

After Twenty Years

Personal Reflections

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I am honored to offer some reflections in this twentieth anniversary year of *Philosophia Christi*. To take a different angle from what the other contributors have written, I thought it might be fitting to recount a bit of my own story—of how I stumbled onto philosophy and how I came into the warm company of the Evangelical Philosophical Society and into my involvement with the journal. The Lord used both the fellowship of EPS members as well as *Philosophia Christi* to encourage my faith, deepen my thinking, and inspire me in my calling.

Surprising Beginnings: Stumbling onto Philosophy

In the fall of 1985, when I began my master of divinity studies at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School in Deerfield, Illinois, I happened to take a philosophy elective that first term. At that time, the reason for doing so seemed a mere fluke: it was because the required Church History I class with Dr. John Woodbridge was completely full (second- and third-year seminarians had priority), and I was determined to take *his* church history classes. So I looked to see what electives might prove interesting and be a reasonable fit for my schedule.

The course was Religious Epistemology, taught by that eccentric and lovable Stuart Hackett—a rigorous philosopher who spoke in Germanic-style and Germanic-length sentences, which required careful attention to follow carefully-reasoned arguments. His class supplied me with important philosophical tools and set me on my way to pursuing a master of arts in philosophy of religion in addition to the master of divinity degree I began. (Another “little happening” for me was my brother and fellow-seminarian Vic’s suggestion to take on an MA in addition to an MDiv, which I could still finish in three years, though taking on the additional task of writing a thesis—which I decided to pursue.)

I took many courses from Hackett as well as from his colleague in the Philosophy of Religion department, William Lane Craig. It was a time of deep learning for me, though I felt like such a novice. I was exploring concepts and

categories and a language that were foreign to me—ontological arguments, modal logic, Reformed epistemology, supererogation, the Euthyphro argument, divine command theory, *esse est percipi*, the covering law model, and epiphenomenalism. During this time, I read and often reread several times over many portions of Frederick Copleston's magisterial *History of Philosophy*. Gradually, I came to better understand things philosophical. As hoped, I was able to successfully complete both masters' degrees in three years.

As I have often reflected on these circumstances and the choice to take this philosophy elective during that first seminary term, I am reminded of a portion in a prayer of Scottish theologian John Baillie, who spoke of "all those little happenings which, though appearing at the time no more than chance, yet afterwards appear to me as part of Thy gracious plans for the education of my soul."¹

Shepherding Days: My Schenectady Years and Early EPS Involvement

Before arriving at Trinity, I had been planning on overseas ministry, and that pursuit remained unchanged after graduation in 1988. After marrying my wonderful wife Jacqueline at the end of that year, I joined the pastoral staff at the historic First Presbyterian Church. (The remains of Jonathan Edwards the Younger were interred in the church cemetery.) I served there from July 1989 to December 1995.

Though my wife and I were still planning to pursue ministry overseas, this was an era of new realizations. During that time, the value of my philosophical education became increasingly clear to me—as I engaged in discipleship training, teaching, preaching, and conversation. Early on I was asked to become a volunteer staff worker for InterVarsity Christian Fellowship at Union College, where Edwards the Younger had been the second president. During this time, I began presenting regularly at the Philomathean ("Love of Learning") Society on campus—a debating society mainly comprised of atheists and skeptics who thought belief in God was for the weak-minded. One of the Christian students on campus, William Weir, told me about this society and arranged through a Philomathean friend for me to speak there. This became a tradition every term during the remainder of my time in New York. I spoke on God's existence or the problem of evil, and any student who desired had two minutes for rebuttal, to which I gave my own two-minute counter-rebuttals. It was a time of enjoyable, lively engagement, and I brought First Presbyterian Church members along to help show how the Christian faith is better able to answer challenging philosophical and existential questions than alternative faiths and philosophies.

1. John Baillie, *A Diary of Private Prayer* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1949), 47.

During this time on church staff, I attended the EPS annual meetings (1993 in McLean, Virginia, and 1995 in Philadelphia). I even presented, with some trepidation, a paper at one of them. The beneficent and gracious influence of EPS camaraderie both nourished my soul and stimulated my mind. In the years to come, that society played an increasingly pivotal role in my life.

While on church staff, I invited William Lane Craig (then a visiting scholar at the University of Louvain in Belgium) to come to our area for a series of lectures and debates I had organized. One of these debates was with the noted metaphysician Richard Taylor, which was held at Union College.² Another debate took place in First Presbyterian Church's beautiful sanctuary, and Craig's debate opponent was Union College philosophy professor, Felmon Davis—a debate, I just discovered, that is available online in video form.³ And a third debate (actually, a dialogue) I organized took place at Siena College in Loudonville, New York. Craig engaged the Jewish New Testament scholar Peter Zaas on the topic, "Who Was Jesus? A Jewish-Christian Discussion."

After Bill's exchange with Zaas, Bill and I were debriefing about how Bill's visit had gone. He did several things to encourage me forward. First, he suggested that I consider pursuing a PhD in philosophy. Second, he suggested that I try to turn this discussion with Zaas into a book. (Eventually, this project came to be published as *Who Was Jesus? A Jewish-Christian Dialogue*.⁴) As something of a cascade effect, Bill later asked me to edit another debate book, *Will the Real Jesus Please Stand Up?* and coedit a third, *Jesus' Resurrection: Fact or Figment?*⁵ Finally, Bill was aware that I had been trying to keep up my academic work and writing while on church staff. During this visit, Bill Craig reviewed, offered comments on, and encouraged me to publish an essay I had written about the doctrine of creation out of nothing. This too was eventually published in *Trinity Journal*. As it turned out, this led to our teaming up on a chapter on Mormonism's doctrine of creation *ex materia*

2. Craig and Taylor, "Is the Basis for Morality Natural or Supernatural? The Craig-Taylor Debate." The transcript of the debate is available at Craig's *Reasonable Faith* website: <https://www.reasonablefaith.org/media/debates/is-the-basis-of-morality-natural-or-supernatural-the-craig-taylor-debate>.

3. Craig and Davis, "William Lane Craig vs. Felmon Davis: Christianity vs. Secular Humanism," First Presbyterian Church, Schenectady, New York, 1993, accessed June 12, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pDaEcRvDEIk>.

4. Paul Copan and Craig A. Evans, eds., *Who Was Jesus? A Jewish-Christian Dialogue* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2001).

5. Paul Copan, ed., *Will the Real Jesus Please Stand Up? A Debate Between William Lane Craig and John Dominic Crossan* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1998); Paul Copan and Ronald K. Tacelli, eds., *Jesus' Resurrection: Fact or Figment?* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2000).

(creation as mere reorganization),⁶ which later evolved into a monograph on the much neglected doctrine of creation out of nothing.⁷

The following year, I invited another EPS friend, J. P. Moreland, to come to our area to give a series of public lectures as well as to teach and preach on God and naturalism as well as on Christianity and science. While visiting in our home, JP likewise encouraged me to apply to PhD programs in philosophy. I thought such a pursuit would be wonderful, but with a wife and four children four and under, this seemed unrealistic. But shortly after JP's visit, my wife and I were discussing what our next steps might be beyond Schenectady. She spontaneously asked, "What about getting a PhD?" I replied, "That's it!" Now, she had been thinking "doctorate in theology" whereas I was thinking "doctorate in philosophy." At any rate, she expressed this idea as a genuine option—indeed, she would be utterly supportive of the entire PhD endeavor—and so I jumped on this opportunity.

I applied to various universities. JP—along with Bill Craig and Stu Hackett—wrote references for me, and I elected to go to Marquette University in Milwaukee. My wife and I—with our four very young children—headed to the Midwest, and I began my PhD studies in January 1995—thanks to the strong encouragement of these Christian philosophers.

Stepping Forward: Involvement in Reinventing and Restructuring the EPS

I completed my coursework as well as passed my language exams and my oral defense in philosophy of religion before the Marquette philosophy faculty. Then in June of 1998 I began work with Ravi Zacharias International Ministries in Norcross, Georgia, as a staff apologist, during which time I passed my comprehensive exams and then wrote and eventually defended my dissertation on the moral argument in the winter of 2000. Since then, I have realized the great benefit having a PhD in philosophy proves to be. Not only was my course of study a stretching and enjoyable learning experience; it provided a strategic, credible platform for the gospel in an array of settings—speaking on university campuses, writing, collaborating with fellow believers as well as non-Christian scholars in the academic guild, writing, and teaching.

After an EPS hiatus due to my PhD program, I resumed attending the EPS annual meetings in 1998, which I haven't missed since. In addition, given my new position as a staff apologist, I was involved in organizing a strategic

6. Paul Copan and William Lane Craig, "Craftsman or Creator? An Examination of the Mormon Doctrine of Creation and a Defense of *Creatio ex Nihilo*," in *The New Mormon Challenge*, ed. Francis J. Beckwith, Carl Mosser, and Paul Owen (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2002), 95–152.

7. Paul Copan and William Lane Craig, *Creation out of Nothing: A Biblical, Philosophical, and Scientific Explanation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2004).

meeting of EPS philosophers at the Simpsonwood retreat center just up the road in Norcross, Georgia. We gathered in order to restructure and reinvigorate the EPS and to launch our journal, *Philosophia Christi*. (JP tells this part of the story in his article in this issue.) We were brimming with excitement about the possibilities while recognizing the immense work that lay ahead.

It was during that meeting that the philosophers in attendance encouraged me to consider nomination for the EPS executive committee, to which I agreed. I was privileged to serve on the committee for four years (1998–2002) with Bill Craig at the helm. Then the next three years I was pleased to serve as his vice president. During this time, the EPS was launching new initiatives. All of us were promoting *Philosophia Christi* journal subscriptions, and we were on the lookout to enlist high-profile philosophers to contribute to it, which proved a great success. I also was honored to contribute to in its earliest days—an exchange with atheist philosopher Michael Martin on the moral argument—and since then.

During our annual meetings, we began hosting an EPS reception for inspiration and encouragement to both seasoned and aspiring philosophers—and to any who were interested in the work of the EPS. During these receptions, we would hear a brief report on the state of the EPS, listen to an inspiring message from a fellow philosopher, and give heed to the president's charge about how we could be involved in God's kingdom through philosophy and apologetics. Less than ten years ago, Jonathan Loose (then at Heythrop College, London) was a first-time attendee at our reception; he told me how unusual the spirit and mission of the EPS were and how encouraging it was to his faith and calling. Jon has regularly attended since then and is now an EPS executive committee member—and I have since enjoyed collaboration with him on various projects. Truly, these receptions are a reminder to me of the immense support I had received over the years as an aspiring philosopher, and now I had the opportunity to encourage others who were just starting out in the society.

Beyond this, the EPS began to spearhead lively panel discussions at the American Academy of Religion and Society of Biblical Literature meetings that immediately followed its own annual meetings. Philosophers of note spoke at our annual meetings. Over the years, these have included Paul Moser, Michael Bergmann, Nicholas Wolterstorff, David Oderberg, Alvin Plantinga, Richard Swinburne, and Stephen Evans. Then in 2004, the EPS launched its first annual national apologetics conference (“Set Forth Your Case”) in the Atlanta area, which was hugely successful. The tradition of this post-EPS annual meeting gathering that typically draws well over a thousand lay people continues under the capable leadership of Craig Hazen, who so skillfully edited *Philosophia Christi* for its first twenty years.

Standing on Giants' Shoulders: Looking Back, Looking Forward

After Bill Craig fulfilled his terms as EPS president, both he and JP asked me to consider seriously their nomination to step into this vacancy. Given Bill's herculean efforts and tireless dedication, I viewed occupying this position as both momentous and daunting. In the end, I agreed to it and was voted in.

At the reception of the EPS annual meeting in November 2005, I received the presidential baton from Bill. During my "inaugural" speech, I told the attendees:

Exactly ten years ago, I was on the pastoral staff of a church. I couldn't have imagined this day back then. And I would not be here today had it not been for the strong encouragement and inspiration of Bill and JP—not to mention Doug Geivett, Gary Habermas, David K. Clark, and other EPS philosophers who have encouraged my spirit and offered guidance through their example and scholarship along the way. Indeed, my lines have fallen in pleasant places, and these friends have been beneficent and gracious influences in my life.

As I reflect on this journey, I see the many signs of God's kindness and leading in my life. I recognize the power of Christian community and the beauty of Spirit-inspired philosophizing—loving wisdom and thinking hard about things—to the glory of God and the building up of Christ's church. The EPS truly is a nurturing community that takes seriously the life of the mind, prayer, the Great Commission, and the task of discipleship. Through the EPS, many opportunities to collaborate and spearhead book projects came my way. I also view the mentorship and encouragement of more senior members of the EPS as a charge that has been passed on to me: as others have helped me forward, I want to assist others who want to use their calling to scholarship, teaching, and writing to further God's kingdom and to equip God's people.

Just as Gandalf counseled Elrond about the hobbits' friendship as they embarked on a daunting journey—though ignorant of the dangers—that same kind of "trust" of "friendship" within the EPS ring of fellowship has had a staying power that has bound us together more than "great wisdom."⁸ And that bond has yielded remarkable collaborative ventures in writing over the years. More recently, I collaborated in editing *The Naturalness of Belief: New Essays on Theism's Rationality* (Lexington Books) with Charles Taliaferro, who had served on the EPS executive committee; this is a book to which at least nine active EPS members contributed. Another recent work is *The Blackwell Companion to Substance Dualism* coedited by three EPS members: Angus Menuge, J. P. Moreland, and Jonathan Loose. Such volumes—as well

8. Gandalf tells Elrond that he should "trust rather to their friendship than to great wisdom." See J. R. R. Tolkien's *Fellowship of the Ring* (2.3).

as many special issues of *Philosophia Christi*—are a natural overflow of the good-hearted, collegial spirit found within the EPS.

I am confident that just as God influenced my thinking and shaped my life through the EPS and through the many scholarly contributions found within *Philosophia Christi*, he will continue to do so in the lives of successive generations of EPS members and journal subscribers as they earnestly follow their calling and seek to bring the blessing of the knowledge of Christ and the great things of the gospel to the academy, the church, and society.⁹

9. Thanks to Betty Talbert for her comments on an earlier draft of this paper. I am grateful to Angus Menuge for his comments as well as his good reminder of Gandalf's counsel.