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## Faithful Education and Healthy Community: Some Thoughts on Education for a Kingdom Perspective

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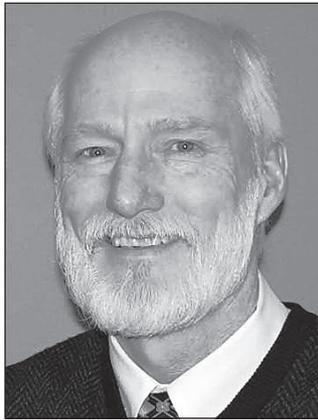
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by Daniel K. Chinn

The yesteryear was 1997. I was attempting to pass a required Algebra class in the fall semester of my senior year at Oklahoma Wesleyan University in Bartlesville, Oklahoma. Math is not a strong suit for me, so I had delayed taking this class until the final hour of my college career, the course I had to pass in order to graduate. In the end, four other classmates and I failed the final exam and therefore the course. From ashes of failure, God brought the phoenix of great good!

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My professor, to whom I'll refer as Dr. X, modeled something that changed my life and launched me into a life-long pursuit to understand what he understood and modeled for me: faithful education in the context of healthy community – in the most unlikely of disciplines, Algebra. For four hours on a Saturday morning after the final, he provided a community environment in which to learn enough Algebra to pass the final and the class. Merely passing the course was my hope. What God had prepared for me through this class, in the end, proved to be much more.

Dr. X modeled healthy community through three aspects: mutuality, responsibility, and affection. He understood that mutually we were all in this thing together, and he stayed until we got enough of the problems correct to pass. He took responsibility for helping us succeed by working with us. So, too, we took responsibility to work hard and *learn* enough Algebra to pass. Obviously, the professor loved us — enough to help us along our academic journey. His affection for us was on display.

Though Dr. X's approach that Saturday morning helped me and positively impacted my future as a professor, I want to offer a suggestion that could help all professors cultivate authentic community in the classroom. It seems that the Saturday morning should have been more than a onetime event. The four students and I who failed

the final exam struggled throughout the semester, not merely at the end. If multiple Saturday mornings (or other opportunities) had been provided all along, we would have grasped more clearly the aspects of community (mutuality, responsibility, and affection) as well as Algebra.

My suggestion leans toward modeling healthy classroom community all along the journey. We should so structure our class time that students understand, from day one, what healthy community involves: mutual commitment to each other, mutual responsibility for the class, and mutual affection or love that binds community together.

I help my students understand healthy community and how it relates to faithful learning on the first day of class. I cover a lecture/discussion called “The Learning Community,” which lays out three things: One, that they see what constitutes healthy community; two, that they understand what is true about them as learners (they are God’s image-bearers; they make a unique contribution to the class and community; they can learn; learning can be difficult yet rewarding; and class time is set apart as a safe, healthy time of community-building and learning); and three, that if they struggle in the class, help is available outside the classroom. It is here that my suggestion comes to play: providing multiple experiences of healthy community for faithful learning the entire semester, especially if they struggle with the material.

Each semester when I read my Student Evaluations, “The Learning Community” lecture always receives positive comments, indicating its significance and help for my students. Dr. X did provide a meaningful learning community, but as I look back, I see that he could have provided it for the entire semester, for faithful learning.

Now, I am the professor with the opportunity to model the same for my students, in the unique context of a Christian college and its emphasis on faithful education. This essay, therefore, seeks to weave together a fuller understanding of what constitutes **healthy** community and how that communal context can enable faithful education, so ably modeled by my professor of yesteryear.

How did Dr. X know that healthy community holds the three aspects of mutuality, responsibility, and affection? And how did he know that such a

learning environment most readily lends itself to faithful learning? He was a Christian educator, and as such he took God of the Bible as his source and model for teaching, as every faithful Christian educator should. Dr. X knew that the God of Scripture is a God in community.

### Understanding Healthy Community – God is Our Model

God speaks to the topic of community from his Word. The word “community” is used 83 times in the Old and New Testaments. The word “fellowship/koinonia” is used 96 times. The capacity for communal relationships is found not merely in humankind but in man’s Creator first: “In the beginning, God created ...”; and he was not alone. God said, “Let us make man in our image, after our likeness.”<sup>1</sup> Scripture does not provide a comprehensive explanation of the community enjoyed by the Trinity. The word “trinity” is not used in Scripture to *describe* the triune nature of God, but the Bible does reveal some of the interactive relationships among the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit to help us understand their communality. The self-chosen names of God indicate the communal, familial relationships of the Trinity, i.e., father/son. God, as one God revealed in three Persons, existing in a cohesive, mutual community, is simply one of the aspects or attributes of God’s character.

Theologian John Frame further helps us understand the communal nature of the persons of the Trinity by highlighting

that the concurrence of the three persons of the Trinity in all that they do is a profound indication of their unity. There is no conflict in the Trinity. The three persons are perfectly agreed on what they should do and how their plan should be executed. They support one another, assist one another, and promote one another’s purposes. This intra-Trinitarian “deference, this disposability” of each to the others, may be called “mutual glorification.”<sup>2</sup>

We find, then, three characteristics occurring in the Trinitarian community: mutuality, responsibility, and affection (love).<sup>3</sup> Mutuality is the idea that the persons of the Trinity belong to each other. In other words, they are in this thing together, i.e., there is an understanding that each member is com-

mitted to the wellbeing, uplifting, and supporting of one another. Each person of the Trinity possesses characteristics that are expressly his alone, i.e., the differing roles of each: the Father initiates creation and salvation, the Son accomplishes creation and salvation, and the Holy Spirit enlivens, empowers, and renews creation and salvation. But mutuality means they share things in common: eternity, knowledge, glory, wisdom, joy, etc., for the overall good and benefit of the Trinitarian community. Responsibility in the Trinity means that each person

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is accountable to the others: The Father is not free or able to do his own thing; the Son cannot act in his own regard without consideration for the other persons; the Holy Spirit cannot disregard the will or love or mutuality of the Father and Son. John 17:1 tells us that Jesus understood he came to do only what the Father sent him to do, and in John 14 Jesus teaches that the Holy Spirit will not speak of himself but only what he received from the Father and the Son. Affection speaks of the emotional regard each person of the Trinity has for the others. As mentioned, love is the fundamental characterization of God; thus, their Trinitarian love is not only self-love but also love that is given away as expressions of affection: devotion, care for, and love one to the others. Summarily, since the persons of the Trinity are in community together (mutuality), they are, of necessity, accountable to one another (responsibility), and they, of necessity, love one another (affection).

### **God's Communal People – A Brief Historical Survey**

This love expresses itself, then, in a cohesive, responsible community. Cohesive community has been defined by novelist, essayist, and Kentucky

farmer Wendell Berry as “the mental and spiritual condition of knowing that the place is shared and that the people who share the place define and limit the possibilities of each other’s lives. It is the knowledge that people have each other, [and it is] their concern for each other, their trust in each other, the freedom with which they come and go among themselves.”<sup>4</sup> For Berry, community clearly includes the spiritual life and a common understanding of belonging to each other and to a place: it is an arrangement involving mutuality, responsibility, and affection for all in the community — human and non-human. A community cannot be made or preserved apart from the loyalty and affection of its members and the respect and goodwill of the people.<sup>5</sup> Community life, insists Berry, is, by definition, a life of cooperation and responsibility.<sup>6</sup> Thus, to speak of the health of an isolated individual is a contradiction in terms.<sup>7</sup>

The kind of community described by Berry is what God desires as the context in which His people can learn and flourish. A brief historical survey of God’s dealings with His people reveals His desire for our reflection of his communal nature in how we learn and live.

Beginning with Adam, God said, “It is not good that man should be alone.”<sup>8</sup> And so, God created a wife for Adam so that they could flourish in community with each other and with their Creator God. When God rescued Noah from the destruction of the flood waters, He placed seven others in the ark with him, lest he be alone.<sup>9</sup> Abraham was told by God that He would make him a great nation.<sup>10</sup> The very design of the Old Testament tabernacle spoke of God’s desire for His people to live in community with each other and Him, at the very heart of His people.<sup>11</sup> Many of the Psalms also speak of God’s communal relationship with His people and of theirs with one another.<sup>12</sup> Entering the New Testament, we find that the very name God gives His Son — Immanuel, “God with us” — speaks of God’s continuing desire to be with His people.<sup>13</sup> After Jesus is baptized by John and is coming out of the Jordan waters, the other two members of the Trinity appear, again reminding people of their God’s communal nature.<sup>14</sup> As Jesus moves from that event, the Holy Spirit accompanies Him as He launches His teaching min-

istry – thus highlighting the need of community for faithful learning.<sup>15</sup> As Jesus’ teaching ministry grows, He surrounds Himself with twelve men that He sends out in pairs to teach, emphasizing the need for community in learning.<sup>16</sup> At Jesus’ ascension, He promises that the Holy Spirit will indwell and empower His people to carry on and expand the Church, of which He is Head. He calls His followers “the ecclesia,” assembled ones, those experiencing “koinonia” (fellowship, togetherness, oneness, mutuality).<sup>17</sup> Finally, the book of Revelation depicts that at the end of all things, the triune God is making His dwelling among the assembled men and women who are the Bride of Christ, all gathered as one in worship of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.<sup>18</sup> Surely, from this brief survey of redemptive history, we see that God personifies community and desires His people to learn, live, and flourish in that context.

### **Healthy Community – Taking It to the Classroom**

How does knowing that God personifies community and wants His people to learn and flourish in that context touch our teaching and classroom experience in the Christian university context? How did Dr. X relate his understanding of mutuality, responsibility, and affection to my learning so many years ago? To unpack this question, let me mention briefly three considerations.

**One, we are *Christian* educators.** This maxim seems painfully obvious, but consider its weight. Are we truly *Christian* educators? May God spare us the misery of teaching at a Christian college whose focus is “faithful education” and whose vision statement intends development of Christ-like character but which does not possess the Christ of the vision nor the Christian faith upon which the idea of “faithful education” is founded. Also, consider those who are, in fact, Christian but who see little or no connection between their faith and their teaching or their students’ learning. They are Christians doing education, but they are not really participating in Christian education. May God spare us that fate as well. Functioning as Christian educators in our university context, we take our cues, from Scripture, as did Dr. X, for understanding both healthy community and its relationship to

faithful education in the classroom culture. We are serious about education and educating from God’s point of view. Thinking comprehensively (across all disciplines), Arthur Holmes, professor emeritus of philosophy at Wheaton College, in his attentive chapter “College as Community,” from *The Idea of a Christian College*, helps educators, specifically those teaching in the context of small Christian colleges and universities, understand that the

Christian college, moreover, is largely a community of Christians whose intellectual and social, and cultural life is influenced by Christian values, so that the learning situation is life as a whole approached from a Christian point of view. It is a situation calculated to teach young people to relate everything to their faith.<sup>19</sup>

**Two, we desire to see our students succeed and flourish.** This desire Dr. X understood as essential to learning. He took responsibility to see us flourish — not merely to pass the final and the class but to learn something about the aspects of communal learning (mutuality, responsibility, and affection). We, too, desire to see our students grow in convictions and character. Steve Garber reminds us that community is the context for the growth of convictions and character.<sup>20</sup> In his helpful book *Fabric of Faithfulness*, he asks and answers the question “how can we weave a fabric of faithfulness between what we believe and how we live?” He also reminds us that “from the most sophisticated cultural critiques to the street-level despair of the ‘dissed’ generation, the evidence seems conclusive: for individuals to flourish they need to be part of a community of character, one which has reason for being that can provide meaning and coherence between the personal and public worlds.”<sup>21</sup> Garber, who travels the world helping people think about educating in faithful ways so as to help their students weave a fabric between a worldview and a way of life, is concerned about helping students (and their teachers) answer the big questions in life: “Do I have a *telos* (purpose) that is sufficient to meaningfully orient my *praxis* (practice) over the course of life? Or in the language of the street, and therefore, a bit more playful: why do I get up in the morning?”<sup>22</sup> If we believe that we, as Christian educators (regardless of our discipline), are inter-

ested in helping our students ask and answer those same questions, Garber is spot on in his insistence that the best (and perhaps only) context in which to accomplish this worthy goal is that of healthy community.

**Three, we desire Christian *Formation*, not merely Christian *Information*.** At our respective places, we want our students to learn the right information (knowledge that accords to the reality of God and His created world). Dr. X wanted (required!) us to learn and know the facts about working an Algebra problem, but he desired more than passing along mere information. His creating a learning environment enabled us to pass along *in-formation* with a purpose. Through the experience of learning the information communally, we learned Christian *formation* — a basic goal of Christian education. Many of our vision statements particularize exactly the kind of formation we target: formation into Christ-likeness. Our desire is to create learning environments where students grasp and construct ideas; through that process, we form the context for their encounter with the living God, who, through the task of learning communally, transforms them more and more into persons who flourish as Christ did, as they weave fabrics of faithfulness.

An essential aspect of learning environments for Christian formation is hospitality. Educators must attempt to carve out a space where students feel welcomed, valued, and respected; in such a place, we weave together our private and public lives. Hospitality is largely about knowing and being known. As Christian educators, we strongly desire to know our students and (with appropriate and wise boundaries) be known by them. Carving out a space, i.e., our classroom, where we cultivate the desire to know and be known, “requires both personal and communal commitment, and settings which combine aspects of public and private life.”<sup>23</sup> To grow in conviction, character, and community, our students need a place where they can develop beyond their own sense of self to know others. Too often hospitality is relegated to the private, the home; but Christian hospitality is both private and public, intentionally bringing together elements that create a welcoming, safe, refreshing environment. “In such environments,” insists

Pohl, “weary and lonely persons can be restored to life.”<sup>24</sup> Pohl continues, “But if hospitality is important to human flourishing, we may want to consider the concerns it embodies and suggest some alternate ways of shaping work places.”<sup>25</sup> This effort may help us think of our classroom as a work place that needs fresh perspectives for integrated, faithful education. Such education creates spaces that offer comfort, safety, care, stability, rest for human brokenness; comfortable furnishing; and inviting lighting, etc.<sup>26</sup> These and other physical and metaphysical characteristics allow students to weave the three stands of convictions, character, and community into a life-shaping tapestry — one whose contours look more and more like the environment provided by Jesus.

### **Communal, Faithful Education on the Street**

Is not that life-shaping tapestry the purpose of faithful education? What is the *telos* (the end goal) of Christian education? Summarily, it is to witness to God’s Truth and to flourish while doing so. This is the very reason Jesus says He came into

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the world: “For this reason I came into the world, to bear witness to the truth.”<sup>27</sup> He then commissions His people (the Church) to the same task in the Great Commission: “Go ... make disciples ... in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you.”<sup>28</sup> The purpose of Jesus’ teaching His people is that they give faithful witness to the person and work of Christ to all the nations. The same purpose (witness), it seems to me, belongs to our purpose for contemporary education: to educate students to can give consistent, persuasive, winsome, truthful witness to God’s story, centered on Jesus Christ in all areas of life. This task is best accomplished in the context of community. Bartholomew and Goheen provide a substantive list of authors’ attempts to answer

the question of education's purpose: responsive discipleship, freedom, responsible action, shalom, commitment, etc.<sup>29</sup> "Education," they then argue, "is for the purpose of equipping students to witness faithfully to the gospel in the whole of their lives[;] ... authentic Christian education is *for* witness."<sup>30</sup>

Of course, God's larger purpose in our witnessing (educating, teaching) is that humanity (individually and collectively) will flourish in a life of shalom. As Bartholomew and Goheen remind us, "A world of shalom is characterized by justice, love, thankfulness, and joy ... [;]shalom, in other words, is the way things ought to be ... [for]in a shalomic state each entity would have its own integrity or structured wholeness, and each would also possess many edifying relations to other entities."<sup>31</sup> From God's nature, described simply but with intense profundity as "love,"<sup>32</sup> we begin to grasp why community matters to us as Christian educators and to the students we care for. And part of that love is holding students responsible for class expectations.

As we cultivate relationships with students, we can cultivate the same mentor/flourishing relationships with colleagues. This goal could include asking a colleague to visit our classroom as a guest lecturer on an area of his or her expertise or simply inviting a colleague to lunch or some event inside or outside the classroom setting. Passing along relevant information wisely among us and students could make educating for faithful learning more meaningful, less difficult. Most tasks are easier to accomplish with helpful information. Wisdom, of course, is the key here: wise exchange of information between colleagues and students – not gossip, or rumors, or information that should not be exchanged.

### **Convictions, Character, and Community**

Such communication produces trust and a reason to develop faith. Our students learn of God's truth and world and love best in healthy, trustworthy community. For, as Garber reminds us, "the young adult is still in formation, still engaged in the activity of composing a self, world, and [understanding of] 'God' adequate to ground the responsibilities and commitments of full adulthood. The young adult is searching for a worthy faith."<sup>33</sup> Might we

say also that the young adults under our tutelage are looking for students, faculty, and administration with which to develop their convictions, character, and community? They are searching not only for a worthy faith but also for a worthy love, around which to orient their *telos* (purpose) and their *praxis* (practice) over the course of a life-time of learning, as they seek, along with the Irish poet Bono of U2 fame, "to tear a little corner off the darkness."<sup>34</sup>

Dr. X knew I would never learn the finer points of the mathematic world; but he also knew that by his creating an environment of hospitality in which he positioned himself mutually, responsibly, and affectionately, I could and would learn; and that by learning, I would experience growth in convictions, community, and formation in Christ-likeness. He was right! Algebra remains Greek to me. But, my experience in that little community of learners launched me into a life-long pursuit to understand more deeply what constitutes healthy community and how healthy community contributes to faithful education. And I love Jesus more, too, because of Algebra!

Let us hope that, as professors at Christian colleges and universities, we eagerly help our institutions fulfill their vision of developing citizens of Christ-like character through faithful education. Let us also hope that we eagerly experience life lived in healthy community inside and outside the classroom so that our students and we are transformed into Christ-likeness in the struggle of learning and flourishing — even in the most unlikely of places, like Algebra!

### **Endnotes**

1. Genesis 1:26 (ESV).
2. John M. Frame, *The Doctrine of God, A Theology of Lordship* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Pub., 2002), 621.
3. Though Dr. Roest modeled early on for me, I am also indebted to Dr. Steve Garber for a fuller understanding of these three relational aspects, as well as to Wendell Berry, though responsibility for any flaws is personal.
4. Wendell Berry, *The Long-Legged House* (New York: Harcourt, 1969), 61.
5. Wendell Berry, *Sex, Economy, Freedom & Community: Eight Essays*, 1st ed. (New York: Pantheon Books,

- 1993), 14.
6. Ibid., 121.
  7. Wendell Berry, *Another Turn of the Crank: Essays* (Washington, DC: Counterpoint, 1995), 91.
  8. Genesis 2:18 (ESV).
  9. Genesis 7:13 (ESV).
  10. Genesis 17:5 (ESV).
  11. Numbers 14:14 (ESV).
  12. Psalm 46:5; 116:19 (ESV).
  13. Matthew 1:23 (ESV).
  14. Mark 1:10-11 (ESV).
  15. Luke 3:23; 4:1 (ESV).
  16. Luke 5:1 (ESV).
  17. Acts 1:8, Col 1:18 (ESV).
  18. Revelation 22a:1-5 (ESV).
  19. Arthur Holmes, *The Idea of a Christian College* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing, 1975), 77.
  20. See Paul Spears and Steven Loomis, *Education for Human Flourishing: A Christian Perspective* (Downer Groves: Intervarsity Press, 2009), 191-217, for an in-depth consideration of character and its indispensable link to education.
  21. Steve Garber, *The Fabric of Faithfulness* (Downer Grove: Intervarsity Press, 2007), 159.
  22. Garber, *The Fabric of Faithfulness*, 22.
  23. Christine Pohl, *Making Room: Recovering Hospitality as a Christian Tradition* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing, 1999), 151.
  24. Ibid., 153.
  25. Ibid., 168.
  26. Pohl, *Making Room: Recovering Hospitality as a Christian Tradition* 152-153.
  27. John 18:37 (ESV).
  28. Matthew 28:19, 20 (ESV).
  29. Ibid., 170.
  30. Craig Bartholomew and Michael Goheen, *Living at the Crossroads: An Introduction to Christian Worldview* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2008), 45.
  31. Ibid., 170.
  32. 1 John 4:16 (ESV).
  33. Garber, *Fabric of Faithfulness*, 96.
  34. Dr. Steve Garber: interview at Washington Institute for Faith, Vocation and Culture, June 2009.