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Approaches to Christian Education: From Elusive Towards a Larger and Deeper Approach¹



by Derek Schuurman

“Despite thirty years of talk about integration of faith and learning, and despite a half-dozen best-selling books that call on Christians to take intellectual life more seriously, the idea of Christian scholarship remains elusive for women and men who teach at and who lead Christian colleges and

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universities.”² This was the conclusion of Michael Hamilton, a participant in a 2001 forum for Chief Academic Officers sponsored by the Council for Christian Colleges and Universities (CCCU), on the state of Christian scholarship. It remains true that this is a topic of discussion in many Christian schools. The ongoing discussion is important since the very rationale for Christian education hinges on the premise that the Christian faith somehow makes a difference in education. However, it is not a trivial matter to transform education into a distinctively Christian education.

Not only has Christian education and scholarship been elusive, in many institutions it has been lost altogether. There are many examples of colleges that began with a mission to provide Christian education that have since lost their way. The book *The Dying of the Light* recounts numerous examples of institutions whose missions have drifted from their Christian roots.³ George Marsden, in his book *The Soul of the Christian University*, describes how some of America’s top schools such as Harvard and Yale were founded by Protestant Christians but somehow drifted into secular institutions. I attended a public university in Ontario which began as a Baptist institution and which is now entirely secular (with the exception of a seminary which remains). The coat of arms for the university still bears the Greek words from Colossians 1, “All things cohere in Christ,” a vestigial reminder of the university’s Christian roots.

Sincere and well-meaning Christians have taken very different approaches to Christian education and scholarship. Some of these differences can be traced to variations in Christian traditions. Generally there are four distinct Christian “streams” to which most Christian schools can trace their roots: the Catholic, Evangelical, Anabaptist, and Reformed streams. Each of these streams has historically taken a unique approach to engaging culture. However, within each of these streams, one can uncover further variations in Christian education and scholar-

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ship. What follows is an exploration of six different approaches to Christian education with examples from the discipline of computer science.

The first approach to Christian education suggests that one can divide life into secular and sacred domains. This approach is a type of *dualism*, which holds that the Bible deals in matters of faith or spiritual life whereas education deals with academic skills and reason. Such an approach to Christian education may simply mean adding chapel or a Bible class while other subjects remain unchanged. The premise is that Bible classes may deal in matters of faith but that other subjects like mathematics, physics, and art are subjects for which faith has no relevance. Indeed, for many people the term “Christian university” sounds like an oxymoron.⁴ Along these lines of thinking, a computer science class would deal in reason and logic and would not be informed by matters of faith. Christian schools built on this premise are more susceptible to various types of “mission drift” since they operate with minimal distinctions from a secular education.⁵

Dualistic thinking is sometimes nuanced by the notion of noetic depravity. In general, the noetic effects of sin refer to the ways in which sin distorts human thinking. The Swiss theologian Emil Brunner suggested that the noetic effects of sin vary by discipline, and he modeled his approach using a series of concentric circles. The outermost circle represented mathematics and science, whereas the innermost

circle represented the field of theology. He suggests that the “disturbance of rational knowledge by sin” will reach “its maximum in theology and its minimum in the exact sciences and zero in the sphere of formal [logic].”⁶ As one moves outward among the spheres, the “disturbance” due to sin decreases. Consequently he concludes that “it is meaningless to speak of ‘Christian Mathematics.’”⁷ This philosophy leads to hiring requirements that may vary by discipline. The hiring process for faculty in computer science may not include any expectations to articulate a Christian perspective, whereas the faculty in theology may be subject to different requirements. In essence, this approach is a denial of the Lordship of Jesus Christ over all areas of creation.

A second approach is to equate Christian education with “Christians educating.”⁸ In this case, Christian education is all about the Christian character of the professor, teacher, and student. To be sure, having teachers who are Christian provides opportunities for prayer, discipleship, and encouragement. Some parents may choose Christian education simply to be reassured that their child will be safely surrounded by other Christians. In this approach the relevance of faith to the actual subject matter itself is not recognized. To be sure, having Christian educators is a *necessary* condition for Christian education, but it is not a *sufficient* condition.

A third approach to Christian education is what I like to call the “discipline frosting” approach. The idea is that you teach a subject in the same way as one might in a secular environment, but you shoehorn something in to spiritualize the lesson. This has also been referred to as the “appliqué” model of faith and learning in which “some cursory mention of faith is applied to the surface but has no transforming power within curriculum, instruction, assessment, or the classroom ethos.”⁹ An example from computer science is to have students write a program to sort items from the smallest to the greatest and then connect this concept to the biblical notion that “the last shall be first.” Another trivial type of frosting is to simply tack prayer to the beginning of class and then carry on as if faith did not matter. An institution may require a Bible verse for each day’s lesson. A former instructor from such an institution has wryly suggested that the verse

“But my brother Esau is a hairy man while I have smooth skin” (Gen. 27:11b) might satisfy Christian education expectations “as long as it appears in the top corner of a lesson’s printed material.”¹⁰

A 1937 report on the idea of establishing a Christian college in Northwest Iowa explicitly set out to avoid this pitfall. This report included the following statement:

The aim of such a junior college is to give young people an education that is Christian, not merely in the sense that devotional exercises are appended to the ordinary work of the college, but in the larger and deeper sense that all the class work, all the students’ intellectual, emotional, and imaginative activities shall be permeated with the spirit and teaching of Christianity.¹¹

Such a “larger and deeper” approach is what we need to find. When faith is tacked on artificially, students are essentially left with the message that genuine Christian education is not possible.

A fourth approach to Christian education relies on *biblicism* to connect faith and the academic disciplines. In this approach, all truth is seen to come from the Bible, and so it is used like a textbook in all subjects. For example, it is suggested the number *pi* is found in 1 Kings 7:23, the motion of the sun in Psalm 19:5-6, the continental plates in Job 9:6, wireless telegraphy in Job 38:35, and atomic theory in Hebrews 11:3. The biologist Jean S. Morton writes, “Many scientific facts, which prove the infallibility of Scripture, are tucked away in its pages.”¹² Richard Mouw writes about a Bible institute which uses the motto “Our only textbook, the Bible.”¹³ If this was the purpose of Scripture, then one might expect that all the information Solomon collected about flowers, cedars, and animals (1 Kings 4:33) would have been included in Scripture as well. Instead, Paul writes that “All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting, and training in righteousness” (2 Timothy 3:16). He says nothing about its usefulness for geography, mathematics, or science. Although this approach is based on a high regard for Scripture, *biblicism* makes the mistake of using the Bible as if it were an academic textbook rather than seeing it as the trustworthy book of God’s salvation story. Another related pitfall is to look at Bible only as a source of morals.¹⁴ Such an approach might

highlight the fact that Daniel ate his vegetables in Babylon and so we ought to eat our vegetables too. This completely misses the point of the bigger historical-redemptive story that unfolds in the Bible. The Bible is not a collection of moral stories or a science textbook; instead, it needs to be interpreted within its own historical-cultural setting.¹⁵

A fifth approach to Christian scholarship looks for *analogical relationships* between academic subjects and God, or attributes of God. For example, one might suggest an analogy between God, whose “word sustains the universe,” and the programmer whose “words sustain his micro-universe.”¹⁶ Kevin Kelly, an editor for *Wired* magazine, has explored the use of a computational metaphor to describe God.¹⁷ Others have looked at the logical operations that can be performed in a computer and compared them to the attributes of God (eternal, omnipresent, and powerful).¹⁸ The theologian Vern Poythress has suggested that when one is speaking of “scientific law,” one is “speaking of God himself and his revelation through his governance of the world.”¹⁹ Although promoters of this approach are quick to point out the limits of analogical comparisons, it seems to blur the distinction between Creator and creation. Another concern is that it seeks to apply theological categories to all aspects of creation, areas that are diverse and distinct from the discipline of theology.

Related to analogical relationships is using a discipline as a source of practical analogies for matters of faith. This approach has been coined the *pranalogical* approach and involves “a practical application of an analogy gleaned from one’s discipline or life experience.”²⁰ An example is to connect mathematical understandings of infinity to theological notions of infinity. While carefully and appropriately chosen practical examples may be useful as sermon illustrations or in devotionals, there are certainly pitfalls. As the Christian mathematician Russell Howell observes, there is “a danger that accompanies all analogies. . . [.] it is easy to draw analogies that are careless and trite.”²¹ In the end, such an approach seeks to integrate faith by transposing concepts from a discipline into theological categories, rather than uncovering the faith and worldview aspects embedded within the discipline itself. In fact, this approach is related to dualism in that things must first be expressed in theological terms before they can be connected with faith. Things that fall outside of the

theological category cannot be connected to faith on their own. Although thoughtful practical analogies can be helpful, they do not necessarily provide a distinctly Christian perspective on a particular discipline.

Finally, a sixth approach is to sift all content through a biblical worldview, one shaped by the biblical narrative.²² A biblical worldview functions like a gear-box on a car. Just as a gear-box mediates between the engine and the tires, a biblical worldview “mediates between the power of the gospel and human life where that gospel must be brought to bear.”²³ This approach is a holistic one that provides an alternative to both dualism and biblicism and which takes the Bible’s message seriously for all of life. Neil Postman writes in *The End of Education* that educational ends need to be supplied by a grand narrative that “tells of origins and envisions a future . . . and, above all, gives a sense of continuity and purpose.”²⁴ The Bible provides us with that grand narrative and the framework of creation, fall and redemption. This approach holds in tension the goodness of creation as well as the potential idols and distortions that are embedded in the foundations of each discipline. Al Wolters writes, “It is the task of every educator to sift out the valuable insights of a tradition and make them fruitful for further progress as well as to expose and reject falsehood and illusion within that same tradition.”²⁵

At the center of the biblical story is Jesus Christ, through whom and for whom all things were made (Col. 1:16). In other words, “There is simply nothing humanly possible to study about the created realm that, in principle, leads us away from Jesus Christ.”²⁶ Jesus Christ has established his kingdom on earth and calls us to participate as agents of shalom.²⁷ In the words of Gordon Spykman, “Nothing matters but the kingdom, but because of the kingdom everything matters.”²⁸ This last approach seeks to acknowledge Christ as king over every square inch and our responsibility as kingdom citizens. This kingdom is diverse, but it also has a coherence as “all things hold together” in Christ (Col. 1:17). The core courses found in many Christian universities can serve to reinforce the notion of coherence and diversity in various aspects of creation, starting with Biblical and philosophical foundations and stretching across the curriculum from the arts and humanities to the social sciences

and natural sciences.

This is in stark contrast to highly specialized, technical schools, which train students in very narrow ways of thinking. Even in professional programs, a Christian education should strive to address the problem of tunnel vision by sketching the breadth of creation, the extent of sin, and the ways that redemption in Christ extends “far as the curse is found.” I recall being warned of developing myopic vision in my eyesight due to prolonged periods staring at screens and circuit boards. The advice I was given was to periodically take a break by looking out the window to allow my eyes to re-focus. This may also be good advice for teaching: as we zoom in on the minutiae of our disciplines, we can prevent educational myopia by periodically zooming out and placing what we study within a Christian framework and context.

I recognized in myself that my training as an engineer had left me somewhat myopic. But even something as technical as computers can be placed within the grand biblical narrative. To use this field as an illustration of this last approach, we begin by recognizing that computer technology is part of the latent potential in creation. Furthermore, the

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development of computer technology is an exciting cultural activity in which we respond to God by faithfully unfolding this aspect of creation. This includes the plethora of possibilities in computer hardware and software designs along with myriad creative applications opened up by this technology. Tragically, the fall into sin has brought distortions in the world of computing and software. Along with creational goodness we observe numerous examples of how computers are misdirected in ways that bring harm to the self, to the environment and to others. And, like anything else in creation, the human heart can be drawn to place its trust

in technology, which has the potential of becoming an idol. We are called to participate in Christ's kingdom by seeking normative ways of developing and applying computer technology. This process begins by recognizing the social, political, environmental, ethical, aesthetic and justice aspects that accompany our technology and directing them in ways that show love and care.²⁹ We need to move beyond the false dilemma of asking whether technology is good or bad and instead discern both its creational structure and its direction.³⁰ As students and teachers of computing, we are called to wrestle with what constitutes responsible computing and how to employ it in service of all kinds of flourishing. Ultimately we look forward to the time when all things, including technology, will be made new, but in the meantime we strive to make "some imperfect models of the perfect world to come."³¹

In order to maintain integrity and plausibility, a school that aims to be a Christian school must also be run in a way that is Christian. The administration, marketing, and finance departments must also be shaped by Christian thinking and practices. Furthermore, not only *what* we teach but the *way* we teach must be informed by Christian thinking. In their book *Teaching and Christian Practices*, David Smith and Jamie Smith observe that "our commitment to Christian scholarship has been significantly more articulate than our commitment to Christian pedagogy."³² In other words, Christian education is about more than just content: it also includes our pedagogical practices. However, one must discern which practices are appropriate in the sphere of education. The school is not a church (or a business or a family), and so one cannot necessarily import wholesale practices from other spheres into the classroom.³³ The same is true for technology in education; we must recognize that we shape our tools but that our tools also shape pedagogy as well as us and our students.³⁴ We need to recognize that "formation happens by means of practice"³⁵ and explore appropriate practices for the classroom. Some of these practices may be informed by general best teaching practices, such as those explored in books such as *What the Best College Teachers Do*.³⁶ However, we must always discern the worldview assumptions that inform a given pedagogy. Jamie Smith suggests the axiom that "behind ev-

ery constellation of educational practices is a set of assumptions about the nature of human persons."³⁷ Pedagogical approaches may also be informed by various philosophies such as positivism, progressivism, constructivism, or individualism.³⁸ Nevertheless, it is an example of common grace that Christian educators can still glean nifty ideas from their secular counterparts. As Augustine suggested, we ought to take the "treasures of the Egyptians" and wisely place them in service of God.

Lastly, Christian education is not just a cognitive or pedagogical exercise; it is also about spiritual formation. Søren Kierkegaard writes about the three wise men who consulted the scribes to find out where the Messiah was to be born: "Although the scribes could say where the Messiah should be born... they did not accompany the Wise Men to seek him." Kierkegaard observes that sadly, although "they studied the Scriptures like so many scholars, it did not make them move."³⁹ We need to recognize that students are not just "brains on a stick" (to borrow a phrase from Jamie Smith). We must recognize the importance of the heart and the need for spiritual formation. Spiritual formation can be defined as "The process of being conformed to the image of Christ for the sake of others."⁴⁰ This is something suggested in the mission statements of many Christian schools and colleges. In a spiritual formation project led by Syd Hielema at Redeemer University College, several ideas were explored to encourage spiritual formation in the classroom. Among these were ideas such as practicing hospitality in the classroom, encouraging virtues such as respect and wonder and a longing for shalom, and cultivating a collegial ethos among the faculty. Faculty were encouraged to make connections between different classes and co-curricular activities.⁴¹ Faculty and staff were encouraged to worship alongside students in chapel, to disciple them in learning communities, and to get to know them through judicious conversations outside the classroom. Faculty can also explore ways to encourage students to develop spiritual and intellectual disciplines and provide opportunities for students to experience reverence and awe.⁴² Faculty can serve to model epistemological humility in the face of perplexing issues as well as showing care and concern. I recall a friend who taught computer science

at a Christian college who shared with me that she used to make a practice of praying for the students in her department individually. To be sure, there is much more work to be done to explore and share best practices surrounding spiritual formation and Christian education.

Indeed, some of the aspects included in each of the six approaches are not necessarily mutually exclusive. For instance, a Christian education must presuppose that teachers themselves are Christians, and hiring practices ought to include questions that probe for evidence of a living Christian faith nourished by spiritual practices and participation in a local church. Christian education will likely include chapel and prayer, as well as striving for excellence. But, in my opinion, viewing everything through the lens of a Christian worldview nested in practices of spiritual formation is most faithful to the Scriptures. Although it is also not easy to work out in practice, it is a worthy ongoing goal to strive towards. Schools that are serious about Christian

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education need to dedicate *at least* as much time and resources to pursuing this as they do on buildings, technology and current teaching techniques. With effort, Christian education need not be elusive. However, without an intentional approach, Christian education is likely to be just religious frosting, or simply Christians educating, or worse yet, an expensive private education that is barely distinguishable from its secular counterparts.

Endnotes

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3. James Tunstead Burtchaell, *The Dying of the Light: The Disengagement of the Colleges and Universities from their Christian Churches* (Eerdmans, 1998).
4. Douglas V. Henry and Michael D. Beaty, *Christianity and the Soul of the University: Faith as a Foundation for Intellectual Community* (Baker Academic, 2006), 67.
5. This approach may be susceptible to a type of elitism, as Christian schools seek to find their distinctiveness in becoming exclusive private schools.
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7. *Ibid.*
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9. Patrick Allen and Kenneth Bradley, *Faith and Learning: A Guide for Faculty* (Abilene Christian University Press, 2014), 36.
10. *Ibid.*
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12. Jean S. Morton, *Science in the Bible* (Moody, 1978), 10.
13. Richard Mouw, *Called to the Life of the Mind: Some Advice for Evangelical Scholars* (Eerdmans, 2014), 20.
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17. Kevin Kelly, "How Computer Nerds Describe God," *Christianity Today*, November 2002.
18. Stoddard, *Computer Science*, 14.
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20. Russell W. Howell, "The Matter of Mathematics," *Perspectives on Science and Christian Faith* 67.2 (June 2015), 85.
21. *Ibid.*, 86.
22. Some good examples of such a framework can be found in *The Cross and Our Calling* (Redeemer University College) and in the *Educational Task and Framework* (Dordt College).

23. Albert M. Wolters, *Creation Regained*, Eerdmans, 2005, 142.
24. Neil Postman, *The End of Education*, Vintage, 1995, 5-6.
25. Wolters, *Creation Regained*, 95.
26. Mark Noll, *Jesus Christ and the Life of the Mind* (Eerdmans, 2013), 25.
27. Christian philosopher Nicholas Wolterstorff has written extensively on education and shalom. For example, see Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Educating for Shalom: Essays on Christian Higher Education* (Eerdmans, 2004).
28. Gordon Spykman, *Reformational Theology: A New Paradigm for Doing Dogmatics* (Eerdmans, 1992). 266.
29. For a good discussion of this see Stephen V. Monsma, *Responsible Technology* (Eerdmans, 1986).
30. Wolters, *Creation Regained*, 107.
31. Lewis Smedes, *My God and I* (Eerdmans, 2003), 59.
32. David I. Smith and James K.A. Smith, *Teaching and Christian Practices: Reshaping Faith and Learning* (Eerdmans, 2011), 3.
33. Jamie Smith compares various practices to “liturgies.” See James K.A. Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom* (Baker Academic, 2009), chapter 3.
34. Derek C. Schuurman, “Technology Has a Message,” *Christian Educators Journal* 51.3 (February 2012), 4-7.
35. David I. Smith and James K.A. Smith, *Teaching and Christian Practices*, 8.
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38. John Van Dyk, *The Craft of Christian Teaching: A Classroom Journey* (Dordt College Press, 2005), 252-256.
39. Søren Kierkegaard, *Provocations: Spiritual Writings of Kierkegaard*, 2014, 218.
40. Robert Mulholland, *Invitation to a Journey: A Road Map for Spiritual Formation* (InterVarsity, 1993), 12.
41. The very term “co-curricular” implies activities that ought to occur alongside of and are related to the curriculum.
42. James C. Schaap, “Reverence, Mystery, and Christian Education,” *Pro Rege* (March 2009).