

ADVICE TO THOSE WHO WOULD BE CHRISTIAN SCHOLARS

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SUMMARY

Wolterstorff lays out five important questions that Christian scholars must consider in thinking Christianly about their discipline, offering practical advice along the way that will help students become more effective communicators for Christ.

ASSESSING THE TEXT

"My first piece of advice is that you get clear on what you understand by the project of being a Christian scholar."

How do you currently understand this project?

"Some assume that what goes on in the contemporary university is pretty much OK as it is, and they look for ways of supplementing that with some distinctly Christian thought and activity..."

Second, some of those who believe that what goes on in the contemporary university is pretty much OK as it is reject the additive approach because they find tension between Christianity as they understand it, and what goes on in the university; so they propose revising Christianity until the tension disappears...

And third, there are those Christians, usually outside the university, who are content to lob grenades at the contemporary university: preachers, free-lance writers, and the like."

Which of these three models do you most easily gravitate towards?

Which does the majority of evangelical Christians gravitate towards?

Do you believe there is a 4th model? How would you describe it?

"To put it in a nutshell, I think the project of being a Christian scholar is the project of thinking with a Christian mind and speaking with a Christian voice within your chosen discipline and within the academy more generally."

Do you agree with Wolterstorff's assessment? Why or why not?

"Among the most important things shaping the academic disciplines are worldviews. I think the Christian scholar will be especially attentive to those worldviews, and will be especially alert to those points where the discipline-shaping worldview conflicts with the worldview embedded in Christianity."

How would you define 'worldview'?

What kind of worldview do you see shaping your discipline?

"Well, for one thing, the Christian voice will be a voice of charity; it will honor all human beings, as Peter puts it in his letter in the New Testament. It will never be abusive."

Is this often true today? How is the cause of Christ harmed when the Christian voice becomes abusive?

"The voice with which one speaks must be a voice such that one can be heard – a voice such that one genuinely participates in the dialogue of the discipline. Every now and then, when teaching at Yale, I would have a student who did not know how to speak in the voice appropriate to philosophy; invariably this was an evangelical. Evangelicals often interpret the response they get as hostility to evangelicalism, or hostility to Christianity. Sometimes it is that; but not always. Sometimes it is just that the person has not learned to speak in the appropriate voice. "

Have you found it to be true of other Christians in your discipline that they don't understand how to speak with the appropriate voice?

How does it damage their cause of making Christ known in their field of study?

"The Christian scholar may feel in his bones that some part of his discipline rubs against the grain of his Christian conviction, but for years, and even decades, he may not be able to identify precisely the point of conflict; or, if he has identified it, he may not know for years or decades how to work out an alternative. Once he does spy the outlines of an alternative, the Christian scholar has to look for the points on which, as it were, he can pry, those points where he can get his partners in the discipline to say, "Hmm, you have a point there; I'm going to have to go home and think about that." He doesn't just preach. He engages in a dialogue – or tries to do so. And that presupposes, once again, that he has found a voice. "

How does this respectful, attentive attitude better reflect a Christ-like attitude towards learning and disagreement?

"First, you have to be well acquainted with Scripture – not little tidbits, not golden nuggets, but the pattern of biblical thought. Let me add here: beware of the currently popular fad of reducing acquaintance with scripture to worldview summaries. "

Do you believe you are well-versed enough in Scripture? Why or why not?

Who in your life could help you improve this part of your spiritual formation?

"Too often American Christians operate on the assumption that we in our day are beginning anew, or on the assumption that nothing important has preceded us. You and I are the inheritors of an enormously rich tradition of Christian reflection on politics, on economics, on psychology, an enormously rich tradition of art, of music, of poetry, of architecture – on and on it goes. We impoverish ourselves if we ignore this. Part of our responsibility as Christian scholars is to keep those traditions alive."

How does this attitude towards others before us make us better Christian scholars?