

An Interview with Paul Williams

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“One of our biggest challenges as a Christian community,” says Paul Williams, Regent’s new David J. Brown Chair of Marketplace Theology and Leadership, “is to help people in the world imagine how things could be different.

“This requires that we see clearly how things are, that we know the Christian story, that we envision—on the basis of that story—how things could be other than they are, and that we can articulate this vision in a way that others can see it—not as a utopia but as a reality.”

“Our culture’s imagination has become sterile and grey. The language of modernity has inevitably been the language of impersonal economic forces, and modernity itself has landed us in a kind of cultural paralysis. People feel unhappy about the way things are, but they feel utterly helpless about changing them.”

Before moving to Vancouver to teach at Regent, Paul worked for a prominent think tank and was the chief economist of a multinational real estate investment bank and consultancy firm based in London. He advised Britain’s Labour Party—just prior to its election, numerous international banks and financial institutions, and the governments of Spain and Estonia. He says that when he was first invited to think about applying to teach at Regent College, where he had completed his MCS in Old Testament (concentrating on “hermeneutics for economists”), his initial answer was, simply, “No.”

As an undergraduate, Paul had studied politics, philosophy and economics at Oxford, where he says he “deliberately rejected” the Christian faith of his originally Brethren parents, who had been involved in the charismatic renewal of the late 1960s. “I lived the life of an agnostic intellectually,” says Paul, “and an atheist practically.”

One of his friends at Oxford—a seeker who knew of Paul’s Christian background—asked him to explain the Christian faith. “I rehearsed the Christian arguments for my friend,” says Paul, “and then I had a climbing accident during which I nearly drowned. My last year as an undergrad was different. I came back to personal faith.

“I began praying, and this was the beginning of my vocational conversion. I became convinced my faith had to impact all aspects of life, including my economic and philosophical training.”

Paul did graduate work in economics, married Sarah (Regent’s new Associate Professor of Church History, introduced in the last Regent World), and went into consulting. He says he saw how Christ was Lord of his life in his extensive involvement in their church, but he couldn’t see how his economic consulting was Christian: “I saw how my personal ethics and relationships could be Christian, but I didn’t think the content of my work was Christian, and I couldn’t see how to make it Christian.”

“God’s agenda was for me to find out what it meant to be a Christian economist,” says Paul. “Over time I realized how much integrative work was necessary and that I couldn’t do it while working full-time. Regent was the only place even thinking this way.”

After finishing at Regent, Paul was hired as an economic consultant in London. He says his colleagues had predicted that taking time out to study theology would destroy his career, “but I found I was actually promoted when I went back—and then headhunted. I am not saying this will always happen for everyone, but I am saying we shouldn’t always believe the stories our culture wants to tell us. What’s important is acting on what we believe God wants us to do.”

On his return to consulting, Paul says, “I tried to find a mode of discourse that was not holier-than-thou, or religious. I looked for schools of thought that were out there—but not in the mainstream—that were in line with Christian thought.

“I found there was an openness to talk about issues of justice, value, and meaning in society and the economy—not from everybody, but from most people. People were not particularly hostile, though I did meet with some opposition.”

Because he felt a call to be clearly engaged with the world, Paul says teaching at Regent initially appeared to be a wrong move: “It seemed to me that to withdraw from the frontline of mission into a potentially Christian ghetto was a retrograde step. However, through the process of considering what God might be saying, I had a growing conviction that I could be as much in the marketplace at Regent as I was when in consulting.”

In the classes Paul has been teaching at Regent since September, he has been providing his students with coffee and tea at break time. He says, “I genuinely believe, particularly in a class on the marketplace where we learn from one another—and I certainly learn from the students!—that rather than having everyone go to all corners of the college at break, it is good if we can actually get to know one another.”

Tamar Koleba, a Doctorate of Pharmacy student at UBC who has been auditing Paul’s Marketplace Ministry class, says, “A lot of us in the class were auditing or part-time Regent students, and we didn’t really know a lot of people. So the coffee and tea really helped people feel connected.”

Tamar says, “I didn’t really have a theology of work going in, but I felt I needed something. I really appreciated Paul’s experience in the workplace. It was good to hear examples of how he’d tried to integrate his faith—and the principles he’d been talking about in class—into his workplace, and even how, in retrospect, he would’ve done things differently.

“One example Paul gave was that of building community: he as boss encouraged people in his company to go out for lunch together—to make that the acceptable work culture. And if people were working late a lot, he’d go by and tell them, ‘I’m going home to my family now,’ or even, ‘You need to go home,’ so they weren’t putting work above their communities outside the workplace.”

“Paul has a lot of wisdom,” says Tamar. “Taking this class has changed my view of mission. It has broadened my idea of what the kingdom is. It is God’s—Christ’s—rule over everything, from creation to political systems. It’s not just about saving souls, but about caring for the environment and redeeming political systems. And so our work in a broader sense—caring for people’s health, in my case—is bringing in the kingdom as well.”

Paul says, “My vision for marketplace ministry at Regent is modeling and equipping students for engagement with the actual public arena of culture. This needs to be part of our corporate life, which must be, at its core, missional.”

Paul sees the facilitation of missional community as directly related to Regent’s strengths. He says, “Regent’s strengths are its core DNA. Regent is at its best when it is integrating Christian thinking and spirituality across a range of disciplines and traditions. Our strengths are integration and being transdenominational.

“In a fundamental sense, we cannot achieve learning in community, spiritual formation, and equipping for mission in the world and, at the same time, have the same mentality of individualism that is typical for academic culture. We may increasingly find secular university criteria—even theological schools’ criteria—coming into opposition with some of our core values.

“We need to continue grappling with how to be genuinely countercultural while staying in the culture. The base of evangelical culture is far away from the rest of culture in North America, but I feel enthusiasm and excitement as I look ahead. We are in a cultural moment that holds huge opportunity, and Regent is in an incredibly good position within the evangelical community to make a difference.”

Currently, Paul is teaching “Marketplace Ministries” and a seminar on “Christianity and Capitalism.” During Spring School, Paul will be teaching “Spirituality and Work,” which will explore the question: “If God dwells within us by the Holy Spirit, what difference does that make to our work?”