

# RECONSIDERATIONS

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EXPLORING A BIBLICAL UNDERSTANDING OF LIFE AND CULTURE

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## WHAT I WISH I HAD KNOWN MY FRESHMAN YEAR OF COLLEGE

*Andy Crouch*

*Editor's note: In this issue, we are spotlighting the upcoming 2nd Annual Summer Institute on Faith and the University (May 23-26 at the Christian Study Center). Andy Crouch was the keynote speaker at last year's Institute, and we are offering here an abridged version of the lecture that he gave at the inaugural event.*

Last year the Cornell Christian Fellowship, which was my own undergraduate fellowship in the late 1980s, and the Christian Study Center in Gainesville, Florida both asked me to speak on "what I wish I had known my freshman year."

Rather than offering advice on, say, study habits or spiritual disciplines or social life or (my favorite topic) the value of a good night's sleep, I decided to dig a bit more deeply into two passages of the Bible that I barely knew existed, and certainly didn't know were relevant, when I started college. One, the story of Daniel and his friends in Nebuchadnezzar's court, is such an obvious parallel for college education that it's been much used in talks like this. The other,

the brief story Luke tells of Jesus' three-day sojourn in the Jerusalem Temple at age twelve, is less often noted. But as I explored these two stories, not only did I find more in common between them than meets the eye, but I became convinced that these stories still bring to life some of the essential chal-

lenges of higher education, even in our very different time and place. They are stories all college students should ponder – or as Luke might say, treasure in their hearts. If I had known them, I might have known how to make more sense of those four years that flew by so fast.

Readers might want to pause here and take a look at Daniel 1 and Luke 2:41–51, because these stories – and the stories that can be found just below their surface – are what I wish I had known my freshman year.

I wish I had known that today, just as in Daniel's time, the vessels of the house of God have been

mixed into the treasury of the world's gods. In Babylon, Israel's sacred vessels become one more piece of religious furniture. In the postmodern university, too, faith in Daniel's God is a valued addition to the institution's texture of diversity. Our problem is not that faith in God is not welcome – it is all too welcome as one more sign that the grand project of assimilation is working. So at Cornell University, where I went to college, the "non-sectarian" Sage Chapel happily mixes and matches Christian architectural forms and texts from the Hebrew and Christian scriptures with a life-size depiction of the Greek muses. Needless to say, this is an environment where only a "non-sectarian" – certainly not a traditional Christian, Jew, or Muslim

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"How much you enjoy it might depend on whether it seems plausible or true, or whether its casual treatment of historical facts puts you off."

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the brief story Luke tells of Jesus' three-day sojourn in the Jerusalem Temple at age twelve, is less often noted. But as I explored these two stories, not only did I find more in common between them than meets the eye, but I became convinced that these stories still bring to life some of the essential chal-

- could truly be at home.

I wish I had known that I was in college partly because of privilege. Nebuchadnezzar selected young men "of the royal family and of the nobility, young men without physical defect and handsome." Perhaps not many students today would have made it into Nebuchadnezzar's highly selective honors program, but access to university education still goes to those who are smart, good-looking, or both. With our ever-expanding definition of the middle class, it is hard for American students to remember that anyone who attends college is privileged. Only twenty-seven percent of Americans over twenty-five years old have a bachelor's degree. The Greek word *scholē*, from which we get the word "school," means leisure. Anyone who is a full-time student is part of the leisure class.

I wish I had known that I was going to be overfed.

For Daniel and his friends, it was "the king's rations" - for American students, it is the lavish buffet spread by universities desperately competing to fill increasingly luxurious dormitories. University education has long been the gateway not just to professional income levels, but also to professional tastes. In college we learn to enjoy a new standard of living. We redefine "normal" upwards.

I wish I had known that I was going to be stationed in the king's court. Despite the sheen of progressive politics that pervades most college campuses, higher education, just as in Nebuchadnezzar's time, prepares students to serve the powerful, and in time to acquire significant power of their own. At least Daniel's tuition costs were covered - the rising cost of education is driving more and more students to maximize the return on their college investment. This requires college graduates to serve those who can pay a premium for our services. Over half of entering students at Harvard Law School say that they want to do public-interest law when they graduate. But three years later, ninety-five percent take positions with firms that practice corporate law.

Yet all of this is just a prelude to the most fundamental change that education was designed to con-

fer upon Daniel, and still confers upon students today. I wish I had known, as I arrived on campus my freshman year, that I would be given a new name and a new language. Language is the basic unit of culture, and the name is the basic unit of personhood. Nebuchadnezzar understood this, so he changed the name Daniel ("God is my judge") to Belteshazzar ("Baal protects my life") and instructed him and his fellow students in "the literature and language of the Chaldeans." Contemporary practitioners of cultural imperialism do the same - for instance, in Turkey today it is forbidden to instruct children in the Kurdish language or give them a Kurdish name.

At the university, we acquire fluency in a new culture, a new language, and are thereby cut off from our past. Just try maintaining a regional accent, such as that of the American South or of

Appalachia, through four years of higher education - even in the South or in Appalachia itself. The university wants to change your name, too - stay the course through advanced training, and you will no longer be Miss Cardozo, you will be Doctor Cardozo. The university (and the educated world of denominational religion) encourages me to sign my name as "Andy Crouch, M.Div." (Academic adepts reading this article have just mentally adjusted their expectations upon discovering that my name does not include a "Ph.D.")

The university insists on yet another change of language for the student of faith. It requires that the student learn to shift from first-order language (self-identifying believer) to second-order language (disinterested observer), to deprecate the concrete in favor of the abstract. In the context of the university, what is prized, as far as religion goes, is not to be religious (though that is tolerated in individual cases), but to study religion. To study religion is to acquire a second-order language, quite remote from the actual language of religious practice. The greatest sin a student can commit in a religion course - let alone elsewhere in the curriculum - is to write a paper in the primary language of their own faith.

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"Christians and others  
who take history seriously  
will object to his central  
assertion that the early  
Church just taught Jesus'  
humanity, until Constantine  
decreed his divinity."

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I wish I had known all this before I started my university education. Daniel had the advantage of having been forcibly marched into exile – today we students of faith find ourselves in college as a result of our own ambition and achievements. For Daniel, Nebuchadnezzar’s university was a palpably tragic interruption – for us, higher education is the natural culmination of dreams that have been set in motion, from the very beginning, by something other than the gospel of Christ.

Yet, for us as for Daniel, there is something else we ought to know as we proceed through the university: this is all happening because of the sovereignty of God. “The Lord let King Jehoiakim of Judah fall into [Nebuchadnezzar’s] power.” For Daniel, and for us, the arrival of people of faith in a foreign land is a necessary historical development that is ultimately for the good of God’s people and God’s purposes in the world. The

Babylonian exile is a sign of judgment – Israel, as generations of prophets had warned, had forgotten God and become entangled in the machinations of the world. Yet the exile is also a sign of hope. God’s people are placed in the midst of the religion-assimilating, privilege-seeking, royal-food-serving, power-serving, name-changing kingdoms of the world to bear witness to those kingdoms that they are not the last word. They are placed there because God loves the world, including Babylon, and wants his ways to be known everywhere, not just within a religious enclave.

So, too, we who find our way into these places are here partly as a sign of judgment on earlier generations of Christians who failed the university, whether as prime movers of its assimilation to the world of wealth, power, and privilege on the one hand, or as suppressors of genuine inquiry and truth on the other hand. We are here, with all our contradictions and mixed motives, as part of God’s plan.

At first glance, the story of Jesus in the Jerusalem Temple looks very different from that of Daniel. Rather than being in a foreign land, Jesus is smack in the center of Jewish identity. Rather than learning a foreign language, he is listening to and asking

questions of Hebrew teachers. Far from being out of place, he’s right at home – as he puts it, “in my Father’s house.”

However, this is not such a different story as we might think. For one thing, Jesus was a Galilean, and as we learn when Peter cowers in the courtyard during Jesus’ trial, Galileans spoke with a pronounced rural accent. Artisans from Nazareth probably felt no more at home in Jerusalem than farm kids feel in New York City today. Nazarenes

didn’t confidently sit down and start asking questions in the Temple.

The Temple itself was not the sort of place where a faithful Israelite could feel fully at home. This Temple, of course, was not the one built by King Solomon at the height of Israel’s political power and religious unity; it was the Temple built by Herod the Great, a substantial expansion of the rudimentary Temple built after some Jews returned from exile in the time of Ezra and Nehemiah.

Herod undertook to rebuild the Temple in grand style – he was desperately in need of ways to legitimate his wholly illegitimate claim to be King of the Jews. The style was grand indeed – because Herod, ever loyal to Rome, built the Temple using Roman architectural features, including a Roman-style double colonnade. To the Jewish residents of Palestine, surely any Temple, even one built by a Roman vassal in Roman style, was better than none. Yet dissatisfaction with the Temple was endemic in Jesus’ day.

And for a faithful Jew, Jerusalem was a confusing place – full of memories of a glorious past, but full of reminders of just how far Israel had fallen. Jerusalem itself was a city in exile, a city of compromises. The religious teachers of whom Jesus was asking such intelligent questions had in one way or another made their peace with Herod’s own Sage Chapel.

All this helps us to recover the proper sense of shock when Jesus says that he is at home, notwithstanding the signs of exile all around him. Jesus is at home in the midst of this garish, Greco-Roman, syncretistic Temple where the wealthy get lots of attention and the widows are ignored. He’s at home in this place where the noise of commerce

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"And we do seem to be  
having a harder and harder  
time keeping our  
entertainment separate from  
hard-won knowledge."

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*Continued on Page 7*

# NEWS FROM THE STUDY CENTER

## RECENT AND COMING EVENTS

The Study Center has been the host of a wide range of programs this spring. Below are some highlights. As the academic semester comes to a close, we want to draw special attention to our *2nd Annual Summer Institute on Faith and the University*, a three-day event for university and college students. Information and a registration form can be found on the following page.

### “SOLOMON SPEAKS TO THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY”

The director’s class for the spring has drawn to a close. On Monday evenings, once per month this semester, Dr. Richard Horner taught on the ancient writings of Solomon for contemporary life.

### “TALES FROM THE MADHOUSE”

Dr. Jay Lynch, President of the Study Center board, led eight discussions based on the BBC produced short film series called *Tales from the Madhouse* on Tuesday evenings. The series is a dramatic portrayal of asylum patients, each based on a New Testament character, who have encountered Christ.

### CULTURE SEMINAR READING GROUP: LESZEK KOLAKOWSKI

This reading group focused on important works by Leszek Kolakowski, who recently was recognized by the Library of Congress for his lifetime contribution to the humanities. Readings drew from *Modernity on Endless Trial*, *God Owes Us Nothing*, and a number of selected essays.

### THE PASSION OF THE CHRIST DISCUSSIONS

With the Mel Gibson film *The Passion of the Christ* getting so much attention in the international press, we decided to draw upon some local theologians and scholars to direct our attention to various dimensions of the film. Steve Gregg, a pastor from Creekside Community Church, led a general discussion; UF History professor John Sommerville looked at Mel Gibson’s take on the bible; and Rob Pendley, pastor of Christ Community Church, addressed why Jesus died.

### DECODING THE DA VINCI CODE

On Friday, April 2 at 4pm in the Reitz Union at the University of Florida, Professor John Sommerville delivered a talk on the popular best-seller by Dan Brown, *The Da Vinci Code*. Dr. Sommerville analyzed the historical fiction from an historian’s perspective, contrasting Brown’s version of Christianity and that which Sommerville attributes to actual history. A good-sized crowd turned out to hear the talk, which was followed by question and answer discussion.

### BEARING THE IMAGE OF GOD IN THE ACADEMY: COLLOQUIUM ON FAITH AND SCHOLARSHIP

On Saturday, March 20 the Center co-sponsored the 3rd Annual Colloquium on Faith and Scholarship for graduate students and faculty. The day long event included a keynote address, interactive panel discussions, and discipline-specific dialogue. Dr. Amy Black, a political scientist, who surveyed central, trans-disciplinary themes concerning the integration of faith and scholarship, gave the keynote address.

## UPCOMING EVENTS

### SUMMER INSTITUTE ON FAITH AND THE UNIVERSITY MAY 23-26, 2004

#### REGISTRATION FORM

On May 23-26 the Study Center will host the 2nd annual *Summer Institute on Faith and the University*. *Faith and the University* aims to equip Christians who are college or graduate students to meet the moral and intellectual challenges of university culture. We are pleased to have Dr. J. Budziszewski as our keynote speaker. Dr. Budziszewski is Professor of Philosophy at the University of Texas and author of *How to Stay Christian in College* as well as numerous scholarly books, articles, and papers. The Institute will run for three days from Sunday evening through Wednesday lunch, and students from across the country are welcome. Further information can be found on our web site at christianstudycenter.org. To register, fill out the form below and mail with payment to the address on the form.

#### COMPLETE AND MAIL THE FOLLOWING REGISTRATION FORM WITH FEE TO: CHRISTIAN STUDY CENTER, 112 NW 16TH ST., GAINESVILLE, FL 32603

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**Please check one or more boxes:**

- Please register me for “Faith and the University.” I am not local to Gainesville and will require lodging. My non-refundable registration fee of \$75 is enclosed (\$150 will be due upon arrival for a total of \$225). Check made payable to the Christian Study Center.
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- Please put me on the mailing list of the Christian Study Center.

*As students grow older, the intellectual level of their Christian training often drops instead of rises! Many of them never get beyond a child’s understanding of the faith. They carry it right into college, where it’s all too often blown away... When Jesus said you have to enter the kingdom like a child, He meant you have to enter with a child’s trust, not with a child’s understanding.*

-- Dr. J. Budziszewski, *How to Stay Christian in College*

## RECOMMENDED RESOURCES

**Paul Elie,**

***The Life You Save May Be Your Own: An American Pilgrimage***

**New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2003.**

Scott Kaukonen

“In the photographs, they do not look like people who might make you want to change your life.” So begins Paul Elie’s *The Life You Save May Be Your Own: An American Pilgrimage*, the story of four mid-century Catholic writers – Dorothy Day, Thomas Merton, Flannery O’Connor, and Walker Percy. In the frontispiece of the book, Elie provides a representative photo of each, and the collective impression is one of illness and old age, isolation and idiosyncrasy. Each writer appears on first glance far removed from the new century’s cultural mainstream, together quaint relics of a dead age.

But into our fragmented, post-modern landscape, this age of cyber-connectivity and spiritual dis-connectivity, of too much information and not enough sense, Elie reintroduces us to these devout pilgrims. He invites us to follow in his narrative and through their work, literary and otherwise, the pilgrimage each followed in his or her effort to be, in the words of Thomas á Kempis, an imitator of Christ. The pilgrim, Elie writes, undertakes a journey “in the light of a story. A great event has happened; the pilgrim hears the reports and goes in search of the evidence, aspiring to be an eyewitness. The pilgrim seeks not only to confirm the experience of others firsthand but to be changed by the experience.” Elie concedes that it may seem anachronistic in an age skeptical of religious experience and religious tradition and in an age equally skeptical of literature’s ability to speak directly to our lives to embark upon such a project, but he remains convinced –and he convinces – that it is a journey worth the effort.

With an astute blend of biography and literary criticism and with the narrative sense of a novelist, Elie skillfully weaves these four lives, each as distinct from the others as they were, as a group, from the culture in which they lived. Day, who began as a novelist, aligned herself with the poor and the disenfranchised in her daily life and in her literary creations. She founded the Catholic Workers Movement, wrote a best-selling autobiography, *The Long Loneliness*, and later took her stand as a prominent peace activist. As

a young man, Merton declined to pursue the material “blessings” of the American experiment – wealth, fame, and power – and chose instead to live in a monastery in Kentucky. His autobiography, *Seven Storey Mountain*, would inspire others to pursue the cloistered life of devotion, and, ironically, turn Merton into America’s most famous monk. O’Connor, a Catholic in the Protestant South, stood as a devout believer in an increasingly secularized literary world, a master of the short story and the Southern grotesque who, in a brief and brilliant career (she died of lupus at the age of 39), firmly entrenched herself in the literary canon. Percy, a son of the South, a doctor and a philosopher, finally found his true calling as a novelist, winning the National Book Award in 1960 for *The Moviegoer*, a novel prescient in its identification of the suburban unhappiness that would mark American literature and film of the late 20th Century.

Elie, a senior editor at Farrar, Straus and Giroux, takes his title from a widely-anthologized O’Connor short story in which a traveling Bible salesman steals the wooden leg of the daughter of a pious woman. It is a story that, in one sense, reminds us that those most in need of salvation are often those trying to save others. Elie’s narrative recognizes that in their efforts to point others to Christ through the witness of their lives and their literature, Day, Merton, O’Connor and Percy were each in the process of working out his or her own salvation. But further, and perhaps most significantly, the title also reminds the reader that the “You” of the title is the reader of Elie’s book. The life to be saved here, through a consideration of the testimony of these lives and the work they created, may be one’s own.

Much of the material here can be found elsewhere (and Elie provides an extensive bibliography and a full complement of annotations), but the strength of Elie’s work is the synthesis he provides. The book stands as a model of literary biography that can bridge the gap between an academic and a popular audience, a literature that honestly engages questions of faith and its place in our world and does not merely ignore it or blindly praise its would-be-saints. The flaws of all four pilgrims are on display as well, making Elie’s analysis a balanced display of genuine faith in Christ which makes room for both the piety and earthiness of human existence.

*Scott Kaukonen is a Ph.D. candidate in English at the University of Missouri-Columbia.*

*Continued from Page 3*

drowns out the voices of prayer. He is at home where religion serves as a handmaid to the world's most powerful empire. Because he perceives that hidden under the layers of every conceivable form of human rebellion and distortion, this is a place where people still want to know God.

And because he's at home, he has the best questions. At age twelve, on the edge of adulthood, Jesus is not here to teach. When he returns in his thirties, he will indeed teach, with authority, and he will take action against the worst of the Temple's compromises. But here - as a freshman of sorts - we see him asking questions, astonishing questions. Wise questions.

The university began as an attempt to understand God's world, with theology as the queen of sciences. From that origin it has become something very different, but there is something about its original purpose that still makes sense to the people of God. The university, with all its doubts about truth, still seeks truth. Well, we follow someone who claimed to be the Truth, so we too care about seeking truth. The university, with all its arrogance and self-centeredness, still is regularly humbled by how much there is to know and how little we really understand. Well, we are in the business of laying aside our pretensions to under-

stand, admitting that we don't know, and asking our maker to show himself to us.

So we can sit down in the university and say, I'm at home here. And I have some questions. With my Galilean accent, with all my strange religious particularity, with my odd lack of concern about getting my own piece of the economic pie, with my hard-to-pronounce name that says that I belong to an apparently defeated god, with my unusual diet that doesn't bother with the king's royal rations, with my foolish insistence that a crucified and failed Messiah from two thousand years ago holds the key to my identity, I settle down for a few days (while my family desperately worries about me, calls my cell phone every few hours, and hopes I'm eventually coming home). I raise my hand and say, "Can I just ask one thing?"

I wish I had known, the summer before my freshman year, that I belonged here, and that even if I didn't have all the answers, my Father had given me the right questions.

Andy Crouch is a columnist for *Christianity Today* and a member of the editorial board of *Books & Culture*. He lives in Swarthmore, Pennsylvania. © 2003, 2004 Andy Crouch. All rights reserved. Used by permission.

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**The Christian Study Center of Gainesville exists in order to encourage the university community in the exploration of a biblical understanding of life and culture.**

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