

My Academic Teaching Philosophy

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“Iron sharpens iron, and one person sharpens another” (Prov. 27:17). As a professor of systematic theology, I feel I am called to be a sharpener. Primarily, I aim to sharpen students’ ability to think critically, and I aim to enable students to sharpen themselves. In return, I also expect to be sharpened, which will further define and refine my own thinking and myself through scholarly interaction with fellow students and faculty. Let me now expand on each of these goals in further detail.

First, I strongly believe that education should develop students’ ability to think critically.¹ Learning to think critically is very important for developing the discernment and careful thinking necessary to become good theologians, which is necessary for students to be effective Christian pastors, counsellors, and academic theologians. I want to teach my students to learn to think Biblically, but also logically, systematically, consistently, and coherently about theology so that they can critically evaluate the ideas that they will come across in sermons, books, and lectures.

Second, I hope to enable students to sharpen themselves by encouraging self-authorship. This was one of the challenges I experienced when I began my theological studies, and so I feel I can relate well to students who are also experiencing this.² When I was a student I found that it was difficult to move away from thinking that my professors and the authors of the books I read had it all figured out. I thought there was only one right answer to most theological questions and that it was the theologian’s job to find it. But through my studies I discovered that Christian theology is far more complex than I initially imagined, because the Bible can support a broad range of theological views, and our personal experiences and preferences have a large influence

¹ Tim van Gelder, “Teaching Critical Thinking: Some Lessons from Cognitive Science,” *College Teaching* 53, no. 1 (2005): 41.

² Nancy J. Evans, Deanna S. Forney, Florence M. Guido, Lori D. Patton, Kristen A. Renn, “Development of Self-Authorship,” *Student Development in College: Theory, Research, and Practice* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2010), 181.

on what we believe. It was challenging to have to make up my own mind about what I believed, and to gain the confidence to hold to an alternate point of view even if it meant disagreeing with a respected professor or a famous scholar. Yet ultimately this is what each of us must do in order to internalize our faith and deepen our relationship with God, and to be ready with reasons when someone asks us about what we believe (1 Pet. 3:15). I want to help each student to build a coherent, logical, and Biblical system of personal Christian beliefs through critical thinking. This is a great value for any Christian because it enables us to maintain faith in Christ in the face of life's challenges.

Therefore, in all my teaching I will aim to show that there may not be only one “right” Christian position on many theological issues. Instead, I will explain that there may be several possible Christian positions, each with some advantages and some disadvantages, which are more or less compatible with certain other theological positions. I will utilize readings that fairly and accurately present each position from an insider's point of view, to show students how someone who holds to that position reasons and makes use of scripture. Yet I will also provide contrasting readings which are more critical of that position, to illuminate some weaknesses and potential problems with it. This approach exposes students to the idea that theology is not about knowing one perfect answer but is about dialoging with others who disagree, which encourages critical thinking.³ This approach should also encourage self-authorship, because that the student will have to make up their own mind about what they believe instead of simply agreeing with the textbook, with the author of the readings, or even with me as the professor.⁴ I hope it may also allow students to be more gracious towards others who disagree with them, because the student can now recognize that there are other equally-Christian ways of thinking and interpreting

³ John C. Bean, “How is Writing Related to Critical Thinking,” in *Engaging Ideas: The Professor's Guide to Integrating Writing, Critical Thinking, and Active Learning in the Classroom* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2011), 20, 27-28.

⁴ Nancy J. Evans et al., “Development of Self-Authorship”, 186.

scripture besides their own. I believe that learning to agree to disagree, while respecting one another as fellow brothers and sisters in Christ, is an important skill for all Christians to have in order to enable greater ecumenical cooperation for the sake of the gospel.

Consequently, in my courses I want to allow students a large amount of academic freedom. I will not force students to adopt a particular view or become a particular sort of person to do well in my courses.⁵ As long as they have good evidence and strong arguments for their positions, and show good critical thinking, I will give them a good grade. I also want to give students some freedom to choose the topic of their major assignments and encourage them to explore ideas that they personally care about, in order to stimulate their passion for theology. In my experience, I wrote my best papers on topics that I was passionate about, and it stimulated my desire to learn more about a topic and even pursue further advanced studies.

But of course all metaphors have limits. While I hope my interactions with students will sharpen them in these ways, I do not want to be “sharp” in my personal dealings with anyone. I hope to have the personal sensitivity and graciousness of a pastor towards all my students, so that they may feel comfortable coming to talk with me about any questions or concerns related to the course work, and also so I may be seen as a safe person to talk with if they desire to have deeper conversations about theology or their own lives.⁶ I hope to demonstrate I am a safe person through the humility of openly acknowledging my own imperfections, preconceptions, blind spots, and limited knowledge, and being able to humbly admit “I don’t know” at times. I readily affirm 1 Cor. 13:12 when it says that now we only see God dimly and in part, and so in all of my teaching I want to be honest about what I believe and why, while being open to learning from others and being open to changing my own views when a better interpretation or understanding

⁵ Alicia J. Batten, “Metaphors We Teach By: The Language of Learning Outcomes,” *Teaching Theology and Religion* 15 (2012): 21.

⁶ Fred Glennon, Douglas Jacobsen, Rhonda Hustedt Jacobsen, John J. Thatamanil, Amanda Porterfield, and Mary Elizabeth Moore, “Roundtable: Formation in the Classroom,” *Teaching Theology and Religion* 14, no. 4 (October 2011): 365.

is offered. I want to make it clear that my views are influenced by my personal experiences and background, and to recognize that others who have had different experiences and backgrounds will see things differently.⁷ So I hope to always remain open to listening respectfully to others about their own experiences and perspectives to attempt to broaden my own perspective. In order to make these opportunities for personal student interaction possible, I aim to be on campus regularly and maintain regular office hours, and will have an “open door policy” that if my office door is open then students are free to stop in to chat about anything, and also will make it known that students can always join me if they see me having lunch or taking a break.⁸ Of course, appointments will also be possible.

I want to teach future ministers, theologians, and counsellors, so that they can be equipped to build up the faith of those they will interact with. Theology should be relevant and practical, and so I want to explain why the subject matter is relevant both pastorally and personally, so that they might also learn to care about theology and develop a passion for it.⁹ Our conceptions of God have many real-life consequences, and so through my lectures, class activities, and chosen materials, I hope to make students aware to what some of those may be, to encourage them to have a sense of responsibility and caution in their future theological endeavours.

In conclusion, I feel I would be a good fit for a multi-denominational, evangelical Christian seminary with a diverse student and faculty body, where I may fulfill my calling to sharpen others and be sharpened in return, while encouraging greater Christian tolerance and cooperation, as God enables me, for His glory alone.

⁷ Jeanne Stevenson-Moessner, ed. “Intersectionality in Theological Education,” *Religious Studies News* (April 2015): 15.

⁸ Jonathan Z. Smith, “Introduction: Approaching the College Classroom,” in *On Teaching Religion: Essays by Jonathan Z. Smith* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 5.

⁹ L. Dee Fink, “A Taxonomy of Significant Learning” in *Creating Significant Learning Experiences: An Integrated Approach to Designing College Courses* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2003), 48-49.