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# Some Reflections on the Task of the Christian Scholar<sup>1</sup>

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**Abstract:** The task of the Christian in the academy is complex. Paul Gould’s essay “An Essay on Academic Disciplines, Faithfulness, and the Christian Scholar” includes some helpful conceptual tools. The first helps us visualize the multiple implications of the fact that God is the prime reality. These implications open up the resources of the Gospel for thinking about the task of the scholar. The second helps us give a more nuanced analysis of the contours of one’s academic discipline. In this essay, I develop these tools to help make them more comprehensive, and, hopefully, even more applicable.

Paul Gould’s lead-off piece, “An Essay on Academic Disciplines, Faithfulness and the Christian Scholar”<sup>2</sup> is an excellent place to begin a sustained discussion about the integration of Christian faith and mission with the entire academic enterprise. My comments will serve, I hope, to continue the discussion by offering some additions to the tools he puts forward.

Gould offers two conceptual tools to help us evaluate both the Gospel and the academic world. In my contribution, I wish to develop these tools in order to make them even more suggestive. Gould offers a diagram for each of these tools in his recent book, *The Outrageous Idea of the Missional Professor*.<sup>3</sup>

The first time I heard Paul present these tools was at a meeting of the EPS. I immediately incorporated them into my own teaching with Graduate students at Yale and at various ministry contexts (always citing Paul’s work). Along the way I saw how these tools can be made even more comprehensive. I shall take the conceptual tools in reverse order. The first tool can be labeled “The Ground of the Guiding Principles.” Gould mentions four that are

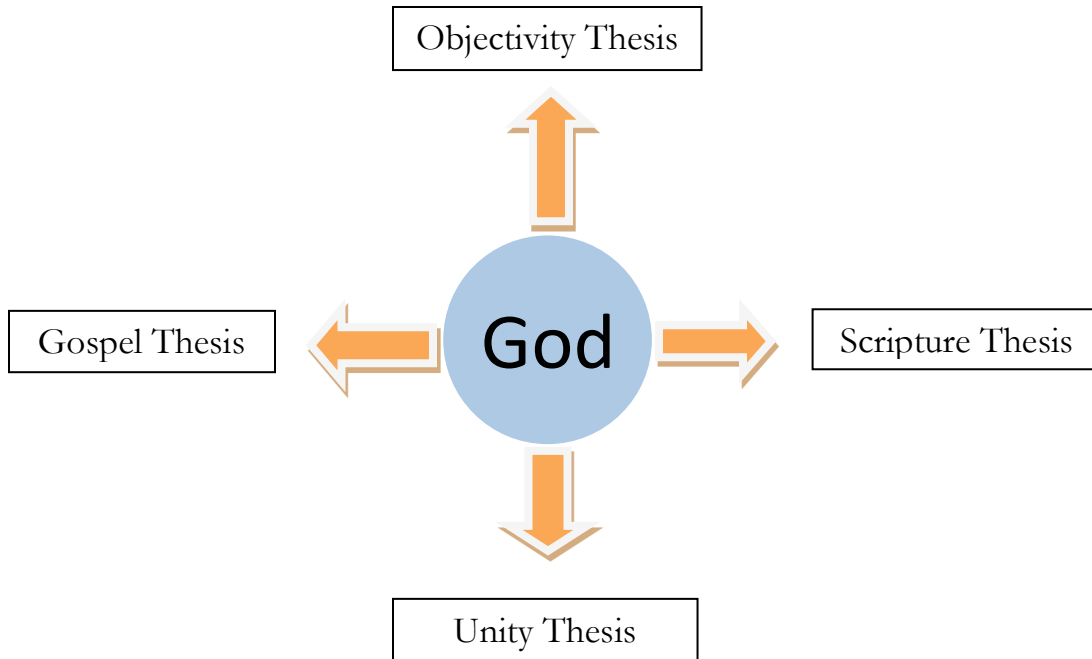
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<sup>1</sup> Thanks to Paul Gould for his work on this topic and to my colleagues at the

<sup>2</sup> Available here: [http://www.epsociety.org/userfiles/file/Gould\\_Essay-on-academic-disciplines-faithfulness.pdf](http://www.epsociety.org/userfiles/file/Gould_Essay-on-academic-disciplines-faithfulness.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> Paul Gould, *The Outrageous Idea of the Missional Professor* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2014).

grounded in the triune God. In his essay on academic integration (excerpted from chapter eight in the book), he adds a helpful diagram:<sup>4</sup>



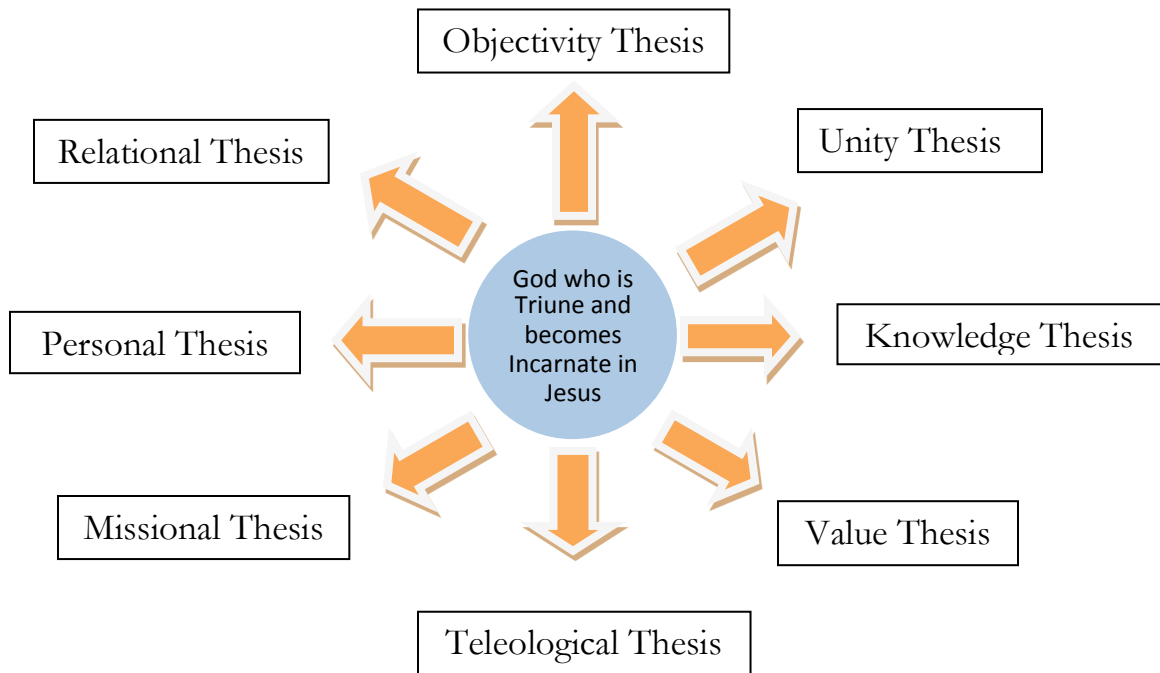
- *Objectivity Thesis*: there is a mind independent reality that we can discover.
- *Unity Thesis*: all truth is connected and unified.
- *Scripture Thesis*: Scripture makes knowledge claims about the nature of God, the world, and the self.
- *Gospel Thesis*: Humanity's greatest need is the gospel.

Although Gould does not claim any kind of exhaustiveness for this elucidation of guiding principles, it became clear that we can multiply the guiding principles that the existence and nature of God grounds. Below is my adapted version:

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<sup>4</sup> Gould, "An Essay on Academic Disciplines, Faithfulness, and the Christian Scholar," p. 13. Available here: [http://www.epsociety.org/userfiles/file/Gould\\_Essay-on-academic-disciplines-faithfulness.pdf](http://www.epsociety.org/userfiles/file/Gould_Essay-on-academic-disciplines-faithfulness.pdf).

## A Moderately Comprehensive view of the Resources of Christian Theism for Scholarship

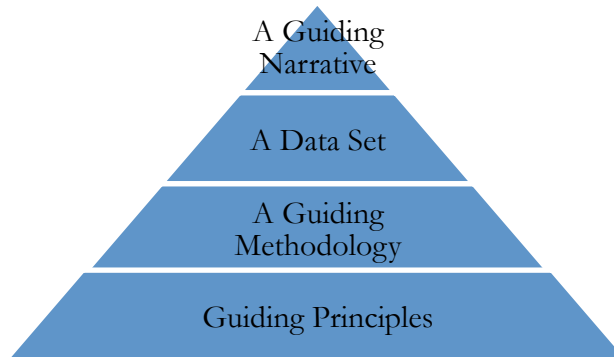


- *Objectivity Thesis*: there is a mind independent reality.
- *Unity Thesis*: all truth is connected and unified in the divine mind and by divine action.
- *Knowledge Thesis*: The world is knowable, and human beings can know it.
- *Value Thesis*: Reality is good and beautiful and worth exploring.
- *Teleological Thesis*: Reality is purposive and moral.
- *Missional Thesis*: God calls all his people and all their work into his redemptive mission – both through witness bearing and through image bearing.
- *Personal Thesis*: The most fundamental reality in the universe is a person
- *Relational Thesis*: The most fundamental reality is in relationship. Our relation to God is fundamental. Everything's relation to God is fundamental.

Gould's great contribution here is to help us visualize the reality that thinking prayerfully and carefully about God as he is revealed in the Scriptures reveals the principles for our scholarly work. My own suggestion is that this picture can further open our thinking to the breadth of ways in which the existence and nature of God grounds the very principles that make a robust Christian scholarship possible.

The second conceptual tool Gould developed is what he calls “The Anatomy of a Discipline” Here too he provides a helpful diagram:

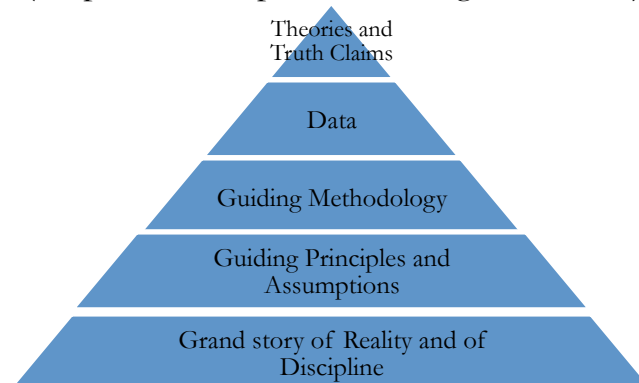
### **The Anatomy of an Academic Discipline<sup>5</sup>**



Gould’s summary goes as follows: “An academic discipline is comprised of four components. At the foundation are guiding principles (1) which inform the discipline’s guiding methodology (2) which, in turn, informs how scholars approach the data set (3). These combined components help give shape to the guiding narrative—the individual and collective narratives of the discipline (4).”<sup>6</sup>

As I presented this at a conference of student leaders, a faculty member from the University of Massachusetts in Environmental Science, Craig Nicholson, pointed out some useful adaptations for this picture:

### **The Anatomy of an Academic Discipline** (adapted with input from Craig Nicholson)



<sup>5</sup> Ibid., p. 8.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., pp. 7–8.

There are two differences in my version. First, the Grand Story (what Gould calls the Guiding Narrative) is at the foundation of the discipline. Second, I added “Theories and Truth Claims” to the top. What is at the top is the output. What is produced in our scholarly work consists of the Theories and Truth Claims we articulate and defend. Because these are the output, many Christians have limited their notion of the integration of faith and scholarship to correcting the falsehoods produced in the university.

Gould’s anatomy helps us see that there are different levels in our disciplines where the Gospel can and ought to be applied. One way to understand these levels is as follows:

*The Grand Story of Reality and of the Discipline.* This narrative includes the stories that are told about (1) the history of reality, (2) the history of the western mindset, (3) the specific history of the discipline. The Grand Story includes the various individual theories held at various times (historical and contemporary) and individual scholars (historical and contemporary) who develop, analyze, and defend them. For example, in Physics the grand story involves the triumph of reason over superstition and theological power interests.

*Guiding Principles and Assumptions:* These assumptions are the beliefs and values that are held in your particular community of scholars that operate as constraints on theory acceptance and as signposts for theory discovery. These are seldom questioned. The Guiding Assumptions include values and commitments about what counts as important or as a good research project. For example (and I thank Craig Nicholson for this example) in Environmental Science, there is an unquestioned, fundamental commitment to the value of protecting species and protecting biodiversity. This value is deep despite the overt commitment to neo-Darwinism that prevails. In philosophy and psychology, there is a similar commitment to the notion that persons are fundamentally physical.

*A Guiding Methodology.* The methodology a scholar (or group of scholars) employs is informed by the guiding principles held within the discipline. In many fields there is a commitment to the causal closure of the physical or to empiricism.

*Data.* The data set encompasses the specific domain of knowledge that is studied. What counts as a fact? For many philosophers and scientists, only third person reports count as facts or data.

*Theories and Truth Claims.* The output of a discipline is its theories and the claims it makes about chunks of reality. Examples range from the very particular (the acceleration due to gravity on earth is  $9.8 \text{ m/sec}^2$ ) to bigger theories such as Newtonian mechanics, Utilitarianism in ethics, theories about the role of the Reformation in the Galileo persecution.

While Gould's *Anatomy of an Academic Discipline* is extremely helpful for diagnosing the contours of our disciplines, there are two other significant applications of this conceptual tool. Integration in our work involves the bringing of the Christian world-view and mission or, what we like to call, the Gospel Lens, into conversation with the discipline and the particular projects we engage. Thus we need a careful investigation both of the Gospel Lens and of our disciplines.

This task of digging deeply into the Gospel can be helped as we think through not only the anatomy of our discipline, but also the anatomy of the Gospel. The *Anatomy of a Gospel Lens* is structured similarly to the anatomy of a discipline.

*The Grand Story of Reality.* God's plan of redemption history includes his creation of the Universe and of human beings with their properties and capacities. His plan is directional. There is objective teleology.

*Guiding Principles and Assumptions:* God is the source and center of all goodness, beauty, and truth. These things are embodied in created things. We can expect to discover and make good, beautiful, and true things. Human beings are real, flawed, and potentially redeemed.

*A Guiding Methodology.* We learn true things because God has made us knowers and put us into a knowable world. Furthermore he has acted and spoken in history. Language has the capacity to carry meaning and is the primary way by which meaning is communicated. There is knowledge to be gained from the third person perspective, from the second person perspective, and from the first person perspective.

*Data.* All that is, seen and unseen. God as revealed. The world as encountered.

*Theories and Truth Claims.* We know things simply in virtue of the fact we are Christians. This knowledge can be the starting point for any of our research projects.

We can apply the anatomy of a discipline also to the anatomy of an individual person. As we aim to bear witness to Christ, we want to diagnose where the Gospel speaks to the most pressing concerns of our friends and colleagues.

*Each person lives in her own Grand Story.* This story makes up what I call a person's core identity. It is their most fundamental beliefs and desires about who they are and who they want to be. A person's deepest story is set within some understanding of a bigger story. What is a life worth living? What do I think counts in life? Is there ground for hope?

*Guiding Principles and Assumptions:* The guiding assumptions a person has make up what we normally call their world-view. What can be known? What is real? This level tends to be shaped more by beliefs than by desires or loves.

*A Guiding Methodology.* How do I navigate my world? What goes into my decisions? My answer makes up my guiding methodology for life.

*Data.* What do I have to think about or take into consideration as I navigate life?

*Theories and Truth Claims.* What do I think is true? For an individual person, this can be a shallow opinion about a political issue or it can be a deeper conviction.

So you can see that Gould's Anatomy has applications for digging more deeply into the Gospel and for listening well to people with whom we aim to present the Gospel. The way we have summarized the task in our work at the Rivendell Institute is that we aim to be faithful Gospel diagnosticians. There are two horizons.

*First Horizon: Dig Deeply into the Gospel.* Ask questions of the Gospel with your location in mind. That is, ask questions of the Gospel in light of *your research* (your discipline, your specialties, your projects) and *your institution* (your department, your university, your classroom) and the



friends to whom you bear witness to Christ. By thinking deeply about the nature and the implications of the Gospel, you aim to identify particular Gospel “plumb-lines” that will be fruitful for you to investigate as you work in your field or in the classroom.

*Second Horizon: Dig deeply into your calling as a researcher and teacher. Ask questions of your discipline with the Gospel in mind. Given the principles grounded in God’s nature and the anatomy of the Gospel, what questions do I need to ask of philosophy? Or my research opportunities? Or how I teach? The more nuanced our analysis of the Gospel is, the more precise questions we can ask of our research.*

The horizon for mission minded academics is vast. I offer my additions to Gould’s analysis to push the missional conversation forward. When I teach on evangelism, I often state that any conversation that continues is a successful conversation. Let’s make the conversation about integration successful by keeping it going.

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