

On Being a Christian Student

My lifelong interest in knights, squires, suits of armour, heroic deeds and saving damsels in distress began when I was very young. Indeed, I began pretending myself a knight before I was old enough to sleep without a teddy bear. And as I was thus young, I did with my teddy bear what I hope many young boys still do. I knighted him. That is, I caused him to kneel before me and took my play sword—I cannot now remember if it was a wooden dowel or a piece of straightened wire—tapped my Teddy on either shoulder, and caused him to rise as a true knight. This meant, as you all know, that he was bound to do good deeds, to give help to any lady in distress, and never to be cowardly. It was just as well that I did not yet understand one very important and undeniable fact that would have annulled all my efforts to gain Teddy his knighthood. In order for anyone to become a knight, he must first be a man. Teddy bears need not apply to the king for knighthood, for none can be granted to them. The obvious parallel to our topic today is this: just as one cannot be a knight without being a man, so too one cannot be a Christian student without being a student. And with that said, I might do well to talk to you a little bit about what a student is. But there is another more important parallel I must bring out first.

Unlike Teddy, as I grew older I became a man myself. I put away my teddy bears and picked up old books instead. In them I read about real and imaginary knights. As I did, I became aware of something a little unnerving. Just as one cannot become a knight without being a man first, thus ruling out poor teddy from the Table Round, so too most of the important things about being a knight—honour, courtesy, kindness to those in need, devotion, and self-denial—are all things that one should really expect from every grown man. So, just as one must be a man before becoming a knight, so too, it turns out, one must behave like a knight if one wants to behave like a man. Well, this is a much more useful parallel to our topic today, for just as one must be a student if one is to be a Christian student, so too—I will argue—one must be a Christian if one is to be a student. Both halves of the title, “Christian Student” are necessary and mutually dependant. This second point is the controversial one, so I should spend most of my time on it.

It is controversial because we all know of millions of non-Christians who are quite convinced that they are students. They believe themselves thus for many reasons. Some believe it because they are enrolled in a school. This, it seems to me, is pretty shabby grounds for counting oneself a student. I suppose poor Teddy, if he could believe anything at all, might have believed himself a knight simply because he sat in the court of my boyhood nursery, doing nothing noble or heroic at all. But enrolment in an institution of learning cannot in and of itself make anyone a student without making the word “student” essentially meaningless. What this means for you is obvious. The fact that your parents go out of their way to enrol you in this home-school co-op and pay hard-earned money for you to enjoy good teaching on excellent subjects will not, in and of itself, make you a student. In fact, all it will make you is wasteful, should you choose to make a bad use of your own time and your parents’ resources.

But there are other ways by which people convince themselves that they are students when in fact they are not. Some believe themselves to be students because they get good grades, which is as silly as my believing that the mere tap of a bent wire on his shoulders was proof that Teddy was virtuous, heroic and brave. Grades are reports, and can only report one of two things. For the lazy student, they can report back to him something he already knows—that he is a lazy good-for-nothing. For everyone else, grades report to them the nature of their gifts in a subject. Now we

may assume right away that the lazy student is no student at all, but the conclusions we must draw for the gifted student are more complicated.

None of us have boundless intellectual gifts, but thankfully these gifts have very little to do with true studentship. No one is a good student simply because he has gifts enough in all his subjects to gain a high grade from his hard work. Neither is one a bad student because he hasn't the gifts to score high grades in every subject. A young person may fail all his courses only because he isn't good at them and yet, for all his Fs, still be a good student. Gifts may actually be an impediment to good scholarship. We think it impressive that Superman can fly. We are less impressed by the sparrows, less still by dandelion fluff. Of course, were we to think of being a student only in terms of outcomes, a very gifted person who worked hard and loved learning would be more successful than a person with mediocre gifts who shared the same work-ethic and zeal. But this is not the *moral* way to evaluate being a student. Were Teddy to have tried his best to save damsels in distress, he would have failed very quickly because his fingerless paws couldn't hold a sword and his pudgy arms couldn't wield it. But if he had done his best and died trying, we might justly have called him a knight of the first degree.

There is yet one more way of looking at grades which I haven't addressed because I don't know how relevant it would be for this audience. I hope none of you have fallen into the silly trap of working *for* grades instead of *for* learning. Imagine the knight who rides behind enemy lines to recover a dozen of his allies from being made into prisoners. Imagine this same knight before his king about to receive a medal of honour for his bravery. Before the award is given, the king asks the obvious question, "What motivated you, Sir Knight, to submit your life to such a risk for the sake of these few?" Imagine then the knight answering, "I did it, fair king, because I know that you sometimes give gold medals out to knights and I think gold is a pleasing substance and good for buying things" This is the kind of student who prizes grades above learning. He has settled for a very shabby prize instead of the real glory that could have been his own.

All of the people I've just described are prohibited from being students because of what we might describe as *natural* faults. They naturally mistake certain types of behaviour for the kind of behaviour one expects from a student. Now, some rare people overcome these natural faults and come closer to being students because of this. Such people really are in love with learning. They read because they love the sound of language and the ideas it expresses. They read because they are curious about earlier times or about creatures that they do not know. They solve math problems because the perfection of the mathematical system moves them deeply. They learn language so that they can hear of new beauties and understand new cultures. Such people have overcome the *natural* resistance we all have toward greatness—which is what we find in most things worthy of study—and have chosen to look greatness square in the face and study it as well as they can. But if they cannot overcome the *spiritual* resistance to learning, if they do not learn out of a zeal for Christ, then their efforts are vain. Romans one teaches us that the nonbeliever, who should learn what can be known about God from the things that are made, instead uses those things against himself to make idols out of them, "worshiping and serving the creature rather than the creator." Here's an example of how that might happen. An idol-sculptor who can produce a life-sized calf, cast in pure gold, must have a pretty good handle on the message of general revelation—of the way God reveals himself in nature—at least insofar as one can see it in a calf's body. But that same person has perverted the message of general revelation by turning it into an idol instead of letting it direct him to God. And in that sense, he cannot be a student,

however aware he is of bovine anatomy. Those who overcome the *natural* resistance to learning but do not overcome the spiritual one will learn and study and grow to their own destruction. Because they will not treat knowledge for what it is, knowledge itself will be spoiled for them. Before they know it, pride instead of curiosity will be driving them, and what it drives them too is, in the end, hell.

So what does it look like when we overcome the spiritual as well as the natural resistance to learning? The difference is a matter of motivation and message.

Let's first consider motivation. Surely you have all, at some point or another, lacked motivation for schoolwork. Doubtless, you've sat at home on sunny days in front of a window with a workbook in hand, labouring through math problems while your bike sat on its side, sparkling with sunbeams and so wanting to be ridden. Why do you continue on with your work instead of tossing the workbook to the side, swinging a leg over the bike, and riding over to a friend's house? Many of you are answering silently to yourselves, "because if I did, my parents would scold me, ground me, or worse." There is something very satisfying in that kind of goody-goody response. A young person who does his duty because his mom and dad have told him to do it seems like a good young person and *is* in fact a good young person on *that one point*. If God only gave us the commandment about honouring fathers and mothers, then those of you who do your school work for this motivation—because failure to do so would be disobedience to them—would be obedient to God as well as them. But this would be like the house-burglar who decides not to break into a house because he hates to break a perfectly good window. His motivation is all wrong. The young man who does his school work out of obedience to his parents is a good young man, but one motivated by secondary things when primary ones were available. He's being driven by AAA batteries when the job really calls for the big D cells. Finding the right motivation matters, and in the case of studies, God gives us other commandments that might pertain more immediately. Let's consider the third commandment: "thou shalt not take the name of the Lord thy God in vain."

Now I was taught as a boy that this commandment forbade my saying certain words in light or irreverent ways. And doubtless this is part of the commandment. But the confessional documents of my church point out that this commandment really forbids our treating lightly any of the ways that God "maketh himself known." God makes himself known through his word and his works. To understand either, one must be a student. And without understanding either for *what* they are—that is, to understand that they are both God speaking—one can never be a student. Most of you have been impressed from a very young age by the Bible. You are rightly enthusiastic about a God who speaks to you from His word. But how enthusiastic are you about the other way by which God speaks? The thing that motivates you to worship God in church, to read your bible and to pray is the same thing that should motivate your love of learning. Love math problems because through them you are better acquainted with the nature of God. Love history because it is a story of his marvellous providence. Love science because his creation is a message to you. And this has brought us to the second part of overcoming the spiritual resistance to scholarship—the message.

People often have a hard time understanding how general revelation speaks. They feel comfortable with the idea that the bible tells us something about God. But how does the chemical process of ice crystallization tell us about God? Well, consider ice crystals in cirrus clouds? Now we know from Psalm 19 that the heavens declare the glory of God. But they do not "speak" with words, though they psalm describes them doing something like that. I've never heard a cloud recite the confession of

faith to me. No, but they do speak. They speak through their form—the ice crystals suspended in mid-air—and that tells us, so scripture says, about God's glory. And we learn in many places in scripture that the same is true for all things—including all the subjects of study in a home-school co-op like this one. The main message of every class here, whatever the subject, is that God is good and powerful and just and loving and merciful and righteous. But don't worry, if keeping the right motivation for studies seems hard to you and the message is one you have trouble understanding sometimes, remember this. Though I was unable for all my efforts to make Teddy into a man or a knight, God can make us in to the people we need to be and then turn our attentions toward his creation in happy devotion.