

FIRST THINGS

GO WITH GOD

AN OPEN LETTER TO YOUNG CHRISTIANS ON THEIR WAY TO COLLEGE

by Stanley Hauerwas

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The Christian religion,” wrote Robert Louis Wilken, “is inescapably ritualistic (one is received into the Church by a solemn washing with water), uncompromisingly moral (‘be ye perfect as your Father in heaven is perfect,’ said Jesus), and unapologetically intellectual (be ready to give a ‘reason for the hope that is in you,’ in the words of 1 Peter). Like all the major religions of the world, Christianity is more than a set of devotional practices and a moral code: it is also a way of thinking about God, about human beings, about the world and history.”

Ritualistic, moral, and intellectual: May these words, ones that Wilken uses to begin his beautiful book, *The Spirit of Early Christian Thought*, be written on your soul as you begin college and mark your life—characterize and distinguish your life—for the next four years. Be faithful in worship. In America, going to college is one of those heavily mythologized events that everybody tells you will “change your life,” which is probably at least half true. So don’t be foolish and imagine that you can take a vacation from church.

Be uncompromisingly moral. Undergraduate life on college campuses tends in the direction of neopagan excess. Good kids from good families too often end up using their four years at college to get drunk and throw up on one another. Too often they do so on their way to the condom dispensers. What a waste! Not only because such behavior is self-destructive but also because living this way will prevent you from doing the intellectual work the Christian faith demands. Be deeply intellectual. We—that is, the Church—need you to do well in school.

That may sound strange, because many who represent Christian values seem concerned primarily with how you conduct yourself while you are in college; they relegate the Christian part of being in college to what is done outside the classroom.

The Christian fact is very straightforward: To be a student is a calling. Your parents are setting up accounts to pay the bills, or you are scraping together your own resources and taking out loans, or a scholarship is making college possible. Whatever the practical source, the end result is the same. You are privileged to enter a time—four years!—during which your main job is to listen to lectures, attend seminars, go to labs, and read books.

It is an extraordinary gift. In a world of deep injustice and violence, a people exists that thinks some can be given time to study. We need you to take seriously the calling that is yours by virtue of going to college. You may well be thinking, “What is *he* thinking? I’m just beginning my freshman year. I’m not being called to be a student. None of my peers thinks he or she is called to be a student. They’re going to college because it prepares you for life. I’m going to college so I can get a better job and have a better life than I’d have if I didn’t go to college. It’s not a *calling*.”

But you are a Christian. This means you cannot go to college just to get a better job. These days, people talk about college as an investment because they think of education as a bank account: You deposit the knowledge and expertise you’ve earned, and when it comes time to get a job, you make a withdrawal, putting all that stuff on a résumé and making money off the investment of your four years. Christians need jobs just like anybody else, but the years you spend as an undergraduate are like everything else in your life. They’re not yours to do with as you please. They’re Christ’s.

Christ’s call on you as a student is a calling to meet the needs of the Church, both for its own life and the life of the world. The Resurrection of Jesus, Wilken suggests, is not only the central fact of Christian worship but also the ground of all Christian thinking “about God,

about human beings, about the world and history.” Somebody needs to do that thinking—and that means *you*.

Don’t underestimate how much the Church needs your mind. Remember your Bible-study class? Christians read Isaiah’s prophecy of a suffering servant as pointing to Christ. That seems obvious, but it’s not; or at least it wasn’t obvious to the Ethiopian eunuch to whom the Lord sent Philip to explain things. Christ is written everywhere, not only in the prophecies of the Old Testament but also in the pages of history and in the book of nature. The Church has been explaining, interpreting, and illuminating ever since it began. It takes an educated mind to do the Church’s work of thinking about and interpreting the world in light of Christ. Physics, sociology, French literary theory: All these and more—in fact, everything you study in college—is bathed in the light of Christ. It takes the eyes of faith to see that light, and it takes an educated mind to understand and articulate it.

There’s another dimension to the call of intellectual work. In the First Letter of Peter we read, “Always be prepared to make a defense to any one who calls you to account for the hope that is in you” (3:15). Not everybody believes. In fact, the contemporary American secular university is largely a place of unbelief. Thus, the Church has a job to do: to explain why belief in the risen Lord actually makes sense. There’s no one formula, no one argument, so don’t imagine you will find the magic defense against all objections. You can, however, offer the reasonable defense Peter asks for. You may at least make someone think twice before he rejects the risen Lord.

Anyway, defense isn’t the point. Lots of people feel lost because they imagine being a sophisticated, contemporary intellectual makes faith impossible. The Church wants to reach these people, but to do so requires an ambassador at home in the intellectual world. That’s you—or at least that’s what you can become if you do your work with enthusiasm. Share in a love of learning. It’s a worthy love in its own right, and it will allow you to be the leaven in the

lump of academia.

So, yes, to be a student is to be called to serve the Church and the world. But always remember who serves what. Colleges focus on learning; as they do so, they can create the illusion that being smart and well educated is the be-all and end-all of life. You do not need to be educated to be a Christian. That's obvious. After all, Christ is most visible to the world in the person who responds to his call of "Come, follow me." I daresay St. Francis of Assisi was more important to the medieval Church than any intellectual. One of the most brilliant men in the history of the Church, St. Bonaventure, a Franciscan, said as much. But the Church needs some Christians to be educated, as St. Bonaventure also knew; this is why he taught at the University of Paris and ensured that, in their enthusiasm for the example of St. Francis, his brother Franciscans didn't give up on education.

The best way to think about the relation between your calling as a student and the many other callings of Christians can be found in 1 Corinthians 12. In this letter Paul is dealing with a community in turmoil as various factions claim priority. It's the same situation today. Pastors consider preaching and evangelizing the most important thing. Teachers consider education the most important thing. Social activists argue for the priority of making the world more just. Still others insist that internal spiritual renewal is the key to everything. St. Paul, however, reminds the Church at Corinth that it comprises a variety of gifts that serve to build up the Church's common good. To one person is given wisdom, to others knowledge, to still others the work of healing, prophecy, and the discernment of the spirits. By all means honor those who are serving the Church in the ordained ministry, or through social action, or through spiritual direction. But remember: You are about to become a student—not a pastor, a social worker, or a spiritual director. Whatever you end up doing with your life, now is the time when you develop the intellectual skills the Church needs for the sake of building up the Body of Christ.

Your Christian calling as a student does not require you to become a theologian, at least not in the official sense of the word. Speaking as one whose job title is Professor of Theology, I certainly hope you will be attracted to the work of theology. These days—at least in the West, where the dominant intellectual trends have detached themselves from Christianity—the discipline of theology is in a world of hurt, often tempted by silly efforts to dress up the gospel in the latest academic fashions. So God knows we need all the help we can get.

But there is a wider sense of being a theologian, one that simply means thinking about what you are learning in light of Christ. This does not happen by making everything fit into Church doctrine or biblical preaching—that's theology in the strict, official sense. Instead, to become a Christian scholar is more a matter of intention and desire, of bearing witness to Christ in the contemporary world of science, literature, and so forth.

You can't do this on your own. You'll need friends who major in physics and biology as well as in economics, psychology, philosophy, literature, and every other discipline. These friends can be teachers and fellow students, of course, but, for the most part, our intellectual friendships are channeled through books. C. S. Lewis has remained popular with Christian students for many good reasons, not the least of which is that he makes himself available to his readers as a trusted friend in Christ. That's true for many other authors too. Get to know them.

Books, moreover, are often the way in which our friendships with our fellow students and teachers begin and in which these friendships become cemented. I'm not a big fan of Francis Schaeffer, but he can be a point of contact—something to agree with or argue about. The same is true for all writers who tackle big questions. Read Plato, Aristotle, Hume, and John Stuart Mill, and not just because you might learn something. Read them because doing so will provide a sharpness and depth to your conversations. To a great extent, becoming an educated person means adding lots of layers to your relationships. Sure, going to the big football game

or having a beer (legally) with your buddies should be fun on its own terms, but it's also a reality ripe for analysis, discussion, and conversation. If you read Mary Douglas or Claude Levi-Strauss, you'll have something to say about the rituals of American sports. And if you read Jane Austen or T. S. Eliot, you'll find you see conversations with friends, particularly while sharing a meal, in new ways. And, of course, you cannot read enough Trollope. Think of books as the fine threads of a spider's web. They link and connect.

This is especially true for your relationships with your teachers. You are not likely to become buddies with your teachers. They tend to be intimidating. But you can become intellectual friends, and this will most likely happen if you've read some of the same books. This is even true for science professors. You're unlikely to engage a physics professor in an interesting conversation about subatomic particles. As a freshman you don't know enough. But read C. P. Snow's book *The Two Cultures*, and I'll bet your physics teacher will want to know what you're thinking. Books are touchstones, common points of reference. They are the water in which our minds swim.

You cannot and should not try to avoid being identified as an intellectual. I confess I am not altogether happy with the word *intellectual* as a descriptor for those who are committed to the work of the university. The word is often associated with people who betray a kind of self-indulgence, an air that they do not need to justify why they do what they do. Knowledge for knowledge's sake is the dogma used to justify such an understanding of what it means to be an intellectual. But if you're clear about your calling as a student, you can avoid this temptation. You are called to the life of the mind to be of service to the gospel and the Church. Don't resist this call just because others are misusing it.

Fulfilling your calling as a Christian student won't be easy. It's not easy for anyone who is serious about the intellectual life, Christian or not. The curricula of many colleges and universities may seem, and in fact may be, chaotic. Many schools have no particular

expectations. You check a few general-education boxes—a writing course, perhaps, and some general distributional requirements—and then do as you please. Moreover, there is no guarantee that you will be encouraged to read. Some classes, even in the humanities, are based on textbooks that chop up classic texts into little snippets. You cannot become friends with an author by reading half a dozen pages. Finally, and perhaps worse because insidious, there is a strange anti-intellectualism abroad in academia. Some professors have convinced themselves that all knowledge is just political power dressed up in fancy language, or that books and ideas are simply ideological weapons in the quest for domination. Christians, of all people, should recognize that what is known and how it is known produce and reproduce power relations that are unjust, but this does not mean all questions of truth must be abandoned. As I said, it won't be easy.

You owe it to yourself and to the Church not to let the incoherence, laziness, and self-critical excesses of the contemporary university demoralize you. Be sure not to let these failures become an excuse for you to avoid an education—a Christian education. Although some universities make it quite easy to avoid being well educated, I think you will find that every university or college has teachers who deserve the titles they've been given. Your task is to find them.

But how can you find the best teachers? There are no set principles, but I can suggest some guidelines. First, ask around. Are there professors who have reputations as intellectual mentors of Christian students? You're eighteen. You don't need substitute parents—or, at least, you don't need parents who think you are still twelve. But you do need reliable guides. So rearrange your schedule to take the professor who teaches Dante with sensitivity to the profound theological vision of that great poet. You may end up disagreeing, both with the professor and with Dante, but you'll learn how to think as a Christian.

Also, go to the bookstore at the beginning of the term to see which professors assign

books—and I mean real books, not textbooks. Textbooks can play a legitimate role in some disciplines, but not in all, and never at all levels. You want to find the teachers who have intellectual friends, as it were, and who want to share those friends with their students. If a professor has a course outline that gives two or three weeks to reading St. Augustine's *Confessions*, you can reasonably hope that he thinks of St. Augustine as someone he knows (or wants to know) and as someone he wants to share with students.

The best teachers for a Christian student aren't always Christians. In fact, a certain kind of Christian teacher can lead you astray. It's not easy to see the truth of Christ in modern science or contemporary critical theory, for example. The temptation is to compartmentalize, to assign your faith to the heart, perhaps, and then carry on with your academic work. Some professors have become very comfortable with this compartmentalization, so be careful. By all means take spiritual encouragement wherever you can get it; these sorts of professors can be helpful in that regard. But don't compartmentalize, because that's basically putting your Christian faith outside of your work as a student.

Your calling is to be a Christian student. The Christian part and the student part are inseparable. It will be hard and frustrating because you won't see how the two go together. Nobody does, at least not in the sense of having worked it all out. But you need to remember what Christ said: "I am the Alpha and the Omega." However uncertain we are about *how*, we know *that* being a Christian goes with being a student (and a teacher).

Although many professors are not Christians (at some schools, most aren't), many professors have a piety especially relevant to the academic life. One, for example, might be committed to the intrinsic importance of knowing Wordsworth's poetry, while another works at getting the chemistry experiment right. These professors convey a spirit of devotion. Their intellectual lives serve the subject matter rather than treating it as information to be mastered or, worse, a dead body of knowledge to be conveyed to students. English literature and modern science do

not exist for their own sakes, and the university doesn't raise money for the sake of professors' careers. For these professors, the educational system exists for the sake of their disciplines, which they willingly serve. This spirit of devotion is not the same as Christian faith, but it can help shape your young intellectual desires and impulses in the right way by reminding you that your job as a student is to serve and not to be served. College isn't for you; it's for your Christian calling as an intellectual.

Eventually, you will no longer be a freshman, and American undergraduate education will force you to begin to specialize. This will present dangers as well as opportunities. You will be tempted to choose a major that will give you a sense of coherence. But be careful your major does not narrow you in the wrong way. It's true, for example, that modern psychology provides powerful insights into the human condition, but don't allow your increasing expertise to lure you into illusions of mastery. Continue reading broadly. It may seem that the more you know about less and less, the smarter you've become; after all, you now know so much more about psychology! But, in truth, the more you know about less and less should teach you humility. After a couple of years spent taking advanced courses in modern European history, you'll know more about the French Revolution, but, if you're self-reflective, you'll also know how much work it takes to know anything well. And there's so much more to know about reality than modern European history.

To combat a tendency toward the complacency that comes from mastering a discipline, it is particularly important that you gain historical insight into the practice of your discipline. For example, I have nothing but high regard for those disciplines we group under the somewhat misleading category "the sciences." Too often, though, students have no idea how and why the scientific fields' research agendas developed into their current form of practice. To go back and read Isaac Newton can be a bit of a shock, because he interwove his scientific analysis with theological arguments. You shouldn't take this as a mandate for doing the same thing in the twenty-first century. It should, however, make you realize that modern

science has profound metaphysical and theological dimensions that have to be cordoned off, perhaps for good reasons. Or perhaps not. The point is that knowing the history of your discipline will, inevitably, broaden the kinds of questions you ask and force you to read to be an intellectual rather than just a specialist.

It is also important that you not accept as a given the categorizations that dominate the contemporary university. For example, if you read Dante, you probably will do so in the English department. The English department has claimed Dante because it considers the *Inferno* “literature.” Dante obviously was a poet, and one of the most influential, but he also was a theologian, and we fail to do him justice if we ignore that quite specific theological convictions, some controversial in his own day and in ours as well, were at the center of his life and work. The same can be said for the theology department, which often imagines that a particular form of scholastic and philosophically shaped reflection defines the discipline even as the departmental theologians ignore the mystical traditions as well as the traditions of biblical commentary.

I emphasize broadening your major with historical questions and challenges to set categories because your calling is to be a *Christian* student, not a physics student or an English student. Again, I do not want to make every Christian in the university into a theologian, but it is important for you to interrogate theologically what you are learning. For example, you may major in economics, a discipline currently dominated by mathematical models and rational-choice theories. Those theories may have some utility (to use an economic expression), but they also may entail anthropological assumptions that a Christian cannot accept. You will not be in a position even to see the problem, much less address it, if you let your intellectual life be defined by your discipline.

There’s more to say, and I wish I could give more practical, concrete advice. But most of academic life is “local,” as Tip O’Neill once said of politics. Theology programs at

some nominally Christian colleges are positively harmful to the calling of the Christian student; programs at others are wonderfully helpful. For some students, studying with a professor who avows atheism may be their first encounter with a teacher who thinks faith is relevant to the intellectual life, albeit in a purely negative way. The encounter need not harm the Christian student. It might galvanize the student's convictions and set him or her on the course of figuring out how faith supports and motivates the intellectual life. Still, as I have tried to emphasize, you need good mentors—men and women who are dedicated to their work and for whom a fitting humility about the limits of their expertise leads them to read broadly and thus become intellectuals rather than specialists.

Let me return to Robert Wilken's observation about the ritual, moral, and intellectual life of the Christian. Don't fool yourself. Only a man or woman who has undergone a long period of spiritual discipline can reliably pray in the solitude of a hermitage. You're young. You need the regular discipline of worship, Bible reading, and Christian fellowship. Don't neglect them in college. Also, don't underestimate the moral temptations of the contemporary college scene. We cannot help but be influenced by the behavior of our friends, so choose wisely.

To worship God and live faithfully are necessary conditions if you are to survive in college. But as a Christian you are called to do more than survive. You are called to use the opportunity you have been given to learn to construe the world as a creature of a God who would have us enjoy—and bask in—the love that has brought us into existence. God has given your mind good work to do. As members of the Church, we're counting on you. It won't be easy. It never has been. But I can testify that it can also be a source of joy.

What a wonderful adventure you have before you. I wish you well.

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