

Danielle Isbell, Class of 2012

By Karen Beman



Danielle Isbell with John Dearduff

What is the value of Christian higher education? Based on her years at Bear Creek and a freshman course at Belmont University, Danielle Isbell has produced a thought-provoking perspective on the value of Christian higher education. She was selected as one of nine honors students chosen from various colleges invited to present a white paper at

the T.H. Olbricht Christian Scholars' Conference at Lipscomb University in Nashville last June. The mission of the Christian Scholars' Conference (CSC) is to create and nurture an intellectual and Christian community that joins individuals and institutions to stimulate networks of scholarly dialogue and collaboration.

Danielle reflects on her paper:

"The biggest impact I see is that this topic and paper forces teachers and educators to think practically about the link between teaching and Christianity. It is one thing to say that everything we do ought to be used for the glory of God, but it is another to actually think about how that can happen on a day-to-day basis. A lot of my paper revolves around teachers making these connections and being ready for them, not necessarily lecturing on inorganic connections to the Gospel. I believe so strongly that God is found in all things, and that He uses every experience to teach us. We just need to be seeking Him. So as far as shaping curriculum, I don't know if it would change much. But in seeking how what we learn relates to God, there are an abundance of connections. I firmly believe that if the one who teaches the course deeply seeks these, the vision and even the power of what is taught can be strengthened and deepened.

"One thing I have really learned is that by participating whole-heartedly in the things I love, opportunities have arisen that fit perfectly within what I want to do with my life. I could never have set a goal of presenting at the CSC (I didn't even know it existed), but it has been one of the most rewarding things I've been a part of. God takes our passions and allows us to use them for His glory often in ways we could never have predicted."

The Value of Christian Higher Education

By Danielle Isbell

Light indiscriminately falls to the earth to reveal all it touches. Particles of light linger on the tops of trees and waves break through to illuminate what is below. We don't live in a transparent or opaque world; we live in a translucent place full of both light and shadow. The manipulation of light is beautiful. If light were to fall directly to the earth as it travels unperturbed in space, there would be no twinkling stars, Northern lights, rainbows, or morning clouds. The way the earth perceives light is much like the way humans understand existence—imperfect and indirect. But there is a beauty to the imperfection of our attempts to understand. Our pursuit of knowledge—especially in Christian higher education—ought to be full of awe and humility; for the ability to reason is a gift and the incompleteness of every answer renders faith and reminds us that our comprehension of the world remains incomplete.

With this foundation of awe and humility, we have to understand that Christ is the most relevant aspect of life and so in all parts of education, from business to religion, Christ cannot be seen as separate from any course. This holistic approach to Christian education seems like an impossible ideal that is unachievable in the modern day university. I'm not going to claim that it is completely attainable, but there are ways to bring the reality of Christ into various aspects of education without seeming contrived or shallow.

Firstly, education needs to be seen as a partnership between students and teachers in which a teacher pushes students to discover and understand truth. Jesus is in all truth¹ and He delights in our honest pursuit of discovering what is true². The way humans seek spiritual truth requires more faith than the way we pursue an education. But Jesus links the truth in our studies and the truth of our faith. Through learning of his world, we can better understand Christ because He is in both the truth of our studies and the truth of faith. Therefore, He can enter every classroom by means of our pursuit to find truth.

Secondly, it is essential for instructors to connect course material to their own faith before guiding students through the class. Students are perceptive and we can discern the teachers who deeply care about their subject, and even faith, without explicit demonstrations of these things. For example, in classes that concern ethics—such as business or law—teachers ought to consider how various principles relate directly to Christian ethics. In classes such as science or math, teachers should reflect on how the interworking of creation reflects the mind of God. In English courses, instructors should contemplate how analyses and examples of the human experience relate to our own lives as individuals seeking purpose and God. It is not difficult to consider how or what we learn connects to the one who gave us the ability to learn.

Personally, my desire to be an English major began as my fascination for the power of words started to grow. Well-chosen words

1 John 14:6

2 Amos 5:4

can make me cry and laugh; they edify and develop my mind. My teachers were Christians, but they did not set aside time to discuss how Jesus is relevant to Raskolnikov's madness or how a well-written essay connects to the gospel. But English classes force me to confront difficult topics I may never experience for myself. This has grown my ability to empathize and to love others—the highest of Jesus' commands. It has caused me to be cautious in how I use words, and to be honest in my all that I write—from essays to fiction. It has stretched and grown my mind so that my faith can also deepen. The more I learn of others' experiences—whether fiction or nonfiction—the more convinced I am of our need for the gospel. These connections were not made for me, but made by me with the help of invested teachers.

Teachers should not plan lectures about faith, but integrate the true presence of Jesus in all parts of the course. In my experience, planned discussions about faith become forced. Teachers need to explore the links between faith and academia before they teach their subject so that when the connections between our Creator and our studies emerge, they can be discussed in a genuine and seamless manner.

There are slightly different criteria for my vision of Christian higher education regarding classes that pertain directly to Christianity. Christian scholars must have awe at the gift of understanding and must study with the humility of realizing there will be no perfect proof of Jesus' resurrection. But we have to see Christian education as necessary. It can give substance to our faith so that in relating to God, Christianity is not merely an emotional interaction with a spiritual being, but rather a motivating, eternally saving, contemplated, studied, and purpose-giving way of life that Christians know how to defend. In order to deeply grasp the foggy parts of Christianity, it is important to deal with issues of our faith and how studying our faith is relevant to today.

Nothing should be 'off-topic' or inappropriate to question because God has accounted for everything in the world and therefore, in a Christian's exploration of the world through education, there are no topics that we should shy away from. Those who do not believe in Christian doctrine are not going to question easy things, but they will directly target the areas of our faith that personally challenge the Christian the most. I want Christian higher education to push me to consider these questions in a real and a practical way, for if my professors don't require me to deal with these issues, the world certainly will. Let me share a few of my own experiences.

Throughout the year, I have had opportunity to meet other students from different schools and areas of the United States. In asking others about their worldviews, my own faith has been called the opium of the masses, a "crutch," a form of conformity, an ignorant stance, a view that works for me, and useless by people whom I care about. These comments have altered the way I view several statements common among Christians.

In church a couple of weeks ago, the pastor said something along the lines of "Knowledge and learning don't matter in the end, what matters is that people love Jesus." He has a point, but I found myself analyzing the implications of this statement. I believe this common phrase has to do with why Christianity has become "weak." While

some report that 78.3% of Americans call themselves Christian,³ a more in-depth study reveals that only 12% of congregates who attend mainline churches view Christianity as the only way to salvation.⁴ Because Christians emphasize the love of Christ above any other doctrine, and because the modern view of love lacks any connotation with discipline, many refuse to accept one of the most foundational statements of Jesus Christ: "I am the way the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me."⁵

Without the belief that Jesus is the only way to heaven, I am left with a religion that is merely a comfort for my fears and an unnecessary way to salvation. This is not something I would base my life upon. God did not design His creation to worship Him this way.

The university is a place where Jesus can use education to strengthen faith and produce hope. Faith without study is like a seed with no soil. Education allows faith to grow, for we will never understand all of the mysteries of our faith. Education and logic did not convert me to Christianity—Jesus did that. But without education, I would have abandoned my faith long ago. Education is how we understand the translucent way that light echoes about our world. Christian higher education is a beautiful and necessary part of glorifying God.

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Scriptural references (ESV)

Jesus said to him, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.

For thus says the Lord to the house of Israel: "Seek me and live"

3 "The Global Religious Landscape," pewforum.org, last modified December 18, 2012, <http://www.pewforum.org/global-religious-landscape-christians.aspx/>.

4 "Portrait of: Mainline Churches," pewforum.org, last modified 2010, <http://religions.pewforum.org/portraits#>

5 John 14:6