

Biblical Integration: Pitfalls and Promise

by Bryan Smith

Introduction: Most Christian educators readily agree that the Bible should play a central role in Christian education. Making that happen, however, is a daunting task—a task that has produced confusion and frustration for many. These dissatisfying results have led some Christians to abandon serious attempts at biblical integration in the classroom. Such decisions are not insignificant. If the Bible is not woven throughout the curriculum of a school, it is not a Christian school, even though it may have many Christians in it.

The Problem of Biblical Integration

Perhaps the best way to begin a discussion of biblical integration is to look at the confusion and frustration that have driven some Christians away from this task.

Evidence of the Problem

Alan Peshkin, a researcher at the University of Illinois, published in 1986 *God's Choice*, an ethnographic study of a large Christian school in the Midwest. He was a secular educator, and his un-Christian perspective comes through repeatedly in his book. However, the snapshots he assembles are telling and instructive. Here are a few that relate to the challenge of integrating faith and learning.

Peshkin learned that the high school math teacher was dedicated to his work but that he had difficulty with biblical integration: “After observing that mathematics ‘works’ because it is within God’s order and that some word problems can incorporate

biblical examples, the math teacher concludes there are few natural chances to integrate” (p. 115). The same teacher taught industrial arts. Peshkin noted that the teacher “had his boys memorize verses: ‘I told them, “Every time you read the Bible and learn Scripture, it will strengthen your faith. We’re going to strengthen your faith for 10 percent of your grade”’” (ibid.).

The literature teacher also had difficulty—though it appears from Peshkin’s treatment that she did not realize it. When asked how she integrated faith and learning, she said, “I like to teach all kinds of truths and philosophy and it all pretty much agrees with the Bible. If it doesn’t, I just don’t teach that part in literature” (p. 79).

Peshkin found the teachers’ attitude toward the academics to be puzzling. On the one hand, the school was an academic institution. But on the other hand, the teachers seemed to keep the academics at arm’s length. In particular he pointed to what one

teacher told him: “Even though our students may be Christians, they still have to know how to function in the world—to balance their checkbooks, talk to people, spend their money, vote, and drive a car. There’s lots of things they need to know, but those are secondary goals” (p. 79). Instead of bringing faith and learning together, their Christian belief system seemed to push learning to the margins of the school’s culture.

A Model to Help Explain: The Two-Story View

Peshkin’s evidence is anecdotal, but it is also typical. Many Christian educators struggle to show students how the Bible is relevant to the subjects they teach. And in failing to find significant connections, many decide to press either learning or the Bible to the margin of the educational experience. Why does this problem exist?

Many Christians have accepted—knowingly or unknowingly—a two-story view of reality. In the upper story, they have placed things that God is concerned to redeem: personal Bible study, prayer, evangelism, interpersonal relations, and church attendance. In the lower story, they have placed things that seem to be unredeemable: academics, “secular” careers, dealing with problems in culture, and taking care of one’s earthly possessions. The former things are worthy of a Christian’s undivided attention, but the latter are things that believers should hold at arm’s length.

So long as the Christian educator views reality in this way, he will never be able to integrate faith and learning in a profound and satisfying way because he has philosophically consigned the stuff of the academics to a lower story, a place where the Bible and the Christian religion does not go in any significant way. Such an educator can get the Bible into the child’s experience, but he cannot

show that the Bible is bound up with the academic matter itself. He cannot achieve profound and natural biblical integration because he is committed to a view of reality that amounts to biblical segregation.

Solving the Problem of Biblical Integration

At BJU Press, we attempt to solve the problem of biblical integration by rejecting the two-story view. We do this, in part, by defining biblical integration as *Christian worldview shaping*.

Behind our commitment to this definition are two assumptions. First, education of every kind is an endeavor shaped by worldviews. Education is more than data and evidence. A well-educated person not only knows facts but also understands his worldview and how it colors and focuses his view of facts. Second, the Christian belief system is a worldview, and it should be taught to students as the only way to see the world the way it was meant to be seen. The Bible deals with more than evangelism, church planting, and the development of godly character. The Bible is the story of God's mighty, saving deeds in a world of sin and death. This story gives the believer the ability to view all things from a Christian perspective—algebra and science no less than philosophy and theology. And if we are serious about Christian education, we must be serious about instilling into students a Christian perspective on all of life.

The Christian worldview that we at BJU Press give students is best expressed in the biblical story of *Creation, Fall, and Redemption*. By taking these three events/themes as the lenses through which to look at the academics, we are able to show that faith and learning are bound together and that the Christian

faith must govern the educational experience.

Creation

When we talk about the Creation component of a Christian worldview, we are especially concerned to answer the following question: What does Creation tell us about what it means to be human? To answer this question, we should go to the Bible's first passage. In the climactic portion of this passage (Gen. 1:26–28), we discover the Bible's answer to the two very important questions “Who am I?” and “Why am I here?”

Genesis 1:26a and 27 answer the question “Who am I?” by asserting that humans are beings made in the image of God. The implications of this truth are multitudinous. One very important implication for the educator concerns comprehension-based learning. Since one of the chief components of the image of God in man is mankind's reasoning capacity, educators should be committed to an educational methodology that encourages the child to think critically and creatively. It is very challenging to teach students to analyze, evaluate, and create. But this is a challenge worth taking. Students who are being led to analyze, evaluate, and create are being pressed to fulfill their unique niche in the world. They are learning to declare God's glory by being like Him, not only in their behavior but also in the life of the mind.

Genesis 1:26b and 28 answer the question “Why am I here?” God made humans to exercise good and wise dominion over His earth. Genesis 1:28 is sometimes called the Creation Mandate (because it is creation that man is mandated to manage), the Dominion Mandate (because God mandates that we exercise dominion over that creation), and the Cultural Mandate (because when we fulfill this mandate, culture

is what results). Each of these labels has merit, but we at BJU Press tend to use the phrase Creation Mandate.

Mankind has a unique, high calling in God's world. Humans alone declare God's glory by being like Him (image of God in man) and by living like Him (exercising dominion). This “dominion” can be defined as *maximizing the usefulness of God's world for the glory of God and for the benefit of our fellow humans*.

Viewed in this way, Genesis 1:28 becomes the key verse justifying all of the academics. Obviously, the structural disciplines are justified by this verse—you cannot maximize the usefulness of God's world without knowing about math, science, and grammar. But Genesis 1:28 also justifies the humane and creative disciplines. Genesis 2:18–25 indicates that dominion that properly declares His glory is not only useful; but also beautiful. It requires creativity and involves poetry and the arts. Christians should be committed to teaching the academics because these subjects are powerful tools for exercising good and wise dominion over God's world.

But Genesis 1:28 not only justifies the academics, it also guides us in how we teach the academics. Since God has called us to govern His world and not simply think about His world, we should show students how the academics relate to real life. We should focus on how each subject is useful in the disciplines and delights of life. Math and science should be taught using real data. Language arts should be related to journalism and the writing of hymns and gospel songs. And history should be taught so that students learn better how to judge their own times.

The biblical teaching on Creation reveals that all of life is meant to declare God's glory. It is not just our

prayers and hymns that declare God's glory; it is also our work. This includes all the things that the academics prepare our students for. Paul's grand statement in Romans 11:36 does not run around the academics—it goes directly through it: "For of him, and through him, and to him, are all things: to whom be glory for ever. Amen."

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Fall

God made us to glorify Himself by our taking our abilities (God-given and shaped by education) and working with the world in order to exercise good and wise dominion. But when our first parents fell into sin, this project became profoundly broken. The world "out there" is broken: it does not respond properly to our attempts at dominion. The world "in here" is broken too: we cannot bring ourselves to think and feel about God and His world as we were meant to. Christian education should teach students that their world is not just created; it is also fallen.

The brokenness of the natural order (the world "out there") is all around us, and it is part of every academic discipline. Because it is all we have known, it is easy for us to ignore it (or to assume that the natural order has always been as it is now). Because we desire to shelter our students from the tragedies of human existence, it is easy for us to skip those aspects of the academics that deal with God's curse on this world. But we must confront our students with the fact that this world is not as it should be. Part of being educated is knowing what is broken and knowing why it is broken. Life is tragic, and it is tragic

because God is speaking to us about our sin. Consider especially the following passages: Genesis 3:17–19, Ecclesiastes 1:13–18, and Romans 8:22.

The Fall has affected all aspects of our being (the world "in here"), including those that we are concerned with each day as educators. We tend to think of the Fall as affecting primarily our physical and volitional aspects. But the Fall has affected all aspects of our being, including those that we are concerned with each day as educators. We are used to thinking of our objectives for our students in terms of *cognition* (remembering → understanding → applying → analyzing → evaluating → creating) and *affection* (receiving → responding → valuing → organizing → characterizing). The Bible teaches that in the Fall, human cognition and affection became broken.

Consider the Fall's effects on cognition first. The Bible takes a remarkably dim view of the fallen mind. Verses like Jeremiah 17:9, Romans 3:11, and I Corinthians 2:14 teach that the fallen human mind cannot understand the world the way it was meant to be understood (see also Rom. 1:18–23 and Eph. 4:17–18).

Consider also what the Bible says about our affections. Proverbs 1:7 teaches that the cognitive ramifications of the Fall are what they are because of the affective ramifications of the Fall: "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge." Here we learn that proper affection ("fear") for God is the key to proper cognition ("knowledge") regarding His world. When mankind fell into sin, his ability to value God and his fellow humans as he was meant to was broken (cf. Gen. 3:12 and Mark 12:30–31). Ever after, humans have been incapable of valuing the most valuable Being in the universe. The story of

human culture has been the story of people attempting to fulfill the Creation Mandate because they love themselves supremely rather than God and their fellow humans.

Jeremiah 2:13 and 19 provide a poignant illustration of how broken affections produce broken (albeit ingenious) cognition. So long as we cannot bring ourselves to love God and others as we should, our view of the world will be badly impaired. We may be able to accomplish some very useful and impressive things, but in the grand scheme of things our cognition will be judged as foolishness. Our loves govern our thoughts. *We do what we do because we think the way we think, and we think the way we think because we love what we love.*

All of life has become broken because of our fall into sin. This brokenness applies no less to the academics and the life of the mind than to our wills and our bodies. Apart from some special, divine intervention, the project of education is shipwrecked.

Redemption

The Bible tells the story of God's mighty intervention in this fallen world. Students of Scripture have referred to this divine intervention as *redemption*. It is fitting term. Biblically, redemption is the work of restoring something to its rightful condition through the payment of a price. This is what God does throughout human history. In the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, He has paid the price for restoring this world to Himself. Throughout Scripture—and all of history—He is at work redeeming humans to their original stature (the image of God in man) and their original calling (the Creation Mandate). Some passages focus on the redemption of God's image (Rom. 8:29; 2 Cor. 3:18; Col. 3:10). Others focus on the redemption

of the work of dominion (Eph. 1:20–23; Heb. 2:5–16; Rev. 5:9–10).

Certainly this redemption is concerned with the forgiveness of sins. One reason God sent His Son was to secure forgiveness for His people (Matt. 1:21). But this is only one reason among many. The most comprehensive statement for the work of Christ found in Scripture is in 1 John 3:8: “For this purpose the Son of God was manifested, that he might destroy the works of the devil.” What all has the devil done? He has brought sin and rebellion into this world, but he has done much more too. He has convinced us to see this world as a secular place, a place under his dominion.

Jesus, however, came to destroy all that Satan has done. He came as the second Adam to accomplish the dominion that the first Adam ruined. Through His obedience to the Father, He has begun the reversal of the curse (1 Cor. 15:20–26; Col. 1:20), has been given dominion over all authorities and powers (Eph. 1:20–21), and has secured for His people the dominion that was planned for mankind from the beginning (Rev. 5:9–10).

How does Christ’s redemptive dominion relate to education? It relates in two broad ways. *First, Christ is King of the believer’s entire person*—his mind no less than his body and his emotions. Repeatedly, the New Testament asserts that salvation involves the mind. Paul tells the Romans to be delivered from worldliness through the “renewing of your mind” (Rom. 12:2). Similarly, he exhorts the Ephesians to holiness by being “renewed in the spirit of your mind” (Eph. 4:23). In his letter to the Colossians, Paul asserts that “all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge” are found in Jesus Christ (Col. 2:3). Later he reveals that growth in

sanctification is the progressive restoration of the image of God in the believer—a restoration that focuses on the believer’s being “renewed in knowledge” (Col. 3:10).

Some contend that these passages do not apply to knowledge in an educational sense, only to knowledge as it relates to doctrine and issues of Christian living. Here again the two-story view evidences itself. Is it not true that the foundations of Christian education are doctrinal and are concerned with issues of Christian living? Surely Paul intended for his readers to be “renewed in knowledge” regarding the Creation Mandate and how it applies to all aspects of the believer’s life. And surely Paul would have been opposed to the secular thinking that dominates many Christians—the thinking that science should be atheistic, that math is religiously neutral, that human history is unredeemable, and that literature cannot be put to Christian use. If Christ is king of the Christian educator’s mind, that educator will attempt to restore every subject to proper Christian understanding and use. Only then will he be fulfilling his obligation to lead his students to turn aside from worldliness and be transformed through the renewing of their minds (cf. Rom. 12:2).

A second way in which Christ’s redemptive dominion relates to education concerns the mission of the Christian church. *Christian evangelism and discipleship should awaken the nations to Christ’s kingship.* Jesus Christ is today “the prince [ruler] of the kings of the earth” (Rev. 1:5). And the marching orders for the church—expressed in the Great Commission of Matthew 28:18–20—are that we compel all the nations to become the disciples of Jesus Christ. What does it mean to teach a nation to follow Christ? It at least means that we are to be evangelizing and teaching not

simply future church members but also future participants in national life: governors, artists, educators, researchers, academicians, and tradesmen. This calling requires a vigorous approach to evangelism and rigorous approach to education.

We are to be engaged in the work of sanctifying our students’ minds by calling into question the history, science, math, and language arts thoughts are in rebellion to the knowledge of God.

How should we go about this discipleship? One of the best statements of the nature of Christian discipleship is given in 2 Corinthians 10:3–5. These verses—which basically summarize the job description of the apostle Paul—are filled with cognitive terms: “Casting down imaginations, and every high thing that exalteth itself against the knowledge of God, and bringing into captivity every thought to the obedience of Christ.” Paul’s job description is ours as well. We are to be engaged in the work of sanctifying our students’ minds by calling into question the history, science, math, and language arts thoughts are in rebellion to the knowledge of God. We are then to lead the students in replacing those problematic thoughts with thoughts that are obedient to Christ and His gospel.

One way we do this is by regularly showing students how affections drive cognition (cf. Prov. 1:7). Proper affection for the Lord makes possible proper cognition regarding His world. If we value God, we will

believe all that He has said. If we believe all that He has said, we will favor explanations and models that harmonize with Scripture, and we will reject explanations and models that cannot be harmonized with Scripture. In doing this, we do not worry that our approach is too dogmatic or intolerant. Being right with God is not a hindrance to understanding the world; it is instead the key prerequisite to all understanding. The world that we study belongs to God, not His enemies.

Another way we lead students to “take every thought captive” is by pressing them to consider the vocational implications of Mark 12:30–31. Christians learn for love. We pursue education so that we may be more skilled in loving our neighbors as ourselves. Our educational practice should be shaped by Christ’s exhortation in Matthew 5:16: “Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father which is in heaven.”

We should seek for our students positions in society that are like a city on a hill or like a lamp on a lampstand (cf. Matt. 5:14–15). These positions will allow our students’ good deeds to shine conspicuously to the glory of our Father in heaven. In order for believers to attain these positions, they must give themselves to serious preparation—preparation that begins in our elementary and secondary classrooms. What would the world of government, economics, statistical research, scientific research, and literary analysis and creativity look like when staffed and run by people who are motivated by love for God and love for their fellow humans? It would look like a world that is feeling more acutely the glories of God’s redemption.

Pursuing Christian Worldview Shaping

At this point it is appropriate to ask how we as educators should go about pursuing worldview shaping with students. In general, we pursue a Christian worldview by constantly asking ourselves how Creation, Fall, and Redemption relate to our academic subjects. More particularly, we may think of biblical integration in terms of the following levels.

Level 0: Relegating the Bible (No Integration)

This approach is common in many Christian schools and homes. Level 0 is characterized by relegating the Bible to devotionals, prayer requests, and out-of-class counsel. Even if biblical statements are made, there are no clear connections to the academic matter. The problem is not giving devotionals or taking prayer requests. The problem comes when the Bible is relegated to these activities. The Bible is relevant to the student’s personal life and struggles, but it is also relevant to the subject being studied. Good biblical integration has not happened until the student learns how the Bible is relevant to the subject at hand.

Level 1: Referencing the Bible

In Level 1 biblical integration, the Bible is referenced while the subject is being taught. There are two kinds of Level 1 integration. The first kind is characterized by *biblical analogies*. Here the educator notes that something in the academic matter is similar to something in biblical teaching. So in math the teacher may observe that a circle should remind the child of God’s unending love. And in science the teacher may point to insect metamorphosis as an illustration of a Christian’s growth in sanctification.

Biblical analogies can be useful, but they often end up being problematic for two main reasons. First, they usually do not fit well with the objectives of a course or a lesson. The analogy is parallel to the academic matter, not actually part of the academic matter. Second, they do not challenge the student to examine the subject from a Christian worldview. Analogies help a child remember biblical truth while studying science, history, or English. They do not help a child connect the subject to the Creation Mandate or how the subject may aid the child in living redemptively in a fallen world.

Another kind of Level 1 integration focuses on *biblical examples*. Here the teacher locates instances of the academic subject in the Bible. So a literature teacher may explain irony by showing it at work in the Joseph-Judah story (Gen. 42–44). A geometry teacher may point to evidence of π in the building of the temple (1 Kings 7:23). And a history teacher lecturing on the fall of Babylon may reference the Bible’s record of that event (Dan. 5).

Certainly, biblical examples fit naturally with academic objectives. After all, the biblical examples are examples of the discipline in Scripture. But here too there are problems. First, although history and language arts examples are abundant in Scripture, there are only a few math and science examples. The Bible does say much about philosophical foundations for math and science, but clear, specific instances of those subjects in the Bible are few and far between. Second, simply noting a biblical example does not shape a student’s worldview. It only demonstrates that the academic subject is relevant to Scripture. The Christian educator must go beyond demonstrating relevance to showing the student how the Bible rules over that subject.

Level 2: Responding with the Bible

On Level 2, the teacher shows the student how the Bible should guide him as he applies the academic discipline to real-life situations. The first kind of Level 2 focuses on *servicing through the academic discipline*. Here the teacher encourages the student to connect the academic matter to obeying the Creation Mandate and loving his neighbor as himself. So a math teacher may show how certain algebraic equations enable a person to make wise choices when purchasing a car or an appliance. A science teacher may apply knowledge of energy to ways of counteracting the urban heat island effect. A literature teacher may assign students to write poems that help people deal with the reality of death. And a history teacher may use patterns discernable in history to determine which public policies should be supported.

Another kind of Level 2 concerns *worshipping with the academic discipline*. On this level the teacher shows students how to use the academic matter to declare God's glory. The science teacher may talk about the amazing vastness and complexity of the heavens and the fact that God made the stars to declare His glory (Ps. 19). The math teacher may use the necessity and incomprehensibility of infinity to reflect on God's greatness. The language arts teacher may show students how skill in journaling can be used to keep a prayer and praise journal. And the history teacher may point out to students the marvelous providence of God displayed in the rise and fall of nations.

Both of these approaches relate directly to the academic objectives of the subjects, and both provide a vision of the academics from a Christian worldview. Nevertheless, some warnings are in order. First, the teacher should not expect to explicitly

reference the Creation Mandate or the glory of God every day. These emphases should support and color the entire course. They are always there, but they should be explicitly pointed out strategically (e.g., at the beginning of the course and at key moments in the course). Second, for Level 2 to be effective, the learning in the classroom must be real-life learning. Math and science must be taught using real data. And language arts and history must be applied to real situations. As students manage real funds, write real letters to the editor, and look through real telescopes at real stars, it becomes easy to convince them that the Creation Mandate and the glory of God are served by every academic discipline.

Level 3: Rebuilding with the Bible

The final level focuses on rebuilding the academics for the glory of God. As with the previous levels, Level 3 consists of two sub-levels. But the sub-levels of Level 3 are two steps in a single process. The first step is concerned with *questioning the assumptions*. Remembering the fallenness of the human mind, the teacher should call into question the secular assumptions of each subject.

In science the teacher should question the assumption of uniformitarianism. At several key points in earth science and biology, the teacher should ask, "How do we know that in this instance the present is the key to the past? Are there other explanations that will work? Does Scripture give any clue regarding the best explanation?" In language arts the teacher should call into question rejecting the objectivity of truth. He may ask, "Can truth be known objectively? What obstacles are there to such knowledge? Does the Bible have anything to say about human knowledge and the difficulty of knowing things as a human?" And in history

the teacher should question the idea that private life may be religious, but public life must be secular. He may say, "Where does this idea come from? Who benefits from such thinking? Who is harmed? What happens to a society that accepts this assumption uncritically?"

The second part of Level 3 is concerned with *rebuilding the discipline*. Here the educator attempts to sanctify the student's thinking within a particular academic sphere by encouraging him to rebuild the discipline from biblical presuppositions. So the science teacher will point to God's work in Creation and the Flood as two key moments when the history of the earth was not uniform. The teacher will also suggest ways in which a Christian pursuing a vocation in science can help to construct scientific models that are biblically faithful and scientifically responsible.

The language arts teacher should acknowledge that objective truth is in some way unattainable but in other ways available. Humans are finite and fallen, but God has revealed Himself in His Son and in the Bible. As believers submit themselves to God's revelation, they are able to see the world they way God intends for them to see it. Again, the teacher should point the student to consider whether God has called him to serve in a vocation in language arts.

And the history teacher should exhort students to consider passages like Psalm 2:10–12. All governmental officials are to submit themselves to the kingship of God's Son. Public life should be left secular only if that society wants to incur the judgment of God. Again, the teacher should show student ways in which a Christian may serve God in a vocation in history.

Conclusion: According to a thoroughly and explicitly Christian

worldview, the work of Christian education is the work of redeeming that which was originally good but that has fallen. No aspect of human culture is completely without value, for all of it ultimately comes from God. We therefore can sing with confidence, “This is my Father’s world” (cf. Ps. 24:1). And, therefore, when we educate, we may also be confident that we are not telling the students about somebody else’s world; we are telling them about their Father’s world. And since He has promised to give us that world as our inheritance (Matt. 5:5), we can also say that we are telling them about *their* world.

Taking this view does not imply that there are no problems in the world. There are problems everywhere—*there is no aspect of God’s world that has not been touched by the Fall*. Nevertheless, we study all aspects of

human culture because we see in that study the potential for redemption. As we view the academics through the lens of Scripture, we learn how we may be used to redeem those disciplines back to God.

This emphasis does not compel the believer to dilute the Christian mission. It rather should open our eyes to its amazing breadth and depth. Proclaiming the Gospel in all its fullness is a worldview endeavor. Christian evangelism should be *worldview confrontation*, and Christian discipleship should be *worldview transformation*. Viewing our calling in this way, we realize that as educators we are not somehow tangential to the work of the Great Commission (Matt. 28:18–20). Our role is a central role. We have been entrusted with the task of fashioning weapons for the great battle of

the ages. As the psalmist said long ago, young people are “arrows”: “As arrows are in the hand of a mighty man; so are children of the youth. Happy is the man that hath his quiver full of them: they shall not be ashamed, but they shall speak with the enemies in the gate” (Ps. 127:4–5). It is a war not of swords, spears, or guns; it is a battle of ideas. We are the heirs of an apostolic ministry, which Paul himself described as follows: “Though we walk in the flesh . . . casting down imaginations, and every high thing that exalteth itself against the knowledge of God, and bringing into captivity every thought to the obedience of Christ” (II Cor. 10:3–5).

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