoral care for students can be either to individuals or to a whole group (such as a whole class). Its primary quality is that I move away from or past the purely academic to a personal spiritual level. I may not stay there long, but I do go down there for a while. This level involves vulnerability on my part, a reflection on my experience in the world as a Christian, my understandings of scripture, and my role as a Christian. On an individual basis, this is similar to counseling, perhaps, but it has a clear spiritual direction emphasis.

The reader from another discipline will have different potential topics as pivots, but I have found that there are science topics and nonscience topics that are excellent seeds for spiritual reflection, even if the time of reflection is brief.

1. Parts of my instructional responsibilities are in the biomedical ethics area. Clearly, there is a rich array of concerns here. Having students read some of the seminal papers in areas of abortion, stem cell research, genetic engineering, physician-assisted suicide, various reproductive technologies, managed health care, and others and then discussing such material is both troubling and instructive to students. A colleague from my past has described education as being subversive. Although perhaps overstated, each of us looking backward at our own education can see that truth. I have found it an exciting adventure to supply basic reading material to students and to process it with them. Once an atmosphere of Christian civility is established in the classroom (and that is very important), such discussions can be vibrant growth-producing opportunities for both students and professors. It is natural to infuse such discussions with pastoral comments.

A second pertinent area in my discipline is to deal pastorally with the topic of evolution and creation. A fair number of students, especially in a Christian institution, will enter the classroom with strongly held stances. Some are, frankly, terrified at the prospect of having an intelligent (they concede) Christian professor influence them away from a simplistic view of creation material. Others, because of a more rebellious spirit perhaps, carry chips on their shoulders in reaction to such simplicity. On this particular topic, as well as some others, I believe I can be most

helpful if I can defuse the topic a bit. Since this is a science class, students logically expect that I will try to lay out for them some good science. There is a lot of good science in evolutionary biology. Students need not be afraid of it. I have been fairly successful in identifying for students the aspects of evolutionary science that virtually all scientists accept. I try to identify for students that some have added a layer of philosophy to evolutionary biology, and although that may be quite interesting philosophy, it is not science. I have found it most helpful to consider the evolution/creation material in the second half of a course after I have established a pastoral relationship (at least partially) with the class.

2. There are many nonscience topics that are fruitful for pastoral consideration. If I am standing before a classroom of thirty students, I can almost be assured that a couple of those students are in deep grief about something in their lives. Their parents may be divorcing, their grandparents may be dying, they may have just broken up from a boyfriend or girlfriend. (I suggest that we older educators ought not be cavalier about the latter situation — this is serious stuff when you are twenty-one years old and, I believe, even more complicated because so many of these couples have been sexually involved.) Sometimes I will know about this grief in my classroom, but usually not. What I must do, then, is continue to play my academic role while acknowledging the lack of focus a student might have because of the current complications of life. And I need to verbalize that acknowledgment both in front of the class and in a private conversation if necessary. Often saying something pastoral in a larger group will stimulate a later personal opportunity to minister. “I felt as if you were actually speaking directly to me but you didn’t know it.”

In addition to the topics above are pastoral insights (given both collectively and personally) on academic honesty, other family circumstances, other sexual concerns, and — one of the most common — “I hate the church, but I love God. Actually, I’m not sure about anything.” The latter sets the stage for serious considerations of the paradoxical nature of Christianity in that it is a religion of individual response and relationship to God that leads instantly to a relationship with a community.

Some Concerns

If we are to take our ministry responsibilities seriously, there is certainly some legitimate pushback that we will receive. Much of this is entirely reasonable and deserves some forethought. Specifically, the professor as pastor metaphor sets up these criticisms.

1. A classroom is not a pulpit. We must not act as if it were. The students are paying tuition primarily to receive instruction in a specific academic discipline. If we fail to aid them in that goal, we are not doing what we are being paid to do. Having said that, however, we must be authentic with our students. On the first day of class, I tell my students that they should expect a rigorous academic course and that I expect academic excellence from them just as they expect it from me. I also tell them that there will probably be a few days when I come into the classroom with something on my heart that I will feel compelled to share with them. It does not happen very often, but it does happen.

2. There is an honesty concern. Most students incorrectly believe that, since we as professors are full-fledged adult Christians, we have pretty much figured out how to deal with the complications and paradoxes of faith. As we make pastoral comments, it might be embarrassing to us to realize that we are acting as if we understand some things that we most certainly do not. We may not feel legitimate in what we say.

As awkward as these times are, however, they themselves are teachable moments. I believe it is entirely honest to tell students that I am perplexed by something, that I have changed my mind about something, or that, frankly, something is a current challenge to my faith. I often remind students of the story in the Gospel of Mark (chapter 9) in which a father comes to Jesus with a health concern about his son. Jesus comments about how dealing with such matters is possible to those that believe. The father replies, "I believe, help my unbelief." Since that is where my faith journey often is, it seems reasonable to affirm that students may be there also.

3. There may be student resistance to dealing with anything other than the academic topic at hand. Science majors of various types in my classes usually

have clear career goals that involve achieving sufficiently high grades, an acceptable entrance exam score (for example, on the Medical College Admission Test), and a set of knowledge/information that will make them competitive applicants and students once they are admitted. They may resent any time, no matter how short, spent on what seems to them to be nonacademic items.

This seems to me to be a smokescreen, however, in light of the available time in a specific course. By creating a classroom atmosphere that is accepting and supportive of reasonable nonacademic considerations, the stage is set for serious academic work during the times we are on task in the classroom or lab. To be pastoral in a class does not mean that the academic standards are lowered for either students or professors.

4. Especially with individual student encounters, acting pastorally needs clear boundaries on confidentiality. When students express their personal or spiritual concerns, they have a right to expect them to be protected. They have come to us for wisdom, not to be taken advantage of. There are obviously gender issues that need boundaries during these student/professor encounters also.

5. The clearest tension I have with students is allowing them to be college students in the best ways but trying to move them past the more negative aspects of being college students. I was twenty-one years old once. There were some great joys of being twenty-one, but there were also some very difficult times. While I would like to be twenty-one again for the good aspects, I do not want to deal with the bad aspects again. At my current age, there are, similarly, good and bad aspects. Each age brings its own blessings and trials; no one age is better than another. It is unfair of me to want my students to see the world as I see it at my age.

On the other hand, as a more experienced Christian, I feel some obligation to try to help those behind me avoid some of the mistakes I made, or at least be more prepared for some of the realities ahead of them. They are primarily interested in constructing their knowledge containers. I am increasingly more interested in how their knowledge leads to wisdom.

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Conclusion

Let me take an unusual and, perhaps, off-putting turn in conclusion. I believe it is not too much to suggest that one role of professor as pastor is to introduce our students to, or to remind them of, their own mortality. Once again, I am not interested in pushing students to a level of life that they do not need to inhabit yet. This is not to be maudlin, but to be realistic. Students (and all of us) need an occasional reminder that life is finite. Biology students should grasp this easily. When I take students with me to deliver Meals on Wheels (often clients of advanced age or with significant health problems), it is appropriate to note with the students that each of us will look and act like that someday. When I take students with me to the hospice wing of the hospital, the message of life and death cannot easily be missed. This is different than the emergency department visit where the activity level, flashing lights, and sounds all seem very much alive. In the hospice area, the dominant features are ambient

light, care, and quiet. These are important lessons for younger people. They do not need to dwell on these matters, but they need to be aware of them.

A colleague of mine speaks of “prayerful teaching.” By this, he is addressing an approach to education whereby the learner, teacher, content, and teaching methods are informed by an ongoing dialogue with God. This is serious business.

One of my former professors noted in a faculty meeting that he was moved every fall by the recognition that all over the country, anxious hearts were looking toward our city and our campus because we held their most precious possessions. It is not enough simply to be educators for those students. We need to be people who draw them closer to God. ★

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UNITED STATES POSTAL SERVICE® (All Periodicals Publications Except Requester Publications)

Statement of Ownership, Management, and Circulation

1. Publication Title: Perspectives on Science and Christian Faith

2. Publication Number: 2 8 3 7 4 0

3. Filing Date: September 12, 2012

4. Issue Frequency: Quarterly

5. Number of Issues Published Annually: 4

6. Annual Subscription Price: \$40.00

7. Complete Mailing Address of Known Office of Publication (Not printer) (Street, city, county, state, and ZIP+4®): 55 Market St, Ste 202, PO Box 668, Ipswich MA 01938-0668

Contact Person: Lyn Berg
Telephone (include area code): 978-356-5656

8. Complete Mailing Address of Headquarters or General Business Office of Publisher (Not printer): Same as above

9. Full Names and Complete Mailing Addresses of Publisher, Editor, and Managing Editor (Do not leave blank):
 Publisher (Name and complete mailing address): American Scientific Affiliation, 55 Market St, Ste 202, PO Box 668, Ipswich MA 01938-0668
 Editor (Name and complete mailing address): James Peterson, Roanoke College, Salem, VA 24153
 Managing Editor (Name and complete mailing address): Lyn Berg, PO Box 668, Ipswich MA 01938-0668

10. Owner (Do not leave blank. If the publication is owned by a corporation, give the name and address of the corporation immediately followed by the names and addresses of all stockholders owning or holding 1 percent or more of the total amount of stock. If not owned by a corporation, give the names and addresses of the individual owners. If owned by a partnership or other unincorporated firm, give its name and address as well as those of each individual owner. If the publication is published by a nonprofit organization, give its name and address.)

Full Name	Complete Mailing Address
The American Scientific Affiliation, Inc.	55 Market St, Ste 202, PO Box 668, Ipswich, MA 01938

11. Known Bondholders, Mortgagees, and Other Security Holders Owning or Holding 1 Percent or More of Total Amount of Bonds, Mortgages, or Other Securities. If none, check box None

Full Name	Complete Mailing Address
-----------	--------------------------

12. Tax Status (For completion by nonprofit organizations authorized to mail at nonprofit rates) (Check one)
 The purpose, function, and nonprofit status of this organization and the exempt status for federal income tax purposes:
 Has Not Changed During Preceding 12 Months
 Has Changed During Preceding 12 Months (Publisher must submit explanation of change with this statement)

PS Form 3526, September 2007 (Page 1 of 3) (Instructions Page 3) | PSN 7530-01-000-9931 | PRIVACY NOTICE: See our privacy policy on www.usps.com

13. Publication Title		14. Issue Date for Circulation Data Below	
Perspectives on Science and Christian Faith		September 2012	
15. Extent and Nature of Circulation		Average No. Copies Each Issue During Preceding 12 Months	No. Copies of Single Issue Published Nearest to Filing Date
Worldwide			
a. Total Number of Copies (Net press run)		2164	2217
b. Paid Circulation (By Mail and Outside the Mail)	(1) Mailed Outside-County Paid Subscriptions Stated on PS Form 3541 (Include paid distribution above nominal rate, advertiser's proof copies, and exchange copies)	1672	1634
	(2) Mailed In-County Paid Subscriptions Stated on PS Form 3541 (Include paid distribution above nominal rate, advertiser's proof copies, and exchange copies)	0	0
	(3) Paid Distribution Outside the Mails Including Sales Through Dealers and Carriers, Street Vendors, Counter Sales, and Other Paid Distribution Outside USPS®	237	235
	(4) Paid Distribution by Other Classes of Mail Through the USPS (e.g. First-Class Mail®)	4	1
c. Total Paid Distribution (Sum of 15b (1), (2), (3), and (4))		1913	1870
d. Free or Nominal Rate Distribution (By Mail and Outside the Mail)	(1) Free or Nominal Rate Outside-County Copies Included on PS Form 3541	42	45
	(2) Free or Nominal Rate In-County Copies Included on PS Form 3541	0	0
	(3) Free or Nominal Rate Copies Mailed at Other Classes Through the USPS (e.g. First-Class Mail)	0	0
	(4) Free or Nominal Rate Distribution Outside the Mail (Carriers or other means)	40	37
e. Total Free or Nominal Rate Distribution (Sum of 15d (1), (2), (3), and (4))		82	82
f. Total Distribution (Sum of 15c and 15e)		1995	1952
g. Copies not Distributed (See Instructions to Publishers #4 (page #3))		169	265
h. Total (Sum of 15f and g)		2164	2217
i. Percent Paid (15c divided by 15f times 100)		95.91	95.8
16. Publication of Statement of Ownership <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> If the publication is a general publication, publication of this statement is required. Will be printed in the December 2012 issue of this publication. <input type="checkbox"/> Publication not required.			
17. Signature and Title of Editor, Publisher, Business Manager, or Owner  Executive Director			Date September 12, 2012
I certify that all information furnished on this form is true and complete. I understand that anyone who furnishes false or misleading information on this form or who omits material or information requested on the form may be subject to criminal sanctions (including fines and imprisonment) and/or civil sanctions (including civil penalties).			

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