

**J. Walton, Ph.D. /HPERDS/Statement on Faith, Teaching, and Learning  
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At Calvin College we do not deny our purposeful approach to this no small matter of learning: that this world is God's and not our own, and that we are called, because of sin and suffering to use every means God gives us to redeem the wretched wreck of a godless culture for Christ and the kingdom. And so we teach from a deliberately distinctive Christian viewpoint in which faith saturates our ideas and learning in ways that lead to joyful discovery. This truly Christian intent is most rare in higher education. It is critical, in the midst of the ruins of countless faith-based colleges that have lost their Christian compass that we at Calvin College remain a faithful remnant in higher education for God's own higher purposes. For this reason, it continues to be a joy and privilege for me to teach here.

**The Place of the HPERDS Disciplines in a Reformed Christian Liberal Arts  
College**

Health, Physical Education, Recreation, Dance and Sport encompass the discipline of human movement. As an Exercise Scientist, I can agree wholeheartedly with our department's philosophic statement that the HPERDS disciplines comprise

"an integral component of the Christian liberal arts, calling students to lives of stewardship, diligence and wisdom, fostering an understanding of the human body and the way it moves and plays in all its marvels yet within its created limits." <sup>1</sup>

In HPERDS, we are very intentional in providing

"learners with a unique opportunity to discover the joy and wonder of the moving human body, with unbounded opportunity to interpret God's revelation to others. We are called to obey God as whole persons in every area of life. Humans, created in the image of God, are saved by God taking on the nature of a human, not that we may have life, but that we may have it more abundantly. The delight that human movement brings through play, leisure, sport and performance is the essence of [the HPERDS disciplines; they] help others to discover and develop the joy of movement in the pursuit of the whole, abundant life." <sup>1</sup>

In Exercise Science,

"the study of the human body leads to a fuller understanding of God as Creator because of the discovery of the continuity from microcosm to macrocosms in God's universe... As in every area of study for the Christian, exercise science seeks not only to know God more completely through knowing oneself better, but also seeks to restore culture and creation to the way it is supposed to be, Shalom. It is within the context of Shalom that we view conditioning of the human body, seeking to prevent lifestyle diseases, and to rehabilitate individuals from physical debilitation caused by incapacitating

health behaviors related to physical inactivity.”<sup>1</sup>

My biggest goal in the integration of faith and learning is to accompany students in learning and knowing who God is. This is our common pursuit, and is fundamental to the student’s ability to take in new knowledge, compare and connect it with what they already know, understand how it fits into (or doesn’t fit) their present worldview, and how it changes and challenges their assumptions.

I find that younger students especially want to explore what God is calling them to do, and where to do it. I usually encourage them in teaching situations, class devotions, or advising sessions to delve deeply into covenantal relationship with God through prayer, fellowship, and studious attention to the Word. I believe that the day a student became a Christian was the day s/he accepted God’s call to serve in the kingdom, and that it is neither the “what” nor the “where” they should first explore, rather the “who must I be?” that they must answer. I urge students to think and pray sincerely about the kind of person they will bring to the mission when they might more naturally be wrestling with what the mission will be. This is not to say that I ignore vocation and calling. But, I first want students to learn to look for God in every individual and intellectual cranny to begin to grasp how great and perfect God’s creation is, how sin corrupts it, and the type of faith and faithfulness it requires to take part in the redemption of this world for God’s glory. It is a long and arduous journey, and I want students to be fit and equipped for both the hills and the valleys through which they will travel as God’s earthly agents. I ache for them to leave their bored familiarity for a passionate intimacy with Christ.

Why do I emphasize this relationship between self and God? There are two reasons. First, we must not assume that our students are biblically literate in ways that help them formulate a biblical framework for what they hear, see, read, or study. For them to honestly integrate their learning and their faith students must strive after and continue to pursue God’s character and truth as it is revealed in the Bible.

Secondly, I have observed that students are often not studious, and have a poor concept of what a studious life looks like. Year in and year out, students share with me that they struggle with the discipline of discipline. They find carving out time for a sustained and faithful relationship with God very difficult; if they set aside time in the morning for study and prayer, they oversleep. If they save it for evening, they get sidetracked or are too tired. Students, like many of us, frequently report living on the fringes of a godly life because they are just too busy. And so, in all my intersections with students, I encourage them to set God, and the knowledge of God, as their first learning priority, and to make a godly life a lifestyle. I don’t want them to just *think* christianly, but to *live* christianly, a victorious life both governed and blessed by the virtues through the conduit of God’s love and mercy. I believe that this attitude is crucial to a student’s ability to develop a lifelong love of learning, learning that is informed by faith. A.G. Sertillanges calls this the virtue of bringing a moral rectitude to

study, and that it is far from naive to assert that the "virtue proper to a man of study is, clearly, studiousness" (*The Intellectual Life, Its Spirit, Conditions, Methods*, CUA Press, reprinted in 1998, p. 25). I deeply desire that my students be virtuous in their studies, both in and out of the classroom and the first and best place this bears fruit is through Bible study and prayer. It is a true joy to watch the maturation of a student in his/her four years at Calvin, especially when s/he moves from a poorly conceived and egocentric fringe of "mission" to a Christ-centered commitment to the commission.

There is a dearth of practical, pedagogical information available in the exercise sciences to help Christian educators in this faith integration task. I have just returned from a kinesiology conference of CCCU schools where I was surprised at the regularity of the questions, "How do you at Calvin integrate faith and learning? Tell me what that's supposed to look like. You guys are so far ahead of us on this issue; can you show us how you do it?" When professors from distinctively Christian schools struggle with faith integration, it demonstrates the ongoing importance and challenge of the task, and highlights the need for our continued attention to the *scholarship* of the faith and learning integration mission. We must continue at Calvin to inform the academy and the Church of the ways in which we integrate faith and learning across the curriculum and at all levels of education through our scholarship. This, I believe, is the most fundamental thing we at Calvin can be doing, discipline by discipline as we fulfill our callings to teach in ways that honor and consider God in every corner of His universe.

### **The Integration of Faith and Scholarship in the Exercise Sciences**

My own scholarship runs along 4 distinct yet related veins:

- Sport Nutrition
- Sport and Vocation
- Physical Activity and Human Embodiment
- Physical Activity and Aging

Reformed faith and thinking frame these topics in ways the secular world has long ignored or misunderstood. The fallen nature of our world, our thinking, and our bodies creates a unique and important vantage point from which to begin to look at the whole world of food, embodiment, play, sport, and aging as elements of creation God meant for good, yet which we see perverted on a daily basis. My scholarship goal, along with my HPERDS colleagues is to continue to bring a distinctively reformed Christian voice to these issues at both a local and national level (primarily through writing) to influence the dialogue in both Church and secular circles of thought.

### **The End of the Matter as the Beginning of Mutual and Joyful Discovery**

Together, we learn in community. Here we make the concerted effort to explore the meaning of grace, allowing one another to voice our questions even in the most timid of ways. I challenge myself and others to critically and faithfully evaluate life, to absorb, digest, reshape, re-think, and own a thought, to make commitments to lifelong study, and to accept and affirm responsibility for learning about and caring for God's

world. Most importantly, we encourage one another to view our lives as worthy of God's calling. This is our greatest empowerment: that a Calvin College education is just the beginning of learning, that our gifts are God-given for His higher purposes, and that to engage in God's wider world, we too must be transformed, and continue in lifelong transformation by a renewal of mind, body, and spirit.

I teach in faith, for faith because I was called. I could do no less, since I am acutely and selfishly aware that this obligation and obedience to God is the root and cause of my own personal joy. My prayer is that God will

"What in me is dark  
Illumine, what is low raise and support;  
That to the height of this great argument  
I may assert eternal providence,  
And justify the ways of God to men."

(John Milton, Paradise Lost)

I don't recall ever wanting to be a teacher or professor, but a writer and researcher. I was quite happily pursuing that desire when God called me to Calvin College. It is here, in the middle of my life that I have had the joy of discovering what it feels like to fulfill God's call, and how the experiences and gifts he gave me have culminated in a life enriched by, and through "professor-ing."

It is both instructive and humbling to evaluate your own labors, particularly here where our work is infused with and informed by a love of God, where we are called to serve and learn from our students even as we lead them, and where we have the gravely important task of nudging fledgling students to the leap of a lifetime from the safety of this nest into a loveless world. Not only that, as true reformers and learners ourselves, each year that passes brings new insights and maturity that continually drive us both to the cross and the drawing board. How does our faithfulness lead to fruitfulness as professors, as students, and as Calvin community? What is my contribution to the process? How well do I show and challenge students to approach all of their lives christianly, including their learning? When I ask these questions, I do it in the shadow of the late chapters of the book of Job, feeling puny and ignorant. Who am I to evaluate this work when it is not mine but God's? After all is said and done, my conclusion is the same; I derive great satisfaction from working at Calvin College. I love exercise physiology and nutrition, feel called by God to be here sharing that love, and marvel at the many ways we collectively lead future generations in taking ownership of both the love and knowledge of God, and of his creation.

I have given Calvin College nearly everything I have. In this regard, I have not changed nor do I expect to change significantly unless my health would require it. I am grateful to work in a community that encourages intellectual inquiry, faith and learning integration, and engaging, transformational service.

Just like my students, I have much room for growth. I can only pray that as the years pass and I mature in this unique place I will know and show more and more grace in every circumstance, because grace does not come easy to me. A quick study of the desire for such human "excellence" might reveal ugly motives that start with an ambitiously prideful "look at me" heart. So, I keep praying for help in getting out of my students' way. In a sense it's like the story of the man born blind. As professors, we slog in the mud of life, wetting it with the Word, smearing it on the eyes of those who are blinded by the culture, ignorance, inexperience, immaturity or unbelief, and then sending them to the Living Water to wash. And when their eyes are opened it is such unspeakable joy if they see not us, but Christ and his kingdom, and the call to be at work in it for his glory in ways that are new, and powerful, and life-changing. We give the tools. We offer our breath, our life, our very all, and then we get out of the way, preparing our students for service in a corrupt and hurting world. This is teaching. This is learning. This is discovery. This is the compellingly collective and renewing shalom for which the world is so desperate, and I am forever grateful to be called to such work at such a time. May God bless it and us as we strive together for his glory.