



**Boston Faculty Fellowship
Academics as Salt and Light in the University
January Retreat 2017**

Session 3. Engaging Theologically or Engaging Faithfully

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INTRODUCTION

We see through a lens – but “darkly” (1 Cor 13)

We are to see all of university life “through the eyes of faith” – Wolterstorff

We are “to think Christianly”

What are the lens?

We may discover many theological points of entry into our engagement through conversation and dialogue.

(1) Great biblical motifs (e.g., justice, peace, creativity)?

Justice – *for the least of these*

Freedom

Equality

Love – *agape*

Forgiveness

Awe/Wonder

(2) Core Christian virtues

Humility

Forgiveness

Equality

(3) The great theologies of creation, fall, redemption, among others.

STATES OF BEING IN THE UNIVERSITY

Today I will approach the university from a different angle – via the Psalms

Walter Brueggemann has a superb commentary on the Psalms: *The Message of the Psalms: A Theological Commentary*.

He draws all Psalms into 3 broad categories (subcategories) – psalms of orientation, disorientation, and re-orientation. Moreover, he shows they have a dynamic relationship to each other. They follow the human experience.

We may read the Psalms as *individuals*, as most of us do in our devotional life.

We may read them as they apply to the nation of *Israel* . . .

Israel's speech to God

God's word to his people

But today I suggest we apply them to the university as an *institution*.

This parallel is not complete or perfect

Yet it is suggestive for me, and offers for me a fresh way of perceiving university life

--too often, in some Christian circles, universities are labeled as "dangerous" or

"secular" or "hostile" or "other"

--these labels all distort

Let us see if we can capture a more nuanced, richer, variegated portrait of university in all its moral/theological/scholarly dimensionality

1st Movement: Psalms of Orientation / University as a Creative Order

Exude well-being, confidence in God's order, where His people are settled, content, living in the way things were ordained by God to be.

Songs of Creation -- descriptive hymns – expressions of creation faith, expressions of order, a sense of the sacred canopy

Psa 19:1-6 "heavens declare glory of God, firmament showeth his handiwork"

Psa 145 v.5 "on the glorious splendor of your majesty, and on your wondrous works I will meditate."

God governs, he has created a world magnificent, glorious, well-arranged

Psa 8 v1-2 God's glory

V3-8 God's glory and honor endowed on humans – "you have crowned them with glory and honor" – humans given dominion – expected to maintain order in a well-oriented world.

In this world, we see the university as a site to discover and celebrate God's creation/creativity (eg., Psa 19)

--everything in the university that involves **discovery of the wonder in physical, biological orders** – applications in engineering, agriculture, medicine

--every part of university that treats **aesthetics, goodness, beauty** –literature – applications in schools of architecture, fine arts, performing arts

Songs of Torah, Law – wellbeing springs from obedience to God's faithfulness and reliability in His moral order – as it gets infused into social orders

Psa 1 "Happy are those" whose "delight is in the law of the Lord"

There is right and wrong, good and evil, in the affairs of mankind

Psa 19:7-15 "the law of the Lord is perfect"

Psa 119

Here we see parallels in:

--every part of the university that **reveals wellbeing and human flourishing** in social, economic, legal orders – applications in social work, public policy, business schools, law schools
--every part of the university that grapples with **morality, ethics, evil** – philosophy, ethics, social moralities

Psalms of orientation allude, more broadly, to every creative breakthrough in concepts, theory, methodology

For me, these are indicative of the processes of the university at its best:

Discovery
Energy
Meritocracy
Excitement
Enlightenment
Openness to offbeat, outlandish ideas

It is also a place of critique, a location of protest.
Cf. China 1989
Cf. Benny Tai, Joshua Wong, Hong Kong 2014-2017]

As Christians:

--these are reflective of our calling to the creative edge, of the creator, of *imago dei*.
--we celebrate the wonder of the modern university

Our presence as researchers & teachers thus is to cultivate, exude, express that excitement.
This should be integral to our Christian posture on campus.

2nd Movement: Psalms of Disorientation / University as a Fallen Institution

These are songs of disarray. Order is broken. The Fall is manifest. Bad things happen.

Incoherence
Disjointedness
The curse of sin – brokenness
For individuals
For institutions.

Psalms of Lament

critique and confess/mourn fall (Psa 51, 52, 53)

Psa 51 – we know in our personal lives

--v1-2. "Have mercy on me, my God . . . wash me thoroughly from my iniquity."

– v3. "I know my transgressions, my sin is ever before me."

Psa 52 – think of institns, academia as a fallen institn

Why do you boast of evil, you mighty hero?

Why do you boast all day long,
you who are a disgrace in the eyes of God?

²You who practice deceit,
your tongue plots destruction;
it is like a sharpened razor.

³You love evil rather than good,
falsehood rather than speaking the truth.^[c]

⁴You love every harmful word,
you deceitful tongue!

Psa 53

The fool says in his heart,
“There is no God.”
They are corrupt, and their ways are vile;
there is no one who does good.

²God looks down from heaven
on all mankind
to see if there are any who understand,
any who seek God.

³Everyone has turned away, all have become corrupt;
there is no one who does good,
not even one.

⁴Do all these evildoers know nothing?

They devour my people as though eating bread;
they never call on God.

We are fallen persons

Israel is a fallen nation

The university is a fallen institution – flirts, commits adultery with false gods

--governments – does their bidding

--industry – driven by profit

--ideologies – current situation in China – serving interests of CCP -- ideology of physical health v. spiritual health or moral character

--perpetuates inequality – favors rich, favors men favors lighter skins

The University:

--magnifies the fallenness of our persons – pride, arrogance, social ineptness, selfishness

--too many of its voices spread the false and arrogant message that “there is no god.”

--they are “corrupt” – easily seduced by the money of governments, industry, benefactors

--they “devour my people” – take pleasure in tripping up young persons, of aiding and abetting the fall of young Christians from faith

--they “never call on God” – too arrogant in their own self-reliance

As Christians:

--we mourn – aridity, hostility, skepticism, condescension

--we confess – our silence, cowardice, laziness, isolation

--we surrender the university to its fallenness

– we retreat into our research/teaching silos

– we bifurcate our lives – we become schizophrenic academic Christians

TH: a confession I have made for much of my academic life

3rd Movement: Psalms of Re-orientation / University as a Redeemed Institution

Songs that come out of lament – out of distress – out of fallenness – out of the “pit of chaos” (20)

Psalms and Songs of new life . . .

- being surprised by joy
- fertility breaks through barrenness –
- creativity bursts out of blocked channels

We are offered new coherence, new ways of ordering:

“This move of departure to new life includes a rush of positive responses, including delight, amazement, wonder, awe, gratitude and thanksgiving” (21)

Other psalms of re-orientation “tell a tale of a decisive time, an inversion, a reversal of fortune, a rescue, deliverance, saving, liberation, healing.” (21)

Cf. those moves in the university:

- when we are stuck in an unproductive line of research
- where we struggle with intellectual problems that refuse to be resolved
- when we wrestle with tough issues, big questions, with no light on horizon
- when we are embedded in a rotten department or unpleasant research team
- when we face bored, unengaged, hostile students
- when we are bogged down in dull or stale approaches to teaching
- when we feel marginalized in our department, discipline

Psalms of orientation point to an astonishing move – an Easter move – after the Cross, the Resurrection.

Songs of thanksgiving

The other side of lament, of fallenness, of the pit, the “miry clay”

They reflect the 3 step move – from contentment to disillusionment to redemption/thanksgiving

Psa 30 – brilliant evocation of these steps . . .

V6, 7a “Prosperity” “By your favor you had established me as a strong as a strong mountain”

THEN

V7b “I was dismayed” – all was going well – “I cried” – I was deep in “supplication”

THEN

V11 “you have turned my mourning into dancing” – “clothed me with joy” –

Psa ends with the triumphant: “I will give thanks for ever”

Conventionally we see this as an individual move . . . fine

Yet, also see it as a redemptive institutional move – from the individual to collective, from introspection to conversation, from isolation to sociability.

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