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Observations upon Entering the Kettle

*Gary Spivey
George Fox University*

Abstract

An oft told parable relates how a frog, when dropped in a kettle of hot water, will instantly jump out. But if you drop that frog in a kettle of cold water, and slowly heat it up, the frog will not be aware of the gradual change in its environment and will die in the kettle. I had formerly limited the kettle analogy to the broad concepts of the “worldly culture” alluded to by pastors who use this imagery. Then, after completing educational experience at major state universities and a fifteen year career in industry, I decided to enter upon a career as a professor at a small, Christian, liberal arts university. This change has been quite a shock to my system, but unlike the clever frog, I did not immediately jump out. This experience alerted me to the fact that the kettles in which we live are much smaller and more distinctive than I had previously thought. Furthermore, it is quite likely that the environment of these kettles may be gradually changing, and the results of these changes might affect me in ways that I might find ... unpleasant.

In having my eyes opened to the Christian-college culture, I have made a few observations about how this kettle seems quite different from the others in which I have previously existed. These observations include aspects about the people who make up this institution, the purpose and mission of the institution, and the operation of the institution. For example, I have been stunned by the diversity of this small group of mostly white, American, Christians. This diversity has profound effects on the mission of the University, as well as the communities of the students and faculty in ways that I did not expect. We have factions, battlegrounds, independent agendas, differing personality traits, insightful viewpoints, and all of these differ wildly from what I have experienced in “other kettles.”

It is not my purpose in this paper to set about an agenda for change. As a first year faculty member, I think that it would be naïve of me to assume that I not only have the answers, but that I can even adequately determine the questions. This paper simply purports to put down many of my observations about this culture and to ask myself to what degree I want to reject, embrace, or engage these elements. I reserve the right to change my opinions in the future (which may be seen as adapting to the kettle).

Finally, I would like to stimulate dialog amongst other engineers who have gone through this process and ask them where they find that they have rejected, embraced, or engaged this culture – and to what degree these actions were intentional. It may very well be my Lord is asking me to be like the frog and to die in a number of areas – that these observations might indicate not what is out of balance at this institution, but what is out of balance in my own life and in the other kettles in which I have existed.

Please forbear me any grievances you might have against my questioning of ideas or institutions that you might hold dear. It is my desire that we all come together in unity for the cause of Christ. It is my hope that this conversation might help us to do so together.

Introduction

An oft told parable relates how a frog, when dropped in a kettle of hot water, will instantly jump out of that kettle. However, if you drop that frog in a kettle of cold water, and slowly heat it up, the frog will not be aware of the gradual change in its environment and will die in the kettle. I had formerly limited this kettle analogy to the broad concepts of the “worldly culture” alluded to by pastors who use this imagery. I have recently applied this imagery to myself. After an educational experience at major state universities and a fifteen year career in industry, I decided to enter upon a career as a professor at a small, Christian, “liberal arts” university. This change has been quite a shock to my system, but unlike the clever frog, I did

not immediately jump out. I also noticed other ‘frogs’ in the kettle that seem quite comfortable within the kettle. I have decided to remain within this kettle, yet, like some of the other ‘frogs’, I find myself beginning to adapt to this new kettle – sometimes in ways in which I am not particularly comfortable.

This paper is a response to the question – “Academic culture – reject, embrace, or engage?” I am not prepared to completely or even adequately answer this question. It is not my purpose to offer any sort of generalized statement about the characteristics of my university, or any other university. I am merely telling my story of my first year teaching from my perspective. In this regard I hope that the reader will not expect a scholarly paper, but simply allow me an opportunity to dialogue. I expect that my experiences may be in many ways unique, but may also be in many ways shared. It is not my purpose in this paper to set about an agenda for change. As a first year faculty, I think that it would be naïve of me to assume that I not only have the answers, but that I can even adequately determine the questions. This paper simply purports to put down many of my observations about this culture and to ask myself to what degree I want to reject, embrace, or engage these elements. I reserve the right to change my opinions in the future (which may be seen as adapting to the kettle).

Finally, I would like to stimulate dialog amongst other engineers who have gone through this process and ask them where they find that they have rejected, embraced, or engaged this culture – and to what degree these actions were intentional. It may very well be my Lord is asking me to be like the frog and to die in a number of areas – might indicate not what is out of balance at this institution, but what is out of balance in my own life and in the other kettles in which I have existed. The process of writing this paper has been quite cathartic for me and I hope that it might stir up something within all who read it. I realize that I will only have one chance to have this ‘frog in the kettle’ experience in this environment – for in the future, I will be in the kettle with everyone else – adapting in ways that I don’t even recognize.

In this paper I will discuss my personal background and some of the reasons I had for this change in life, in addition to some of my expectations about what this life would be like. Upon arrival, I had some personal interactions with others already at the institution. These interactions rapidly and radically altered my expectations and helped me begin to recognize something about the diversity of ideas and opinions that exist in this environment. I began to understand that one of my primary assumptions, that all of the employees had a singular purpose, was both naïve and narrow. I then began to see a wide assortment of groups that existed to further their own interests. Many people appeared to align themselves with one or more of these groups. These groups sometimes acted harmoniously, sometimes ambivalently, and sometimes had a long history of conflict. Initially, I was disconcerted at not only the existence of these seemingly divisive groups on what I thought was to be a ‘Christian’ campus, but I was shocked at the acceptance of these conflicts by other faculty. It was this observation that first brought me to the frog in the kettle analogy. I could not initially understand how easy it was for certain individuals to accept things in a Christian university setting that I was not willing to accept in a secular professional setting. However, I began to recognize that I was allowing myself to identify with certain groups as well, and unbeknownst to me, I was myself, slowly adapting. In the end of this paper I will discuss what this has meant to me at the conclusion of my first year as a university professor.

Please forbear me any grievances you might have against my questioning of ideas or institutions that you might hold dear. It is my desire that we all come together in unity for the cause of Christ. It is my hope that this conversation might help us to do so together.

Background

I was born and raised as what others would label a fundamentalist – specifically, a Pentecostal. I would call myself an evangelical Christian, reared in a home by parents who were also evangelical Christians. It was an imperfect, yet loving home, similar to many other God-fearing, evangelical, Christian homes. I attended the University of Arizona and studied electrical engineering. While at the University, I met my

future wife and was active in Chi Alpha, the Assemblies of God campus ministry. Upon graduation I accepted a position with the National Security Agency (NSA) and moved to Maryland. During this period I continued worshipping in an evangelical Christian church, but was growing more frustrated at the inability of my faith to transform me into the type of individual that my understanding of the gospel required me to be. Four years later, after the birth of our first child, I accepted another position within the Agency and moved to Scotland. It was in Scotland that my spiritual life would make a dramatic change. I had, while at Arizona and Maryland, read a book by Richard Foster, entitled “The Celebration of Discipline”. In Maryland, I taught a simple Sunday school class using the book. However, upon arrival in Scotland, I felt prompted by the Holy Spirit to do a little more than read and teach the book. I felt a strong inner prompting to actually do the things that the book taught. This period in my life forever changed how I view myself, my Lord, and my faith. I was involved with a wonderful church, great fellowship and support, and my faith blossomed. I would be remiss if I did not mention that we had our second child in Scotland at this time. It is not germane to the discussion, but I would hate to leave my son out of the story.

Three years later, when our tour in Scotland had concluded, we returned to Maryland, again with the NSA. Finding a church home and fellowship was not easy upon returning to the U.S. My faith had grown and become much more relevant and I found a growing discontentment with the traditional models for church that I had encountered. It was also at this time that I felt prompted to resume graduate studies at the University of Maryland. These studies, coupled with the responsibilities of being a husband and father of what would rapidly become four children, left me with little time and energy to delve more deeply into this growing spiritual discontent.

During this time in my life I had achieved a certain measure of professional success and was respected professionally within my organization. However, after completing the MSEE and the coursework for the Ph.D. at the University of Maryland, we felt the winds of change stir in our hearts and accepted a position with a small defense contractor in our original hometown, Tucson, Arizona. We returned home to happy grandparents and siblings and we were certain that this would be the place where we would put down roots and raise our family. This occurred in 1999. We were wrong.

In Tucson I stayed active working toward the completion of my Ph.D. dissertation. I had also been reading more about spiritual formation including books by Richard Foster and Dallas Willard. Both of these men are involved in a ministry called Renovare. One night while browsing the internet, I was perusing the Renovare website (www.renovare.org) and discovered a little line at the bottom of the website that stated “This site graciously hosted by George Fox University.” I had never heard of George Fox University and clicked the link to see who they were. I found it interesting that they were a small, Evangelical Christian college in the northwest, but even more interesting that they had an engineering program. I began examining the engineering program and found an ad for an EE professor. Upon further investigation, I was shocked to find that the opening matched my experience perfectly. Almost too perfectly. A bit unsettlingly perfectly. So perfectly that the thought didn’t leave me for quite some time. I sent off an e-mail of inquiry about the position (mostly out of curiosity). As I had not yet finished my dissertation, I decided that the timing wasn’t quite right and put it behind me and continued working toward the completion of the dissertation. During the next year, I completed the dissertation, grew more frustrated with my job, and more frustrated with the church in general. All the while, this little thought about this little university was kicking around in my head. Finally, one day I went back to the George Fox website and noticed that the job was still open. One year had passed and the job was still open. Hmmm. I broached the subject to my wife who was none too excited about the possibility of leaving family, but who was thankfully, completely dedicated to the cause of following Christ wherever he may lead. I contacted Fox again and began a process of toying with the idea of applying for the position. One line came to me that I had read in John Eldredge’s “Wild at Heart” – something to the effect of “don’t do what you think the world needs – do what makes you come alive – the world needs people who come alive.” I had been doing some work with college students as a part of my job and was electrified every

time I set foot on a college campus.

We decided to interview for the position and I was completely overwhelmed with the quality and dedication to Christ of the people who I would be working with. I must say, the salary wasn't overwhelming, but my wife and I went away feeling quite drawn by the Lord to this opportunity.

Ultimately, we accepted the position and haven't looked back since. Well, maybe glanced occasionally – well – maybe even wondered what on earth we had done. But after finally making it through my first year as a professor, I can't imagine anything I would rather be doing or anyplace that I would rather be. That said, the transition has not been simple. I had some expectations that were not appropriate and should have had some other expectations that would have helped me understand this year a little better.

Expectations

I call myself a “recovering fundamentalist.” What is more correct is that I am an evangelical Christian who holds unwaveringly to my best understandings of the fundamental Christian creeds and the statement of faith that I signed at George Fox University, and that I no longer need to hold unwaveringly to a lot of the doctrines of my age and my culture. Having lived as a Christian at secular universities and in the secular marketplace, I had developed a rather polarized view of Christianity. Basically, and this is a gross generalization, there exist simply two groups – the Christians and the non-Christians. While the “world” likes to speak of diversity, it can often be viewed (at least in my American experience) as a group of people who want to live for themselves, do whatever “ism” they want to do, and expect everyone else to allow them to do this. We have learned to call this tolerance. In opposition to this are a large number of ‘Evangelical Christians’ who believe that the scriptures are anywhere from literally true to ideologically authoritative, and that there is some measure of absolute rights and wrongs. It has been my experience that while within Christianity there may be many different areas to debate (and God bless those Calvinists and my own Pentecostals for providing much fodder in this area), in “real life,” where Christians are actually living in the world, we tend to congregate in polarized bodies of “us vs. them.” It is very easy to put aside doctrines of limited atonement or glossolalia when we are confronted with issues like the lordship and deity of Christ. We are very good about dismissing the “in-house” debates and coming together around the things that we believe are of supreme importance. Of course, I must admit that even in the world, the Christians that seemed to congregate together were typically the same set of “Evangelical Christians” that shared not only a large set of common spiritual beliefs, but political and social beliefs as well, such as abortion, drugs, and human sexuality. It was my hope that this experience would broaden somewhat when I came to George Fox University. I was not necessarily challenging these views, but desirous of a broader understanding of what in my views derived from my culture rather than from Christ.

I was growing in many ways in my own spiritual life. In the period before coming to George Fox I had begun reading quite a bit of Brian McLaren's works regarding what Christianity will look like in the postmodern world (and even agreeing with some of it). I expected that I would find many people like myself who would be excited about the possibility of growing in our faith in new ways. I expected that all of this growth would be anchored in the fundamental creeds of the Christian church and in the Statement of Faith subscribed to by all University employees.

Furthermore, I expected that at a Christian University, I would find many people who were excited about the conversation. I had grown weary of interacting with non-Christians in my secular environments. I had heard and learned from their atheistic worldview, I had learned to respect the rationale of their position and my complete dependence on my faith in Christ (or on Christ for my faith). It was my desire however, to move beyond that conversation. When I finally recognized that faith was not derived from reason, I wanted to accept the faith for what it was and then move on into deeper things. It was my hope that this would be not only a part of the Christian University experience, but one of the fundamental parts of the

experience.

I expected that the Christian university community experience would be superior to my frustrated church experiences. I expected that the individuals who worked at the University would be working there with a sense of ministry – eager to do all things for the cause of Christ that was so clear to the Christian groups parting which I have participated.

Finally, I must say that I naively expected that I would somehow be entering into a Christian utopia. This was not a conscious expectation – in fact, I distinctly remember telling myself and others that I was not expecting that. And yet, in some ways, deep down, I think that my hope to find one expanded deeper into a sense of expectation.

I want to emphasize that many of my expectations have been met in wonderful ways. I don't want to in any way give the impression that George Fox University is not a wonderful place to serve Christ. I am, after all, intending to stay as long as they will have me and I am looking forward to the development of the engineering program as the Lord leads. But I must admit that not all of my expectations were completely met ...

White People and Diversity

I would like to take a chance here to expound a little on the diversity that I have encountered here and what effects this has on who we are. George Fox is located in Newberg, Oregon, about 30 miles south of Portland, Oregon. There are not quite 20,000 people in the town. Let me begin by saying that there are, in my perception, more white people here in this part of Oregon than in any place I have been in the world. At least in Scotland we had enough military involvement to diversify the little Scottish community. I noticed this lack of racial diversity during my interview and expected that I would be moving to a little town that would be almost completely made up of white Christians. In some ways, this is true. Even the non-believers are nice people who would, some of us might say, make very good Christians. I expected a rather homogenous experience and it appeared that my friends from my former job were going to be correct when they suggested that I would miss the diversity that their office afforded.

However, rather than encountering a homogenous workplace, I have landed in a more diverse environment than I could have imagined. It seems to me that diversity is not about the color of your skin but the content of your ideas. As I stated earlier, the 'world' does not seem to me to be as diverse a place as people want to make it. It generally is made up of people who want to live for themselves in some way, do their own thing, and be left alone to do it. George Fox University is full of many people who have a wide range of beliefs regarding what it means to serve Christ.

Before I explain this range, let me digress into another observation. Often, students refer to their experience at George Fox as being "in the bubble." This is a pitiable statement. They think that they are somehow isolated from the world here. I think that they couldn't be further from the truth. I look at my experiences and recognize that while at the University of Arizona, surrounded by 35,000 students, I was actually involved with about 20 in my dorm and in my major and about 50 others in my Christian group on campus. That was about it. After college, I moved to Maryland where I interacted with about 50 people in church and another 50 at work. Later, when we moved to Scotland and I interacted with about 50 people at church and another 50 or so at work. Back to Maryland, and maybe 20 people at the University, 50 at work, only a few at church, but 15 or more in the neighborhood (kids showed up). Back to Arizona where there were maybe 40 at work and maybe 30 at church, and then family. Most of these people fall into the two group category of "Christians" and "Non-Christians" that I defined earlier. Now, that means that at any given point in my life, I interacted in some meaningful way with less than 100 people, generally half of which were Christians and the other half were generally professional relationships. Seems to me that this was rather insular and ... uh ... bubble-like. These students at this University can easily interact with several hundred students and professors, all of whom are asking these

diverse questions. Rather than a bubble, it seems to me that it will be the most expansive and free environment that they will ever be placed in.

Another way to look at this is to define what a “normal” life is. Students often appeal to this “normal” life or “real world” as opposed to their “bubble” experience. Let’s examine my aforementioned job, where my friends felt I would miss the diversity when I left for a homogenous, Christian school. As it turns out, that office was populated with a couple of minorities and maybe 20 women in a workplace of 100 people, approximately 80 percent technical and the rest support staff (about half of the women were support staff). Of the technical population, there were approximately thirty computer scientists. The rest were made up of mathematicians, physicists and primarily engineers, three quarters of whom held advanced degrees – about 20 of those with Ph.D.’s. I cannot conceive of any way that this environment can be construed as “real world” or in anyway outside of a “bubble.” I have learned to be very careful with the phrase “real world.”

Personal Interactions

And so, I arrived at George Fox bright-eyed and bushy-tailed, unaware that I would be entering an environment of such diverse Christian viewpoints. I was eager to engage other faculty members and bask in the glory of this Christian environment. This was a rather naïve dream. As it turns out, my first expectation that went unmet was the notion that everybody else wanted to have this conversation. As it turns out, this isn’t true. Spending a career around a bunch of engineers does not adequately prepare one for life outside of that environment.

I do not intend to make any bold sociological assertions here. But let me attempt to explain my interactions as best as I can using some generalities. Engineers appear to me to be an abnormally objective breed that, generally speaking, do not obtain their self-worth from the approval of other individuals. I have been on both ends of technical discussions – often quite loud discussions. While I have seen enemies made and friends won, typically, I have seen individuals disconnect their technical ideologies from their relationships. It could be said that the topics of discussion were not worthy of emotional involvement, however conversations at lunch and outside of work often revolved around topics of religion and politics. Again, I am not offering reasons to justify my experiences; I am simply attempting to provide a framework for my understanding of them.

The simple truth is that a much larger number of people in my new environment had a significant emotional attachment to certain ideas. I discovered that simply inquiring about these ideas could be construed as a hostile argument. As an example, I was informed that certain discussions involving race would be unwelcome. Frankly, this surprised me at the time and still does. Some may derive their self-worth or security from their intellectual positions and feel threatened when these positions are challenged. I find this surprising as these individuals are all not only at the highest level they can achieve academically and have already been validated by the world, they also have the acceptance of Christ. Of course, I shouldn’t be surprised by this as I also, very often, lapse into deriving my self-worth from what others think of me. I wonder what those of you who are reading this paper think of me.

I did however, find individuals who were emotionally attached to certain ideologies, and these were not because of personal issues. Some of these individuals have a broader (or differently narrow) interpretation of Christianity than I have been exposed to. This is the diversity of opinions about “what it means to serve Christ” that I alluded to earlier. Christian feminism and pacifism are topics that this white male, formerly employed by the defense department, has not been heavily exposed to. It appears that some of these issues are as important to some individuals as my faith in the authority of scripture. This surprised me as well – and I will admit that I am emotionally involved with the Christian creeds. I was not prepared to find this same level of emotional involvement with elements outside of the creeds.

Maybe another way to say this is that when I thought about leaving the secular world and the ideas that

they had against Christ, and entering into the Christian University, I expected that the elements that we would all ascribe to as essential would be, in fact, the same elements. I suppose I was hoping for a set of ideas that the Orthodox would say were held “everywhere, always, and by all.” I am now thinking that this was also naïve – a chasing after the wind as it were. Maybe this is what I expected in some way when I said that I thought that the university would be like a church – a common gathering of people who share “like, precious faith.” I don’t know that I can assume this at my university – and I don’t know that this is a negative thing. Part of my desire in coming here was to have my faith broadened and deepened. I suppose it was somewhat silly of me to expect to have it broadened in ways that I could have anticipated.

Mission

Diversity is not without its difficulties. Where there is diversity, there can also be division. One place this can show up is in the mission of the University. If there is a diversity of opinions about what this mission might be, (and there is), the organization may find it more difficult to stay on course – or more appropriately, define a course.

When I worked for the National Security Agency, the concept of mission was ubiquitous. The mission of that National Security Agency is simply “the ability to understand the secret communications of our foreign adversaries while protecting our own communications.” Politically, one can have different opinions about the usefulness and/or ethics of this endeavor, but its focus seems quite clear. It was relatively simple at the NSA to determine if a project related to the mission of the organization.

The mission of George Fox University is “To demonstrate the meaning of Jesus Christ by offering a caring educational community in which each individual may achieve the highest intellectual and personal growth and by participating responsibly in our world’s concerns.” Again, regardless of what one feels about the mission statement, this mission statement is open to quite a bit more interpretation about what it means to “demonstrate the meaning of Jesus Christ” – specifically, feminism, pacifism, universalism, sexual orientation, thoughts about the varying degrees of authority one can give the scripture, the catholicity of the church, even some questions about some orthodox views of who Christ was. Different interpretations of these various ideas are expressed, and not all are endorsed by the university. Again, I am not asserting that this diversity of interpretations is necessarily a negative thing, but it was more diverse than what I expected.

Groups

In the process of seeing how different individuals gave strength to different interpretations of our Statement of Faith and university mission, I observed that we did not all classify ourselves into the same groupings – in fact, many different groupings developed.

My initial assumption was that we would be one unified community seeking Christ. As it turns out, there are a plethora of unique groups. I had expected something like the council in Jerusalem. It appears to me that we are in some ways closer to the church of Corinth where some follow Paul, some Apollos, and some Christ.

The first grouping that emerged to me was along this line of three groups – the Denominational representatives (in our case, the Friends), the Scholars, and for want of a better word, the Christians. I don’t want to make it sound like the Denominationalists or the Scholars aren’t Christians, just as I don’t think that Paul intended to characterize those that followed either himself or Apollos as non-Christian. Some individuals give allegiance to blends of these three groups, and some tend to fall primarily into one of them. I freely admit that these groups are not as clearly defined as I present them. I am certain that our faculty is much broader than this narrow representation; however, it is distinctions of these groups that I find interesting. Once again, I do not intend this to be a sociologically advanced study, simply an observation by someone new to the environment.

The Denominationalists are extremely concerned, and possibly rightly so, about preserving the defining characteristics of that denomination with George Fox University. In the case of the Friends, there are some with passion for varying types of pacifism and feminism, and there are some who strongly believe that meetings should not include votes but should move ahead only on consensus. As I have only observed this for one year, I will not comment on more than these elements, although there are other Friends elements that seem to be somewhat absent. The Denominationalists, (and by no means do all of the Friends adherents subscribe to this philosophy), are intent on George Fox University not simply being a quality Christian school, but a profoundly Friends Christian school. I can imagine that other denominational universities have a similar component and I must commend the Friends at George Fox as they have managed to maintain a rather strong denominational element whilst becoming a minority on campus. I expect that this might be a rather unique situation in Christian universities. It could also explain the intensity of this group that could very easily disappear by simply being overrun in a university growing with Christians of other denominations.

The Scholars are the group who intend, and possibly rightly so, for George Fox University to become an elite scholarly university. There is a debate on campus about exactly what the phrase “scholarship” might mean at a predominantly teaching focused University. With the Scholars, there is no debate. It means the same thing that it has always meant at other university – specifically, publication in peer-reviewed journals. While the Scholars are concerned with the Christian aspects of the university, and some of them the Friends aspects, some of them are willing to place Scholarship as the driving force of the university. They seem to have the idea that the scholarly level of a faculty is at least as important, if not more important, than the spiritual component that a faculty member might bring to the community. I have not heard of anyone who commends the hiring of faculty who do not necessarily comply with the Statement of Faith in order to achieve a higher reputation scholastically. However, this is one of the fears that others sometimes perceive when interacting with this group.

The Christians are the group who intend, and possibly rightly so, for George Fox University to completely adhere to an idealist understanding of the gospel lived out on earth. This group can often be discounted as impractical as it is very easy for this group to say all of the right things about who we as a University ought to be in the world, but fail to actually bring in any money to help the university survive. If it isn't obvious already, I will inform the reader that I am a member of this group. It is easy for me to offer criticisms of situations on campus, but have no alternative to offer. Let me give a rather innocuous example. It seems slightly odd to me, for a Friends school where titles are eschewed as part of the Friends tradition, to accept donations from individuals and then honor their giving by placing their names on facilities. This is not a unique way of bringing funds into the university. It seems somewhat un-Christian and quite un-Quaker to me, and yet, it helps to pay my salary and allows me to minister Christ to students who want to learn about him. I have, at present, no alternative to this arguably lamentable situation.

I would like to point out that I don't think that any of these three groups are completely “right.” In his first epistle to the Corinthians, Paul doesn't condone any of the three groups either. The point Paul seems to be making is that they need to quit having divisions and come together in unity. I pray that a dialogue of this nature might be useful in that regard. I think that it is also important to avoid discounting the issue of groups as something natural. It is exceedingly natural. Paul commands us to knock it off. We are supposed to be “supernatural” (and here comes my idealistic Christian side).

There are quite a few other groups that are easy to recognize. There are the Liberal Arts vs. the Professionals. There are sometimes conversations in which the efficacy of different approaches is argued and elitist statements are offered by both sides. There are the Humanities vs. Sciences. This debate often shows up in the meaning of “scholarship” and in the distribution of funds.

One grouping that has been, in my one year estimation, surprisingly Christian in its interactions is the rigidly defined administrative, faculty, and staff groups. While there are always individuals in any group

that can have conflicts, this set of groups has, from a mission's perspective, seemed to operate in full cooperation. This strikes me as a distinctly positive statement about George Fox University as the conflicts are not necessarily occurring where the "rubber meets the road." It might also be used as further evidence of the quote attributed to Henry Kissinger – "The reason that academic debate is so vicious is that, so little is at stake."

However, on a personal level, there is very much at stake. I am becoming aware of my affinity to shift my focus from the good of Christ to the good of my group. With regard to these groupings, I have been posing this situation. Imagine if I proposed an idea that was going to be tremendously useful for the university, but horrifically bad for the body of Christ. I would think that most individuals on campus would say that this would be a resoundingly bad idea. Now imagine if I proposed an idea that was simply going to be tremendously useful for the university. What I have noticed is that the second question – "Yes, but what about the purposes of Christ?" This question sometimes goes unasked.

In light of this I need to recognize that this unity begins with me in the smallest of areas. On our campus we have an engineering department with two mechanical engineers, two electrical engineers, and one physicist. I was ranting one evening to my wife about some of these issues and then began a rant about something in our department involving the ME's and the EE's. My wife calmly asked me "are you only worried about your own agenda?" I suppose that's what the word "helpmeet" means – somebody to rapidly and pointedly indicate my failings. Through my wife's insight I was able to recognize that it is exceedingly easy to identify my group's agenda as Christ's agenda. This phenomenon has been used in the past to justify many a non-Christian endeavor in the name of Christ.

As a result of this observation, I find myself in a university full of individuals like myself, with different ideas about the mission of the university, who classify ourselves into different groupings, and all too easily identify our purposes with those of Christ. This can be quite an ugly picture when you look at it through idealistic glasses.

Job/Ministry

This situation is not hidden in any way and I doubt that many would disagree with the basic concepts I am expressing. We live in an imperfect world and we ascribe to perfection. How can we deal with the inconsistencies? I am afraid that some in this kettle have decided to simply accept the inconsistencies in some way. The typical way that I have discovered is to carve out a section of the campus and make that an island of refuge – not unlike denominations in the world of Christianity. I was unsettled by some occurrences on campus and another professor (from the Christian group) stated "that sort of thing happens on that side of campus." Beyond any analysis of his statement, what shocked me the most was his acceptance of the situation. This was my first indication of the "kettle" syndrome occurring in front of me. This professor had simply adapted to the kettle and given up on the hope of unity among us.

Some handle the inconsistency by calling their involvement on campus a job rather than a ministry. They attempt to isolate their personal Christian experience from the job – appealing to the phrase "it's a job" whenever something that is inconsistent with the concept of Christian unity rears its ugly head. One professor told me that if you think about it as a church, you will be frustrated, but if you think about it as a job, "it's a pretty good job."

I find this response unsatisfying as well. I am disappointed that it took this experience to make me recognize that I have been doing this for many years in the secular world. It now seems clear to me that I should have been more intentional laboring at my former 'jobs' as though they were ministries. However, there are some differences within the Christian university. We make great efforts to call ourselves a place where we attempt to integrate faith and learning. It is absolutely inconceivable that we would attempt to teach students how to integrate their faith into their lives, preparing them for life in the "real world" when we choose to opt out of our faith obligations as it relates to our "job" in a Christian University. I had a

“job.” I can make a lot more money for myself and my family at another “job.” This is a response that I find to be far from the purposes for which I feel Christ called me here. It is also the very response that I find myself falling into. It is the most dominant part of the kettle occurring around me. I hear myself getting frustrated with some situation and making statements like “well, I will simply come in and do my job and go home – forget about them and that situation.” This terrifies me. It is all too easy to opt out of the call of Christ and accept the contentment of smaller, more peaceful surroundings.

The Students

In my first year of academia, friends would often ask how I enjoyed Oregon. I would respond “Oregon? I live in Wood-Mar Hall – I am not yet aware that there is such a thing called Oregon.” They would also ask how I enjoyed teaching. Similarly, I would respond “I don’t know – I haven’t started teaching anyone yet – I have spent the year being a poor instructor, simply disseminating information – maybe I can begin actually *teaching* next year.” In this year of life change I have had little time to actually think about the very students that I am here to serve. This all came home to me one evening.

At George Fox University, this was a bit of a special year for the engineering program as we graduated our first set of seniors. Prior to this year, George Fox had offered a 3/2 program in engineering. At the conclusion of the year we held an engineering banquet which proved to be a pleasant and rewarding evening. Both the faculty and the students were permitted to share thoughts about their experiences at George Fox University. I felt that the entire evening refocused us on the nature of what we are doing here at George Fox. Many of the students spoke of the spiritual growth that they had experienced while students here. One student in particular caught my ear when he thanked the faculty for their daily prayers for the students. When I heard him say this I thought to myself, “gee – I’m sorry, I really didn’t pray for you today – in fact, I didn’t pray for you this week – in fact, I didn’t pray for any of the seniors this week – and in fact, I don’t know that I prayed for any of the students this year – well maybe that one student that I had an issue with – no ... wait – I think I prayed for myself and how I should deal with the situation. So – sorry fella, I didn’t pray for any of you all year.”

This was a rather convicting revelation and it began to make me wonder – what makes me any different than a faculty member at a secular school? Firstly, Christian faculty members may actually pray for their students at secular schools. I could likely learn something from them. But I also began to wonder, in the midst of this entire year of change, what is my true function here at George Fox University? What is my mission? Am I simply to teach engineering and is there anything wrong with that? Am I to pray for students and interact as I assume Christian professors at state institutions might do? Or am I to go beyond that level and truly minister the life of Christ to these students – to participate in the discipleship process as a mentor and a friend?

Thinking about what it means to be a Christian seems to make it clear that I am to go beyond a casual level. Something about the freedom of being a faculty member at a Christian school seemed to make this rather obvious to me. But as I began to apply this idea to my specific life, it seemed obvious that all Christians are to “do all things for the glory of God.” This is a statement about our intentional focus in how we live our life. I fear that my words are incapable of expressing my ideas here. It seems to me that there are so many things that pull at us from so many angles – and that Christ simply calls us to obedience and a life of bearing fruit and being poured out to others.

Practically this means that the growth of the soul of the student becomes the exclusive primary goal of the faculty member. I sometimes seem to think that it is the faculty’s role to dispense knowledge – some of us more detailed and technical – some espouse to a more classical or liberal arts view. Whatever our view, we sometimes equate the dispensing of knowledge with power. This was basically my situation as an “instructor” in my first year of teaching. I am beginning to realize that for me, I want to reach more of the student than the mind. I want to involve their passions, spiritual disciplines, character, relationships, AND

knowledge in this university experience. Some might think that this is a job best left to the church or “Student Life” or some other “trained” entity. I don’t know the way ahead in this area, but I do know that at least one student seemed to indicate that it was his understanding that I was to be doing something in this area – and that my heart resonated with this calling. This is why I came to a Christian university.

I don’t know what the next years hold for me in this regard. I have been working with ideas about spiritual formation groups among the engineering students. I wonder if a relational program of spiritual disciplines would do for my students what it has done for me. I wonder if engineering students have time to pray. I can understand their situation as, I had little time as a new faculty member myself.

Conclusion

I get one shot at this life. This reality drives me. I heard a quote in one of my children’s movies – “the brave may die, but the cautious never truly live.” I don’t want to adapt to this world, or accept the failings of men or the institution. I want to be “in the kettle, but not of it.” I want to reach for the ideal. I want to “know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, and so, somehow, to attain to the resurrection from the dead.” That part about sharing in his sufferings has always frightened me.

Sometimes I think that wisdom states that I should sit quietly and defer to my elders. That I should learn in quietness and submission. This may be a very wise thing indeed. However, I am troubled in some ways with the state of the church in which I have been raised. Some of the questions about the institution have made me wonder to what degree the elders have adapted. Whom do I trust? Some might say that I should trust the scriptures. Some might say that I should trust the church. The simple answer is that I trust Christ. But what does this look like practically?

And so I am left in a swirl of confusion, grasping at air for some cosmic meaning. I have found it more peaceful to ask more specific questions. Things like, “Lord, what do I do about this particular situation in this particular moment?”

I suppose I should end with some answer to the question that got me started on this whole paper. “What standard do I use to accept, engage, or reject this culture?” If the culture contributes to the call of Christ on our lives to reconcile men to God, then I would embrace it. If it attacks that call, then I would reject it. Otherwise, I want to engage it and attempt to understand which it really is. That sounds like the Christian group response, all full of Christian imagery but devoid of any practical reality.

To be quite honest, I think the best answer at this time is simply, “I am not sure.” I can make a few statements about what I want:

As to diversity,

I want an institution that is open to a conversation beyond our traditionally cultural and modernist aspects of our faith. I also want an institution that holds unswervingly to the faith that we profess. I suppose that I am simply restating the old quote “in essentials, unity; in non-essentials, liberty; in all things, charity.”

As to Personal Interaction,

I want an institution where individuals are open to the conversation. I want the freedom to ask questions without fear of offense. I want to be accepted as an individual that is searching for the truth and hasn’t yet found it. I want to learn to afford others that same benefit. I want this quest to be anchored in the accepted facts of our shared orthodoxy.

As to groups,

I want an institution where we feel no need to defend our “groups” and where we no longer “own” our groups but give up all things for the sake of Christ. I want an institution that does not feel the need to

academically justify every proposition or “win” every argument, but one that can find peace in the leading of Christ through study of the Holy Scriptures and the guiding presence of the Holy Spirit. In this matter, I think the Friends church has an excellent pattern that we can model. That said, it does present difficulties when the community expands. I would pray that we could find a way to make this model work in our institutional setting.

As to mission and purpose,

I don't want to fall into the trap of viewing my role at this university as a 'job.' I want to always be reminded of the 'call' that brought me here. I want to be part of a community – a university rather than a multiversity. I want this university to be abundantly clear about its primary mission so that the community has a clearly defined foundation to build upon.

As to students,

I want a relationship with other faculty members that will attempt to ensure that we never forget the reasons that we are here. I want to encourage others that those reasons go far beyond the dispensation of knowledge to the formation of soul and spirit.

In many ways I think that what I want exists right here at George Fox University. Aspects of it need to be clarified, stirred up, and worked upon a little bit, but there is truly a great community here. I think that my expectations coming from outside a Christian institution were so rose-colored that my shock at the institutions imperfections has been in somewhat overstated. However, the kettle analogy still holds in a somewhat ominous manner for me. Christ calls us to be perfect as our Father in heaven is perfect. I do not want to come to a place where I accept my imperfections.

It has been an enriching, rewarding, and often very trying year. I don't know what the future holds, but I am excited about the possibilities. As I said earlier, I reserve the right to change my mind, contradict myself, and/or ridicule the thoughts proposed in this paper. I wanted to write this paper for myself so that I would have a record of my thoughts before my adaptation began. I really don't know how impertinent it sounds or if it can be motivating to others at all. Thank you for taking the time to read it – I expect that you can be of more service to me than I have been to you. I look forward to hearing responses. Please feel free to contact me.