


2019

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Jeffery S. Gates

Cedarville University, jeffgates@cedarville.edu

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Recommended Citation

Gates, Jeffery S., "The Y-Factor: Christian Librarians or Librarian Christians?" (2019). *Library Faculty Publications*. 81.
https://digitalcommons.cedarville.edu/library_publications/81

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The Y-Factor

Christian Librarians or Librarian Christians?



**Jeff Gates, Information Services Librarian,
Cedarville University**

Welcome to the resurrection of The Y-Factor column. The editorial team of *The Christian Librarian* brings this column out of retirement with this article. Since most library schools are primarily secular, they do not usually deal with important questions about academic librarianship from a Christian perspective. Rather than giving comprehensive answers, The Y-Factor is a place to provoke thinking and reflection about important questions that readers of this journal may ask.

Allow me to begin this awakened column appropriately with some questions. As a child, were you very curious? Did you ask questions? Although I seldom expressed my inquisitiveness to others, I had lots of questions. Why do people eat chocolate ice cream when they could have vanilla (my favorite)? How come the shipwrecked castaways could never get off that deserted island on my preferred TV show? What is the reason that some of my classmates at school are so smart and others so dull? Why doesn't everyone like me? Why do people hurt other people? How come people die? And eventually – why am I here? Questions like these led many of us to Jesus Christ (they did me), who profoundly impacted our curiosity and gave it focus. As I grew in my relationship with Jesus, my questions related more and more to Him. Questions, such as how does my job relate to Him? and, how does He relate to my career?, became more prominent. Consequently, after I became an academic librarian, I naturally wondered how it related to Christ. Instead of only asking why students like such weird colors for group study rooms or how other academic librarians do not see what is so obvious to me, I also asked questions like: What does the Bible say about these students? How does academic librarianship relate to Christian higher education? and How can I better serve God and others through academic librarianship?

An important question that readers of this column may ask concerns the phrase “Christian librarian.” Is there such a thing as a Christian librarian? If so, what does

it mean to be one and what does it look like? How do they act and what do they do – and not do? Furthermore, how does this differ from being a librarian without that description?

Instead of calling ourselves Christian librarians, I suggest that “librarian Christians” is more appropriate. Let me explain why. In both phrases, the first word describes the second word. The second word is primary, and the first word is secondary. For example, a blue green crayon is primarily a green crayon with a trace of blue. In the case of people, the second word of a two-word description represents who they are and the first word what they do. With this in mind, the term Christian librarians actually defines librarians who practice Christianity. Librarian is their identity, and Christian is their role. However, readers of this article think of themselves primarily as Christians who practice the role of librarian. Instead of being librarians who happen to be Christians, they are Christians who happen to be librarians. Therefore, librarian Christians is more suitable.

The Apostle Paul addressed both the identity and major roles of the Ephesian Christians (not Christian Ephesians) in his letter to them. Their identity was Christian; their roles were wives or husbands, children or parents, and servants or masters. It is easy for us to think that these roles make up our identity. To the question, who are you?, I might answer, husband, father, academic librarian. However, these are just temporary roles. They are not really who I am. When my life on earth ends, I will no longer carry out the roles of husband and father (Matthew 22:30) – although I fully expect to continue my relationship with my wife and children throughout eternity. If I change jobs, retire, or die, I will no longer perform the role of academic librarian – although I do like the purported quote from Jorge Luis Borges, “I have always imagined that Paradise will be a kind of library.”

My dad had a saying, that is, “marriage only works for Christians.” This is not to say that non-Christians never have good marriages, but it emphasizes that roles are expressions of identities. Obviously, there are specific things I can do to have a good marriage, but the best thing I can do is to be a good Christian. The same could be said of a librarian Christian. If I were to display the fruit of the Spirit (Galatians 5:22-23) in my role as an academic librarian, the rest would be easy. This is similar to the character ethics of David (Psalm 37:4 “Delight yourself in the Lord, and He will give you the desires of your heart”) and Augustine (“Love God and do what you will”). However, lest character ethics turns into situation ethics, Paul also gave guidelines for the expression of Christianity in some roles.

Although we do not have inspired text about the expression of Christianity in the role of academic librarian, Paul’s admonition to the Ephesian Christians to express Christianity in their roles as husbands, wives, parents, children, masters, and servants

may serve as a model for the outworking of Christianity in academic librarianship. In light of the relationship between the first and last parts of Paul's letter to the Ephesians, how should we Christians fulfill our role as academic librarians? While master-servant roles seem to be the most similar to our current working environment, the expression of Christianity in all the roles that Paul addressed involve authority structure, accountability, mutual submission, respect, and diligence before God. This is hardly a job description, but it helps us define our role as academic librarians.

For example, librarian Christians in human resources management recognize their accountability to God and the library director or academic dean for helping those they manage to work together to accomplish the library mission. They seek to do this through diligent listening, analysis, encouragement, and action. Similarly, librarian Christians who manage information resources are cognizant of their responsibility before God and the library dean or director to conscientiously work with the faculty and library staff to select, provide access to, and promote information resources to faculty members and students. This often involves careful use of library space and preservation of those resources. In their role of librarian, Christians who provide reference services, research appointments, and library instruction diligently seek to build relationships of mutual submission and respect with faculty members and students. They also endeavor to stay current in academic librarianship and the disciplines of those whom they serve, and seek to improve their one-on-one and group presentations. In all this, they acknowledge their duty to submit their librarian plans and practices to the library dean, director, or appointed supervisor and ultimately to God.

Paul gave us some principles that we can apply to the role of academic librarian. Too bad he or one of the other biblical authors did not give us a model to apply to academic libraries run by Christians! †

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jeff Gates is Information Services Librarian at Cedarville University. He can be contacted at jeffgates@cedarville.edu.
