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A Cruise on the S.S. Hagar

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The lovable cartoon character Hagar the Horrible reminds us of students described in this article. To many students, life looks like a cruise with Hagar: an impulse-gratifying adventure without much reflection. Since he is a Viking, Hagar would understand Lutherans; and he lives in the water, somewhat akin to Baptists.

Jim Bachman and Shuf Davis are campus pastors at Florida State University in Tallahassee. Jim serves the Luthern Chapel and Shuf serves the Baptist Campus Ministry. In the following they respond to a question about ministering to students as they confront religion, humanities and philosophy courses on a secular campus. We hear first from Jim.

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For fifteen years I have worked both sides of the street. I have taught religion and humanities courses on secular campuses and have ministered to those who take them. I began with the intellectual's presumption that college students live and are moved in intellectual ways. Thus, I was both surprised and puzzled to find that most of my students make their way through secular religion and humanities courses with a min-

imum of fuss. There have been, of course, some exceptions, and I ministered to them with relish. But, truth to tell, God seems mostly to have called me to a ministry different from that of interpreting the Word in the midst of students' intellectual upheavals.

It is useful to reflect upon why this may be so. To assume that students might be moved and shaken by their studies is to assume that they bring with them to campus a reasonably well-formed world view that is susceptible to moving and shaking. Or, perhaps more modestly, it is to assume that they come with some sort of confidence that reason and/or faith can function in ways that will enable them to achieve a fruitful understanding of their lives and their world. These assumptions probably were warranted in the first couple of decades after the Second World War. Neither assumption, however, fits the lives of most of the students I encounter today on state-supported campuses.

These students seem no longer to have any kind of coherent world view that they can test against their university experience. They have been made wise beyond their years in knowing the weaknesses of systems of thought. They have been made cynical beyond their years in their despair that no way of thought or life will stand the test. Faculty too participate in this hyper-critical despair. One might think that it is the dogma of separation of values and education that keeps faculty from modeling a world view to students. I suspect, however, that in many cases, faculty either try to live with a suspension of belief or they keep their own beliefs and commitments pretty much to themselves. In this latter case they seem to adopt a relativist view that whatever it is they believe is their own private construct. They will not expose their own views to criticism nor will they presume to recommend their own private construct to another.

So the problem of helping students with challenges from secular religion and humanities turns out to be very different from what it might have been a generation ago. The problem now is first to help students reach the point where they might be challenged! Our problem is not that the religion courses shake them up, but that the courses simply confirm students in their cynicism and despair. How is this difficulty to be overcome?

What I am gradually learning is that the time is long past for teaching students how to be undogmatic and open in their thinking. They've learned those lessons with a vengeance. What they haven't learned is how to combine open thought with faithful, hopeful commitment. Mine is now a positive preaching and teaching (dogmatic in the good sense) task of proclaiming a Gospel that has definite edges and concrete content. There are times for tearing down conventional religion, but this is not one of them. Ours is a time to build.

But how shall we build if the academic world refuses to supply at least a little straw for our bricks? In several ways, I think. One will be by having faith that the Word of the Lord does not return empty. We need more courage simply to proclaim the Word, trusting that God provides what is needed for God's bricks. This means we pastors have to have faith that, before and after all the theories of both 'liberal' academics and 'fundamental' apologists, God is sending forth the Word with authority. We need to model that kind of faith to our students. It is a peculiar kind of unfaith to communicate an anxiety either that the unbelieving academic can overturn the Word of the Lord or that the crabbed, anti-intellectual defender of the Word can somehow do God a service He hasn't already done in a far superior way for Himself.

Since we have God-given intellectual skills, we can also offer another service to our students. There is a grand *non-sequitur* in contemporary thought. Put it in this simple argument:

1. If there is widespread, ineradicable disagreement, then there either is no truth or each person's private claim to 'truth' can function as the truth 'for him' or 'for her.'
2. There is widespread, ineradicable disagreement.
3. Therefore, there is no truth or each person's private claim to 'truth' can function as the truth 'for him' or 'for her.'

The step from 1 and 2 to 3 is, of course, valid. But the *non-sequitur* lies in premise #1. It does not follow from widespread disagreement that there is no truth or that truth is relative. The question about truth remains open, for our disagreements may only show the limitations of our tools, not the absence of the truth. This may seem hopelessly abstruse or

intellectual, but it is the unexposed *non-sequitur* underlying much of the despair and cynicism of our time. If we are able to bring it to light, we remove an important obstacle in the way of our students' hearing of God's Good News.

I have already alluded to the need for the pastor to model something of the faith our world needs. My fellow pastor and friend in Christ, Shuf Davis, is highly skilled at unpacking how the Christian community can model our faith through our personal relationships with one another and with Christ. I gladly turn the paper over to him.

* * *

Thanks, Jim.

Do students at "secular" state universities regularly ask their campus ministers for counsel over problems precipitated by challenges to their faith in Bible, humanities and philosophy classes? Well, actually, no, they don't! Jim and I mused, reflected carefully, and could not come up with very many examples of this crisis of faith in our 31 years of combined campus ministry.

Instead, there seems to be a tidy compartmentalization which allows students to deal with the contradictory cognitive input by saying, "it is the professor's theory," or "I learn the stuff for the test." They seem unaffected by historical criticism, evolution, humanism or liberal education. Jim believes this unperturbed walk through academia results from the general cultural cynicism and unquestioned acceptance of epistemological relativism. I agree and would add some developmental issues which impact students in this pilgrimage.

The traditional college student, 18 to 22 years old, has been described as "an amalgam of brains, hormones, nerve ends and appetites." Their experiential (existential) focus is often more on self and relationships than on intellectual integration. Any felt cognitive dissonance is eased with a simple bifurcation: "that's a man-made theory which really has little to do with my personal relationship with Christ."

What puzzles Jim and me is that for most students these processes of compartmentalization and bifurcation are pain-

less, even blissful. There is no pain, no agony, no angst. As children of the sixties we know we risk a bias toward ideology, causes, protests and marches. But as ministers we are scared by our students' lack of struggle and their attraction to all the numbing distractions of our culture, i.e. music, MTV, movies, drugs, sex. So many of them seem gleefully ready to sign up for a cruise with Hagar, especially if the entertainment is right.

Many scholars have developed typologies of developmental tasks. These tasks generally enumerate both cognitive and relational skills necessary to move to the next stage of maturational development. What follows is my version of five critical developmental tasks students face:

1. Separation — individuation from the family of origin.
2. Defining self, which includes issues of esteem, integrity, sexuality, and an adult model.
3. Choice of first career, usually forced by a decision on a major.
4. Choice of first spouse.
5. Continued solidification of life values.

One would hope that all of these tasks are aided by a growing, vibrant faith. Since faith is a relationship, how one feels about self and others is often projected on God.

We suspect the average student's faith is insulated from intellectual challenge by years of cynicism about any authority and about the need to have a viable mental framework to deal with all the intricacies of relationships. Obviously, the critical developmental tasks outlined above are systemically intertwined and not in a linear order. The tasks are primarily relational, not intellectual. Our conclusion is that students are too relationally oriented to be seduced by cognitive challenge. Yet, their lack of cognitive moorings leaves them adrift also in their relationships.

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How then shall we minister? We are not willing to capitulate to the cultural malaise. A Jesus model of campus ministry will always raise prophetic questions about issues and ideas. Biblical truth, even with varieties of interpretation, stands in stark contrast to relativism. Students must be simultaneously

challenged and ministered to intellectually and relationally. It is wholeness which is the goal of redemption. Be ye perfect. We want to accept the challenge to be more specific about strategies of ministry for the problems we have described. In what follows Jim says some things about specific Scripture resources and Shuf makes some recommendations about treating relationships in campus ministry.

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I begin with the too easily omitted obvious. Campus pastors need to have the Word speak to them as well as to their flock. Isaiah 55:9-11 is one of God's Words that speaks to me in this environment:

For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts; and as the rain and the snow come down from heaven and do not return until they have watered the earth, making it blossom and bear fruit, and give seed for sowing and bread to eat, so shall the word which comes from my mouth prevail; it shall not return to me fruitless without accomplishing my purpose or succeeding in the task I gave it.

There are two thrusts in this text. First, God's thoughts are not ours. This provides a basis for reflection on human disagreement. Ineradicable disagreement among us is a sign not that there is no truth or that truth is relative, but that God's First Commandment is in operation still. The knowledge of all things after which Adam and Eve lusted is not and never has been available. Our disagreements are a sign of our limitations. It is a peculiar self-pride that concludes since we cannot figure God out, there must be no God. How much more likely to conclude with the text that God's ways are not ours nor are our thoughts God's.

The second thrust in this passage from Isaiah 55 is that God has nevertheless provided for us. God's Word accomplishes God's purposes. As pastors our task is to act in faith on that promise and to let the Word go forth among our troubled students.

Shuf reminded me of Acts 17:16ff. There Paul finds himself ministering to some cynical sophisticates in Athens. In Luke's account Paul takes care to find some common ground

with his hearers, but he does not let this effort obscure a clear witness to our Lord:

As for the times of ignorance, God has overlooked them; but now he commands mankind, all men everywhere, to repent, because he has fixed the day on which he will have the world judged, and justly judged, by a man of his choosing; of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead.

The Word that does not fail of its purpose is, as Mark 1:1 has it, "the Good News of Jesus Christ the Son of God." John's Gospel makes it explicit — Jesus is "the Way, the Truth, and the Life" (14:6). Pilate may exclaim in exasperation "What is truth?", but Jesus' words remain: "All who are not deaf to truth listen to my voice" (19:37f.).

These are times when it is especially important for pastors not to be ashamed of the Gospel of Christ, but to give witness to Him in a forthright way. My suspicion is that these are times when I should be quicker to make the straightforward witness and a little slower to offer detailed interpretations. It requires the swallowing of some intellectual pride to say this, but these do not seem to me to be times when students are struggling for a deeper interpretation of the faith. No, they are struggling simply to find a place to begin in faith. They need a John the Baptist's witness to Jesus as the Lamb of God, not a sophisticated theologian's explanation about how Jesus might be a light for the world.

There will still, of course, be need for helping some students with specific intellectual problems. Skill in reading Genesis, the Gospels, Paul or John, will still be needed by some. My own pilgrimage in ministry, however, has brought me repeatedly to the question of how to minister to those many, many others who right now couldn't care less about Genesis, who are doubtful of any Word of any tradition, and who are my charge in the place where I have been sent. Perhaps these brief comments will be specific enough to provoke either an "of course" or an "are you kidding?!". If you're minded to share your own insights on these matters, I would welcome hearing from you. And with that I return you to "Shuf the Baptist."

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When Jesus was asked what is the greatest commandment, the Gospels record (Matthew 22:34-40; Mark 12:28-34; Luke 10:25-28) that Jesus quoted from the Old Testament about relationships. The question was about a rule; the answer was about relationships. From the *Shema* He reminded the lawyer that the core of the law was to love God. Curiously, Jesus connects Leviticus 19:18 to Deuteronomy 6:5 making one commandment which encompasses three relationships: love God, love others, love self.

Campus ministers have a complicated task teaching this great biblical truth. For centuries the church has spent 90% of its time teaching half of what Jesus said — “Love God.” When or if the church ever teaches the other half of the great commandment it often presents it wrongly. We are socialized by many years of preaching and Bible study to love others like we love God or Jesus, but rarely like we love ourselves. Perhaps we avoid self love because *hubris* or pride is the essence of sin expressed in Genesis 3:5. But we must remember how Jesus said it, especially since Paul calls the teaching “the whole law fulfilled in one word” (Gal. 5:14), and James calls it the “royal law” (James 2:8). If Paul and James agree on anything, especially with Jesus, it must be true!

Our task is to teach and model healthy self esteem to a group whose self image is in major flux, and we must do this without historic permission or much theology of self. I assume you know many ways to communicate to students how to love God. In the face of creeping cynicism and unquestioned relativism, loving the great “I am” must be creatively and systematically taught. I do not want to minimize this task. The following, however, are suggestions about the role of scripture in teaching students to love themselves and others.

Self esteem is as much caught as taught. The self of the campus minister becomes a critical tool in helping students through the transition toward their first sense of an adult self. The key issue biblically is blessing. Contrast the woeful lament of Genesis 27:34-36 where Esau pleads for a blessing from his father with the affirmation of Jesus at His baptism in Matthew 3:17. Inputs, both behavioral and verbal, from significant others in our early years are major formative building blocks in our sense of self. In this connection Jim tells me that Lutherans

have a powerful resource for dealing with self esteem in their teaching on Baptism and that they will want to think about love of self in the light of God's love in Baptism.

A three generation genogram, or family tree, is very useful in helping students understand their internalized models of intimacy. A genogram often encourages homework because a student fills in information about aunts, uncles, grandparents which was previously a mystery. Data on the genogram should include words which describe the person's personality or relational style, like "warm," "mean," "loving," "cold," etc. Designate the dyads where tension exists and who was triangulated in as a buffer during anger or distance. A personal relational model evolves which delineates how a student's family of origin handled closeness and distance, love and anger, intimacy and tension, and how they "blessed" or "cursed" each other.

From this personal introspection an education or counseling program can shift to relational issues of friendship, roommates, dating, love, and marriage. Most campuses have skilled professionals, particularly in the student affairs division, who train others in interpersonal communications. Dealing with our negative residue from the past, developing skills for a growing healthy self esteem, negotiating difficult relationships and conflict resolution, illuminating ways in which romantic relations are different from all other relationships are all timely issues for the developmental tasks outlined earlier.

Biblical themes surround all of these relational issues. Hurts and deficits from the past as devastating as emotional, physical, and/or sexual abuse must be addressed with compassion and wisdom. Students regularly experience the divorce of parents or siblings which disturbs their image of how relationships ought to work. Scripture gives clear guidelines about speaking the truth with love, confrontation even in painful issues, processing hurt over time, forgiveness (of self too), grace, loving the sinner and hating the sin. Here again Jim would remind Lutherans of the way in which the Sacrament of Baptism brings to a focus God's Law and Gospel in the midst of relationships.

Christian literature abounds in many specific areas of human hurt and human relationships. The only caveat we

would offer is that some of the literature is entirely too glib, offering easy answers for complex issues. The Bible affirms us with great hope for healing and redemption. Sometimes, however, it takes more time. This indecipherable period of struggle toward wholeness is likely why one of the roles of the Holy Spirit is to agonize on our behalf before God (Romans 8:26).