



Volume 51 | Issue 3

Article 4

2008

Being a Christian Librarian: A Partial Definition

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Recommended Citation

Kaehr, Robert E. (2008) "Being a Christian Librarian: A Partial Definition," *The Christian Librarian*: Vol. 51: Iss. 3, Article 4.
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.55221/2572-7478.1749>

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Being a Christian Librarian:

A Partial Definition

The drift of this article is to explore a partial definition of the phrase, Christian librarian. As this author closes out his career of 39+ years as a librarian, he has become reflective. Why? Perhaps it has something to do with age or perhaps something to do with an impending retirement, or perhaps it has something to do with the urgent. If the last reason is on target, what makes this exploration so crucial? Of course, this question brings more questions. Why wait so long to answer the question? Such questions should be asked at the beginning or throughout one's career rather than at the end. Of course, the conceptualization of Christian librarianship is likely an evolutionary process taking years to develop.

Defining Christian

Defining the meaning of Christian librarian is fundamental to understanding who we are in the context of this profession. What, if any, are the differences between being a non-Christian or Christian librarian? Is the only difference terminology? These questions are ripe for examination before ending a career. The Oxford English Dictionary defines Christian as "One who believes or professes the religion of Christ; an adherent of Christianity." Oxford has a second definition more closely allying itself with the evangelical mind: "One who exhibits the spirit, and follows the precepts and example, of Christ; a believer in Christ who is characterized by genuine piety" (Oxford...) Using this definition of Christian, there is a blending of thoughts into a simple recipe, maybe/maybe not. How does the Christian librarian exhibit *the spirit*, follow *the precepts* and *example, of Christ*, and show *genuine piety* as a librarian? I remember a psychology professor from years ago who suggested that every act of man is selfish. That does not appear to be *genuine piety*. Notice in the Oxford definition, action comes after belief.

Librarianship probably has gained more library-related advances from non-Christians than from believers. Christians are not the only ones who understand truth. In fact, most librarians receive their graduate training from what are considered secular schools. In this essay, there will be an attempt not to separate the world into the secular and the Christian. God's truth exists throughout His creation.

There is a near drought of library articles defining Christian librarianship. There are articles, which focus on the call of a Christian librarian. There was one helpful book, which dealt with the librarian's integration of faith and profession. A couple articles highlight various characteristics of a Christian librarian. Christian faith's influence on library service is another topic in the literature. Other than these articles, there is little discussion about what a Christian librarian is or how they are different from other librarians. Before going further on this journey, allow the author to make some disclaimers. There is no claim here to be a theologian or a philosopher. This endeavor is the ramblings of a pilgrim trying to understand the nature of being an academic Christian librarian. No consideration is given to school, public, or special librarians, and not all areas of librarianship are covered. For instance, technical services are not included though they are crucial to library service. This author's assumption is whether Christian or not, a technical services librarian should strive for excellence. The principal difference between the two librarians is one of dedication. One gives the glory of the job well done to man. Christian librarians perform the service to the glory of God. Budgetary matters are similar. Ultimately, administering the budget is an act of stewardship, Christian librarian or not. Who receives the glory and motivates the librarians, however, are the important differences. The Christian is motivated by action of the Holy Spirit, and she or he gives God the glory for

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ABSTRACT

In this essay, the intent is partially to define the meaning of the phrase, Christian librarian. Because of journal limits on the length of an article, only a partial definition is possible. As literature about Christian librarianship accumulates, I hope a clearer understanding will emerge. Gregory A. Smith's Christian Librarianship: Essays on the Integration of Faith and Profession (2002) has given a good start to defining Christian librarianship.

the good work accomplished. Non-believing people, non-religious people, often, are motivated by material issues, money, status, power, friendships, professional pride, etc. and give the glory to themselves or others. These things also motivate Christians. When Christians aspire for their glory and honor without recognizing God's grace, sin wins. Grasping for some honor cannot or perhaps should not be avoided completely. Nonetheless, for the Christian, the ultimate glory belongs to the Lord. The Apostle Matthew addressed this clearly in his gospel, "Let your light so shine among men that they may see your good deeds and give glory to your Father in heaven" (Mt. 5:16). If at times, I appear to wander, feel free to take a short cut, perhaps jump to the next paragraph, or perhaps come along. Sometimes the sentences may seem like a flow of consciousness. At other times, you may glean a pint of understanding about what it means to be a Christian librarian. I hope I do.

This article's approach is both academic and biblical. Of course, biblical and academic approaches may be synonymous. It is impossible to eliminate either approach. The inability to separate the one from the other is one of the fundamental differences between Christian librarians and others. As one who finds his life moored in Christian faith among fellow believers, the Bible is the compass that guides me through this profession called librarianship.

The book of Hebrews informs us to strip away patiently all sin interfering with our relations with Christ. To do this we need to "fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith" (NIV, Heb. 12.1-3). Notice it is His Faith, the author and perfecter [source], mingled with our faith that allows us to mature properly in this life. In addition, Isaiah gave us the admonition, "Come now, let us reason together" (Isa 1.18). There is always a blending of faith and reason found in scriptures. The reasoning to which Isaiah alluded was argumentative and similar to the arguments offered in a court of law. We are to be people of faith, but we are equally called to be people of reason. Inability to reason our faith is perhaps the biggest hurdle to effective witnessing.

Love

People, who call themselves Christian, love, believe in, cling to, and rely on the living Jesus, the Christ. In addition, Jesus clarified the type love He wants from His followers. If Jesus' teaching is accepted, we can get a little closer to understanding Christian librarianship. The Apostle John records Jesus as saying, "If you love me, you will obey what I command" (John 14.15). However, there are so many commandments; did Jesus suggest reinstituting the old Pharisaical system of law-keeping? Thankfully, that was not the case. Jesus reduced the commandments down to just two, or perhaps one, if combined. Jesus told the teacher of the law in Mark's gospel the most important command is "[T]he Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength. The second is this: 'Love your neighbor as yourself' There is no greater commandment than these" (Mark 12.29-31). Notice the sequencing, heart, soul, and mind, strength, everything making up a person, the physical, the emotional, and the rational.

Therefore, it is imperative the Christian librarian live by and work by this command, loving Jesus Christ and allowing that love to flow to others. This two edged command is the umbrella under which Christian librarians, or any Christian, operate. Smith gave this principle considerable weight when he said, "[W]e should promote the love of God as mankind's highest occupation" (Core virtue ... 53). In the professional and menial, work-a-day world of the librarian, how does this display? With this question, another question always looms large to me; how does being a Christian librarian, teacher, attorney, banker or whatever, this Christian-being, done differently from the humanist.

Having known a many non-Christian teachers, professors, librarians, etc. through the years, many have displayed more love and other virtues for their students, their patrons, and their clients than did their Christian counterparts. Years ago as an English teacher, I badgered a fellow teacher into wanting to take a swing at me. I am glad he stopped

short! More importantly, I am glad that later when we had both calmed down from our confrontation, I apologized for my rude and unchristian behavior. I wish that incident had been the only ignorant, non-professional, unloving move I made during my career. I have seen Christian faculty yelling in anger during faculty meetings and using offensive sarcasm to cut people down. I have seen staff and faculty using crude language. Such talk, attitudes, and actions are never acceptable among Christians and less so among Christian professionals (Eph 5.1-12).

Faculty can be overly demanding of librarians, wanting library items yesterday. Administrators may completely ignore legitimate requests for resources to serve the students. Christian campuses play political power games. Sarcastic remarks are made all-to-often about colleagues and administrators. Many other slimy examples can easily be dredged up. Nonetheless, they would serve no good purpose. It should be sufficient to say, many Christian-educator colleagues including this author have blown it in the love arena throughout the years.

Sometimes students frustrate and anger librarians and staff. Interlibrary loan forms are submitted incomplete without authors' names, article titles, or periodical titles. Rather than retrieving their free printed articles when leaving the library, students often leave the printouts at the circulation desk. Every conceivable excuse is given why a book was not returned on time. Occasionally, students can be brash and unapologetically rude. Of course, such things may cause unnecessary frustrations and loss of valuable time.

Some of the most significant concerns that have brought me regret have been my poor witnessing to library and staff colleagues. We have a more intimate knowledge of one another's work habits and attitudes than anyone else does on campus. Staff observations especially through long-term relations best evaluate one's credibility as a Christian and as a librarian. How many relationships have been soiled by negative rumors, lazy attitudes, and harsh words, though perhaps unintended? Rumors can be true; lazy always applies

to the other person, and of course, harsh words are never intended. For those of you who live in near perfect harmony with your staff and colleagues, please ignore this and congratulations.

Unforeseen problems may develop as close relations develop over the years. It is easy to know how to pull each other's triggers. It is common knowledge over-familiarity breeds contempt. Nonetheless, things happen. A director knows things, extra long breaks, which person discloses inside knowledge of the campus happenings, who is sluffing-off, who talks too much on the phone, and who is incompetent in various skills needed to run a complex organization such as a library. Part of the problem about long-term relations and knowing all this about other librarian(s) and the staff is that they know the same things about their directors.

It should be noted, however, people who conflict over these issues, agree more than they disagree. In fact, when one of their members suffers, all seem to forget their differences and empathize with the sufferer. When an important library project needs attention, the entire library crew willingly gives it their full attention until it is completed.

In addition, most all the staff strives for excellence in their work. Of course, it is easy to think otherwise. If another makes questionably obvious mistakes, then it is often easier to doubt the person's ability than to work together trying to fix it. We can always fall back on, "Well, if you want something done right, do it yourself." Often, this maxim appears true at least when viewing it from our vantage. However, if we were completely honest, we might realize with a little more training, the errant person could become proficient at doing the task. Sometimes the problem may be impatience in thinking there is not enough time to spend solving the problem. In addition, for many cases, it would help to transfer the person to a different task or position where they might succeed. Love demands that we want the best for our fellow workers in Christ.

Defining the meaning of Christian librarian is fundamental to understanding who we are in the context of this profession.

What does all this have to do with being a Christian librarian? What does this have to do with love? What does this have to do with keeping His commandments? Moreover, what does love and keeping Christ's commandments have to do with being a Christian Librarian?

Well, library literature is replete with situations such as the ones previously described. Looking at some of the foibles and strengths of library personnel, Davis and Tucker give the following description of possibilities in developing good relations.

From Christ-centered interactions, "one's place of employment becomes like a home and one's coworkers like a family or, at least, they hold forth that potential. We are concerned about each member's physical family—spouses and significant others, children, and parents" (p44). In addition to these concerns, work-related stresses need to be listed. Our staff prays for the physical, emotional, and spiritual well-being of one another, and our families and friends, and the entire campus. This interconnectivity has helped us immeasurably when less-than-Christian conflicts and sibling rivalry arise. It is always important both professionals and staff remember everyone wants what is best for the family, both in the library context and the broader communities we serve. When remembered, during times of conflict, these tensions moderate or disappear. Christ-centered familial love eliminates conflict and brings peace. Frequently we receive and respond to email prayer requests to pray for special needs around campus. Gregory Smith said in The Role of the Library in the Character Formation of the Christian College Student, "[W]e should pray for and with our patrons. This is an essential aspect of our moral responsibility as Christian librarians" (188).

Librarians occasionally face arrogant or disgruntled students complaining about library fines, unfair busywork library-based assignments, the librarian's lack of understanding about their needs, or another real or imagined lack of library service. When this happens, what is the appropriate Christian response? Is retaliation the immediate desire? In certain circumstances, that is exactly what I want to do. Sometimes, I want to use some

sharp-witted, at least I want to think it is, remark to put the student in his/her place.

Nonetheless, Paul tells the Colossian church to "clothe [themselves] with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience" (Col 3.12). Using a barbed tongue to retaliate against an alleged surly student is not compassionate, kind, humble, gentle, or patient. Davis and Tucker give reasonable advice when encountering such students: "The cheerfulness with which difficult questions are fielded may reflect Christ's love – a distinct contrast to the bureaucratic encounters that characterize much of modern life" (Christian Librarianship [...]. 45). In addition, however, Terhune mentions encounters involving conflict do occasionally require a strong but loving confrontation (99). The specific response may be different for similar situations by various librarians, and that is acceptable. Nonetheless, the attitude by which each situation is handled is crucial. Hasker, in his essay, Faith Learning Integration..., said, "Whenever service is performed, especially service done directly for human beings, it makes a tremendous difference in what spirit or attitude the service is done" (248).

Regarding faculty/administrative librarian relations, it sometimes helps librarians not to take things too personally. Some faculty members, if they think about librarians, think of them as [...]. The ellipsis is intentional. You fill in the blanks, clerks, paraprofessionals, almost adjunct, here-comes-another-request-for-money staff member, or "just" support personnel, whatever that means. On the other hand, some faculty members recognize and value librarians as vital to the educational enterprise.

Sometimes administrators or faculty members are overheard to refer to the number of professional librarians on staff. Notice the phrase, professional librarians. What's with the redundancy? Of course, librarians are professionals. There is no need to state the obvious. Note, however, Terhune is right, however, when he says, "Too often librarians can be on the defensive, worried about their

status, feeling as if other faculty members might view them with condescension. In a Christian community, the librarian should seek to serve the faculty without worrying about her status" (98). What Terhune says is usually true; nonetheless, remember in *Christian community*, condescending attitudes are wrong. Moreover, as mentioned earlier about confronting unethical or improper attitudes with students goes for faculty and administration. A strong but **loving** person will **tactfully** confront such attitudes whether presented by students, staff, faculty or administrators.

Forgiveness

One aspect of building appropriate Christian relationships, especially among faculty, administrators, staff, and librarians is to understand the importance of forgiveness. The scriptures are clear about its importance in the Christian's everyday life. The Lord said, "And when you stand praying, if you hold anything against anyone, forgive him, so that your Father in heaven may forgive you your sins" (Mark 11.25). That is a difficult standard, "anything against anyone." Matthew said this differently. "For if you forgive men when they sin against you," Jesus said, "your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive men their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins" (6.14-16). When we forgive someone, we no longer judge the person, and we act kindly toward the offending party. Therefore, when an administrator/faculty member/staff member offends us, and it does happen, we must learn to forgive; forgiveness implies reconciliation, and reconciliation implies unity.

Defining Librarianship

So far, the focus of this essay has been mostly on library relations and attitudes. You might wonder when this essay will consider the definition and tasks of librarianship. In all this, however, we have been discussing addresses librarianship. No one area of library service can be separated from relations and attitudes. David Kaser (personal conversation, 1980s) defined librarianship as "getting the right material to the right person at the right

time." Kaser shared this definition with me decades ago. Nonetheless, it still incorporates all the departments of the library and serves nicely as a compact definition of librarianship. When chatting with Evan Farber (personal conversation, 1970s), Earlham College, he shared that if a bibliographic instruction program is going to grow, meeting and discussing library-based assignments with faculty is essential (Farber. Conversation). Faculty members are the key to library use on an academic campus. Since then, I have allowed Kaser's definition and Farber's principle to be pragmatic underpinnings of my philosophy of library service.

Therefore, whether working in technical services, circulation, reference, information services, or administration, attitudes and relations are crucial to what is done by Christian or non-Christian librarians. As mentioned earlier, it is impossible to separate Christian from librarian when speaking of the believer who happens to be a librarian. It is important for the Christian librarian, however, not to get into the trap of placing librarians in a Christian or secular world. William Hasker has written possibly a scholarly essay about faith integration. He noted, "There is not a secular world and a sacred world, but a single world created by God and a single, unitary, truth which is known to God" (238). The scriptures tell us, "The earth is the Lord's, and everything in it, the world, and all who live in it" (Psalm 24:1). Then they say, "'Thus says the Lord,' Heaven is My throne and the earth is My footstool" (Isaiah 66.1a). This theme is explicitly stated or implied throughout the scriptures, "To the Lord your God belong the heavens, even the highest heavens, the earth and everything in it" (Deut 10.14). There are not two worlds, one Christian and one secular. Such redundancy is as if we are saying there is God's truth and man's truth. Truth is truth.

Collection Development

One important task for a librarian is the selection of materials. The goal is to have a high quality, well-balanced collection, which meets the needs of students and faculty. There should

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family, both in the
library context
and the broader
communities we
serve.*

be a formal collection development policy in each library. Although rarely written or read in today's library, they undergird the proper handling of collection controversies when the need arises. One area covered by a collection policy is censorship. What does a librarian do when patrons challenge questionable material? Perhaps, the material is too sexually explicit, too politically incorrect, or maybe the material supports a contrary view of evolution or abortion. Being a Christian librarian becomes crucial at such times. After all, Christian librarians have strongly held opinions on such topics also. What should a Christian librarian do if he/she objects to certain materials in the library?

One example of potentially offensive material surrounds the abortion issue. There are Christians who are pro-choice/pro-abortion advocates and Christians who are pro-life/anti-abortion advocates. If a Christian librarian believes abortion is legalized murder, how can he/she accept books into the collection that advocate pro-choice thinking? Whether the abortion issue or a multitude of similar issues, Christian librarians, eventually face and address them. I believe that for every Christian librarian there may be an appropriate time to censor.

One of the better articles on Christian librarians responding to intellectual freedom issues comes from J. Ray Doerksen, "Intellectual Freedom and the Christian Librarian." In it, he emphatically supports intellectual freedom. Nonetheless, he reasons the need to reject ALA's concepts of "absolute freedom" and "neutrality" in building a library collection (110). Smith stated this principle as, "[W]e should acknowledge God, not professional standards, as our supreme authority" (Core Value [...]. 53). In another of his articles, Smith stated ways Christian librarians can potentially encourage moral development on its campuses. "First," he said, "we can provide resources that cultivate the moral life. By implication, this involves excluding or controlling access to morally degrading material" (Smith; The Role of [...]). It is improbable any Christian would

deliberately include flagrantly anti-Christian materials in the collection without some reservations.

If the abortion issue or most other controversial issue comes before a Christian librarian, it is important to remember the collection does not belong to the librarian. It belongs to the institution. Individual people, groups of people, and institutions, however, can be wrong in judging issues. It is important to take seriously and accept the professional responsibility of selecting a quality collection. Nonetheless, it is usually wise to have group discussions about controversial selection issues. In such discussions, it is wise to apply Aristotle's golden mean that the truth of a matter is usually found somewhere in the middle. In controversial cases, discuss the issues with the library committee. They have been appointed to help consider important library matters. If the committee rules against the librarian's opinion, it behooves the librarian to consider seriously the committee's decision. If agreement cannot be reached, it may be time for the librarian to take a stand and accept the consequences or to move on to another line of work.

What are other differences between Christian librarians and those who are not? Are there fundamental differences between and among these librarians? There are basic differences between Christian and non-Christian librarians. One difference is Christians believe in the Lord Jesus Christ as their personal Saviour. Christians believe in and follow the living Christ as revealed in the Bible. Christians follow Christ's commandments and show personal kindness and concern, through Christ, for one another and the world around them. Non-Christian librarians often show love for one another. To the shame of many Christians, they sometimes express love more demonstratively to a hurting world than Christians do. Christians, however, also show love, and they pray for one another's needs. While the non-Christian may show love, it is often humanistic, and man-centered. Christians on the other hand are taught to love because He, Jesus Christ, first loved them (1 John 4.19),

and they are commanded to love God and their neighbors. The world's love emanates from inward needs and is anthropologic; Christian love emanates from a spiritual experience and relation to Christ's love for us. In addition, non-Christians ignore the working of the Holy Spirit through prayer.

Another difference is interpersonal relations. Christian librarians get irritated with one another like other librarians. However, here is the rub; Christians are taught by Christ's command to forgive anyone who offends them. Forgiveness is not uttering the words, "I forgive you." Forgiveness implies Christians involved in conflict, including the offended and the offender, truly being forgiver and forgiven. If the conflict is between a Christian and those who are not, the Christian bears the burden to forgive even if the other person rejects an apology. In addition, there is no room for a sense of superiority during a conflict, for example, as between the librarian and a rude student.

There is no room for bitter retaliation between a staff member and a librarian. There is no room for harboring resentment between a librarian and anyone on campus. Forgiveness is an expected virtue of all Christians.

Collection development, which includes the area of censorship, is a difficult situation librarians face. Non-Christian librarians may choose to ignore materials blatantly offensive to themselves or the public. They likely agree with and follow the ALA's inclusiveness guidelines and their "neutrality" principles about collection development and censorship. However, Christian librarians ought to place every aspect of their professional lives first under the lordship of Christ. Doerkson rightly said, "Christian librarians do not need to accept every tenet of the Intellectual Freedom Manual to be good educators. Neither do they need to retreat from the marketplace of ideas in order to provide a sanctuary of 'safe' materials" (112).

For instance, there is a time to censor library materials. This, however, does not give license to dismiss controversial materials in opposition to our opinions. When such potentially censorial instances occur, the librarian ought to consult the library committee and seriously consider their findings before acting. In addition, the Christian librarian should graciously accept the consequences of their censorial actions.

There are many other issues, which need to be discussed about Christian librarianship. Is there a Christian distinctive to reference service, technology and automation, and circulation services? Indeed, many other areas need consideration including subdivisions of the services mentioned. Continued dialogue is of paramount importance about these and other areas of Christian librarianship. †

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