

CR: Darin Davis, Welcome to the show and thank you for joining us today.

DD: Christopher, Thanks. I'm glad to be here.

CR: I want to talk to you about the issue of student character development. I know that this is one of your major concerns in your teaching and in your writing and your, in your work with faculty. What is student character development? What does this mean for you and why do you think this is important for universities to be thinking about?

DD: Well, thanks for the question, Christopher. When we think about the, the history of universities from their inception in the High Middle Ages, universities have always cared about the moral and intellectual formation of their students. Education, if you look at the word, means to be led, to be led out, or to be led out of ignorance towards the truth as, as well as we can apprehend it. And that passage, not unlike the kind of description that Plato gives in the Allegory of the Cave is, is not easy, it's painful. It takes a long time. And because of all that, we're going to need some qualities of character that help us along for the journey. And those are really the virtues. And we're talking about here virtues of both action and thought, moral virtues and intellectual virtues. And I think that's really the perennial, one of the perennial missions of what university education is about. And I think that in the last many years, universities have changed. And part of it is that universities are asked to do more than they've ever been asked to do in their history. And they're under considerable pressure from the external entities and internal entities as well. And we here at Baylor, for instance, we, we want to raise our aspirations and have for the last two decades raised our research aspirations. We want to do exactly what you and your colleagues in ATL are so committed to, which is to not merely continue but raise our aspirations with respect to classroom teaching at the undergraduate level, at the graduate level, professional level as well. But we've got sports programs as well. We gotta be excellent in that. Everything from the new core to the basketball court, as, as I've sometimes said. And so it's not that the question of character formation is not understood or, or embraced as important, but in the modern university and when it's, when we're trying to do so many other things, I'm afraid that it can, it can get lost or it can be this sort of thing that begins to feel a little bit like an add on condition of really what our mission is about. And so I'm of the mind that when we look at our culture and the times in which we live, we realize that we really do want to educate our students for the virtues, for character. And we can do a lot of great things for them here at Baylor. We can prepare them, among many things, for meaningful work, but we're also preparing them for life. And that passage from here to wherever they're being called will require them to have some qualities of character, some excellences of character. And we hope that in our work here at Baylor, with our students and with our colleagues, we're growing in our understanding and our practice of what that is.

CR: That word "call" is really important too. I know for the work that the Institute for Faith and Learning does, this issue of vocation, and of course, at a Christian university, we think about this as being, as giving us kind of the divine anchor or the theological rationale for what we do in, in every day-- whether it's our learning or our occupations or our families. So can you talk a little bit about the challenges that we're at from a Christian university perspective versus how the culture thinks about these things.

DD: Yeah, sure. I mean, I think a really helpful way of thinking about it is if you're called to do something, you are first recognizing the, the, the presence and the reality of a caller. So for Christians, that is God and the Trinity, all altogether, all in one. But there is, there is something beyond the self that is calling us, literally calling us out--calling us out to do important work, calling us out to do things that

we otherwise would not do, Calling us into risk, sometimes in, into danger. And we live in a world where I think the challenge of that, Christopher, is that we so often think that living and doing well is really about individual choice. And seeing the cafeteria of options, I decide to choose one, and if I go to it and determine, well, that's not exactly what I wanted at this particular moment, don't like that nearly as much as I thought, I'm going to choose something else. And so there's a kind of a frenetic character to our, to the, to the life of choice. When it's just grounded in my individual wants and desires, those are all important, those ultimately have to yield to something beyond the self. And Christian, a Christian construal of vocation is an enormously important way to think about more than just your job or your particular work or even your career, but really your entire life.

And I surely have thought, particularly in times where we encounter difficulty like we, like we are now, that without a pretty rich understanding of being called into difficult work and persevering nonetheless and also asking for God's strength and God's grace, it'd probably be pretty hard to continue to do what we're doing day in and day out. And so vocation is, is more than just the stuff of glossy mission statements. It's really at the heart of the Christian life and I think it's, I think institutions like Baylor can think about institutional callings as well. I mean, I think I do, do believe that Baylor itself and other church-related higher education and I think other colleges and universities have a certain calling placed upon them and to realize that really is, really is important.

CR: And so counter-cultural there, too. Nobody, nobody — nobody is having as much fun teaching and working in the pandemic as they were before. I, I'd like to meet that person if that person exists. And so something else has to be, has to be at the foundation of what, what drives us, what motivates us, what brings us to our work. And not just brings us to the work, but brings us to do it as, as well as we possibly can. And that, that issue of taking risk and going into danger, that's counter-cultural. And I also think the issue of bringing students into a perspective of vocation as students is really counter-cultural as well because as you mentioned, recent shifts in higher education, and I think part of one of the major recent shifts is this gearing towards the future--it's just about career preparation and those kinds of things--and students really, in my experience, really have a hard time seeing these four, five, six years as "this is your call. This is what you're called to do right now."

DD: That a great point. And so the introduction of vocation for the, for the here and now for them can be absolutely a revelation and that's, that's formation of character right there. Because vocation and virtue here go very much, very much hand in hand. But just to be aware to, to, to help introduce students to the idea that, you know what you're doing here is not just biding time. And it's not just putting yourself in a position to earn a six-figure salary when you get out. What you're doing here is something important that serves you incredibly, powerfully, in the rest of your life. And the rest of your life is now, right now.

CR: So this brings to mind questions that we've recently been part of, dealing with academic integrity and increased concern about academic integrity in the pandemic era with just so much teaching remotely and through technology and that kind of thing. And call me naïve, but I think this is part, this has to be part of our response to those concerns too: bringing students into that picture of what you're doing right now is your vocation. It's not just, you're not preparing for a future vocation, because if the message they're getting is "I'm just preparing for future vocation," well, then why not get the best grade by any means possible if that's really what I'm focused on?

So what questions do you hear from faculty about teaching--teaching so that students can bring these questions of faith and learning into more holistic understanding?

DD: Well, our faculty at Baylor are so talented and so eager to put these two seemingly disparate things together as they are generally presented, which is the work of the scholar and the work in the classroom is one thing and if it happens to be done by people of faith, well, that's, that's terrific, but what material difference does that make? And as we know, you know we've both been to graduate school—you more recently than I—but I'm not completely blurry about my imagination. And I went to a PhD program in the humanities and philosophy at St. Louis University, a Catholic university. But even there and even in the Philosophy program in a Catholic university, there's lots of ways in which the specialization of the discipline and the professionalization of the discipline can really very much exclude the idea that actually faith and reason are not merely compatible, but actually, you know, come together in this unity as we sort of seek understanding and truth. And so if that's my experience coming at this as a philosopher, who was trained at a Catholic university, can you imagine what it can be in other disciplines, particularly in settings that are not in, in faith-based education? And so lots of our, our colleagues come to Baylor with this deep desire to contribute to Baylor Christian identity. And we talk about faith and learning. But the, one of the most obvious questions is, "Tell me, tell me what this is about?" "Tell me what, what you mean by that, tell me what the work of the Institute of Faith and Learning is, tell me what this could mean in a class, tell me how this might have anything to do with the research that I conduct."

And so, you know, that sort of base, basic questions. The fundamental questions are they're the best ones that we get. And they're also, they're challenging. I mean if everyone knew how to do this, Christopher, we, we, we would've done it by now. So, you know, everyone has a particular take on how their own faith commitment might be expressed best as a teacher and a scholar. One of the things that Baylor does is it offers people the opportunity to not only explore that, but to put it into practice. And so that's a great thing that we have a place like Baylor. And I'm also grateful that we have a place like the Institute for Faith and Learning and other centers and institutes on campus that have this on their radar and help enable faculty to begin to think and, and put into practice what they've learned.

CR: You and I both know the work of David Smith, who writes about, about this so eloquently and also so practically about bringing, bringing us as he calls it teaching Christian-ly, which is just such a beautiful, beautiful way to describe this. And I think that it brings us on the, on the level of helping individual faculty and the individual faculty member might come to us and say, well, statistics is statistics or engineering says a bridge is a bridge. And I can tell you 12 different ways to make a bridge and not one of those ways is a Christian bridge or something like that. And those who are writing and thinking about this, like Smith, really help us to remember that the content is not the only thing that students learn. They also learn the how of it. They also learn the process of it as well. So does any, do any experiences of working with faculty come to mind for you about how you've worked through some of those questions with faculty?

DD: Absolutely. I mean, one of the, one of the phrases that I've borrowed from David Smith, and David has been a great friend of ours and IFL and he has been a part of our, our faculty retreat, our community of faculty retreat for number of years, is the idea of teaching for our Christian Imagination. Which is, which is to say in a slightly different way, what you were suggesting, which is the question of content, while important, is not the only thing there is. So faculty might think, well, you know what, what have Christians said about the various questions of content in a course and there have been lots of easy quick examples of, well, this is a Christian speaking into this discipline or this discipline, and then there's a Christian speaking into most—I haven't seen a discipline yet in which there's not an example of a Christian speaking in sort of explicitly Christian ways about, about how that, how that goes. Even in engineering and even in statistics, there are people who have sort of ask the more meta questions we

might say about, you know, what's, what's at stake here for the way in which Christians imagine the discipline. So that's very important.

I also think that this question of forming students in ways that engage their imagination from a faithful perspective about the questions in the course is, is, so, it's so important. So here's a, here's a, here's a good example. Ian Gravagne is a friend and a colleague who teaches in electrical engineering at Baylor. And in electrical engineering, he does he does stuff that I can't even explain, wouldn't even try. And that's why I'm a philosopher and he's an electrical engineer. But one of the things he does is he, he, he, he teaches courses, or did for a number of years, in solar energy. And there's, there's one where you'd say, what's the Christian construal of social--or solar energy? Solar energy. The theorems, the understanding, all the rest of the application is, is, is, it is what it is, you've learned at Baylor no differently than you learned at UT and A&M or Harvard or anywhere else. But he began to think about, "well, okay, That's the course that I'm teaching and that's my area of research. But what would it be to teach for a Christian imagination with respect to solar energy?" And it just occurred to him, um, "my goodness, think about the idea of stewardship." Think about the way in which the account of creation that we give and the recognition that the world, the world in which we live is a gift created, created by God. We have incredible stewardship over the resources that the, that the earth, the earth provides and that the heavens provide. And how do we begin to understand more than just the theory of solar energy, but how would Christians have a Christian imagination about the uses of solar energy with respect to that virtue of stewardship. And so he, he retooled is class in, in an incredible way. And I've always held that out as a, as a really important example of taking seriously the idea that the Christian imagination can help us think from any number of disciplines, not only in terms of content, and sometimes the content is going to be, is going to be just as it is as it always has been--no Christian construal of accounting per se, or solar energy--but, but the why and the how in the sort of larger context in which that body of inquiry is and its connectedness, out to other disciplines. You know, the one thing that he found is he needed to go read a lot about what stewardship was about. You know, what were the theological understandings and what stewardship implies. So that's one of the things about talking about faith and learning. It's, it's likely not going to keep you within your discipline.

CR: And isn't that, isn't that really something that's very much on the minds of a lot of higher education thinkers right now is interdisciplinarity?

DD: Absolutely. And I've always thought that, that Christian universities are the best places to pursue those kinds of things. Not because it's the avenue by which we would, we would get grant money or research pizzaz, but because it's really a part of the ontology about what a, a university, particularly a Christian university or a Christian construal of a University is, which is that you have various disciplines connected in a way in which they're ultimately trying to seek the same thing, but do it in, in different ways with different methods from different avenues. And that's one of the really exciting things. I know that you find in your work with faculty. But over the years, I just, that's been a incredible thrill to see people who come to us with is this real deep sense of need to contribute to the mission of this place and do so in a, in a fulsome way. And how they find out, well, look, this is bigger than I am, I'm going to have to ask some help for that and then they begin to find conversation partners and colleagues and ultimately, I think in many cases, friends across the University to pursue this work together--that's great.

CR: I really liked that example of stewardship because I think that for many folks and, and I was the same way and I think in some ways I'm still kind of working through it Is that when you, when you ask faculty to think about how faith and learning work together, it just seems like such a huge thing that

they've never been prepared to do. But when you, when you start with a virtue and I know that in some of your workshops--I'm, I'm the beneficiary of this—in some of your workshops, Character Across the Curriculum workshops, we just look at a list of virtues and go “Wait, so what jumps out to you? Like, what would you like your students to just be a little bit better at?” So a stewardship is one of those. And the one that I landed on was empathy. And I've done writing on this, how I've, how I've helped students through the historical study of the Christian heresies to develop a more empathetic reading of those who believe differently than, than, than we do. So you just start with something--concrete is not quite the right word--but just specific and kinda manageable, right?

D: Oh, that's the best advice I can give to anyone who wants to think about how, you know, the faith commitments they have might inform the practices of teaching which is start, do something, you know, don't, don't, don't try to get it all right on the on the first run. You never will. And we'll spend our entire lives trying to do that. But, but to have a little bit of modesty or humility about these things. And just to say like what, what small change could I make? Maybe it's a reading that evokes a different conversation about a question in the class. Maybe it's asking a series of questions that you, that you wouldn't have asked otherwise. I mean, I've found teaching in the last two semesters during a pandemic that it opens up really important questions for us to ask about the fragility of life, the way in which conceptions of the common good are more important now than ever, the way in which we understand suffering, genuine suffering, and the way in which we understand injustice and anger, righteous anger and unrest, and the need for, ultimately, well, first contrition and reconciliation, forgiveness and all the rest. There are all sorts of really important questions that...we could ask those questions in any number of settings--If I were a student at the University of Texas, if I had a really good teacher, I'd be asking those questions too. Christians ought to be asking those questions and they ought to be asking those questions from a Christian imagination. As we can, we ought to be trying to lead our students to, to better, better answers as to not only why those things are happening, but what we do in the midst of them. Such that they call us, call us forth not just out of the deliverances of our intellect, but actually putting our one foot in front of the other to try to do differently, to try to be, try to be the presence of Christ in the world. That's, that's what it boils down to. So there just are opportunities left and right, anytime, but I think especially now for, for all of us to think with a Christian imagination about educating students.

CR: As a historian myself, sometimes I've just been so, so shocked to go back and look at church periodicals or read sermon manuscripts that are, that are, that are taking place in 1916, 1917, and there's like no mention of the war. And you just wonder like, there's so many missed opportunities to connect what people are really experiencing with what their faith should be, should be there for. And I worry that maybe we're going to look back at, at our teaching at this time too and go man, there were so many missed opportunities to, to really connect in very tangible ways--the things that we say we want students to take away from these four or five or six years that we have with them.

DD: Absolutely. And they need it. Where else are they having an opportunity to do this? I mean, we, we have we have such an opportunity in a university, in a Christian university, to shape the future and to do all we can to, to, to help our students grow in the virtues such that no matter, um, what, what, what trials, what joys they'll face, they'll meet them faithfully. And if, if they, if they can't find opportunities to think through and to talk and to listen and to do so with charity, with us, in these years, their chances to be able to do that later on, I think are, are more difficult.

CR: So we've talked a bit about the opportunities that the pandemic might present for our pedagogy. What kinds of challenges do you think faculty are having? Those who are, who are interested in

pursuing these faith and learning questions? Does, does the pandemic present, present challenges specifically for that?

D: I think it does. I do I think that teaching and learning, there is an experiential and embodied character to it that there, there -- certainly good things that can happen at a distance. And our technological advances in online education have made leaps and bounds in terms of just quality of the transmission, hearing one another's voice, seeing each other's face and all the rest. But I do think the lack of opportunity to gather in the ways in which we have always gathered just makes it a bit more difficult. I think, and I'm teaching two classes this semester face to face. You say face to face, its not really face to face. Its at best eyes to eyes.

CR: A recent conversation that I had, the, the faculty member kept using the phrase mask to mask. I thought at first it was a little jarring, but then I thought that that's much more accurate.

DD: Yeah. I nearly said something like that, then I decided to go a different way. But I do think that's, that's created, I think for some of us and some of our students, there's, even though some of us have been in class, there's still been a distance. And so, I don't, I'm one who believes that the context and the feel in a classroom is, is really important and there's certainly ways in which we, we are adapting and can adapt, but it's just not the same. And so I think that's a general sort of thing. But I think it, it goes, it goes to just one of the difficulties of teaching.

I think one of the things I did think about as an opportunity just in the last few days is the students who hang in here with us this semester, if we can't help enlarge their moral vocabulary about what perseverance is and how they're being schooled for perseverance, we've missed an opportunity there because the students that are with us who are, who are really doing extraordinary things to just keep putting their feet one after another, making progress, are learning. They're learning what perseverance is probably in stronger ways than they've ever been asked to.

CR: Yeah. One of the realities of a university like Baylor with a explicit Christian mission is the fact that not all of the student body is Christian. And you've, you've come from a Catholic institutions. And many of the Catholic institutions have a reputation for really navigating that well, but maybe less so with our Protestant institutions. So I wonder how you, how you advise faculty to think about that dynamic. For something that I recently wrote, I had to look up our, our student population by, by religious affiliation. I think it was like 93% are some kind of orthodox, orthodox -- little o, orthodox version of Christianity. So that's, I mean, that's close to 10 percent of the students in our class are not going to identify as Christian, and that matters.

DD: It does. Well. My thinking on this, my thinking on this is pretty, pretty straightforward. I do think that the first thing we owe to every one of the students who takes a class at Baylor is the best of what we are. And by that I mean, if there is content in a class or an approach in a class that, that needs to be, or we want to be the expression of the Christian intellectual tradition, reflection, we need to offer the very best of whatever that is. We really do owe that to all of our students because they've come to Baylor. Our mission is as it is and we want to offer the, the best account that we possibly can and that's going to require us to know our stuff.

I would also say that, again, the virtues here of being charity led, which goes beyond just sort of civil discourse. I think that's a very important thing and I'm all for it, but I think Christian universities ought to be ultimately led by love and that means you sort of you love one another, you love your students. You

care, you care about them. You want them to do well, you also love the discipline and you care about it. And you want to offer that up, and you can do that in the right way. It seems to me and the people who I've known who've tried in my own experience, that has a way of sort of lifting up what's common and, and, and not highlighting differences in a way in which it will really gesture towards discord. Okay, so there's a way in which I think you can teach a number of classes in sort of controversial ways that are jolting, that sort of wake students up and shake them out of their dogmatic slumbers and all the rest. And I think there's a role for that if it's always done, in the end. Charitably.

I'm a great admirer of the work of Saint Thomas Aquinas. And you think about the way in which Aquinas modeled intellectual inquiry in the Summa Theologica. Well, he laid out the most important questions. He tried to answer them in a compelling, clear, detailed way, but what else did he do? He looked at the strongest possible objections to every one of the questions that looked up. So that's part of teaching with charity--being open to articulate the ways in which this view over here would come into contact with the Christian tradition on this particular question. But not to be, not to be blind to that, not to be blind to the implications, but to engage that perspective as well as you can and actually give that as fulsome and clear an expression as you possibly could. So again, I think when you, when you do that ultimately with a love of students, with a love of the subject matter and with a deep desire to, to seek the truth together, recognizing that everybody in the classroom ultimately seeks the truth. And we all want everyone to love wisdom. We all want them to be philosophers, whether or not they end up majoring in philosophy. Those kinds of things seem to me to, to be very important, engaging all of our students no matter what their perspectives are.

CR: Well great. We're just about out of time here. So Darin Davis, I want to thank you for the work that you do at the Institute for Faith and Learning and for the broader academy, just helping us think through these things and really being a thought leader on these important issues. And thank you, of course, for talking with us and sharing your insights and this platform too.

DD: Christopher, thanks so much for having me. It's great to be with you today. Thank you.