



**Boston Faculty Fellowship
Academics as Salt & Light in the University
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Choosing Scholarly Topics

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Choosing Research and Scholarly Topics

Let me give two examples from my own research trajectories:

- Mobilization for basic legal freedoms – struggles for political liberalism across time and place (Halliday and Karpik 1998; Halliday, Karpik, Feeley 2007; Halliday, Karpik, Feeley 2012)
- Crafting of laws for world markets, trade (Carruthers and Halliday 2009; Block-Lieb and Halliday 2017).

Regrettably, I did not begin my research in either of these lines of research with theological or ethical questions in mind.

Contrast two approaches as Christian scholars:

a. we might begin with the topic, then move to faith

Think of this in purely academic terms

- Start with big questions
- Choose institutions, e.g., a given discipline, problem, lab and allows its currents to sweep us along
- We might be directed to projects by mentors
- Opportunities open – we seize them, ask faith questions later

Thus – we follow an academic trajectory – and we hope for God’s grace, for a faith light to shine, for a redemptive moment that presses for integration of faith and learning

This raises the critical question – how to effect the faith move?

- Do we proceed in passive hope?
- Do we seek out faith interlocutors?
- Do we draw on IVCF/IFES/Developing a Christian Mind resources?

OR

b. we might begin with faith, then move to a topic

In some fields this move has more possibility than others. If so, can and do we choose Christianly?

An immediate question arises: Are there topics more inherently *Christian* or *biblically salient* than others?

Yes, some questions seem to be more immanent for some disciplines

Yes, but some are much deeper and more difficult to discern in other disciplines

Some are completely imperceptible.

Pure mathematics

Logic

Musicology

Theoretical physics

Computing languages

Properties of materials

And if we choose, what theological armory do we have?

Who provides it?

How do we get it?

All of which confronts us with several puzzles we'll consider in our breakout groups:

- Do we *choose*? Or are we *chosen*?
Perhaps we are chosen and choose in subtle, even imperceptible interplay
- What if the Christian significance of a topic is not obvious?
Providential or serendipitous moments – new ideas, new opportunities, new data access
Do we plunge in?
Eg. My research opportunity with the International Monetary Fund.
- When to say “no” to opportunities – and why?
- What theological resources do we have for matching our passions with our faith – to “think Christianly”

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