

FRIENDSHIPS OF EXCELLENCE

REFORMING INSTRUCTION IN MEDIA PRODUCTION

Reappointment Evaluation by Brian Fuller

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Hospitality and Student Friendship

Students of Hebrew rabbis were intellectually and morally improved by orbiting their professors, not in classrooms through syllabi and curriculum, but in homes and marketplaces. Thus, a life of friendship was and is the heart of the successful teacher-student relationship.

Jesus loves his students and calls them friends.¹ To teach in His footsteps, I'm obliged to do the same. And if they're my friends, the Gospel's high standard of friendship is that I lay down my life for them. That could mean I should step in front of a train before it hits Blake, a survivor of my Video Production class. But Scripture recognizes the rarity of such life-laying opportunities.

Love is, instead, choosing ten more minutes editing with Kiel over personal goals. It's setting aside earned titles for the time it takes to pray with Diane. It's feeding a class at my house on my own dime. It's chasing scholarship which ignites my curiosity *and* involves my students.

Such an approach to teaching will probably favor service and advising while shortchanging scholarship, the other legs of Calvin's table.² But hospitality is the fulcrum of faith-learning. Not without its challenges, four of the most perilous points on hospitality's balance beam might be:

A professor-student friendship may be inappropriate since we bring to it unequal power.

The word "pedagogy"³ institutionalizes inequality. To see college students as children downplays the Epistles' notion of heirship and consigns them to a kind of slavery.⁴ But they are not slaves. They are sons and daughters, sharing together suffering, promise, and glory.⁵ Hospitality with these equals looks less like a mission of charity and more like co-creating a neighborhood. A synthesis of Isaiah 60 and Revelation 19 imagines the wedding supper of the Lamb -- and the meals with student friends that point to it -- as potlucks, not catered affairs.

All but a very few friendships are characterized by inequity. The best we can hope for, I think, are reciprocal moments of vulnerability.

Student friendship might compromise objective grading.

My family went to Jeff's basketball games, his number emblazoned on our faces in greasepaint. He visited

often and sat with my kids through Bible study. One night, a heavy snow trapped him in the house. I rolled out a sleeping bag and we went nowhere until late the next day. So Jeff and I had time to paint the bathroom.

Did hours in the bathroom with this student make it easier or harder for me to give him the grade he earned? Easier by far, I would argue, since his coursework -- and his girlfriend, and his athletic performance, and his sister's new baby -- were already matters of open conversation.

Such a relationship echoes Peter's friendship with Christ, characterized on either side by uncompromising evaluation.⁶

Limits on my finances, time, and stamina require me to create boundaries.

I'm on the planet -- not to amass fortune or fame, but to make myself nothing.⁷ If I ever have money, one of its chief purposes is friendmaking.⁸

As for time, I've heard some professors invoke the notion of Sabbath as a way of drawing an "after hours" line between them and their students. Such a demarcation makes students "my work." It equates them with customers or product. The joy of my job is that I'm compensated for hanging out with friends for hours each day.⁹

While we might gladly give students our own time, it is perhaps less fair to give them hours from our family schedules. But to hope for a tidy life without bleed from one pigeon-hole to another misses an opportunity. Thus I might say, "Alyson, I've got to help my daughter with her math homework. Come home with me, eat dinner with us, and I'll show you how to white balance the camera after Aynsley's algebra is done."

My upbringing and career choice didn't prepare me for a life of hospitality.

Monastic scholars must know there are gregarious profs in their midst. We must complete each other, giving students a full spectrum view of Body, speaking of hospitality's virtue in an intentional dialogue.¹⁰

But a perceived lack of giftedness in the area of hospitality is no "chicken switch." There is simply no getting around the blunt directives of Romans 12:13,¹¹ 1 Peter 4:9,¹² and 3 John 1:8.¹³

Teaching Media Production

Academic friendship is no end to itself, but a virtuous platform on which I stack my discipline's knowledge and skills. I've below tried to capture some of the motives in my head when a class hangs studio lights or I drag students to the editing bays.

The Eloquence and Quality of Spirit-Filled Handiwork

The Spirit-filling of Bezalel¹⁴ and David¹⁵ testify to the importance of excellent art. Christian educators are obliged to remind aspiring filmmakers their best work is possible when the Holy Spirit is with them behind the tripod.

From the Bible's first chapter, a job well done is ample evidence of the Almighty's hand. Creation's refrain is "And God saw that it was good," never: "And God explained *why* it was good." Thus neither script nor plot (nor prolegomena nor written devotions) is the exclusive starting place for film.

No Blemished Lambs

Inasmuch as a created thing fulfills divine expectations for use and beauty, the thing is godly. Jesus – both creator and carpenter – understood and achieved this balance of form and function. In his image, the best of filmmakers look for the same balance, asking always both "Will it work?" and "Is its appearance appropriately beautiful?"¹⁶

Excellence isn't the only weight on the scales. God requires of us an unblemished *lamb* – a small thing done exceptionally well. Does He then smile more brightly on an incredible three-minute film (which provides a student director with an impressive résumé piece *and* allows him to pass Spanish) than on a mediocre film ten times that length?

Living Backwards

Isaiah's improbable reference to the *root* of Jesse¹⁷ implies that Jesus preceded his own ancestor.¹⁸ Thus, Christ's future return motivates all other events before it. Though the concept is contrary to our view of time, the future actually causes the past and present.

Instruction in editing improves camerawork. Clear and persistent vision of a film's premiere motivates its execution from script and storyboard forward.

Old Testament Faith Vision

The landscape of American broadcasting will change in 2008 as the shape of televisions becomes more

rectangular. But today's freshmen are trained on studio equipment in flux between the aspect ratios of 4:3 and 16:9.

If I teach them which function keys to push, absent age-old principles of composition, I ill-prepare them for a future clouded by technology's advance.

Hebrews 11:8 expresses a truth deeper than lifelong job training.¹⁹ From that perspective, readying students for widescreen broadcasting also makes them better spouses, parents, and persons of faith.

*New Testament Fraternity*²⁰

Filmmaking's collaborative nature distinguishes it from many other academic disciplines and artistic endeavors.²¹ Consequently, Christian filmmakers catch a greater glimpse of church unity than do many others.²²

On the "plus" side, a group is capable of more than any of its individuals. On the "minus" side, each individual can derail group effort: missed sound cues can make an actor look foolish; unsafe set pieces distract audience attention from the script.

If students cannot hear the Catechism's fifty-fifth question²³ as they pull focus, perhaps my teaching failure has deafened them. Obviously, student friendship is the essential secret weapon of Christians engaged in communal enterprise.

Diplomats of the Silver Screen

Public film screenings expose the college's instructional standards in ways that biology lab experiments do not. Calvin filmmakers ought to hope that audiences take with them a respect for the college's academic program.

As they mature into careers, faithful media makers must understand their burden of trustworthiness and healing²⁴ may not be the same as those shouldered by other graduates.

Producers and Consumers

The majority of Christian students (not to mention research- and teaching-oriented scholars) are charged with *studying* films, less often with actually *making* them. Shying from such creative acts reflects the Church's current status as artistic outsider and sidelined stone-thrower.

As a consequence, Church instruction is more often about how to choose the right children's movies (suspicious consumption) and almost never about which camera angles would best tell the story of Esther (production). The troubling lean toward consumption

counters the Bible's assertion that input – not output – reveals human hearts.²⁵

That said, God and humans make things differently. God creates *ex nihilo* and sustains his work. Man creates from excess and walks away. Steven Spielberg's 6:1 shooting ratio demonstrates the latter principle. For every minute of *Schindler's List* on screen, editors trashed another five. Students content with only two takes of a shot arrogantly claim they are better filmmakers than Spielberg.

They may also weakly grasp their Creator God. An amateur's low shooting ratio begs a response from the Belgic Confession, a discussion of the ways our creative natures both reflect and respond to our Heavenly Father.²⁶

Friendships of Excellence

My students and I agree to meet where everyone has a first name and a pair of jeans. Reciprocal entrée into life allows unique integration of media production and reformed Christian thought and behavior.

Student friendship also allows and obliges me to maintain stratospheric standards of academic excellence, because raising the bar is about asking people to tread steep cliffs in my footsteps – not about giving them enough rope to hang themselves. It demands a collaboration of equals, a relationship of interdependency in which students value their work as necessary contribution to an adult effort.

A well-meaning colleague once encouraged me to establish a “gulf of formality” between myself and my pupils.

Nothing doing.

¹ “As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Now remain in my love. If you obey my commands, you will remain in my love, just as I have obeyed my Father's commands and remain in his love. I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete. My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends. You are my friends if you do what I command. I no longer call you servants, because a servant does not know his master's business. Instead, I have called you friends, for everything that I learned from my Father I have made known to you. You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you to go and bear fruit—fruit that will last. Then the Father will give you whatever you ask in my name. This is my command: Love each other.” John 15:9-17

² Surely the reappointment process is about admitting one's shortcomings as well as celebrating one's triumphs.

³ Literally, “the teaching of children”

⁴ “What I am saying is that as long as the heir is a child, he is no different from a slave, although he owns the whole estate. He is subject to guardians and trustees until the time set by his father. So also, when we were children, we were in slavery under the basic principles of the world.” Galatians 4:1-3

⁵ Romans 8:17; Galatians 3:29; Ephesians 3:6

⁶ “Are you still so dull?” Jesus asked them. “Don't you see that whatever enters the mouth goes into the stomach and then out of the body? But the things that come out of the mouth come from the heart, and these make a man 'unclean.' ...but eating with unwashed hands does not make him 'unclean.' ” Matthew 15:16-18, 20

⁷ “Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus: Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant being made in human likeness.” Philippians 2:5-7

⁸ “I tell you, use worldly wealth to gain friends for yourselves, so that when it is gone, you will be welcomed into eternal dwellings.” Luke 16:9

⁹ If you don't enjoy your work as much as I enjoy mine, get a new job (a paraphrase of Ecclesiastes 2, perhaps?).

¹⁰ Surely it's telling that “Hospitality” (and its obverse, “Gratitude”) are conspicuously absent from the college's list of virtues. Neil Plantinga says the core list is not exhaustive, but “is, rather, exemplary, tailored to the mission of the college as an academic institution.” *Engaging God's World*, p. 229.

¹¹ “Share with God's people who are in need. Practice hospitality.”

¹² “Offer hospitality to one another without grumbling.”

¹³ “We ought therefore to show hospitality to [the brothers] so that we may work together for the truth.”

¹⁴ “Then the LORD said to Moses, “See, I have chosen Bezalel... and I have filled him with the Spirit of God, with skill, ability and knowledge in all kinds of crafts- to make artistic designs for work in gold, silver and bronze, to cut and set stones, to work in wood, and to engage in all kinds of craftsmanship.” Exodus 31:1-5

¹⁵ “Then David gave his son Solomon the plans... of all that the Spirit had put in his mind for the courts of the temple of the LORD...” I Chronicles 28: 11-12

¹⁶ I say “appropriately beautiful,” since a movie about pigs might reasonably require shooting a filthy sty.

¹⁷ “And again, Isaiah says, ‘The Root of Jesse will spring up, one who will arise to rule over the nations; the Gentiles will hope in him.’ ” Romans 15:12

¹⁸ Consonant with the understanding of Micah 5:2 and Hebrews 7:3 forwarded by Article 10 of *The Belgic Confession*.

¹⁹ “By faith Abraham, when called to go to a place he would later receive as his inheritance, obeyed and went, even though he did not know where he was going.”

²⁰ Yes, I got hung on the yardarm of sexist language during a summer offering of Introduction to Video Production. Not counting me, there was only one guy in the class. The ladies were gracious enough to make us honorary members of their “sorority.”

²¹ Theatre as well as symphonic and choral music are important and obvious exceptions. I don't mean to forget others.

²² “Love the brotherhood of believers...” I Peter 2:17

²³ “...each member should consider it a duty to use these gifts readily and cheerfully for the service and enrichment of the other members.” *Ecumenical Creeds and Reformed Confessions*, p.35.

²⁴ “A wicked messenger falls into trouble, but a trustworthy envoy brings healing.” Proverbs 13:17

²⁵ “What goes into a man's mouth does not make him 'unclean,' but what comes out of his mouth, that is what makes him 'unclean.' ” Matthew 15:11. See also Matthew 15:10-20

²⁶ Article 12, *The Belgic Confession*.