

# **Gerry Clarkson: Education should teach wisdom in using information**

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Gerry Clarkson is the interim dean of the School of Science and Mathematics and chair of the department of physical sciences at [Howard Payne University](#), having served that institution nearly 30 years. He is a member of Coggin Avenue Baptist Church in Brownwood. From deep in the heart of one Texan, he shares his background and thoughts on Christian higher education. To suggest a Baptist General Convention of Texas-affiliated leader to be featured in this column, or to apply to be featured yourself, [click here](#).

## **Background**

### **Where else have you served, and what were your positions there?**

I was an assistant professor of geophysics at Western Michigan University for six years.

### **Where did you grow up?**

I grew up in Elkview, W.Va. For everyone not from that part of West Virginia, Elkview is a small community about 15 miles away from the capital city of Charleston.

### **How did you come to faith in Christ?**

It was a process, really. I grew up being sent to church and from about age

9 to 17. I attended the little Methodist church, which literally was at the end of the block we lived on. Through the teaching I received there and my personal study, I gradually came to understand who I was and my need for a Savior. This culminated one night when, at age 17, I confessed my sin and asked Jesus to be my Savior.

I made that decision public a few weeks later at a basketball tournament I was participating in run by a Christian organization. I don't know if I ever knew who was sponsoring that tournament, but I am grateful to whoever it was.

A few weeks later, I was baptized in that little Methodist church. Since then, I have had the opportunity to grow in my faith and understanding of what it means to have Jesus as Lord, as well as Savior, through the influence of many fellow believers who have helped me mature in the faith.

## **Where were you educated, and what degrees did you receive?**

I received my Ph.D. and Master of Science degree in geophysics from New Mexico Institute of Mining and Technology in Socorro, N.M., a Bachelor of Arts degree in physics from Oberlin College in Oberlin, Ohio, and an Associate in Arts degree in physics from Potomac State College in Keyser, W.Va.

## **About education**

### **Why do you feel called into education?**

When students ask me a question like this, I usually tell them it's because I couldn't decide what I wanted to be when I grew up, so I just kept going to school. Although, after more than 56 years of school, you would think I would come to some decision. Honestly though, like many things in my life,

it has been a process.

In graduate school, I was fortunate to have the opportunity to experience both the scientific research environment and the teaching environment. In my first full-time academic position, it became clear to me I enjoyed most the classroom teaching side of university academics, and that is what I have been able to focus on at Howard Payne University.

In retrospect, I can look back and see God orchestrating events in my life to lead me to where I needed to be.

## **How does being a Christian influence your work in education?**

First of all, it keeps me mindful that all truth is God's truth, whether I am teaching my Sunday school class or a science class.

Being a Christian shapes the way I look at the world and how it works. It also reminds me, whether in the classroom or in meetings or in our faculty/staff/student pick-up basketball games, I should be trying to live a life that reflects well on my Savior.

## **What is your favorite aspect of education? Why?**

Administrative paperwork. Not really.

Actually, I enjoy most working with students, helping them understand basic principles and being able to apply them to different situations.

## **What one aspect of education gives you the greatest joy?**

Seeing the light bulb go on about an idea, principle, concept or philosophy. And along with this, seeing a student grow toward realizing their potential as they reach graduation.

## **What is your favorite class to teach? Why?**

That's kind of like asking which is your favorite child. I have several I especially enjoy for different reasons.

I just taught a new engineering science course in ethics last spring. That was fun for several reasons. It was a new course, so that made it particularly interesting for me as I prepared for teaching it. Getting students to think about how ethical principles, in general, and Christian principles, in particular, would apply to their future occupations made it an important challenge to me.

Another course I have taught a few times is the Integration of Science and Christian Theology. I have enjoyed this one in large part because it is an area of great personal interest to me and one I wish more people would take some interest in.

Overall, I guess my favorite would be the two semesters of University Physics. I like the opportunity to introduce students to the basic physical principles behind the way the world has been designed to work. It is important for them to become familiar with these principles and how they apply to their various fields of study in science and engineering.

## **Name the three most significant challenges and/or influences facing education.**

Instead of three, let me address one I think is of major significance. I think the biggest challenge for higher education is what it always has been—maintaining the proper focus for what education should be.

Although some basic knowledge acquisition is extremely important for education, I believe education should be primarily about the training and growth of the individual and the ability to think about all aspects of life. This should include not only practical aspects of knowledge application, but

also ethical and moral considerations, as well.

The growth of technology will continue to impact education, and not necessarily for the better if we are not mindful of what education is for. It is possible to obtain enormous amounts of information quickly these days, but just having information at our fingertips is not enough. Education should bring wisdom in the use of that information.

Just because we know how to do something does not mean we should. This can be overlooked easily in the scientific realm.

The foremost role of education should be to train students to think. This should include the ability to think, not only about what can be done, but also about what ought to be done. Given societal pressures on education, this focus may be difficult to maintain if we are not intentional about how we go about the educational process.

## **About Baptists**

### **Why are you Baptist?**

I am a Baptist primarily because of Coggin Avenue Baptist Church. My background has been diverse. I grew up in a conservative little Methodist church, and in our early adult years, my wife and I were involved with nondenominational fellowships.

When we moved to Brownwood for my teaching at HPU, we considered a few churches and decided on Coggin Avenue. We were in agreement with fundamental Baptist doctrines and felt led to Coggin Avenue Baptist Church, where we have been members for more than 29 years.

**What        are        the        key        issues        facing**

## **Baptists—denominationally and/or congregationally?**

The same issues facing anyone who wants to be a faithful Christ-follower, I think. How do we maintain a consistent, faithful witness to the world in a culture—in the United States, at least—increasingly uninterested in or hostile to the gospel and biblical principles.

“Speaking the truth in love” sounds a bit cliché, but I think it does describe the task we find ourselves in at this moment.

## **About Gerry**

### **Who were/are your mentors, and how did/do they influence you?**

My parents really were my first mentors. In particular, they taught me about perseverance and loyalty. If something was worthwhile, then stick with it, even when it was difficult.

I had several important people who influenced me in graduate school. My thesis adviser taught me many things, but probably the most significant thing was about working in collaboration with others. Two other significant people were one of my graduate geophysics professors, who also taught a home Bible study I attended, and an older friend who was a physics researcher at the university. This friend modeled to me being a scientist serious about one's faith.

In addition, there have been numerous pastors and church leaders throughout my life who have helped me mature in my faith by guiding me in the utilization of my gifts to serve the church.

### **Other than the Bible, name some of your favorite**

## **books or authors, and explain why.**

C.S. Lewis, Os Guinness, J.R.R. Tolkien and lots of the good, ol' science fiction writers like Robert Heinlein, Isaac Asimov, Kurt Vonnegut and others.

I like the imagination of science fiction. A good science fiction writer can raise very profound questions in ways that, because they are removed from the familiar, invite you to think about issues from a different perspective.

As for Tolkien, how does anyone not like *The Lord of the Rings*? Lewis and Guinness have been particularly important in helping me formulate a Christian worldview. *The Call* by Guinness was my one assigned reading for our two homeschooled daughters in their teenage years.

## **What is your favorite Bible verse or passage? Why?**

Another question hard to narrow down. There are many.

Recently, the one I have been contemplating the most is Psalm 24:1—"The earth is the Lord's, and all it contains, the world, and those who dwell in it."

I have been drawn to this verse by more than one source discussing its connection to a famous quote from Abraham Kuyper's inaugural oration at the 1880 opening of the Free University at Amsterdam: "Oh, not a single bit of our world of thought can be hermetically sealed off from the rest; and there is not a square inch in the whole domain of our human existence over which Christ, who is Sovereign over *all*, does not cry: 'Mine!'"

I love the emphasis on the fact that the Christian life should not consist of compartmentalized pieces but should be an integrated whole, a reminder certainly applicable to academics.

## **Who is your favorite Bible character, other than Jesus? Why?**

Another singular choice? My initial response to a question like this is Shamgar, partly to try to be obscure, but also because I find these characters who are referred to by name, while we are only given a few words about them, to be fascinating.

Among more familiar people I would say the apostles John and Thomas. John, because his writings were particularly influential in my early growth in the faith. Thomas, because I admire his devotion to Jesus and his willingness to express his desire for evidence of the resurrection.

In addition, I had a friend whose wife was from India, and the church she grew up in traced its founding back to the ministry of Thomas, a story I found captivating in thinking about the growth of the early church.