

I often get questions from people who have been in a career for a while who want to know if it is feasible for them to go back to school and get a PhD in my field of New Testament/Early Christianity. In most cases it is not feasible at all, simply because it is way too complicated and involved — and takes way more time than one would think. Here is what I said about what being a graduate student working toward a PhD involves, from my perspective as one who teaches these students.

I teach one undergraduate and one graduate course a semester. Teaching undergraduates is a passion of mine. I love doing it. These are nineteen year olds who are inquisitive, interested, and interesting. I enjoy lecturing to a crowd like that, figuring out what can make complicated material intriguing and compelling, keeping them attentive, helping them understand such important topics. Some of my colleagues find teaching undergraduates a real chore; others find it very difficult. I find it to be a pleasure and it comes naturally to me. So I'm very lucky about that.

What is really HARD, though I enjoy it intensely too, is teaching graduate students. The graduate student seminar is a very focused experience. A seminar usually last three hours (meeting once a week) and it involves an intense pouring over texts in the original ancient languages (Greek, for my classes), discussion of heavy-hitting scholarship, critique of students' work, and so on.

But even though it's hard, it is very rewarding. And there is nothing - absolutely nothing - that can substitute for graduate teaching to expand a scholars' own horizons and competencies. The students are mature men and women who are devoting their lives to scholarship who already know a lot and are hungry to devour more and more knowledge. They are interested in things that I may or may not know a lot about already (usually not, as it turns out). And so I'm forced to learn a lot.

Here are two recent examples. Today one of my students defended her dissertation. It was about views of martyrdom in three Christian texts/authors of the second to third centuries, Clement of Alexandria (a proto-orthodox church father of the end of the second century), the Coptic Apocalypse of Peter, and the Testimony of Truth (the latter two are "Gnostic" texts from Nag Hammadi). The defense was before five of us professors on her committee; we grilled her for an hour and a half about it, then voted whether to pass her. (We did.)

The second was a master's student who needed to talk today about his MA thesis. It is on the view of demons in the neo-Platonic philosopher Plotinus as it relates to views of demons in other pagan texts and in Christian Platonists of the second and third Christian centuries.

Directing work like this can't help but...

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