Alumni
GORDON CONWELL

Alumni Spotlight: Benjamin L. White (MANT ’02)

Current title: Associate Professor of Religion and Chair of the Department of Philosophy and Religion at Clemson University

Family: Wife: Melissa Evans White, Child: Lucas White

Favorite professor: Dr. Catherine Kroeger & Dr. Bill Mounce

Favorite class: An independent Greek reading course with Dr. Catherine Kroeger, which required me to visit her at her home on Cape Cod several weekends one summer to discuss the finer points of Greek translation. My wife, Melissa, would join me. I enjoyed perusing her library (the only theological library on the Cape) and going to church with her and her husband.

Favorite memory: When I was thinking about the next steps after Gordon-Conwell, Dr. Ed Keazirian was kind enough to travel to Boston with me to visit Boston University where I met Dr. Joel Marcus, with whom I ended up studying. I ended up going to Duke Divinity School where Dr. Joel moved the following year. Dr. Ed’s kindness is so typical of the faculty at Gordon-Conwell.

Please tell us about your area of expertise and what courses you teach.

My area of expertise is Pauline Studies, broadly conceived. I’m not only interested in Paul as a historical figure, but in the reception of Paul in early Christianity. I teach courses in the New Testament, early Christian history, Koine Greek, and Greek and Roman religions.

How did God weave together your Gordon-Conwell education with other life events to bring you to where you are now?

The pastor of the church I grew up in was a Gordon-Conwell alumnus, and I very much respected both him and the academic reputation of the seminary. So, off I went to Massachusetts as a newlywed straight out of college. Gordon-Conwell’s emphasis on biblical languages and careful textual exegesis formed my future as a biblical scholar.

When I teach Greek to students at Clemson, I still use Dr. Bill Mounce’s *The Basics of Biblical Greek*. He was my Greek teacher at Gordon-Conwell and his love for the language oozes out on every page of his textbook. His legacy is long with me and my students. The strong foundation in biblical exegesis propelled me forward to a ThM degree at Duke, in the area of New Testament exegesis, where I wrote a thesis under the direction of the late, great Dr. Richard Hays.

From there I went to UNC-Chapel Hill for a PhD in Ancient Mediterranean Religions. It was on account of the time that I spent studying with Bart Ehrman at UNC that doors began to open for me on the job market, including at a major public research university like Clemson. But Gordon-Conwell set the foundation for sure!

What are some things you love about your roles as a faculty member, professor and/or researcher?

I love to mentor students. Teaching is part of mentoring, but mentoring includes further investment in the lives of your students, whether that's coffee outings, showing up to watch them speak at their local churches or campus ministries, or participating in their ordination services. I also love to write. Now that I'm the chair of my department, I have less time to mentor students and write. But that time will come again.

What are the current challenges of teaching in higher education, being a faculty member in general, and in your context specifically?

The current challenge for teaching the Bible in the university setting is getting students to hang in there with long texts. This generation of young adults does a lot of reading, but it's mostly short form and digital in nature. They don't have the attention span of previous generations. The Bible, of course, is a long book. I don't assign a textbook in my New Testament course because I'm interested in students actually reading the New Testament itself. But that's hard work for them, to hang in there for twenty-one chapters of the Gospel of John, or sixteen chapters of Romans. I ban electronics from my classroom and ask students to try to envision a semester in which sitting under an oak tree for an hour and reading the Bible in preparation for class is the norm. That's really hard for them to do without being distracted by their phones.

What has been Gordon-Conwell's biggest influence in your current role, or the way you engage in your role?

I very much appreciated the fact that Gordon-Conwell emphasized the Biblical languages. The fact that I had to take a Greek competency exam at the beginning of my Romans class with Bill Mounce, and a Hebrew exam at the beginning of my Historical Books class with Dr. Doug Stuart, introduced a kind of rigor that I have come to understand isn't normal for seminary education at present.

This was an important model for me as I came to Clemson, which doesn't have a classics department. Many of our Religious Studies majors are interested in seminary or

Christian ministry, so I created a two-semester Koine Greek sequence for them. I believe that I'm the first person to have ever formally taught Greek at Clemson in its over 125-year history. It's given our students a major leg up as they apply for seminary and enriched their reading of the Bible.

Also, since you teach at a secular institution—are there ways that your Gordon-Conwell education helped prepare you to work in that environment?

The transition from Gordon-Conwell to teaching the New Testament in a public university was a long and winding road, with more than a few twists and turns. It's certainly not the typical path of a seminarian, but I'm thankful that this is where I have landed. I did take a preaching class while at Gordon-Conwell with Dr. Haddon Robinson. I wasn't very good at it, but I do remember him saying that the minister should have the Bible in one hand and the newspaper in the other. While I'm no preacher, the public university affords me plenty of opportunities to stay in touch with what's happening out there among today's young people, from all walks of life. It makes me a more interesting teacher of the New Testament, for sure.

Do you have any publications or links you would like to share?

Counting Paul: Scientificity, Fuzzy Math, and Ideology in Pauline Studies.