

HOW TO USE THE BIBLE IN CHRISTIAN SCHOLARSHIP

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Everyone recognizes how important it is to rely on the Bible as the basis of Christian theology. This article, however, does not examine how to use the Bible in theology. Rather, my focus is to examine how properly to use the Bible in non-theological fields of Christian scholarship.¹

I am assuming that Christian scholarship is the heart of the task of Christian colleges and universities. Christian scholarship means developing a Christian perspective in all fields of study—not only in theology, but also in other fields such as sociology, psychology, history, political science, and the natural sciences. If a Christian perspective in all these fields is to be genuinely Christian, obviously this perspective must be shaped by Scripture. Hence I will explore how best to use the Bible in these non-theological disciplines.

Creational Revelation and Christian Scholarship

But first, it is important to recognize that Christian scholarship is based not only on Scriptural revelation, but also on creational revelation. Though guided by Scripture, Christian scholarship does much more than draw upon the Bible. Scripture reveals truth, especially the true message of the way of redemption; yet, not all truth and knowledge is contained in the Bible.

In a fundamental way Christian scholarship is founded on and is an exploration of creational revelation (or general revelation). The creation itself is the primary *source* of knowledge for Christian scholarship in any discipline. The creation, by reflecting its maker, reveals something of God's character (Romans 1:20). But creational revelation is more than that. It also reveals something of God's will for his creation. The very way God structured things in an orderly way reveals his will for the structure and proper functioning of creation in all its diversity. God's will is expressed in his Word. His creational Word originally called forth and dynamically continues to sustain all parts of the creation. The regularities exhibited in the order of creation reflect the creational Word that gives order to the world. This Word is normative and regulative, and so it has the character of law. Thus, God's creational Word functions as a complex set of laws by which he orders and providentially upholds all parts of the creation. These laws are not just "natural laws;" they are really expressions of God's will for the structure of creation.

Academic scholarship seeks to understand the created structure of things and the laws to which they conform. It is the task of academic theorizing to identify, understand, and articulate these structures and laws. They must be discovered by the sciences. The scientist studies similar states of affairs in a particular field, notices patterns of regularity, concludes that there is a creational law that regulates such patterns, and formulates a description of this law. In this way, science explores and discovers the general revelation of God's will for creation. Of course, such academic work is always fallible human interpretation of this creational revelation. As revelation from God, creational revelation bears divine authority; scientific formulations of it do not.²

The Bible and Christian Scholarship

The Bible has authority over all of life, including the life of the mind. So Christian learning must also be grounded on Scriptural revelation.

Before spelling out ways in which Scripture should and should not function in Christian scholarship, a preliminary point is worth noting: the relationship of Scriptural revelation to creational revelation.

Biblical revelation is clearly spelled out while creational revelation is latent. As God's revelation both are divinely authoritative; yet human interpretations of both are fallible. The scope of the Bible is more limited than creational revelation. Its primary purpose is redemptive. Pointing us to the way of salvation in Christ, the Bible then functions like spectacles focusing our eyes to see the revelation of God in creation. Due to this limited purpose, the Bible does not reproduce all the rich variety of creational revelation; it does, however, offer a *selective* articulation of some themes found in creational revelation. For example, the political theorist can discover the structure of justice by studying actual political relationships and institutions; the Bible also reveals the nature of justice. On the other hand, the Bible does not comment on the structure of the atom; that must be discovered from creational revelation.

¹ Parts of this article are drawn from a larger study of mine, "Beyond Integration to Holistic Christian Scholarship," in *Marginal Resistance: Essays Dedicated to John C. VanderStelt*, ed. John Kok (Sioux Center, Iowa: Dordt College Press, 2001), 187-207. My e-mail address is: Don.Sinnema@trnty.edu.

² For a fuller discussion of the role of creational revelation in science, see Michael Goheen, "Scriptural Revelation, Creational Revelation and Natural Science: The Issue," in *Faith and Science*, ed. Jitse Van der Meer (Lanham: University Press of America, 1996), vol. 4, 331-345.

How Not to Use the Bible in Christian Scholarship

Before focusing on how properly to use the Bible in Christian scholarship, I briefly note some improper ways of using the Bible in scholarship.

1. Proof-texting

Christian scholarship should not be based on proof-texting, the rallying of texts from here and there in the Bible to prove a particular point in one's field of studies. Of course, it is sometimes important to appeal to Scripture, but one must always recognize the intent of a passage within its original context, not abstracted from it. One problem with proof-texting is that it often fails to read a passage in context.

It should also be recognized that an appeal to Scripture need not always mean explicit quoting of passages; often in scholarship a general reference or an allusion to a biblical theme is sufficient.

2. Using the Bible as a Textbook or Manual

Sometimes Christian scholars have referred to the Bible as a textbook for their discipline, alongside other textbooks in the field.

The problem here is that the Bible was never intended to serve as a textbook for science or as a manual for medicine. The purpose of a typical textbook is to provide a full survey of the knowledge of a particular field, by defining basic concepts, by organizing the content of a field in its proper categories, by analyzing the content in its constituent parts, and by offering pedagogical exercises to help the student master the content.

But this is not what the Bible does for any field of studies. The Bible has a completely different purpose; its central purpose is redemptive, to present the way of salvation in Christ to a lost world and the way of life that issues from salvation.

3. Using the Bible as a Sourcebook for Information

Some Christian scholars also seek to draw the basic content of their field, or part of the content, directly from the Bible, as if it were the authoritative source of information for this or that field. For example, there have been attempts to develop a whole field of biblical counseling directly from Scripture, as if the Bible were a manual of psychology.

What this approach fails to recognize is that the prime source of information for any field of Christian scholarship is God's creation, not the Bible. The different academic disciplines examine different aspects of God's creation itself, whether that be the physical aspect, biotic aspect, psychic aspect, aesthetic aspect, and so on. In studying a particular aspect of creation, each field needs to draw its content from that aspect of created reality.

On this issue, it is helpful to use the biblical metaphor that God's Word is a light on our path (Psalm 119:105). Our eyes should be on the path, rather than looking blindly into the sunlight. The path is the creation itself, and the Bible illuminates the creation we study so that we can see its contours more clearly rather than grope around in darkness. This metaphor focuses our attention on the creation itself as the place of scholarly inquiry; we should not stare into the light, as if to seek in the Bible answers to academic questions.

Normative Uses of the Bible in Christian Scholarship

In surveying proper uses of Scripture in academia, it is important to recognize that there are normative as well as non-normative ways in which the Bible might function in Christian scholarship; in other words, necessary ways in which we *should* use the Bible, and unnecessary ways in which we *could* sometimes use the Bible.

There are four levels at which the Bible should function normatively in our academic thinking.³

1. The Call to Faith

The first relates to the primary redemptive purpose of Scripture. At this level, the Bible addresses the heart of the Christian scholar. "The Bible calls us to faith and to the living out of our faith in everything we do, including our scientific work."⁴ Our Christian faith should color everything we do. Academic study, like all activities, is an expression of our religious heart commitment, and is one way in which we put our faith to work. At this very general level, the Christian scholar is different than the non-Christian scholar.

2. The Biblical Worldview

On a second level, the Bible teaches the biblical worldview, which provides the comprehensive framework for Christian thinking and action. The basic pillars of the Christian worldview are the highlights of the grand biblical drama that moves from creation and fall to Christ and on to the new creation.⁵ The cluster of related beliefs embedded in each of the major concepts or pillars of the biblical worldview are also taught throughout Scripture.

Here I will especially elaborate on this worldview level. By worldview, I mean the foundational conceptual framework through which one views and makes sense

³ For the normative uses of Scripture, I draw on Sidney Greidanus' important article, "The Use of the Bible in Christian Scholarship," *Christian Scholars Review*, 11 (1982), 138-147, but his analysis needs to be supplemented.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 144.

⁵ An excellent survey of the grand biblical narrative is Craig Bartholomew and Michael Goheen, *The Drama of Scripture: Finding Our Place in the Biblical Story* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2004).

of reality. This framework consists of a comprehensive pattern of religious convictions or assumptions that are answers to the most basic questions of life, such as: Who is God? What is the world? Who am I? What is wrong? What is the remedy? What is our destiny?⁶

Fundamental to the biblical worldview is the most basic distinction in reality, the distinction between God and creation, and the ongoing relationship between God and creation.⁷ That relationship has a history, expressed in a cosmic creation narrative, which summarizes the highlights of that history. God originally made the creation good, but it became distorted with the fall into sin; yet, through redemption in Christ it can again be restored and in the end will be fully restored in the new creation. This is the foundation and framework of all Christian thinking. In other words, this is the biblical worldview that forms the basis of Christian scholarship.

In its simplest form, the biblical worldview may be summed up as follows:

God

Creation → Fall → Redemption → New Creation

This captures the essence of the cosmic narrative and biblical message. As the framework for Christian thinking, it is helpful to express this worldview in a bare bones form. It is cosmic, in that it includes all of reality, and it encompasses all of history: the beginning (creation), the end (the new creation), and the two most significant moments in creation history (the fall and Christ's redemption). This formulation of the Christian worldview also has the advantage of expressing the continuity between creation and the new creation as the same creation restored.

⁶ Helpful descriptions of the nature and role of worldviews may be found in James Olthuis, "On Worldviews," in *Stained Glass: Worldviews and Social Science*, eds. Paul Marshall, Sander Griffioen, and Richard Mouw (Lanham: University Press of America, 1989), 26-40; Brian Walsh and Richard Middleton, *The Transforming Vision: Shaping a Christian Worldview* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1984); and Albert Wolters, *Creation Regained: Biblical Basics for a Reformational Worldview* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985).

⁷ Arthur Holmes makes this point in *Contours of a World View* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983), 57, and in *The Making of a Christian Mind: A Christian World View & the Academic Enterprise* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1985), 18. The common creation-fall-redemption formulation of the Christian worldview fails to take account of this most fundamental distinction. Strictly speaking, since God is essential to the Christian worldview, it is not just a *world* view but a reality view.

This skeletal summary of the Christian worldview, of course, needs to be fleshed out. Embedded in each of the basic concepts is a cluster of related convictions. For example, the creation motif includes at least the following convictions, all of which are taught in Scripture:

- The creation is all of reality apart from God.
- All creatures are dependent on God for their ongoing existence.
- When God created he made all things good.
- Creation was made in an orderly way that reflects an orderly design.
- Humans as creatures were made in God's image as responsible agents.

The specific convictions embedded in each part of the Christian worldview may vary somewhat due to differences between Christian traditions and even individuals. Hence, it is helpful to distinguish between core worldviews and determinate worldviews.⁸ A core worldview is a vision of reality at the level of very basic convictions, for example, Christian theism or scientific materialism. Determinate worldviews are different versions of a core worldview, as the core convictions are fleshed out in differing webs of more specific convictions. Thus, one may identify variations of the Christian worldview, such as Roman Catholic, Anabaptist, or Reformed worldviews, as well as subtypes of these. The summary of the Christian worldview that I present above is general enough to be a core worldview; yet in its selection of core categories and arrangement, it reflects a Reformed formulation.

A Christian worldview gives Christian scholars a comprehensive framework through which they see and interpret all of reality, and it provides a meaning context for academic work in all fields. As part of an interpretive framework the cluster of religious convictions that make up a Christian worldview function as "control beliefs" that lead the Christian to reject certain theories that conflict or do not comport well with those beliefs; and they lead one to devise theories that comport as well as possible with those beliefs.⁹

⁸ Stephen Wykstra makes this distinction in his articles, "Have Worldviews Shaped Science?" in *Facets of Faith and Science*, vol. 1, 104, and "Should Worldviews Shape Science? Toward an Integrationist Account of Scientific Theorizing," in *Facets*, vol. 2, 151.

⁹ Nicholas Wolterstorff developed the idea of "control beliefs" in his book, *Reason Within the Bounds of Religion* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976), esp. 66, 72. Wolterstorff, however, is critical of the worldview approach to Christian scholarship. See his article, "On Christian Learning," in *Stained Glass*, 66-67. Yet his notion of control beliefs makes the most sense if what he calls the "belief-content of one's authentic Christian commitment," that functions as control within the devising and weighing of theories, is in fact the cluster

The basic religious beliefs that make up the Christian worldview are foundational to all of life, including all fields of scholarship. They operate at the foundational level of all disciplines and so are part of each discipline itself. They operate internally to the discipline, and so they are not external influences that somehow need to be integrated to the discipline.

Each of the basic concepts in the Christian worldview has profound implications for Christian scholarship in any discipline. I will briefly sketch some key implications of a general nature. Each of these implications is drawn from the Bible or is implied in biblical themes.

The influence of a Christian understanding of *God* can best be seen in his ongoing relationship to the creation. (1) As creator God is the sovereign Lord of the universe and he continues to uphold all things by his providence. His lordship lays claim to all scholarship. (2) God is not the origin of sin and its debilitating effects in the world. Rather, he stands in judgment over sin. (3) In love and mercy God sent Christ to redeem the broken world, and he sent the Holy Spirit to work out redemption in a process of personal and cosmic renewal. (4) In the end God's judgment will do away with all evil in the world and in Christ, he will reign forever with his people over the fully restored creation.

The *creation* motif has many implications for scholarship: (1) The creation is cosmic. God made everything as one creation, so every field of study examines some part or aspect of creation as God's handiwork. (2) Since this is God's world, the creation is affirmed and life in creation is affirmed. Thus, creation itself is a legitimate field of study. (3) Because of the fundamental God-creation distinction, creatures are different than God. This runs counter to pagan conceptions that deify some part of creation, as well as to pantheistic views. (4) Because of the God-creation distinction, everything apart from God is his temporal creation. Thus, the heaven(s), angels, spirits, and all non-physical phenomena are not part of a separate spiritual realm along with God, but are part of the natural creation, and are legitimate subjects of academic study. (5) Since the whole of creation is God's world, this excludes any dualistic perspective that divides reality into spiritual/natural, sacred/secular, religious/neutral, as if Christianity relates only to one level of reality. (6) This also implies that Christian scholarship should be done across the whole curriculum; no one discipline is inherently more Christian than another. (7) As creatures all things are fully dependent on their Creator for their very existence and ongoing operation. (8) The creation itself is the source of knowledge and data for all academic fields.

of beliefs that make up a person's worldview. Without the worldview framework, Wolterstorff's "control beliefs" seem to operate in a piecemeal way, accepting one theory and rejecting another.

(9) Since God created all things in a wonderfully complex diversity, Christian scholarship seeks to recognize and celebrate the rich diversity of creation. (10) Since God originally made the creation good, this means that the way things presently are (as fallen) must not necessarily be interpreted as the way they always were or ought to be. (11) Since God made all things as an orderly structured cosmos, the creation order is first of all the subject of academic investigation. The orderliness and patterns of regularity in creation reflect the laws which God set in place to structure and regulate creation. These laws are an expression of God's wisdom and will for creation, and so scientific study of these laws explores this general revelation of God and his will. (12) In his providence God continues to uphold by his Word the orderly structure of the universe; this guarantees the regularity of creation. (13) Humans are special creatures who have been created in God's image and have been endowed with great freedom and responsibility. (14) The creation (or cultural) mandate that calls humans to rule over creation as stewards implies a call to study it, discover, interpret, and theorize in order to understand it. (15) By God's common grace, non-Christian scholars still bear God's image (though in a distorted way), they are at work in the same creation, and the same creation order that they investigate in their various disciplines impinges on them as upon Christian scholars. Thus, their study of creation leads to valid insights that must be recognized by Christian scholars.

The *fall* motif also has important implications for Christian scholarship: (1) The fall into sin has cosmic ramifications; not only humans but also all of creation has fallen under the effects of sin. (2) Since creation was originally good, sin is not inherent in creation, but is only a distortion of its original goodness; so brokenness and disorder should not be interpreted as part of the natural state of affairs. (3) The brokenness that is studied in the various fields of study (e.g., disease, environmental pollution, racism) must be ultimately recognized as the effects of sin, not simply as deviant or abnormal behavior. (4) Sin has also distorted the human capacity for knowledge of the creation. Because of sin's effects on the human mind false interpretations of reality easily arise. Thus, a Christian critique of wrong ideas is necessary. So a balanced Christian perspective takes seriously not only the valid insights that secular scholars arrive at, but also the antithesis between Christian and non-Christian ideas.

The *redemption* motif also has implications: (1) Redemption is cosmic in scope; in Christ, the whole creation is being redeemed, though this will not be fulfilled until the new creation. (2) Such redemption not only includes personal salvation, but also restoration and cure for the brokenness in society and in the physical world. (3) The process of renewal by which the Holy Spirit makes all things new includes human involvement. The Holy Spirit works in and through human activity, including redemptive activity

that we engage in as scholars. (4) In their scholarship Christians are called to be a transforming influence as intellectual agents of reconciliation in the world. (5) All scholarly activity, even by non-Christians, that seeks to find remedies for brokenness in the human body, in society, and in the natural environment is an expression of the redemptive process of renewal. (6) Yet, since redemption is God's gift and not a human achievement, humans cannot save the world by their technological and intellectual accomplishments.

Finally, there are implications of the *new creation* motif: (1) The same creation that God originally made will in the end be totally restored as the place of everlasting life and service, so this creation and our study of it have great value. (2) Since Christ has already won the decisive victory over evil, the final outcome of history is assured. This gives Christian scholars a sense of hope that their scholarly labors are not in vain and that in the end the world is not headed for destruction but for complete renewal. (3) This hope for cosmic renewal also gives Christian scholars a sense of purpose since they know that they are part of God's grand project to make all things new. (4) After the refining fire of God's judgment, the fruits of good scholarship in this age will be rewarded and will somehow enrich life in the new creation.

3. *Biblical Norms or Principles*

On a third more specific level, the Bible also teaches certain principles or norms or themes that should guide the Christian scholar in particular disciplines. Often these are selective norms that are also accessible from creational revelation, but they are explicitly articulated by God in Scripture to show the way of obedience. Such biblical norms and themes serve as guidelines that impact specific content of certain disciplines, the methods that are employed, and the way knowledge is applied.

Examples could be given in many fields of study. The political or legal theorist must take into account the biblical norm of justice; the biologist the biblical norm of stewardship; the sociologist the biblical idea of community and the biblical view of marriage; and the psychologist the biblical view of humanity and human nature.

As an example let me elaborate especially on biblical principles that apply to one field, the field of the business and economics. A Christian perspective in this field would take into account a wide variety of biblical principles:

- the biblical view of property and ownership: God really owns everything and humans are stewards of the gifts that God has entrusted to us.
- the nature of labor: Work must be viewed as *service* to God and our neighbor, not as drudgery or as just a way to make money.

- the nature of business: Doing business must not just focus on the bottom line, but must be viewed as service—providing needed goods or services to the community.

- the role of money in human life
- the relationship of a business to employees (servants)
- the payment of a fair wage
- charging fair prices
- doing quality workmanship
- making quality products
- fair lending practices
- providing appropriate working conditions
- using honest scales or means of measurement
- the obligation to pay taxes
- taking stewardly care of resources in business
- charity as a means to help the needy

The Bible has a lot to say about all of these themes, and a Christian perspective on business must certainly be guided by these biblical norms.

4. *Biblical Virtues*

On a fourth level, the Bible teaches certain virtues that shape good habits of the mind required for disciplined scholarship and teaching.¹⁰ Intellectual integrity, scholarly rigor, a positive inquiring attitude, sound judgment in handling the content of one's discipline, humility, patience, civility in debate, fairness and charity to those with whom one differs are all examples of virtues that the Christian scholar must cultivate and model for students.

Non-normative Uses of the Bible in Christian Scholarship

Besides these normative uses of Scripture in Christian scholarship, there are also non-normative uses of the Bible. In presenting its basic redemptive message the Bible often provides *incidental* information that may be of interest to this or that field of study. Such information is incidental to the redemptive intention of Scripture and is not normatively taught, but it may well be useful in this or that field.

Thus, for example, an architect might be interested in information about the structure of Solomon's temple. A student of dietary science might study what the Bible says about ancient Jewish eating habits. A naval engineer might examine the structure of Noah's ark. A linguist might analyze the style of Old Testament Hebrew. One might compare the economic system of Old Testament Israel with that of modern Israel. Or one might search for biblical allusions in a piece of literature. There are countless possibilities for such non-normative uses of Scripture by scholars. Yet it must be remembered that, though valid, exploring these does not in itself make scholarship Christian.

¹⁰ Arthur Holmes, "Reintegrating Faith and Learning: the Biblical Mandate," in *Perspectives* (Christian College Coalition, 1993), 4.

Also, in terms of practical teaching strategies, there is a great variety of ways in which Scripture might be utilized in the classroom. For example, one might use a biblical passage as a reading exercise in a foreign language class. But such pedagogical practices should not be confused with the normative ways in which the Bible ought to function in Christian scholarship.

I have tried to identify specific and practical ways in which the Bible should operate in various non-theological fields of Christian scholarship. My hope is that a clear understanding of the role of Scripture in scholarship may contribute to a flourishing of the whole enterprise of Christian scholarship in all fields of study.