

## Faith Bolstered at the University – My Personal Journey

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This morning, I want to share with you something about my own personal journey of faith. As my starting point, I want to read to you what the Apostle Peter wrote in his first epistle (1 Peter 3:15-16). Peter wrote,

“...but in your hearts honor Christ the Lord as holy, always being prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and respect, having a good conscience, so that, when you are slandered, those who revile your good behavior in Christ may be put to shame.”

I choose this as the starting point for my remarks because it applies very directly to my experience when I was in college. Some professors and other academicians talked with me in a non-argumentative way, *with gentleness and respect*, but nevertheless very persuasively, about their Christian faith, and I am forever grateful to God for leading them across my path at just the right time. Those experiences were very instrumental in my own intellectual and spiritual development and they set my foot on a solid foundation that has proven to be a sure foundation for my life. However, before I get into those details, I want to share something about myself, and about the family I was born into.

I was born in Helsinki, Finland. The family later immigrated to the US and we became naturalized citizens. I was blessed to be born into a genuine Christian family; into a family that was not just nominally Christian, but into a family where my father and mother both knew the Lord in a deep personal way. They lived every single day with a clear purpose – to honor God and to do His will - to the best of their ability.

As far as I know, they were in fact the first believers in Christ in their respective families. The generations before them had no known history of any interest in religion. My mom and my dad had come to know the Lord as teenagers, and they had both been changed radically by their conversion to Jesus Christ. Both of them had genuine “ah-ha moments” in their teen years that opened their understanding to the biblical gospel, that “turned the light on” as it were, for them in a life-transforming way. And their lives were living proof of the reality of that transformation, which Christ alone can bring to a person. Both of my parents were true “first generation” Christians, living with zeal for the Lord. I didn’t realize how greatly blessed I was to have been born into this family until much later, but over the years I have come to appreciate more and more the enormous blessing that God, by His grace, gave me when He brought me into this world as a member of that particular family.

My father became a pastor some years after his conversion, and my mother was a gifted speaker as well. Both of them shared in the preaching and teaching ministry in our church when I was growing up, and their life, as well as their words, had a powerful influence in shaping my life when I lived at home, and particularly my life of faith. Dad had come to know the Lord through the witness of a schoolteacher, and although he later became a minister in the Lutheran church of Finland, he first was in a non-denominational church in Finland. Indeed, he was one of the leading figures within that movement. So, I was blessed with an amazing spiritual heritage.

My father was an avid reader – mostly of books on theology. He read books by many different authors, but the one author he really connected with was Martin Luther. He read a great deal of Martin Luther’s writings, and also books written by others about Luther’s theology. Actually, he became quite a Martin Luther scholar in his native Finland, and conducted many seminars on Luther’s doctrine of justification by faith. He was deeply moved by Luther’s discovery (or re-discovery) of the biblical gospel, Luther’s re-discovery of the biblical truth that we sinners are made right before a holy

God not on the basis of anything we can do, but simply by believing and trusting in what Christ has already done on our behalf through his death and resurrection. My father affirmed again and again that all of humanity is innately sinful and that nothing we can do can ever erase that reality. So, we are hopelessly lost if we are left to our own devices. We are, by nature, alienated from God and the only way we can become reconciled to God is through faith in what He graciously did for us in Christ. These were the biblical truths my Father had discovered himself some years earlier and so he resonated deeply with Luther's teaching on this point.

I grew up under my father's teaching, and I accepted wholeheartedly what he taught. I put my trust in Jesus Christ as my Lord and Savior at around the age of ten. But I must say that I led a somewhat sheltered life....that is until I left home to enter college. I say I lived a sheltered life before entering college in the sense that I was not exposed to any ideas that questioned the basis of my faith – at least not seriously or credibly. But when I entered college, I experienced challenges to my faith – challenges on a level that I had not experienced before. Some of my professors were openly proclaimed atheists, and they argued quite “religiously” against the credibility of the Bible, against the validity of any kind of faith, and even against the very existence of God. They spoke “ex cathedra” as it were, from their exalted position as university professors.

I didn't actually lose my childhood faith because of the new arguments I was exposed to, but I was in an inner turmoil during my college years, as I sought for ways to counter the arguments I was hearing from my professors. I knew in the depths of my heart that there must be some answers, but I had not yet discovered them. So, I lived for quite a few years with this inner turmoil.

My father, who had been my spiritual role model, and my theological mentor, was unable to help me in my intellectual struggles. Although he was truly a man of God –

a man of the gospel – and a man who could articulate the gospel with great clarity – he was not knowledgeable concerning the kinds of intellectual arguments I was facing at college. I admired him greatly, and I still do, and I thank God for the foundation he established for my faith, but he was simply not able to offer me any help to counter the academic atheistic arguments I was hearing. As an observation, I think many students from Christian families face a similar challenge when they leave their home and their home church to enter college.

During that challenging time in my life, God made me aware of an organization called InterVarsity Christian Fellowship, a ministry that's still active on many campuses even today. InterVarsity became for me the place where I found answers to the challenges I was facing. InterVarsity introduced me to many respected scholars in many different fields of study – respected scholars who were deeply committed Christians, and who were able to articulate their Christian faith with clarity in an intellectually credible way. They were able also to present credible counter-arguments to the atheistic propositions my professors had been challenging me with. So, the campus ministry God used to bring answers to me in my search was InterVarsity Christian Fellowship. I am eternally grateful for that.

One of the Christian scholars who made a deep impression on me was Dr. Gordon Van Wylen, who was the Dean of Engineering at the University of Michigan when I was a graduate student there. Dr. Van Wylen was a man with high academic credentials, and yet he was a man who openly professed his faith in Jesus Christ. He was the faculty advisor for the InterVarsity chapter on the University of Michigan campus. In the few interactions I had with him, he related to me in a personal and thoughtful way, sharing his viewpoints in a very natural way....with gentleness and respect, as Peter admonished us to do in the Scripture reference at the start of this talk. Van Wylen had a profound influence on me. Here was a man who had a great deal of credibility in academia, who had authored one of the leading textbooks on

thermodynamics, and yet he openly professed faith in Christ. That, in itself, spoke to me powerfully.

It was through InterVarsity that I also became aware of the British scholar and author, C. S. Lewis. Lewis taught at Oxford University. He had been an atheist for some time, actually since his teenage years, but later on through his friendship with some other scholars, most notably J. R. R. Tolkien, Lewis gradually came to see that his belief in atheism was based on a not well established foundation. Atheism did not connect all the dots satisfactorily, but left many unanswered questions in Lewis's mind. The more he examined the evidence, the more he moved from atheism toward faith in God; and he turned from Atheism to Theism at the age of 31, and shortly after that, he professed faith in Jesus Christ as the Son of God and as his Savior a couple of years after that.

Lewis, as most of us know, was a prolific writer, and he became a very widely-read author. He wrote many books – about 40 of them - and a lot of them were written to convince secular readers of the truth of Christianity. With only a few exceptions, His books were mainly apologetic in nature. He defended the reasonableness of the Christian faith, and he presented arguments, based on his own former belief in atheism, on why an intelligent, educated man or woman living in the 20<sup>th</sup> century can actually believe in Jesus Christ. Lewis came to understand that Christianity connects all the dots in a way that no other religion, including atheism, does. His book, Mere Christianity, was one that was very influential in my life....as it has been in the lives of countless others through the years. It remains to this day on best seller lists , especially in the English speaking world. Lewis wrote with amazing clarity, and he exposed the shallowness of the atheistic viewpoint he had once held. He did it very effectively in a winsome way.

Here are a couple of quotations from Lewis. He wrote, "I am trying here to prevent anyone saying the really foolish thing that people often say about Him: 'I'm ready to accept Jesus as a great moral teacher, but I don't accept his claim to be God.' That is the one thing we must not say. A man who was merely a man and said the sort of things Jesus said would not be a great moral teacher. He would either be a lunatic — on the level with the man who says he is a poached egg — or else he would be the Devil of Hell. You must make your choice. Either this man was, and is, the Son of God, or else a madman or something worse. You can shut him up for a fool, you can spit at him and kill him as a demon or you can fall at his feet and call him Lord and God, but let us not come with any patronizing nonsense about his being a great human teacher. He has not left that open to us. He did not intend to." (Mere Christianity)

Here's another quote: "Christianity, if false, is of no importance, and if true, of infinite importance, the only thing it cannot be is moderately important." Lewis had come to the conclusion that it is indeed true, and therefore of infinite importance.

And another quote: "If the whole universe has no meaning, we should never have found out that it has no meaning: just as, if there were no light in the universe and therefore no creatures with eyes, we should never know it was dark. Dark would be without meaning."

And just one more: "When you argue against Him you are arguing against the very power that makes you able to argue at all: it is like cutting off the branch you are sitting on." And there are many other quotes one could give.

So, In addition to using InterVarsity Christian Fellowship to help me see that there are many thoughtful people in academia who are also thoughtful, confessing Christians. Dr. Van Wylen was one of them in my life, but in addition to Dr. Van Wylen's impact on me, God also used C. S. Lewis to articulate for me some of the reasons why the Christian faith can withstand any and all onslaughts from those who believe in

atheism. Of course, there were many other people I met and many other authors I read who also helped me grow out of my doubts, but I mention InterVarsity and C. S. Lewis here because God used them in a very powerful way at that particular time in my life, at a time I was struggling with these kinds of challenges.

So, instead of emerging from the university with my faith in shambles, which unfortunately happens to many students, I am thankful to God that by His grace I emerged from my university years with my faith actually bolstered...and strengthened....and on a more firm foundation.

In more recent years, I've learned about some other excellent apologetics resources as well. For example, there's the faculty and graduate student ministry of Campus Crusade for Christ, which is a resource my good CNF associate and good friend Nolan Hertel from Georgia Tech has made me aware of. Another good resource is "Reasons to Believe," an organization directed by Hugh Ross, and one that another friend from the CNF, Carl Mazzola, made me aware of. Timothy Keller's book, The Reason for God, is yet another excellent recent work that deals with questions of honest skeptics in a winsome and persuasive way. Thousands of skeptics and seekers in New York City have found satisfying answers through Keller's writings and his talks at Redeemer Presbyterian Church in NYC. Through Keller's books, many outside New York City have also responded in a similar way.

There's also Veritas Forum ([www.veritas.org](http://www.veritas.org)), an organization that arranges for thoughtful, articulate Christian speakers to address large numbers of students at events on university campuses. Their work is truly amazing.

One of our colleagues in the CNF, plasma physicist Ian Hutchinson of MIT, is one of the speakers on Veritas Forum's list of speakers. Ian went to Cambridge University as a non-believer but he became a Christian during his time there. He was invited by some friends to attend a series of lectures, and he was struck by the intellectual

strength of the arguments he heard in support of Christianity, something he had never considered before. So, Ian Hutchinson, a highly respected plasma physicist at MIT, represents yet another example of the large number of thoughtful scientists and academics who have examined the Christian faith seriously, and have become convinced of its truth.

I enjoy visiting Ian's personal web page and recommend that to all of you as well . It is at <http://hutchinson.belmont.ma.us/hutchinson/ian.html> . Ian has recently written a book entitled *Monopolizing Knowledge*, in which he writes about the false philosophical belief in "scientism" that is quite prevalent today. His talk on Scientism and Science can be accessed at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nrqY2aG4GE4>.

Of course, this does not exhaust the list of good resources. There are a growing number of excellent resources that deal with the reliability of Christianity, and many that provide rather convincing proof of the Christian position.

In this short paper, I've given a brief account of my own personal faith journey, of how my faith was bolstered during my university years. I've also attempted to give some examples of respected scholars examining the foundations of the Christian faith and as a result becoming convinced of its reliability and truth. I thank God for bringing InterVarsity into my life at just the right time, and I thank God especially for Dr. Van Wylen who set my mind on the right course while I was in graduate school. He and other Christian scholars and academics who have openly confessed their faith in Christ have taught me so much. They have set for me an example that I have tried to follow now for several decades.

In conclusion, I thank God first of all for bringing all these influences into my life, and for leading me to a clear understanding that the Christian faith is not based on wishful thinking or on man-made myths, but that it is based on a solid foundation that can be explained in a way that any reasonable person should be able to understand. One

does not need to leave his brain outside when exploring the Christian faith. Because of this sure foundation, we have an unshakable assurance of who Christ is and of what He has accomplished on our behalf. Because of this, we also have no guilt in life and no fear in death, and we can live our lives with real purpose and joy.

Finally, I pray that God will use us, as people who have been trained in the sciences, and as people who therefore have some credibility in the world's eyes, to share our faith, and to challenge our colleagues, as well as today's college students, to take a more serious look at Christianity. Let's remember - We are called by God to "always be ready to give a defense to everyone who asks us a reason for the hope that is in us."

So, let's not be hesitant to answer questions or objections from our unbelieving friends, but let's remember to do it "with gentleness and respect," as Scripture exhorts us to do. Our purpose is not to win arguments, but to lead people, in a respectful way, to a life transforming faith in Christ. The Lord will be honored when we do this, and He can use any one of us to open the eyes and hearts of skeptics and doubters, to help them realize that He is the way, and the truth, and the life, the one in whom they can place their faith with confidence. Coming to faith is in most cases a process, in many cases a long process. May God use us to point seekers to Jesus Christ.