

**SPIRITUALITY IN THE CLASSROOM:
TWO INTEGRATION EXERCISES
FOR MANAGEMENT (AND OTHER) CLASSES**

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Is a student's spiritual life divorced from the classroom? Most CBFA members would say that it is not – that God does, and should, inform everything a student does, including his or her academic work. However in practice, even at Christian universities, students often find their spiritual life primarily addressed in activities outside the classroom: chapel, accountability groups, and the like. Even if this is not so, many students find it difficult to see the direct connections between their spiritual lives and what they are learning in the classroom.

Several years ago, I was challenged to search for systematic ways to create spiritual-academic connections in the classroom. In this [interactive pedagogical session](#) I will demonstrate, with the help of the audience, two exercises that were created to enhance students' awareness of the spiritual dimensions in the management subject material. After the demonstration, we will discuss student reactions to these assignments and personal observations.

I use these spiritual-academic integration exercises in management classes but the exercises can be adapted for other disciplines as well.

EXERCISE 1: THE POWER OF ASSUMPTIONS

Suggested classes: Introduction to Management, Introduction to Business, Organizational Behavior, Business Ethics, any class where competing values is discussed.

Purpose: Assumptions are the key to an individual's value system, his or her spiritual walk, and his or her actions towards employers, colleagues and employees (Rokeach, 1975; Zigarelli, 2004). The purpose of this exercise is to show the connections between assumptions, values, attitudes and actions and to demonstrate experientially how different assumptions lead to different actions. The student comes to understand how important his and other people's assumptions are and how they affect work and personal relationships and actions.

Exercise:

Step 1: The professor defines the following terms and explains how they interact with each other. The definitions below are adapted from the *Dictionary of Psychology* (Chaplin, 1985) and are compatible with most textbooks.

Assumptions: Presuppositions about life, the universe, and everything. These are largely unconscious and taken for granted. Very stable but can be changed by questioning.

Values: Global concepts that guide judgment, basic convictions about what the person sees as right or desirable. Values are the screen through which we make decisions. They are usually based on assumptions and are largely unconscious. Stable but can be changed by questioning.

Beliefs: Consciously tested and deliberately accepted resolutions of questions about life, the universe, and everything.

Attitudes: Decisions about how to respond to a *particular* object, person or event.

Attitudes are influenced by assumptions, values, beliefs, taste and so forth.

Actions: What a person actually does

Step Two: The professor presents two completely different assumptions about success.

Assumption I: Success is the “American Dream.”

Question: If you would ask most people what “success” was, what would they say?

The answer is invariably some variation on the following: A good job, plenty of money, a comfortable life, a nice family, a nice place to live – e.g. some version of “the American Dream.”

Assumption II: The Puritan view of success

Question: What would a Puritan say “success” was?

Answer: The Puritan view is that a successful person is one who glorifies God and treats his or her neighbor with altruistic (*agape*) love.

Background on the Puritans

In the 16th and 17th century¹, a loosely affiliated group of people in Britain objected to the corruption and nepotism of the Anglican church. They called themselves Nonconformists but were interested in personal and liturgical reformation (purification) and so the press gave them the derisive name “Puritans” (Packer 1990) in much the same way that our contemporary press calls conservative Christians names such as “right wing fundamentalists.” However, over time the Nonconformist movement developed a distinct attitude towards life (Davies, 1948). That attitude was to, as far as possible, follow Jesus’ command to “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and your neighbor as yourself” (Luke 10:27, NAS)

As the Nonconformist movement became established, the British Industrial Revolution began to develop². The British Industrial Revolution was one of the most radical frame-breaking changes in the history of commerce. Triggered by technological advances such as the spinning jenny, the steam engine, and the application of science to agriculture, and facilitated by the development of an effective central bank and credit system (Kreis, 2001) the British Industrial Revolution changed commerce from an agrarian community affair, participated in between neighbors, to an impersonal, complex, national and international trade system (V. Smith, 1997) driven by the invisible hand of the market (A. Smith, [1776] 1937). The resulting changes shook society to its very core.

¹ Packer (1990) sets the age of English Puritanism between the years 1550 and 1750.

² Roughly the beginning of the 18th century. There was significant overlap in the two movements (V. Smith, 1997).

Many of the Puritans became businessmen. Because they refused to sign an oath making the King the head of the Church, certain professions were closed to them. They could not join the government, the judicial system, teach in any school, or preach in any national church. That left farming and business. The Puritans, eager to bring every aspect of life under the control of God created a theology of business based on Scripture and the writings of Luther and Calvin. They focused on four major principles (Ryken, 1986).

- 1) Any honest work can be sacred, a sacrament to God.
- 2) God calls each Christian to a personal vocation.
- 3) The reason to work is to glorify God and to show love to one's neighbor. Making a living is incidental and under God's control.
- 4) Work should be diligent, but the job should not become an idol.

Step 3: Exercise

Break students into groups and tell them the following: "Pretend that you are a customer service representative for a major financial brokerage firm. Three people report to you."

1. Begin with each assumption about success.
2. What are likely values and attitudes towards clients and towards employees that this assumption would confirm? Why?
3. Based on those values and attitudes, what are likely actions a person would display to clients? To employees? Why?

Comments:

After this exercise students see clearly that different assumptions lead to different actions. To a surprising degree, this is a new thought to them and one that will be useful to them as they move into jobs. After this exercise, they are more careful to specify what they, and other people, assume.

As an additional benefit, students learn that there has been a group of people who strongly integrated the Scripture into their business life. After this exercise, some of my students became earnest readers of Puritan literature.

EXERCISE 2: SOUL PROJECT

This exercise is powerful. The premise of this exercise is simple: assign students to pray for a major assignment and the workgroup for that assignment and report what they learned. The reactions to this exercise, however, are very complex. I have received a maelstrom of response from students and even other professors.

When I created this exercise for my classrooms I was fortunate to have a wise mentor who was a veteran in this type of exercise. Without his advice, given from deep experience, I would have made some significant mistakes.

Suggested class: I used this assignment in Strategic Management, however it can be used in any class that has group assignments or major projects.

Purpose: Workgroups are becoming increasingly important in businesses that are driven by the need for innovation (Kleiner, 2005; Nadler & Tushman, 1996). Many businesses ask that business students be taught how to work in groups. Accordingly, group assignments are given in many business classes. In this class, I assign workgroups to do a semester long simulation.

This exercise asks students to pray about two things in a systematic way: 1) a large assignment and 2) their attitude towards their assigned workgroup.

There are multiple purposes for this assignment:

- Students are reminded that even the details of their academic work are important to God.
- Students learn to pray about major assignments.
- Students see that God takes care of them in academic as well as non-academic life. To God, all of life is “spiritual.”
- Students grow in their prayer and spiritual life.
- God sometimes intervenes in otherwise disastrous work groups.
- Students fulfill Christ’s command to pray for each other.

Exercise: (The full text of the assignment is in Appendix A)

Instructions to Students:

A. Spend 15 minutes in the presence of the Holy talking with God about how you doing the Capstone simulation can glorify Him. The simulation is a training in analyzing complex situations, making decisions about those situations, and coping with the results of the decisions. There are also all kinds of group dynamics involved in the work for this assignment.

B. Spend another 15 minutes talking with God about how you can maintain integrity as a member of a work group in this class. In group work, what you do - or don’t do - impacts other people significantly. It can make the semester great or awful for them. How does God want you to interact with the work your group has to do, and with the individual members of your team? Ask Him how you can bring glory to Him as you work with others.

C. Hand in a 1-2 page reaction paper discussing this assignment (typed, double-spaced, well-written). Please write only what you are comfortable sharing.

At the beginning of the paper state the amount of time you spent in prayer on each part, i.e. “I spent ___ minutes praying about how my doing the Capstone simulation can bring God glory. I spent ___ minutes praying about my integrity as a group member.”

Comments:

At the suggestion of my mentor, the instructions for the assignment discuss some of the common spiritual situations students run into and gives them instructions on how to handle them. This turned out to be a great help for the students because it defused some major frustration. Four situations tend to arise as students pray for an extended period.

1. *Feelings.* Students feel the assignment is not spontaneous. Some of them feel bored, frustrated, or are plagued with a wandering mind. I instruct them to not be concerned with how they are feeling but to accept these things as what our loving Heavenly Father chooses to give at this time. When we ask for bread, God does not give a stone (Matt. 7: 9-11). Students are instructed to place these things in His hands and continue praying.
2. *God doesn't say anything.* Students (like most of us) want a sign or a response from God. A spiritual exercise isn't "spiritual" unless there is something exciting to report. Our sovereign God does not always give us these things. Students need to understand that this is fine – that God chooses when to talk to us, and it is not a measure of our spiritual life when He decides to be silent.
3. *Extended prayer brings up tangential issues* in the life of the student. I suggest that students bring these issues to the Cross, leave them there, and quietly return to the subject.
4. *Occasionally a student is so stressed, tired, or fractured that he or she is unable to even pray.* I instruct that student to relax, leave the situation in the hands of God, and spend the required time reading Scripture. This will not affect their grade.

Questions that come up about this assignment:

Q: Should a professor give academic credit for students praying?

A: Our goal as Christian professors is to help the students see that God is involved in every part of their life, including their academic life. I see no problem with giving students academic credit for praying about their academic tasks – in fact I think it sends a strong message. Having said that, this assignment is one of many and is worth about 15% of what a test is worth.

Q: How do students react to this assignment?

A:

Pro: This assignment received the most enthusiastic responses of any assignment I have ever given. Over 90% of the students really appreciate it. Students relate how, for the first time ever, they actually prayed about a major project in class. They relate how this assignment helped them have their best semester ever. It helps groups develop cohesiveness like they had never before seen. It helped a group decide how to deal lovingly and appropriately with a social loafer.

Comments: “I have never had a professor do this. It was very special. Thank you.” “God did miraculous things as I prayed. This was the best.” “I learned to pray about big projects for the rest of my life.”

Con: However, this assignment has also received some of the nastiest responses I have ever received for an assignment. The negative responses seem to come from two places.

1. *Social loafers.* This assignment tends to make students who have been social loafers in other classes, feel guilty about exploiting their friends. Many of them repent and become better group members. However, a few of them become angry and project their guilt on the professor.

2. *Students who are in rebellion against God or are in a sin they do not want to repent of.* These students resent being asked to be in contact with God for even this limited time. Some resent the necessity to focus on others. Their resentment and rebellion often spill out towards the professor.

In at least two semesters, to my knowledge, the nasty reactions carried into the teaching reviews. Therefore, if your dean is one of those that does not understand the limitations of teaching reviews, you may want to think twice about adding this assignment. If he or she does understand and supports what you are doing, this assignment can be a powerful force for good.

This assignment can also be a great encouragement for the professor. The strongest, most cohesive, and most fun classes I ever had were those that did this assignment. But in several of those strong and cohesive classes, there were students that took out their anger and guilt on me. Spiritual warfare is a very real thing. So if you give this assignment, pray for your class and for yourself.

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APPENDIX A: TEXT OF THE SOUL PROJECT AS HANDED OUT TO STUDENTS

BUSN 470: Soul project:

Exercise: Open the Soul to God Regarding the Capstone Simulation Assignment

Find a quiet place away from people and distractions.

A. Spend 15 minutes in the presence of the Holy talking with God about how you doing the Capstone simulation this semester can glorify Him. The simulation is a training in analyzing complex situations, making decisions about those situations, and coping with the results of the decisions. There are also all kinds of group dynamics involved.

God is in control of all things. It may be that He has something particular for you to understand because of Capstone, or maybe He just wants you to learn a necessary skill. Maybe He has something else in mind entirely. Open your soul to God and ask Him.

B. Spend another 15 minutes talking with God about how you can maintain integrity as a member of a work group in this class. In group work, what you do - or don't do - impacts other people significantly. It can make the semester great or awful for them. How does God want you to interact with the work your group has to do, and with the individual members of your team? Ask Him how you can bring glory to Him as you work with others.

C. Hand in a 1-2 page reaction paper discussing this assignment (typed, double-spaced, well-written). Please write only what you are comfortable sharing.

At the beginning of the paper state the amount of time you spent in prayer on each part, i.e. "I spent ___minutes praying about how my doing the Capstone simulation can bring God glory. I spent ___ minutes praying about my integrity as a group member."

NOTE: Please remember this is an exercise in opening your soul to God about daily tasks. It may not feel natural or spontaneous, particularly since you have to watch the clock. Don't worry about it. As with any exercise, it takes discipline and time for it to flow. Also, as you pray you might find yourself feeling bored, frustrated, or be plagued with a wandering mind. God may not choose to give you a clear answer to the questions you ask. Again, don't be concerned, but accept this as what your loving Heavenly Father chooses to give you at this time. Place these things in His hands, then quietly move back to the subject.

Once in a great while, a person finds him or herself so fractured or stressed that he is unable to even pray. If this happens to you, relax. Leave the situation in the hands of God Who knows all things, and spend the required time reading Scripture. Report this in your paper. Under those circumstances, if you spend the required time in this way it will not affect your grade.

God be with you and with your spirit.

Grading criteria: You will be graded on how completely and fully you followed the instructions.