

BLESSED ARE
the **BALANCED**

A Seminarian's Guide
to Following Jesus
in the Academy

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Paul E. Pettit
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Blessed Are the Balanced: A Seminarian's Guide to Following Jesus in the Academy

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INTRODUCTION

Loving God While Learning about God

Attending a seminary is an exciting experience. You study the Bible in detail. You engage in theological discussions. You learn how to minister in various contexts. You study how to reach and teach people in various age-groups. You learn how to communicate the Bible to others by teaching, preaching, and counseling.

Also you are surrounded by Christians who, like you, are dedicated to serving the Lord faithfully. You are stimulated spiritually in chapel services, in small-group settings, in prayer meetings, and in daily devotional times. And you have opportunities for sharing God's truths with others.

Yes, seminary can be a stimulating experience and a soul-enriching time. But it can also be dangerous. Seminary, believe it or not, can be hazardous to your spiritual health. With almost daily exposure to God's Word, it is easy to become spiritually cold.

Unfortunately a good number of students graduate with a head full of biblical and doctrinal knowledge, but with a heart that has grown cold to God. They enter seminary eager to know God better, but in their seminary years they become callous toward spiritual things. You would think that a few

years of seminary training would deepen their walk with God, encourage their spiritual growth, and enhance their desire for spiritual things.

But this does not always happen. Why? What causes spiritual burnout among seminary students? Why is a seminary education detrimental to your spiritual health? Why is it difficult to learn about God and adore Him at the same time?

Many factors can contribute to this problem. And this book helps explain how to avoid some of the common pitfalls that can lead to spiritual burnout when one enters into an academic study of God and the Scriptures. This work encourages a healthy balance between knowledge and experience; between faith and learning.

The English Standard Version of 1 Corinthians 8:1 reads, “knowledge puffs up.” When you read those words can you picture a bloated, oversized, student? The apostle Paul explains that charity or love builds up, but he warns that much learning carries with it the temptation for one to think more highly of himself than he ought. Again there is a difference between second-hand acquired knowledge and firsthand lived-out wisdom.

More than one veteran of theological higher education has warned that learning that stays in the head becomes cold and stagnant, but truth that makes its way to the heart is warm and vibrant. But how does this happen? Are there steps you can take to avoid becoming “puffed up” in this potentially risky process? How do you integrate head and heart knowledge?

This book focuses on how students of God and the Scriptures can achieve a healthy balance between both rigorous academic scholarship and a growing piety. Put another way, in the pages that follow you will learn how students, church leaders, Bible study group members, and Christian teachers can side-

step burnout, apathy, or a growing hard heart. You will learn how to avoid the process of the Bible becoming no more than an academic text. Sometimes intense seasons of study may lead to a hardening of your spiritual arteries, but there are time-tested principles and practices that can keep your heart soft for the fellowship of God and His people.

We all know friends who started out in a pursuit of advanced Bible study with the best of intentions but were sidelined for various reasons. Often they explain, “Seminary became for me a dry desert, and the Bible lost its appeal as I came to view it as one more assignment to check off my list!”

Our goal is that a fresh wind of the Spirit will guide you into a balanced approach to healthy spirituality and rigorous scholarship. Many readers in various ministry endeavors have devoted their entire vocational lives to the Scriptures, and they seem to grow more in love with its precious pages each day. How do they walk the tight rope between critical scholarship and a vibrant faith?

One seminary founder clarified the problem by stating, “You can make the Scriptures as clear as ice, but just as cold!” He often warned students to avoid the danger of what he called spiritual frostbite. We seek to do the same.

One of the main sources of frustration for serious students is a growing gap between acquisition of knowledge and the experience of internalizing or living out the knowledge they have accumulated. The new facts may exist in the head, but often in the journey from head to heart much is lost in translation. Malcolm Warford nicely summarizes this potential problem.

While the earliest classical philosophical tradition understood knowing as lived experience rather

than abstract thought, the Sophists created the school as the primary place for learning. The earlier emphasis on learning that occurs by formation in a community's life—its values, institutional practices, and traditions—was superseded by teaching and learning in the formal setting of the school. Ever since, we have struggled with reconnecting knowledge and experience in the kind of practical wisdom that shapes our souls and forms the practices of our lives.¹

Four Warning Signs of a Shaky Balance

Zealous students need to watch for four warning signs as they embark on a seminary education. *The first is confusing your identity* in Christ with your identity as a vocational pastor, Bible teacher, or theologian. Much like the thrill of starting out on a long hike, the journey of Christian scholarship begins by everything seeming to be exciting, new, and fresh. The sacred Scriptures come alive with initial Hebrew and Greek language studies. Difficult theological concepts are broken down into understandable categories by gifted teachers and exciting classroom lectures. And the end result of all this new study is often a growing, vibrant faith.

However, over time a student can easily confuse his identity *in* Christ with his identity as one who learns and teaches *about* Christ. The new student may soon replace his passion for reading and understanding the Bible with damaging zeal for de-

¹ Malcolm L. Warford, ed., *Practical Wisdom: On Theological Teaching and Learning* (New York: Peter Lang, 2004), 11.

fending his own narrowing stance or fringe doctrinal position regarding the Bible. Instead of viewing the Bible as the fresh font of spiritual nurture, the advancing student uses the Bible as a weapon for fighting theological battles.

We are to worship Christ, not the book that shows us Christ. We are commanded to point others to life in Christ—not life in the academic study of Christ. Making the Bible an academic textbook can be a trap, for it can divert us from the life-giving power it offers. Sadly, sometimes Christian academic experts vehemently argue, sometimes with seething anger, over certain passages of Scripture, seeking to defend their position, while at the same time denying by their very actions the love of God those same passages advocate! Thomas à Kempis captured this point well:

What good does it do you if you dispute loftily about the Trinity, but lack humility and therefore displease the Trinity? It is not lofty words that make you righteous or holy or dear to God. . . . I would much rather *experience* contrition than be able to give a definition of it. . . . Naturally, everyone wants knowledge. But what good is knowledge without the fear of God? A humble peasant who serves God is much more pleasing to him than an arrogant academic. . . . Learned people always want their wisdom to be noticed and recognized.²

When one's very own identity gets so wrapped up in whether he holds a certain doctrine or denominational creedal point, dan-

² Thomas à Kempis in *The Christian Theology Reader*, 2d ed., ed. Alister McGrath (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2001), 211.

ger looms on the horizon. Our identity should rest securely in Christ, not in the various positions we hold. Mixing our identity with our success or failure as a minister, theologian, or biblical scholar is not worth the high price exacted from the effort.

Our goal should be to love Christ always. And we should love the members of the church and show reverence toward the Bible and the One who gave us the Scriptures. Keeping and maintaining this healthy balance requires diligence.

Some Christian academicians reveal that they love their views on Christ more than they love Christ. They demonstrate passion for debates over the Scriptures more than passion for the Scriptures themselves. They long to argue about the church more than they long to be with the members and Head of the church. Keeping your identity focused solely on Christ and Him alone will help you stay balanced in your theological studies. But how do you keep close tabs on your identity? This book shows you how.

The *second* warning sign is a growing *isolation and privatization* in your academic studies. Often the deeper one delves into a study of theology or the Bible the more isolated and private one becomes. At the outset, the eager student attends a variety of Bible studies and prayer meetings with various fellow believers. The fellowship seems fresh and inviting, and there is a growing identification with Christians from various backgrounds. And yet over time isolation and individualization can creep in and as a result, the advanced student believes only his or her set of beliefs is the correct one. A hardening of the spiritual arteries occurs and brings narrowness and suspicion, even doctrinal paranoia.

This second warning serves as an encouragement for you as a new seminary student to spend significant portions of time

with a variety of mature believers. True, your heartfelt convictions and well-developed beliefs should be firmly held. However, seek to avoid becoming rigid and unbending in your beliefs and doctrines. The danger of isolation, privatization, and individualization is a looming threat in any undertaking of biblical and theological study.

Time spent with others in theological reflection is critical. New students should share with trusted friends what, why, and how they are learning. We all need others in the body of Christ to check on us to see how we are progressing. We need others who love us enough to ask us tough questions about the doubts we may experience. We need to surround ourselves in conversation with mature believers when we study “difficult passages” or try to comprehend the depths of justice and mercy of our holy God. Often the “mysteries” of theology and biblical study shake the very foundations of our faith; thus we need to interact intensely with faith-filled friends who have journeyed along a similar path and emerged stronger from the study.

A *third* warning sign in your theological higher education is *a lack of zeal and service for God* and others. Serious study of the Bible and theology should lead to ever-increasing levels of love for God and service to His people. Along with stimulating academic study and rigorous intellectual intake, there needs to be a corresponding level of humble output and serious service. We learn in order to live, not the other way around. Be careful when you notice an increasing lack of zeal and service for God and others. This could mean you are missing out on the balance that leads to blessing.

A *fourth* sign of an academic downslide is *a lack of time for prayer and reflection*. Psalm 1:2 reminds us there are really

only two times when we need to meditate on the Word of God: day and night. And yet, during seasons of intense study we often fail to take adequate time to reflect on what we are learning. Prayer can become perfunctory and lifeless. We become so busy acquiring knowledge that we no longer take time to contemplate *what* we are learning and *how* the new learning can be integrated into our lives.

The enemy of our souls uses the legitimate doubts we experience to drive a wedge between our heads and our hearts. His tactics have not changed since the garden of Eden. He isolated Eve and cunningly asked, “Has God said?” (Gen. 3:1). Obviously Eve should have prayed to God, reflected on what He really said, and asked Adam, her friend and husband for faith-filling advice. And yet in her isolation and doubt she questioned the goodness of God. The problem with increasing levels of Christian privatization is that it leads to further isolation. Instead of building deeper associations in the body of Christ, we further alienate ourselves. As we study, we need to pray. When we learn, we need to reflect. While we are struggling with understanding who God is, we must at the same time remember what He has done!

We must continually strive for balance between a humble pursuit of godly wisdom and an insatiable appetite for acquiring theological knowledge. The former ought to produce a warm, vibrant relationship with God, while an overemphasis on the latter often induces a cold, doubting introspective lifestyle that can lead to extended seasons of habitual doubt and selfishness. As Jesus promised, “I came that they may have *life*” (John 10:10).

CHECKLIST OF AN UNBALANCED ACADEMIC CHRISTIAN LIFE	
1.	A confusion regarding one’s identity in Christ with an identity as a worker for Christ. Thinking, “Unless I win this theological argument, I am not important.” Are you secure in Christ alone? Are you secure in the work you do for Christ or the study you undertake about Christ?
2.	An increasing amount of isolation and privatization. Thinking, “There are really only a handful of us true believers, and I worry about some of them. I should get out of my study and interact with others, but I guess I’m the intellectual type.” Are you surrounded by a handful of faithful, authentic friends who know you well?
3.	A decreasing amount of service toward God and others in the body. Thinking, “I should probably balance my study time with service or outreach, but I need more knowledge to make certain I’m correct in my positions. I don’t have time to serve others; I’m studying and researching to find real answers. Are you engaged in selfless service? Why or why not?”

Introduction

CHECKLIST OF AN UNBALANCED ACADEMIC CHRISTIAN LIFE

4.

A lack of prayer and meditative reflection. Thinking, “I should probably set aside time for authentic prayer and honest contemplation, but I have all these increasing academic deadlines that I must fulfill!” Or, “I need to meditate on Scripture, but I want to learn what this new church controversy is all about first.” Do you always need to be with others? Why?

Chapter 1

CHRISTIAN MATURITY AND HIGHER EDUCATION

Can They Be Balanced?

Consider these two scenarios. Lingered at the moving truck's sliding back door while glancing at old correspondence, Tyler somberly reflected on being so excited at receiving his acceptance letter to seminary. He had envisioned late nights with friends studying the classic theologians of the faith. He longed to know more about the *content* of his faith, the *reasons* he should believe, the underlying *nature* of his faith. He desired to dig deeper. He wondered why, in just two brief semesters, he now struggled with deepening levels of doubt. He was confused as to why he had become so cynical and sarcastic toward the faith he once held dear. Tyler entered with such eager anticipation and was now leaving with little enlightenment and certainly no degree in hand.

When I (Paul) was in grade school I enjoyed most subjects. Reading, writing, and arithmetic all held my interest. Growing up in northeast Kansas the fall months seamlessly turned to winter and normally a blanket of snow covered the school parking

lot and playground. Then spring would arrive in its full splendor. Like suddenly awakened flowers shooting up from their long-dormant positions under the cold soil, all the kids in my class sprang from our assigned seats and raced to the playground.

Plenty of options existed from which to choose. There were the swing sets, monkey bars, merry-go-rounds, and jungle gyms. But one piece of playground equipment always captured my imagination more than the others. I was always drawn to and intrigued by the teeter-totter. Simple in design, this playground staple consisted of one long piece of lumber bolted atop a sturdy metal bar. But oh, the potential dangers lurking; for a group of young boys they seemed endless.

The normal way to ride on the teeter-totter was for one child to sit on one end of the long board and a similar-sized child to sit on the opposing end of the board. While we pushed off with our feet and legs, the up-and-down motion provided hours of endless fun.

But hilarity followed when different-sized kids would try to keep one end of the board suspended in the air. Or two or more kids would try to launch one child into the air. And especially dangerous was to quickly run up the teeter-totter and then to the metal bar; keeping one foot on one side of the bar and another foot on the other side. As weight was slightly shifted from one side to the other, the final goal of *balancing* the teeter-totter could be achieved. This took skill, patience, experience, and wisdom. Too much weight in one direction always produced a painful and embarrassing spill.

Students also need to exercise extreme caution in order to balance growth in Christ (a life-long pursuit of spiritual maturity) with a concentrated effort at learning more about God (undertaking a course of Christian study or pursuit of theology).

Surely the desire to accomplish this task is a worthy goal. Scripture always emphasizes the holistic nature of man. For example, Jesus answered an expert in the Law by referring to Deuteronomy 6:5, pointing out that believers should love God with all of their being; heart, soul, strength, and *mind*. In addition, Peter advised his readers to know the *reasons* why they believe. He urged them to “sanctify Christ as Lord in your hearts, always being ready to *make a defense* to everyone who asks you to give an account for the hope that is in you, yet with gentleness and reverence” (1 Peter 3:15).

Those who desire to learn more about God long for a good thing. Today the church has been accused of “dumbing down the gospel,” and some say that the technical and digital revolution means we are “amusing ourselves to death.”¹ Now more than ever, we need theologians who can learn and defend the orthodox doctrines of the faith. The church desperately needs vigorous defenders who can engage a lost and broken post-Christian culture.

In addition, evangelicalism is in need of those who burn with passion for following Jesus Christ. The church is looking for sold-out disciple-makers who mirror the commitment of Jesus and His earliest followers. Possessing a head full of facts and dogmas without a heart filled with love for Jesus and a passion to serve the Savior is of little value.

But how can this teeter totter between Christian maturity and a seminary education be mastered? Can one really possess both a mind able to defend the faith and a heart passionately beating for Christ? To tiptoe up one side of this teeter-totter and peek over the edge, several terms must be defined.

¹ Neil Postman. *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business* (New York: Penguin, 1985), 155.

What Is Christian Maturity?

The New Testament writers employed several metaphors to describe the process and product of growth in Christ. The following are three of them. First, the apostle Paul used the metaphor of a *grown man*, urging Jesus' followers to *grow up* in "the body of Christ, until we all attain to the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a *mature man*, [attaining] to the measure of the stature which belongs to the fullness of Christ [so that] we are no longer to be children" (Eph. 4:12-14, italics added).

Paul fought against his prevailing culture (which was filled with various private religions and individualized beliefs) by showing new believers that theirs was a religion of growth toward unity. Each person was needed, and all were encouraged to give and contribute their unique faith gift to the church in order for the church to become a *mature* man. Are you maturing in your Christian faith?

Second, Jesus used the illustration of good *fruit* to show results of growth in the Christian life. He said, "You will know them by their fruits. Grapes are not gathered from thorn bushes nor figs from thistles, are they? So every good tree bears good fruit, but the bad tree bears bad fruit. A good tree cannot produce bad fruit, nor can a bad tree produce good fruit...So then, you will know them by their fruits" (Matt. 7: 16-18, 20). Are you producing good fruit as a result of following Jesus?

Third, John used the image of *light* to describe maturing in faith. John admonished, "But if we walk in the Light as He Himself is in the Light, we have fellowship with one another" (1 John 1:7). And Paul similarly encouraged his Ephesian readers, "For you were formerly darkness, but now you are Light in the

Lord; walk as children of Light" (Eph. 5:8). Are you avoiding the darkness and walking in the light?

These three metaphors (growing, producing, and walking) represent what it means to become spiritually mature. Maturity in Christ means (a) putting away childish things and becoming an *adult* in Christ, (b) partnering with the Holy Spirit to produce *good fruit*, and (c) walking in the *light* of God's truths. The Scriptures view Christian maturity as normative for believers. Living things grow. But can growth in Christ occur when a person undertakes an advanced study in theology? Is it possible to see growth in Christ *alongside* rigorous academic achievement? Can these two be balanced in a healthy manner?

What Is "Higher Education?"

Some Christian leaders have discouraged advanced biblical or theological study. And some Christian denominations look with disdain on pursuing higher education.² On the other hand, the Council for Christian Colleges and Universities (CCCU) holds as its mission statement, "To advance the cause of Christ-centered higher education and to help our institutions transform lives by faithfully relating scholarship and service to biblical truth."³

- 2 Brethren leader James Taylor Jr. tolerated post-secondary education, while James Harvey Symington strongly discouraged it. Toward the end of his life, Symington actively suppressed any discussion that found value in higher education (<http://56755.blogspot.com/2009/03/brethren-revisited.html>). In addition, Amish and some Mennonites discourage study in higher education (<http://www.guidedbiblestudies.com/library/christianbrethren.htm>).
- 3 Council for Christian Colleges and Universities, (<http://www.cccu.org/about>, under the heading Mission).

In the Western world advanced education is primarily viewed as post-secondary education (“graduate school” or “further education”) undertaken on a voluntary basis. This can mean studying at a university or a seminary, taking a certificate class at a local junior or community college, or attending a vocational or trade school. The Platonic Academy was founded in the fourth century BC and included theological discussion as a part of its course of study.⁴ Modern universities (a collection of more than one “college”) grew out of the monastic tradition in which individuals felt “called by God” to devote themselves solely to the church. Universities therefore trained members to become officers and leaders in the church.

In the Middle Ages, theology was considered the “ultimate subject” at universities and was referred to as “Queen of the Sciences.” The word *theology* comes from the Greek θεολογία which combines θεός (*theos*, “God”) and λογία (*logia*, “study of”). Theology was taught first. Then the Trivium (the “three ways” or “three roads”)—grammar, logic, rhetoric—were taught. After the Trivium was mastered, students studied the Quadrivium (the “four ways, or “four roads”): arithmetic, geometry, music, and astronomy. Additional subjects, such as philosophy, existed primarily to assist with the undertaking of theological thought.⁵

Over the centuries, however, theology’s valued position as “queen” began to erode. During the Enlightenment era especially, people questioned whether faith and reason could exist together. Surely one could be held, but could both? Debates broke

4 John Dillon, *The Heirs of Plato: A Study in the Old Academy, 347~274 BC* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003) 2.

5 Thomas Albert Howard, *Protestant Theology and the Making of the Modern German University* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 56.

out as to whether the study of theology was an undertaking in science or theory? Later in the United States, universities such as Harvard, Yale, and Princeton were founded with the distinct goal of providing theological training for clergy.⁶

Is Balance Possible?

Now that we have taken these brief looks into Christian maturity and higher education as separate entities, we return to our original question: Can a healthy pursuit of *both* of these targets be achieved? How can a balance occur? Can you really stand in the middle of the teeter-totter as a whole person who is passionate about Christian formation and deeply engaged in advanced academic pursuits?

The answer to the question is a resounding *yes*. However, you must adhere to certain principles, guidelines, and warnings, for the journey to become a success.

J. Gresham Machen described this dilemma as a potential conflict between Christianity and culture.

“Are then Christianity and culture in a conflict that is to be settled only by the destruction of one or the other of the contending forces? A...solution fortunately, is possible—namely, consecration. Instead of destroying the arts and sciences or being indifferent to them, let us cultivate them with all the enthusiasm of the veriest humanist, but at the

6 George M. Marsden, *The Soul of the American University: From Protestant Establishment to Established Nonbelief* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 41.

same time consecrate them to the service of our God. Instead of stifling the pleasures afforded by the acquisition of knowledge or by the appreciation of what is beautiful, let us accept these pleasures as the gifts of a heavenly Father. Instead of obliterating the distinction between the Kingdom and the world, or on the other hand withdrawing from the world into a sort of modernized intellectual monasticism, let us go forth joyfully, enthusiastically to make the world subject to God.”⁷

The Dangers Involved in Failing to Achieve Balance

Someone may argue, “What difference does it make if I’m not involved in either of these pursuits.” All Christians are called to grow. And all Christians are called to know what they believe. As stated earlier, we are always to be “ready to make a defense to everyone who asks you to give an account for the hope that is in you, yet with gentleness and reverence” (1 Pet. 3:15). So both of these goals are more than simply worthwhile attainments; they are scriptural mandates. Think of these two arenas of development as the two ends of our teeter-totter example.

On one far end stands the believer who does not see the benefit of learning about the content of his or her faith. Because he does not see the importance of learning “sound doctrine,” he is in danger of being led astray by false teaching. As Paul warned, “As a result, we are no longer to be children, tossed here and there by waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by

the trickery of men, by craftiness in deceitful scheming” (Eph. 4:14). All Christians should “be diligent to present yourself approved to God as a workman who does not need to be ashamed, accurately handling the word of truth” (2 Tim. 2:15). Believers need to understand *why* they believe *what* they believe.

On the other end of the teeter-totter stands the believer who slips into the practice of always studying and learning but fails to *practice* or *implement* what he is learning. This subtle danger can creep in unawares. As James warned his readers, “But prove yourselves doers of the word, and not merely hearers who delude themselves. For if anyone is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he is like a man who looks at his natural face in a mirror; for once he has looked at himself and gone away, he has immediately forgotten what kind of person he was” (James 1:22-24).

After much biblical or theological study, some may tend to think proudly, “I know so much more than most Christians,” or “I am smarter than the average Christ-follower.” How strange that the advanced study of a book promoting humility and service toward others would leave one feeling smug over his knowledge or ability to recall biblical data or doctrinal facts.

Understanding the Inherent Imperfections in All Theological Systems

God has made Himself known through revelation. Theologians distinguish between general and special revelation. General revelation holds that God’s existence and attributes can be known by all through both an internal sensing and by external observation and discovery of nature, the universe, and even historical events. Special revelation refers to the distinct self-disclosure of God to specific persons and ultimately through Scripture. Christian ma-

⁷ D.G. Hart, *J. Gresham Machen: Selected Shorter Writings* (Phillipsburg: P & R Publishing, 2004), 402.

turity and academic theological study, which are to be held in balance, can be addressed by these two categories of revelation.

Because of the gift of general revelation, mankind can observe the world as it is. From the intricacies of nature, the complexities of the human body, and the wonder of beauty and art, people can reason there must be a Creator. The apostle Paul explained this concept clearly: “For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men who suppress the truth in unrighteousness, because that which is known about God is evident within them; for God made it evident to them. For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes, His eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly seen, being understood through what has been made, so that they are without excuse” (Rom. 1:18-20).

All theological systems are man-made and therefore inherently flawed to some degree. Of course they contain truth, but they are not *the* truth like the Scriptures. The Bible is the inspired and inerrant Word of God. As Paul wrote, “All Scripture is inspired by God [lit., God-breathed] and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness” (2 Tim. 3:16). Inspiration can be defined as the work of the Holy Spirit in enabling the human authors to record what God wanted written down. The writing of the Scriptures was divinely guided. Inerrancy means that the Bible is trustworthy and reliable. And because the Scriptures are authoritative, they can be referred to as God’s Word.

Christian maturity is ultimately based on both the general and special revelation of God. The special revelation of God speaks to the mystery of salvation (right relationship with God). For example, the apostle Paul told the Corinthian believers, “We speak God’s wisdom in a mystery, the hidden wisdom which

God predestined before the ages to our glory” (1 Cor. 2:7). The special revelation of God describes the process of sanctification (right fellowship with God). The following passages all mention how God sanctifies (sets apart for service) His own:

“For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand so that we would walk in them” (Eph. 2:10).

“For I am confident of this very thing, that He who began a good work in you will perfect it until the day of Christ Jesus” (Phil. 1:6).

“For it is God who is at work in you, both to will and to work for His good pleasure” (Phil. 2:13).

“But we should always give thanks to God for you, brethren beloved by the Lord, because God has chosen you from the beginning for salvation through sanctification by the Spirit and faith in the truth” (2 Thess. 2:13).

These passages show that God is at work in the lives of believers to bring them more and more into conformity to Christ. Sanctification is both an accomplished fact and a process of growth. We are formed and ever forming. To use the metaphors mentioned above, we are *growing up* into our full stature, we are producing *good fruit* that benefits the body of Christ, and we are learning to *walk in the light*, as more and more light is revealed to us. Special revelation shows how the process of sanctification should occur. But we rely on general revelation as well. We tap

into the wisdom of saints who have gone before us to learn some of the “best practices” for growing in godliness.

We look to learned men and women of the faith who have studied the Scriptures and systematized their observations into reasonable divisions of learning. Believers today rely on (a) the insights and knowledge of Christians who lived in previous ages, (b) doctrines and dogmas formulated through church councils, (c) popular and academic writings on the faith, and (d) faith practices and patterns from others who have embraced Christ as Lord.

Humans were created as moral agents. We were gifted with the incredible power of choice. A glimpse into a Garden of Eden scene reveals, “The LORD God commanded the man, saying, ‘From any tree of the garden you may eat freely,’ (Gen. 2:16). However, even though humans have been granted this amazing freedom to choose, we are ultimately still frail, weak, and finite. The following Bible passages address this weakness.

“Can you discover the depths of God? Can you discover the limits of the Almighty? They are high as the heavens, what can you do? Deeper than Sheol, what can you know? Its measure is longer than the earth and broader than the sea” (Job 11:7-9).

“When I consider Your heavens, the work of Your fingers, the moon and the stars, which You have ordained; what is man that You take thought of him, and the son of man that You care for him?” (Ps. 8:3-4).

“LORD, make me to know my end and what is the extent of my days; let me know how transient I am.

Behold, you have made my days as handbreadths, and my lifetime as nothing in Your sight; surely every man at his best is a mere breath” (Ps. 39:4-5).

“Such knowledge is too wonderful for me; it is too high, I cannot attain to it” (Ps.139:6).

“A voice says, “Call out.” Then he answered, “What shall I call out?” All flesh is grass, and all its loveliness is like the flower of the field. The grass withers, the flower fades, when the breath of the LORD blows upon it; surely the people are grass. The grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of our God stands forever” (Isa.40:6-8).

“Yet we do speak wisdom among those who are mature; a wisdom, however, not of this age nor of the rulers of this age, who are passing away; but we speak God’s wisdom in a mystery, the hidden wisdom which God predestined before the ages to our glory; the wisdom which none of the rulers of this age has understood; for if they had understood it they would not have crucified the Lord of glory” (1 Cor. 2:6-8).

Understanding the Inherent Imperfection of All Christian Formation Systems

Both general and special revelation help gifted and learned scholars build systematic theologies, which are useful for the church and her people. But since these systems are based on the

writings of imperfect people, these systems of thought are not inspired or inerrant. In a similar manner, methods and plans for growth in godliness also contain imperfections.

Becoming more like Christ has been God's goal for His followers since Jesus first chose 12 followers and began the process of building His church. Since that time, Christians have relied on the revelation of God and their own human intellect to devise plans and strategies for growth. The earliest followers of Jesus employed the methods they learned from the first disciples including prayer, the sharing of all things in common, regularly meeting together to observe baptism and the Lord's meal, and other distinctly Christian practices.

Through the ages, various practices were added to these in an attempt to become more fully devoted disciples of Jesus. But these practices, habits, and patterns of devotion, all devised to help us become mature Christians, do not have a 100% guarantee of success.

We can surely employ these methods in good faith expecting desired results, but God produces the results. Jesus said, "The wind blows where it wishes and you hear the sound of it, but do not know where it comes from and where it is going" (John 3:8).

Balancing the Head and the Heart: It Can Happen!

God made man in His own image (Gen. 1:26) and part of that image is the gift of reason. Scripture reveals the wisdom of God, which differs from the ruminations of the most learned or brilliant human thinkers. C. S. Lewis is an example of an atheist who was drawn to faith over time. His mother, Florence, died when he was nine years old. His best friend, Paddy, died during World War I. And yet the subtle emotion that prompted Lewis

to keep investigating Christianity was joy. Joy was Lewis' term for a stab of longing that unexpectedly welled up in him during moments of contemplation, such as listening to an opera or reading an ancient Norse tale.

In his book, *The Weight of Glory*, Lewis wrote that the yearning he experienced during those moments convinced him there was another existence beyond this world: "For they are not the thing itself; they are only the scent of a love we have not found, the echo of a tune we have not heard, news from a country we have never visited."⁸ In Lewis, faith and reason found a comfortable home. His was a brilliant mind and by all accounts a heartfelt, genuine faith.

The psalmist asked, "Examine me, O LORD, and try me; test my mind כִּלְיָהּ (*kilyah*) and my heart לֵב (*leb*)" (Ps. 26:2). In Hebrew, כִּלְיָהּ stands for the motives or understanding (the mind) and לֵב stands for the affections or emotions (the heart). We can truly find the golden mean between our heart and our head; we can strive for the healthy, holistic lifestyle of a devoted walk with the Savior and the passionate pursuit of academic excellence. A blessed balance *is* possible!

We do not have to suffer from spiritual frostbite when we pursue advanced studies in theology or the Bible. Paul encouraged the Philippian believers by admonishing them to focus on the peace of God. "And the peace of God, which surpasses all comprehension, will guard your *hearts* and your *minds* in Christ Jesus" (Phil. 4:7, italics added). In the Greek language

⁸ John Blake, *Surprised by C. S. Lewis: Why His Popularity Endures*. CNN Belief Blog, Dec. 17, 2010; <http://religion.blogs.cnn.com/2010/12/17/surprised-by-c-s-lewis-why-his-popularity-endures/?hpt=C2>

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kardia “heart” was considered the center of the body and thus the center of the spiritual life, while *noema* “head” stood for mental perception or thoughts. The apostle Paul placed these two seemingly disparate parts together and promised us that the incredible peace of God can guard (garrison) both our emotions (feelings) and our thoughts (mental choices).

The next chapter highlights some of the potential dangers inherent in acquiring knowledge. And, the remaining chapters help explain how we can maintain the head/heart balance described above. Rest assured, Christian maturity and theological higher education are both worthy and attainable pursuits.