

BEING BIBLICAL IN A PLURALISTIC ACADEMY

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Abstract

This essay examines two senses of what it means to be biblical in a pluralistic academy. The first is to examine the Bible as a document of the university, susceptible to many kinds of critical probing. The rest of the essay explores the second way, which is to use the Bible as the authoritative control story that articulates how Christians view Jesus Christ as the ground, grammar, and goal of both the university and the universe itself. I examine how biblical authority should and should not be deployed in the academy by looking at the natural and human sciences. I then draw out four implications for the importance of using the Bible as the social imaginary of academic research, with special emphasis on how being biblical avoids the cardinal sin of academicians: reductionism.

Keywords: Pluralism, Academy, University, Universe, Critical, Authority, Control Story, Natural Science, Human Science, Social Imaginary, Research, Reductionism

Introduction

Once upon a time, in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries to be exact, the study of the Bible gave rise to the formation of the first European universities.¹ What began in medieval Italy, France, and England as scholarly communities in cathedral or monastic schools devoted to interpreting the Bible gradually evolved into the institutions of higher education with which we are familiar today. In the first universities, many of the subjects—especially the *trivium* of grammar, logic, and rhetoric—focused on skills for reading and commenting on Scripture, and for reasoning out its implications.²

That was then. The Bible that once served as the authoritative foundation of the university has now become simply one more document to be studied from a variety of different disciplinary points of view, including historical,

¹ See Charles Homer Haskins, *The Rise of Universities* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1957).

² See further G. R. Evans, *Old Arts and New Theology: The Beginnings of Theology as an Academic Discipline* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1980).

linguistic, sociological, psychological, philosophical, and archaeological.³ This reversal of fortune leads to two contrasting ways of being biblical in a pluralistic academy.

The Bible as a Document of the University

Being biblical in a pluralistic academy means, in the first place, submitting the Bible to study from a number of disciplinary perspectives.⁴ There is some irony in this: in the medieval university, students had first to learn grammar, logic, rhetoric, and other subjects in order to read the Bible well.⁵ In contrast, students in the modern university may study the Bible as part of a course on world religions, ancient history, anthropology, or even English literature. As a new member of the faculty of the University of Edinburgh, I was interested to learn that there were only two professorial chairs at its founding in 1582, in Divinity and Humanity respectively.⁶ By the time I showed up some four hundred years later, however, there were dozens and dozens of academic specializations: everything from cognitive epidemiology, parapsychology, biotechnology, molecular plant sciences, and astrobiology to Scottish ethnology (of course), intellectual and environmental history, and South Asian Studies. The academy is therefore pluralistic, in one sense, simply because it has so many disciplines and departments. Each academic discipline aims at specialist knowledge about some aspect of the universe. Most academics believe that their disciplinary perspective offers important insights into the natural or human world—into some aspect of reality—and that these insights should therefore inform a person's worldview. Yet how is a unified worldview even possible when, thanks to the centrifugal force of increasing specialization, it is no longer clear what unifies a university?⁷

³ Hans D. Betz, ed., *The Bible as a Document of the University* (Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1981).

⁴ For an important twentieth-century statement about the impact of pluralism on the study of theology, see David Tracy, *Blessed Rage for Order: The New Pluralism in Theology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996).

⁵ See G. R. Evans, *The Language and Logic of the Bible: The Earlier Middle Ages* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984).

⁶ The University of Paris likewise had only a handful of faculties at its founding in the thirteenth century: theology, medicine, law, and arts. For a glimpse of theology's role, see Spencer E. Young, *Scholarly Community at the Early University of Paris: Theological, Education and Society, 1215–1248* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014).

⁷ Relatedly, John Sullivan wonders whether and to what extent the practice of reading in the university is in decline. In a gesture that recalls the unifying role of the Bible in the medieval university, Sullivan suggests that retrieving biblical literacy may influence the way other types of reading are carried out in the university ("Reading

The Bible, as a document of the university, can in principle be the object of study in multiple departments. Portions of the Bible may be assigned in courses in Ancient Near Eastern Studies, Modern European History, comparative literature, or even philosophy. Present-day students in North America are most likely to find Bible courses under the Department of Religion. In North America and in many European universities, the study of theology and schools of Divinity have given way to the study of religion and departments of Religious Studies.⁸ It is a fateful change: in the context of the modern secular university, to study religion is to study human religious belief and behavior—anthropology, not God.⁹

Consider what it was like to study the Bible in nineteenth-century Oxford University, when it was no longer a medieval but a thoroughly modern university. Faith commitments had to be checked at the laboratory or classroom door.¹⁰ To be credible, academics had to abide by a new creed: methodological naturalism, another name for the modern scientific method and its requirement that only natural causes explain natural phenomena.¹¹ The classic statement of methodological naturalism as it pertains to studying the Bible is Benjamin Jowett's famous 1860 lecture, "On the Interpretation of Scripture."¹² Jowett was Regius Professor of Greek at Oxford, and a clergyman. Nevertheless, his lecture proposed that, because the Bible was a document of the university, it be read "like any other book"—that is, like any other book *written by historically conditioned human beings who were not*

Habits, Scripture and the University," in *The Bible and the University*, ed. David Lyle Jeffrey and C. Stephen Evans [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007], 216–239).

⁸ This trend arguably began with Friedrich Schleiermacher, who made Christian faith (human religious feeling) the object of his study rather than God himself. See his *The Christian Faith* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1928). See also Linell E. Cady and Delwin Brown, eds., *Religious Studies, Theology, and the University: Conflicting Maps, Changing Terrain* (Albany: State University of New York, 2002).

⁹ For an introduction to the anthropology of religion, see James S. Bielo, *Anthropology of Religion: The Basics* (New York: Routledge, 2015).

¹⁰ For a classic statement of the challenge for a faith, like Christianity, that relies on historical claims, see Van A. Harvey, *The Historian and the Believer: The Morality of Historical Knowledge and Christian Belief*, rev. ed. (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1996).

¹¹ For a critique of methodological naturalism from a Christian point of view, see Del Ratzsch, *Science & Its Limits: The Natural Sciences in Christian Perspective*, 2nd ed. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000), 122–129, and Alvin Plantinga, "Should Methodological Naturalism Constrain Science? In *Science: Christian Perspectives for the New Millennium*, ed. Scott B. Luley et al. (Addison, TX: CLM/RZIM, 2003), 107–34.

¹² In Benjamin Jowett, *The Interpretation of Scripture and Other Essays* (London: George Routledge & Sons, 1907), 1–76.

supernaturally inspired. Subsequent scholarship has been happy to oblige—so much so that Michael Legaspi could entitle his recent study of the Bible in the modern university, *The Death of Scripture and the Rise of Biblical Studies*.¹³ It is largely the story of how the Bible lost its status as authoritative Scripture in coming to be read “like any other book.” Indeed, in the modern university one does not read Christian Scripture at all, only what Legaspi terms the “academic Bible.” Like any other document of the university, the Bible has become subject to whatever methods, disciplinary approaches, or worldviews that happen to be à la mode (i.e., modern; in fashion).¹⁴

Everything changed again with the advent of postmodernity. Postmodern biblical scholars have given up the illusion that they can come to the text, with the scientific mindset of neutral objectivity.¹⁵ For many postmodern thinkers, the disinterested rationality so valued by modernity is a mask behind which lurk any number of ideological interests. Rationality never gives us a God’s-eye point of view, but is rather situated in a particular culture, time, ethnicity, gender, and class. Postmodern critics view biblical interpretation with suspicion. Those who read the Bible are not serving faith, as in premodern times, or critical knowledge, as in modernity, but rather their own or their own interpretive community’s will to power. There is no neutral reading, for every interpretation of the Bible is political, in the sense that it is caught up in a contest for power.¹⁶ In the academy today, where knowing modern and postmodern armies clash by day and night, postcolonial and ideological criticisms vie with various forms of historical criticism for bragging rights over who is reading the Bible rightly. As Dorothy might say, “Toto, I’ve a feeling we’re not in 1860 anymore.”¹⁷

One intriguing way to study the history of ideas would be to examine the changing fortunes of biblical commentary. Indeed, there may be no more

¹³ Michael C. Legaspi, *The Death of Scripture and the Rise of Biblical Studies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).

¹⁴ The work of James Barr is typical of modern critical biblical scholarship. See in particular his *The Bible in the Modern World* (New York: Harper & Row, 1973) and *Holy Scripture: Canon, Authority, Criticism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983).

¹⁵ See the introductory survey by A. K. M. Adam, *What is Postmodern Biblical Criticism?* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress Press, 1995) and A. K. M. Adam, ed., *Handbook of Postmodern Biblical Interpretation* (Atlanta: Chalice Press, 2000).

¹⁶ For an example of approaches that feature variant kinds of ideological criticism, see the work of Elizabeth A. Castelli et al., eds., *The Postmodern Bible: The Bible and Culture Collective* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997).

¹⁷ For an interesting collection of essays on the present predicament of the university caught between modern and postmodern currents, see Ronald Barnett, *Thinking and Rethinking the University: The Selected Works of Ronald Barnett* (New York: Routledge, 2015).

telling intellectual *and* cultural barometer than the way people read, interpret, and appropriate the Bible. It is not the Bible itself, but the way we read it, that acts as a mirror in which we see all our passions and preoccupations. Every social trend, every academic fashion, eventually shows up in the kind of commentaries people write.¹⁸ The academy influences which methods we bring to bear on how we read the Bible; the broader culture influences our sensitivities as to what we read *for* in Scripture or what we attend *to* in Scripture. Every type of literary theory and literary criticism eventually shows up in biblical commentary. Similarly, every cultural preoccupation or movement, from Feminism to Marxism and the environment have their respective champions in the arena of biblical interpretation. Many of these critical approaches and thematic concerns are helpful to the extent that they illumine this or that level or aspect of Scripture. Yet, all too frequently, they impose worldly concerns and preoccupations onto the text, and these may or may not correspond to the text's own interests and to the intentions of its authors.¹⁹

It would be a mistake to think that there was no place for faith in reading the Bible as a document of the university. This is not my claim. My claim, rather, is that specifically Christian and ecclesial interests have been displaced by various disciplinary and ideological interests in the pluralistic academy: "It is impossible to do scholarship, to engage in the business of academic inquiry, without basing oneself to a significant extent on pre-theoretical commitments which cannot themselves be justified on theoretical grounds."²⁰ It is not that academics read the Bible with no faith, then, but that they read it according to their own deepest rational and cultural convictions—call it a *secular* faith.²¹

¹⁸ It is not merely coincidental, for example, that feminism eventually begat feminist biblical interpretation. See, for example, Carol Newsome, Sharon H. Ringe, Jacqueline E. Lapsley, eds., *The Women's Bible Commentary*, 3rd ed. (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2012) and the *Feminist Companion to the Bible* series published by Sheffield Academic Press. There are also African, African-American, womanist, and queer commentaries. Another major trend worth noting is the increasing number of postcolonial commentaries. See, for example, Hemchand Gossai, ed., *Postcolonial Commentary and the Old Testament* (London and New York: T&T Clark, 2019) and Fernando F. Segovia and R. S. Sugirtharajah, eds., *A Postcolonial Commentary on the New Testament Writings* (London and New York: T&T Clark, 2009).

¹⁹ See further my "Theological Commentary and 'The Voice from Heaven': Exegesis, Ontology, and the Travail of Biblical Interpretation," in *On the Writing of New Testament Commentaries*, ed. Stanley E. Porter and Eckhard J. Schnabel (Leiden: Brill, 2013), 269–298.

²⁰ Al Wolters, "No Longer Queen: The Theological Disciplines and Their Sisters," in *The Bible and the University*, ed. Jeffrey and Evans, 60.

²¹ See further Mark A. Smith, *Secular Faith: How Culture Has Trumped Religion in American Politics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015).

The Academic Disciplines in Biblical Perspective: The Big Picture

Like Samson shorn of his locks, the Bible in the pluralistic academy today has become as weak as any other book. Oxford University biblical scholars Robert Morgan and John Barton probably put it best: “Texts, like dead men and women, have no rights, no aims, no interests. They can be used in whatever way readers or interpreters choose.”²² Much more could be said about the myriad ways the Bible is today being analyzed, investigated, dissected, and deconstructed as a document of the university. However, I here propose to take my title in a different direction, where the Bible is less an inert object than an operative heuristic—a living and active (cf. Heb 4:12) interpretive lens. The aim is to explore the possible positive roles that biblical authority can play in the context of today’s multi-disciplinary university. Specifically, I want to explore whether Christian scholars can be biblical in disciplines other than biblical studies, church history, and theology; and, if so, how.²³

A Working Hypothesis

I begin with a working hypothesis: the Bible’s most important contribution to the university in general, and to its various academic departments in particular, consists not in providing a specific set of data but, rather, an overarching and ultimate framework for understanding the natural world and human history.

In my previous essay, I argued that worldviews provide narrative frameworks or stories that enable us to answer the big questions of life and so orient us to the project of being-in-the-world. I argued that non-biblical stories had taken pride of place in the modern social imaginary.²⁴ I now want to suggest that the most important strategy for Christian academics is to make the gospel—the story of what the Father is doing in the Son through the Spirit to renew creatures and the whole creation—the “control story” for our thinking about reality.²⁵ The gospel of Jesus Christ should be the ultimate touchstone for all our thinking about all of created reality (being), together with our

²² Robert Morgan with John Barton, *Biblical Interpretation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), 7.

²³ For an important collection of essays on this general topic, see Jeffrey and Evans, eds., *The Bible and the University*.

²⁴ On the role of story in worldview, see the works cited in my “Being Biblical in a Pluralistic Age,” AUSS 57.2 (2019): 305, note 1.

²⁵ Cf. Nicholas Wolterstorff on “control beliefs”: “My contention in what follows is that the religious beliefs of the Christian scholar ought to function as *control* beliefs within devising and weighing of theories” (*Reason within the Limits of Religion Alone* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984], 70).

judgments concerning its truth, goodness, and beauty (the transcendentals).²⁶

A quick qualification is in order: acknowledging the Bible as our control story does not mean that it ought to function in oppressive or coercive ways. We want neither to sacrifice nor oppress the intellect. Whereas medieval scholars were happy to call theology “queen of the sciences,” their modern counterparts long ago declared theology to be a queen with no clothes.²⁷ To invoke the supreme authority of the Bible (*sola scriptura*), then, is not an excuse for theologians to take up the queen’s mantle and lord it over the other academic disciplines, or for biblical scholars to tell their colleagues in the sciences what they can and cannot say in their own fields. This would be anti-intellectual. No, the better part of wisdom is to remember that we are fearfully and wonderfully made: molecular biologists may need to be reminded that the genome is not the whole human story, yet theologians need to hear what molecular biologists have to say about DNA.²⁸ We need many academic disciplines to fully understand the story of what it means to be human, and theology ignores them at her peril. Reductionism is still stupid, even when it is on the side of the angels.²⁹ It is not, then, that biblical scholars and theologians can dictate the particulars of other domains of knowledge; it is, rather, that the Bible and theology speak to a domain that is beyond the limits of science: the domain of the word of God.³⁰ The apostles

²⁶ Many medieval universities adopted Aristotle’s ontological framework according to which truth, goodness, and beauty are properties of “being.” Truth corresponds to epistemology, goodness to morality, and beauty to aesthetics. On the transcendentals, see Alice M. Ramos, *Dynamic Transcendentals: Truth, Goodness, and Beauty from a Thomistic Perspective* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2012) and Scott MacDonald, ed., *Being and Goodness: The Concept of the Good in Metaphysics and Philosophical Theology* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1991). What is lacking in the modern pluralistic university is an agreed upon metaphysics, that is, a consensual account of what reality is like. To the extent that naturalistic materialism pretends to sit on the throne of metaphysics, it typically eliminates questions of goodness and beauty. The present essay explores what it might mean to assign a metaphysical function to the gospel.

²⁷ Thomas Aquinas does not explicitly use the phrase “queen of the sciences,” but he does present theology as a science, and a “nobler” science than other sciences, such that “other sciences are called the handmaidens of this one” (*Summa Theologiae* Pt. 1, Q. 1 art. 5).

²⁸ One helpful genomic story-teller is Denis Alexander, *Genes, Determinism and God* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017).

²⁹ By reductionism, I mean the tendency to explain higher-level phenomena (e.g., consciousness, love) in terms of lower-level scientific terms (e.g., physics, chemistry). See further Arthur Peacocke, *Theology for a Scientific Age: Being and Becoming—Natural, Divine, and Human* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1993), 39–43.

³⁰ See John Webster, *The Domain of the Word: Scripture and Theological Reason*

who wrote the New Testament knew something secular academics do not and cannot know by unaided reason, namely, what holds the various parts of the curriculum, and the universe itself, together.³¹ The apostles proclaim the mystery of Christ, through whom all things have come into existence and in whom all things hold together (Col 1:16–17). Theology is less queen of the sciences than (to continue the chess metaphor) a bishop that moves laterally through the ranks, making interdisciplinary connections. The task of theology in a university setting, as urgent as it is challenging, is “to claim that Jesus Christ is Lord and to propose this claim as determinative for the Christian scholarly enterprise.”³²

The Triune Economy of Light: The Ground, Grammar, and Goal of a Christian Worldview

Christians believe there is a unity of wisdom—a ground for the *uni-* of the university—that undergirds the disciplinary plurality we see in the academy. Saint Bonaventure begins his thirteenth-century treatise, *On the Reduction of the Arts to Theology*, by citing James 1:17: “Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights.” For Bonaventure, there is one light source, but many lights. For example, he distinguishes the light of sense perception from the light of philosophical knowledge, a product not of sense but reason.³³ The intellect is God’s outstanding gift to creatures. Scripture is a superior light because it reveals the truths that transcend reason and are necessary for salvation. Yet, all forms of human knowing ultimately serve one overarching purpose: to lead us back to God. Please note: *Reduction* in Bonaventure’s title does not mean what we today call reductionism. The word, taken from the Latin *re + ducere*, literally means *to lead back*. The light of reason or intelligence comes from God and leads back to God—or ought to.

Theology’s special task is to speak of God and all things in relation to God. Yet, theology has largely been exiled from Western universities, replaced by religious studies and, even in those pockets where it remains, it no longer enjoys royal status: “The demotion of theology to the status of being one—

(London and New York: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2012), 3–31.

³¹ Pascal is a good example of a philosopher who acknowledges the existence of reasons that reason cannot know: “The heart has its reasons of which reason knows nothing” (*Pensées*, #423). See further, Thomas V. Morris, *Making Sense of It All: Pascal and the Meaning of Life* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992).

³² Douglas Harink, “Taking the University to Church: The Role of Theology in the Christian University Curriculum,” *Christian Scholars Review* 28.3 (1999): 391 (emphasis original).

³³ Saint Bonaventure, *On the Reduction of the Arts to Theology*, trans. Zachary Hayes (St. Bonaventure, NY: Franciscan Institute, 1996), 41.

insecure—discipline alongside (and increasingly harried by) others inhibits theology from furnishing a comprehensive account of the nature and ends of intellectual activity *in toto*, and so of human studies.”³⁴ John Henry Newman anticipated the consequences of this demotion even back in 1852, when he published his classic work *The Idea of a University*. Theology’s role in the university, Newman believed, was to guarantee the unity and coherence of the university without letting any single academic disciple falsely absolutize its domain of or approach to reality, as if physics were truer than psychology.³⁵

Back to James 1:17: God is light, and we see all things in relation to God’s light. But how? In what follows, I want to speak, as a dogmatic theologian, about what I call the *economy of light*, namely, the way the triune God shares with temporal creatures his eternal knowledge and wisdom.³⁶ Whereas Bonaventure’s “reduction” pertains to following the light we see in the university back to its ultimate source in God, the economy of light traces the way the Father of light communicates his light through the work of his Son and Spirit, thereby enabling us to share “in the inheritance of the saints in light” (Col 1:12). By unpacking the economy of light, I believe we will have a better grasp of the ground, grammar, and goal of what it means to be biblical in a pluralistic academy.

God is One, the One Who has Made All Things (the Ground)

The one God is three persons, the Father, Son, and Spirit, whose life is perfect communication (i.e., “making common”) and communion. Like the first Christians in Jerusalem, the three persons “were together and had all things in common” (Acts 2:44) even before creation.

Though the triune God eternally enjoys the perfect light, life, and love that he is in himself, he decided to communicate this goodness to what is not God, namely, the created universe.³⁷ Creation is neither self-starting, self-

³⁴ Webster, “Theology and the Humanities,” in *The Domain of the Word*, 171–172.

³⁵ John Henry Newman, *The Idea of a University* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1982).

³⁶ I treat this at greater length in Kevin J. Vanhoozer and Daniel J. Treier, *Theology and the Mirror of Scripture: A Mere Evangelical Account* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2015), 85–90.

³⁷ It is important to distinguish God’s own inner and eternal life (the “immanent” Trinity) from God’s works in and mission to the world outside himself (the “economic” Trinity). There is only one triune God, of course, but we can say that the economic Trinity “communicates” the immanent Trinity. See further my *Remythologizing Theology: Divine Action, Passion, and Authorship*, ch. 5 “God in three persons: the one who lights and lives in love” (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010). See also Fred Sanders, *The Triune God*, ch. 3 “Communicative Missions” (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2016).

sustaining, or self-explanatory, but wholly dependent on the will of God. It is because the universe is contingent, a free creation which might not have been and could have been different, that we now have to discern its order through careful study of its particularity.³⁸

Being biblical matters, not only because it is the control story undergirding the Christian worldview, but also because, apart from the Bible, we would know nothing of God's plan of salvation. The triune God has made himself known by what he has said and done and the Bible itself is part of God's communicative action. The biblical narrative is ultimately a "missions" story—the story of the Father's "sending" the Son and Spirit to accomplish his plan of salvation. We need to understand the story of the Bible in order to know the triune God, ourselves, and the meaning of history.³⁹ The Church Fathers express a profound understanding of the God of the Bible with the formula *opera trinitatis ad extra indivisa sunt* ("the outward works of the Trinity are indivisible"). It means that everything God does is the work of all three divine persons. Why is there something rather than nothing? Because God the Father created all things in and through the Son in the Spirit. Why is there good news rather than no news (silence)? Because God the Father has reconciled the world to himself in Christ through the Cross. Herman Bavinck draws out the implication for a Christian worldview: "The Christian mind remains unsatisfied until all of existence is referred back to the triune God, and until the confession of God's Trinity functions at the center of our thought and life."⁴⁰

If Bavinck is right, it follows that we have to refer back to the triune God *the Christian mind itself*. Stated differently, we need a theology of human intelligence. We need to understand the human mind as created, fallen, and regenerated, and we need to do so in a Trinitarian framework—in what I am here calling the economy of light. As with all Trinitarian works, the Father initiates, the Son orders, and the Spirit performs the act of enlightening.⁴¹ The

³⁸ See further, Thomas F. Torrance, *Divine and Contingent Order* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1981) and *Theological and Natural Science* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2002).

³⁹ Because the Bible relates a unified story of the triune God's communicative acts in history, it is better to think of the story as a drama: an enacted story; story made flesh. See Craig G. Bartholomew and Michael W. Goheen, *The Drama of Scripture: Finding our Place in the Biblical Story*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2014).

⁴⁰ Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics: God and Creation*, vol. 2, trans. John Vriend (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004), 330.

⁴¹ Cf. John Calvin: "to the Father is attributed the beginning of action, the fountain and source of all things; to the Son, wisdom, counsel, and arrangement in action, while the energy and efficacy of action is assigned to the Spirit" (*Institutes* I.13.18).

Holy Spirit is the primary author of restored intelligence. It is only thanks to the Spirit's shining the light of the Word on our minds (i.e., illumination), that our Christian intellects are awakened from their non-dogmatic slumbers to the bright reality of *what is* in Jesus Christ.⁴²

God is Light, the Resplendence of Reason and Truth, and Thus
the One Who Enables All Things to be Known (the Grammar)

The triune God is both the ground of the universe and the grammar of the university—the source of the ground rules for speaking truly about the universe, ourselves included and, by way of derivation, God the Creator. In particular, God the Son, the eternal *Logos*, is the principle of the intelligibility of all things, for all things hold together in Christ (Col 1:17). Moreover, the Son who is the light of the world (John 8:12; 9:5) “gives light to everyone” (John 1:9), graciously enabling men and women to participate in his intelligence. This, too, is a communication of light. If we are to recover the primacy of the story Scripture tells, then we must include the human mind as itself part of that story. Creation through Christ, falling away from Christ, and redemption in Christ, who is the light, is one way of telling the biblical story of created intelligence. In the words of the late English theologian, John Webster: “Theology and universities are elements in the unfinished history of the redemption of human intelligence.”⁴³ Revelation is the technical term for the triune God sharing or making common his self-knowledge (light) with human creatures. If we understand something fully only when we can relate it to God—the ground and grammar of creation's intelligibility—then we can say that, in an important sense, revelation is necessary for true knowledge. It is also necessary for redemption. For the light is the “light of life” (John 8:12), and in Christ “was life, and the life was the light of men” (John 1:4).

God is light (1 John 1:5), and the created order reflects some of his light (Rom 1:19–20), yet sinful hearts and minds are lost in darkness (Rom 1:21). Hosea 4:1 says, “There is no faithfulness or steadfast love, and no knowledge of God in the land.” How much knowledge of other things can we have if we shut our eyes and close our minds to the ground and grammar of the universe?⁴⁴

Thanks be to God, who in his mercy communicates his light to a darkened world: “in your light we see light” (Ps 36:9). Here, too, all three

⁴² In philosophy, metaphysics is the study of ultimate reality, *what is*. Similarly, theology, I argue, is the study of ultimate or eschatological reality, *what is* (and is coming to be) *in Christ*.

⁴³ John Webster, “God, Theology, Universities,” in *God without Measure: Working Papers in Christian Theology*, vol. 2 (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2016), 157.

⁴⁴ See further Andrew R. Hay, *God's Shining Forth: A Trinitarian Theology of Divine Light* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2017).

persons are involved in illumination. The Father “dwells in unapproachable light” (1 Tim 6:16), yet he has sent the “true light” into the world (John 1:9). Jesus Christ is, in the words of the Nicene Creed, “Light of Light, very God of very God.” He, the *Logos*, is “the light of the world” (John 8:12; 9:5). According to Thomas Aquinas, “The illumination of our minds is primarily the mission of the Son.”⁴⁵

Those who come to know Jesus are transferred to his kingdom of light (Col 1:13). The Holy Spirit’s role is key as well; it is he who shines in our hearts “to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ” (2 Cor 4:6). The Father is the source of light, the Son is the radiance of this light, and the Spirit is the perfection of light, the one who enables it to be seen. Illumination is thus the perfection of revelation and the product of the economy of light, “the work in which God the Spirit quickens creaturely intelligence and makes it capable of receiving and appropriating divine instruction.”⁴⁶

Without the Spirit’s illumination, humans would still be in the dark, as regards both the subject matter of Scripture and the meaning of life. Modern secularists maintain that human reason supplies its own light, but Christians have to disagree, knowing that sinners suppress the truth in unrighteousness (Rom 1:18). The good news is that the Spirit *renews* the mind and repairs our cognitive functioning (Rom 12:2). God has designed the human mind to work best when it trusts the word of God, which alone orients it rightly to reality.⁴⁷

God Wants His People to be Little Lights, Persons Who Participate
in the Economy of Light as Wise Witnesses to the Light (the Goal)

Francis Bacon was a prophet of modernity when he declared that “Knowledge itself is power” (Lat. *ipsa scientia potestas est*).⁴⁸ Goethe’s tragedy of *Faust* well depicts the price one pays for lusting after knowledge.⁴⁹ It is highly debatable whether the sheer accumulation of knowledge is an intrinsic good. The twentieth century showed us how true that is (think atomic weapons) and how knowledge can be used for good or evil. The Christian university exists not merely to gather and dispense knowledge (*scientia*) but to cultivate wisdom

⁴⁵ See David Whidden III, *Christ the Light: The Theology of Light and Illumination in Thomas Aquinas* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2015), 8.

⁴⁶ Webster, “God, Theology, Universities,” 160.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 160.

⁴⁸ Francis Bacon, *Meditationes Sacrae* (1597).

⁴⁹ See J. W. von Goethe, *Faust, Parts One and Two*, trans. David Luke (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

(*sapientia*), the right use of knowledge.⁵⁰ Christian academics, in particular, must therefore do more than inform students; they must form them into people who know what to *do* with knowledge in order to care for creation, edify others, and glorify God—and who are willing to do it.

Erasmus understood how central the humanities are in education: “What is the most pernicious thing for man? Ignorance. . . . People are not born, but formed.”⁵¹ He believed that education was the key to the renewal of society. He was concerned about the corruption in his sixteenth-century Christian society, and exhorted popes, princes, and preachers alike to employ what he called the “philosophy of Christ,” which was largely a matter of interpreting the Bible in a way that formed a Christ-centered life.⁵² Should this not be a goal in Christian universities in all times and places? Twenty-first century university students are awash in information and specialist knowledge. In T. S. Eliot’s memorable words: “Where is the wisdom we have lost in knowledge? Where is the knowledge we have lost in information?”⁵³ The goal of a Christian university education ought to be helping men and women become wise in Christ. This requires not simply studying the Bible, but also indwelling its canonical, social, and cosmic imaginary.⁵⁴

Wisdom is first cousin to understanding. We get understanding when we are able to see how things fit together in larger wholes. Learning is the ability to fit more and more things into a picture of the whole, namely, the story of creation, fall, redemption, and consummation recounted in the Bible. Only Scripture (*sola scriptura*) gives us authoritative access to the meaning of life, the whole of history, God, and ourselves. Far from being inimical to reason, or to a university education, Christian faith in the word of God rather aids, abets, and enables learning by pointing us towards the whole without which there can be only information. Recall Bonaventure’s *reduction*: all forms of human knowledge serve to lead us in our journey back to God. This, then, is the triune grammar of light: the Father who is light sends Christ who is the light of the world, who, in turn, sends the Spirit to shine that light in our hearts and minds (2 Cor 4:6).

⁵⁰ On the difference between knowledge and wisdom, and the necessity of the latter, see Mary Midgley, *Wisdom, Information, and Wonder: What is Knowledge for?* (London: Routledge, 1989).

⁵¹ Desiderius Erasmus, “*De pueris instituendis*” (1529).

⁵² See further Lisa Jardine, ed., *Erasmus: The Education of a Christian Prince* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

⁵³ From T. S. Eliot, “Choruses from ‘The Rock,’” in *Collected Poems 1909–1962* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1991), 147.

⁵⁴ See further my “From Bible to Theology: Learning Christ,” in *Theology, Church, and Ministry: A Handbook for Theological Education*, ed. David Dockery (Nashville: B&H, 2017), 233–256.

Scripture in the Economy of Light

The Bible is a graciously given instance of special revelation and an ingredient in the triune economy of divine light, “a light unto our [academic] path” (Ps. 119:105). Scripture *alone* (*sola scriptura*) is the divinely authored and authorized transcript of the drama of redemption, the key to understanding the story of Jesus Christ and thus for everything that happens in the Great Theater of the World.

Sola scriptura gets a lot of bad press yet, rightly understood, it plays a vital role in the Christian university curriculum.⁵⁵ A picture of *sola scriptura*—of an individual interpreting the Bible alone without consulting any other source—gives biblical authority a bad name, as it seems to marginalize science. However, the Protestant Reformers never intended to suggest that Scripture ought to be the only thing people study in the academy. One should not confuse *sola* with “solo” *scriptura*.⁵⁶ By *sola scriptura*, the Reformers affirmed the Bible as the supreme and final authority for Christian faith and thought, but not the only authority. Scripture is the supreme court, but there are lower courts that also have a role to play, including the various academic disciplines that are part of the economy of common light (i.e., general revelation).

Recall that for N. T. Wright, knowledge takes place “when people *find things that fit* with the particular story” that expresses their worldview.⁵⁷ I have been arguing that, in a Christian university, the Bible should function as the control story into which other knowledge fits. This suggests an entirely different sense of the Bible as “a document of the university.” Instead of looking *at* the Bible the way critics examine every other book, we ought to be looking *along* the Bible in our respective academic disciplines: in the Bible’s light, we see more light.⁵⁸ Scripture alone provides for the possibility of a unifying

⁵⁵ For a recent critical examination of *sola scriptura*, see Hans Burger, Arnold Huijgen, Eric Peels, eds., *Sola Scriptura. Biblical and Theological Perspectives on Scripture, Authority, and Hermeneutics* (Leiden: Brill, 2018). For a defense of the traditional view, see D. A. Carson, ed., *The Enduring Authority of the Christian Scriptures* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2016); Matthew Barrett, *God’s Word Alone: The Authority of Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2016); and, John C. Peckham, *Canonical Theology: The Biblical Canon, Sola Scriptura, and Theological Method* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2016).

⁵⁶ A point made effectively by Keith A. Mathison, *The Shape of Sola Scriptura* (Moscow, ID: Canon Press, 2001).

⁵⁷ N. T. Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God* (London: SPCK, 1993), 37.

⁵⁸ I take this distinction from C. S. Lewis’s essay “Meditation in a Toolshed,” in which he compares looking *at* a beam of light and looking *along* it (in *God in the Dock: Essays on Theology and Ethics* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1970], 212–215). Scripture, I suggest, is that beam of light.

vision for the university. Two cautions are necessary at this point.

First, *sola scriptura*, rightly understood, does not attempt to use the Bible as a scientific textbook. This is the temptation of a naïve Biblicism that forces the text to speak to issues or answer questions it does not address.⁵⁹ At the same time, *sola scriptura*, rightly understood, does not restrict the scope of Scripture to matters of personal faith either. This is the temptation of a dualism that segregates the sacred and the secular. Abraham Kuyper rebuts such dualism when he famously claimed, in his dedicatory address at the founding of the Free University of Amsterdam, that, “There is not a square inch in the whole domain of our human existence over which Christ, who is Sovereign over all, does not cry: ‘Mine!’”⁶⁰ The Bible speaks authoritatively about “every square inch” of reality, yet it does so in a particular way and at a particular level. And this leads me to my second point.

Scripture is authoritative in the university, yes, but not as a privileged source that trumps or supersedes scientific data. The nuts and bolts of academic work in each disciplinary domain—study, induction, analysis, etc.—remain necessary.⁶¹ Scripture’s singular role is to serve as the overarching story or metanarrative that informs and transforms the social (and academic) imaginary, our sense of the origin, order, and purpose of things, and how they fit together. The Bible provides precious testimony as to where we came from and where, in Christ, we’re going. The unified story of Adam, Israel, and Jesus Christ answers the big questions that no one academic department can possibly answer. It is this story, underwritten by the triune God, that reveals God and his relation to the universe and, ultimately, provides coherence to the university. The Bible makes known the ground, grammar, and goal of the university by disclosing that all things ultimately lead back to the triune God, their beginning and end.

*The Academic Disciplines in Biblical Perspective:
The Natural and Human Sciences*

Article 2 of the Belgic Confession (1561) treats “The means by which we know God,” declaring that we know God by his “two books.” The first, Nature, is “a beautiful book, in which all creatures, great and small, are as letters to make us ponder the invisible things of God.” The second of God’s two books is, of course, the Bible. Bavinck draws an important implication: “It must never be

⁵⁹ For a criticism of such naïve Biblicism, see Christian Smith, *The Bible Made Impossible: Why Biblicism is not a Truly Evangelical Reading of Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2012).

⁶⁰ In James D. Bratt, ed., *Abraham Kuyper: A Centennial Reader* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 488.

⁶¹ A still valuable resource for modelling a balanced approach is Bernard Ramm, *The Christian View of Science and Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1954).

forgotten that even on the view that the Bible and nature, since they come from the same God, cannot be in conflict, it is still quite possible for the exegesis of the two to come into conflict with each other.⁶² This is a most important point, and worth exploring further, for it is simply not true that theology and science are locked in mortal combat. The real conflict lies not between theology and the sciences, but between rival metaphysics that skew the interpretation of both God's books.⁶³

Natural Sciences

To recapitulate: God is the author of two books, the one studied by science and the other by theology. Why, then, do theology and science appear so often to disagree? Bavinck is right in stating that the problem is not with the divinely authored texts, but with their humanly formulated interpretations: "Conflict arises only because both the text of the book of Scripture and the text of the book of nature are often so badly read and poorly understood."⁶⁴

Reading God's two books rightly is the principal task of the Christian university. However, right reading is a matter not simply of following methods and procedures, but also of becoming the right kind of person—a person of intellectual virtue.⁶⁵ Being honest, careful, and humble is as important in the natural sciences as everywhere else in the university, including biblical interpretation. Wisdom is the chief intellectual virtue, and has to do with the willingness to relate fields of knowledge to the bigger picture of life's meaning. As we read in the book of Proverbs: "Pride goes before reduction(ism)." Well, that's not quite right. Yet reductionism is a kind of fall: a loss of the organic and comprehensive knowledge of the universe—the knowledge of how parts fit into the whole—that a *university* should be after. Disciplinary myopia ultimately results in a distortion of reality. Bonaventure's *reduction*—tracing all things back to their origin of God—is poles apart from a *reductionism* that explains complex phenomena in terms of a single academic discipline or theory only, a massive simplification that keeps scientists from seeing the forest for the trees.⁶⁶

Reductionism is no respecter of disciplines. It is not legitimate for a physicist to say that there is no soul, or God, on the grounds that reality

⁶² Bavinck, "Christendom en Natuurwetenschap," 200; cited in Al Wolters, "Herman Bavinck on Faith and Science," in *Facets of Faith and Science*, vol. 2, ed. Jitse M. van den Meer (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1996), 49–50.

⁶³ See further, Alvin Plantinga, *Where the Conflict Really Lies: Science, Religion, & Naturalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

⁶⁴ Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 2:496.

⁶⁵ I treat intellectual virtue further below.

⁶⁶ See further, John Lennox, *Can Science Explain Everything?* (Oxford: The Good Book Company, 2019).

is nothing but matter in motion. That would be to mistake a claim about matter in motion (physics) with the nature of reality (metaphysics), and to think that the latter collapses into the former.⁶⁷ Yet, a theologian would be equally wrong to pay no attention to what science tells us about matter, for to deny our material reality is to fall prey to one of the oldest heresies on the books, Gnosticism, and its mistaken notion that material reality is the source of all evil. The truth, of course, is that God created material reality and “saw that it was good” (Gen 1:10, 12, 18, 21, 25).

One cause of the apparent conflict between the biblical story and the natural sciences is the persistent failure to distinguish science from scientism, physics from metaphysics.⁶⁸ Too many people believe that, just because science has proven so instrumentally successful, it must have privileged access to the nature of reality. This is a false inference. No amount of physics can establish a metaphysical proposition, for they pertain to different orders of discourse and different aspects of reality. To think that physics can establish metaphysical conclusions is to commit the most egregious error of all: a category mistake.⁶⁹

Science has not and cannot prove metaphysical claims such as “all reality is material.” Materialist naturalism is a faith, a cleverly devised myth—and one that flies in the face of the Bible’s story. Scientism—the belief in the omniscience of the natural sciences—is not scientific theory, but a form of reductionism.⁷⁰ One of the most common temptations for academics is the urge to reduce the reality under examination to what one’s own discipline or one’s own theory can explain or master. Science itself is not the problem; the problem is scientists who overreach. It is tempting to play god over a few square inches of the universe. Little children, keep yourselves from reductionisms (1 John 5:21).

⁶⁷ For a critique of the metaphysical and methodological naturalism behind much scientism, see J. P. Moreland, *Scientism and Secularism: Learning to Respond to a Dangerous Ideology* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2018).

⁶⁸ Metaphysics is a philosophical theory about the nature of ultimate reality. Materialistic metaphysics may overlap with physics in a way that Platonic metaphysics, where the spatial and temporal is thought to be less real than the spiritual and eternal, does not. On metaphysics, see John W. Carroll, *An Introduction to Metaphysics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

⁶⁹ A category mistake confuses one kind of thing for another. The philosopher Gilbert Ryle coined the term to describe what he thought to be the error of describing the mind as an “immaterial substance.” See his *The Concept of Mind* (London: Hutchinson’s University Library, 1949).

⁷⁰ For an interdisciplinary examination of scientism and the limits of science, see Maarten Bourdri and Massimo Pigliucci, eds., *Science Unlimited? The Challenges of Scientism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017).

Human Sciences

The human and social sciences pose their own peculiar challenges. While self-knowledge is desirable, one wonders whether human beings are best understood through strict scientific methods, or whether historical, sociological, economic, and psychological modes of inquiry share similar methodological commitments.⁷¹ Here, too, there is a temptation to overreach one's disciplinary limits as academics strive to explain the mechanisms, motivations, and morals of human beings. Some think that molecular genetics contains the answer to the riddle of human existence; others look to psychology, sociology, economics, and so on.⁷² However, no department in secular universities is successfully tackling the big questions like, "Who is truly living the good life?" or "How does one become a genuinely good person?" Just as we need to read the book of Nature in conjunction with the book of Scripture, so we need biblical wisdom in order to understand the human creature and the shape of human flourishing.

Human beings stand in the world condemned, as it were, to act: "the human problem is *to find in knowledge a solid basis for action*."⁷³ This is the drama of human existence: we have to choose how to live, or else we simply fall into well-worn social ruts, in which case we let the masses determine how we live. A "liberal arts" education was originally supposed to be an education in how to use one's freedom.⁷⁴ The natural sciences explore physical causation; the human sciences explore the use of freedom. Can the university tell us how to live so that we will flourish, as individuals and communities? This is an enormously important perennial question, yet the twenty-first century university seems as far from answering it as ever.⁷⁵

⁷¹ Wilhelm Dilthey's classic 1883 treatise, *Introduction to the Human Sciences*, is still valuable: *Wilhelm Dilthey: Selected Works vol. 1* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991).

⁷² The case of Edward O. Wilson is particularly instructive. Trained as an entomologist, Wilson eventually came to apply what he learned about bee colonies to human societies. The result: an evolutionary account that roots human group behavior (sociology) in evolution (biology)—and a new field, *sociobiology*. The critical question is whether one can, or ought to, reduce sociology to biology as Wilson does. See his *Sociobiology: The Abridged Edition* (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1980), and *The Meaning of Human Existence* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2014).

⁷³ Dallas Willard, "The Bible, the University, and the God Who Hides," in *The Bible and the University*, ed. Jeffrey and Evans, 17.

⁷⁴ See further Michael S. Roh, *Beyond the University: Why Liberal Education Matters* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014), and Martha C. Nussbaum, *Not for Profit: Why Democracy Needs the Humanities* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010).

⁷⁵ Miroslav Volf and Matthew Croasman argue that theology is the best placed

The Bible, our “holy script,” provides direction for meaningful action: orientation as to why we, the church, are here, and direction as to what we should be doing as a holy nation.⁷⁶ And yet the arts, humanities, and social sciences also have a vital role to play in orienting students to reality as it is and is being renewed in Christ. Remember the social imaginary, the main engine behind our secular age? What conveys a social imaginary—we could also call it a plausibility structure—is not explicit propositions, but the images and stories by which a people live. As its name is, so it does: culture cultivates. What culture cultivates—what it grows—is the social imaginary, the storied framework that generates the beliefs and practices that make up a particular culture.⁷⁷

The arts matter too. We need poets, musicians, and artists, for these disciplines also, when they express a Christian worldview, are ministries of reality. The arts can help us grasp the meaning of the whole, the mystery of human existence, something that eludes the hard sciences. It is precisely for this reason that Eugene Peterson commends poetry to pastors: “The theologian’s best ally is the artist. . . . We must see the imagination as an aspect of ministry.” If Peterson could set up his own seminary curriculum, he would spend a whole year on a couple of poets: “I would insist that students learn how to read poetry, learn how words work.”⁷⁸ Reading imaginative literature is indeed an excellent way to grasp of the meaning of the whole.⁷⁹

Elsewhere I have described the imagination as a cognitive faculty that helps us perceive or create meaningful patterns.⁸⁰ Whereas analysis is reason

discipline in the university to tackle questions concerning the meaning and conditions of human flourishing in their *For the Life of the World: Theology that Makes a Difference* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2019).

⁷⁶ I define Christian doctrine as “theatrical direction for discipleship” in my *Hearers and Doers: A Pastor’s Guide for Making Disciples through Scripture and Doctrine* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2019), 132–137.

⁷⁷ For the relation between cultural and spiritual formation, see my “That’s the Spirit! Or, What Exactly Does Spiritual Formation Form?” in *Tending Soul, Mind, and Body: The Art and Science of Spiritual Formation*, ed. Gerald L. Hiestand and Todd Wilson, (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2019), 51–69.

⁷⁸ Eugene H. Peterson, “On Pentecostals, Poets, and Professors” in *Subversive Spirituality* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 252.

⁷⁹ It is also a way of understanding people who are quite different from oneself, and this alone warrants pastors reading fiction. See further Cornelius Plantinga, Jr., *Reading for Preaching: The Preacher in Conversation with Storytellers, Biographers, Poets, and Journalists* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2013).

⁸⁰ Kevin J. Vanhoozer, “Introduction: The Discarded Imagination: Metaphors by Which a Holy Nation Lives,” in *Pictures at a Theological Exhibition: Scenes of the Church, Worship, and Witness* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2016), 17–46.

taking things apart, the imagination is reason in its synthetic Sunday best, putting things together, making creative associations that enable new discoveries. The imagination is what allows us to formulate hypotheses: *what ifs?* The Bible helps us imagine not *what if* but *what is*. Faith in *what is* in Christ comes from the hearing of a word that captures the imagination, and the desires of our heart.

In sum: the goal of a Christian university should be to help students become biblically literate, to understand the story of the Bible, and to imagine the world that Scripture imagines. Being biblical in a pluralistic academy means learning to study the natural world and interpret human experience in light of the all-encompassing drama of creation, salvation, and consummation.

Being Biblical: Four Academic Implications

We have now examined two different ways of being biblical in the pluralistic academy. The first involved studying the Bible as a document of the university from various disciplinary perspectives. The second, specifically Christian way, involved retrieving the Bible as the control story in whose light the various academic disciplines pursue their respective tasks. It may be helpful to draw out four further implications of this second strategy.

1. The biblical story of the triune God's self-communication to creation ought to be the ground and grammar of the social imaginary that serves as the unifying framework of the Christian university.

Scripture alone provides the "deep background" that helps academics consider the ground, grammar, and goal of their respective disciplines. Scripture alone is a reliable guide to the most fundamental questions about (a) the nature of reality (ontology), (b) the nature of the human person (anthropology), and (c) how we go about knowing the subject matter so we can trust the results of the knowing process (epistemology). In John Webster's words: "For the regenerate intellect, there are no secular studies, because there is nothing which is not to be traced to God as its principle."⁸¹ For the Christian scholar, faith in Christ "lays comprehensive claim to all of reality in a pluralistic world."⁸²

A faith-based university provides a unique context for scholars to think Christianly across the entire spectrum of knowledge, at every point tracing intelligibility back to the One through whom and for whom all things were made (this is Bonaventure's sense of *reduction*). However, many Christian

⁸¹ Webster, "On the Theology of the Intellectual Life," in *God without Measure*, 2: 155.

⁸² Craig G. Bartholomew, "Scripture and the University," in *Introducing Biblical Hermeneutics: A Comprehensive Framework for Hearing God in Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2015), 466.

scholars receive their PhDs from secular institutions where they may have inadvertently learned naturalized versions of their disciplines, so the learning curve may be steep.

2. Christian scholars in all departments ought to follow Plantinga's advice to Christian philosophers to let faith rather than secular concerns set their discipline's agenda or dictate its methods.

Some years after delivering his celebrated 1984 lecture "Advice for Christian Philosophers" (his inaugural address upon becoming a Professor of philosophy at the University of Notre Dame), Alvin Plantinga added a "Preface" for Christian thinkers from different disciplines.⁸³ In it, he rightly points out that it is not just in philosophy that scholars "are heavily influenced by the practice and procedures of our non-Christian peers." We imbibe the prevailing assumptions about our disciplines as we do our mother's milk, even when these assumptions do not mesh with our Christian convictions. This is true even of biblical scholarship and theology in places where the Bible is studied "like every other book."⁸⁴ The result: when scholars trained in secular schools start teaching at their Christian institutions, they try to "integrate" their faith with their secular learning, which often results in adding Christian icing to a cake baked in the oven of methodological naturalism. Plantinga's advice: "In these areas, then, as in philosophy, it is up to Christians who practice the relevant discipline to develop the right Christian alternatives."

C. Stephen Evans makes the same point, but phrases it differently: "In the grand tournament of narratives, we Christian scholars must not lose our nerve."⁸⁵ Craig Bartholomew spells out what this might look like in practice: "Christian scholarship must insist on doing its work 'in Christ' and should not make the mistake of yielding the epistemic foundations and then trying to reach Christian conclusions from alien starting points."⁸⁶ Thanks to Plantinga and others who founded the Society of Christian Philosophers, Christian philosophy now has a firm foothold in the secular academy. Other disciplines, alas, have not yet been as fortunate. Consequently, much work remains to be done.

⁸³ The original lecture is published in James F. Sennett, ed., *The Analytic Theist: An Alvin Plantinga Reader* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 296–315. The new preface is available at http://www.faithandphilosophy.com/article_advice.php (accessed Feb. 4, 2019).

⁸⁴ See further, Alvin Plantinga, "Two (or More) Kinds of Scripture Scholarship," in *Behind the Text: History and Biblical Interpretation*, ed. Craig Bartholomew, C. Stephen Evans, Mary Healy, and Murray Rae (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003), 19–57.

⁸⁵ "Afterword – The Bible and the Academy: Some Concluding Thoughts and Possible Future Directions," in *The Bible and the University*, ed. Jeffrey and Evans, 310.

⁸⁶ Bartholomew, "Scripture and the University," 468.

3. Radically Christian scholarship requires persons whose minds and hearts have been reformed by God's Word and renewed by God's Spirit, disciples prepared to follow Christ where he leads in the disciplines.

Christian scholarship is radical, both because it gets to the "root" (Lat. *radix*) of reality (the *Logos* through whom and for whom all things were made and in whom all things hold together) and because those who indwell the story Scripture tells will often go against the flow of received knowledge and prevailing opinion.

To be a disciple of Jesus Christ in one's discipline means that we have to become both scholars and saints, the kind of people who can follow both the evidence where it leads and the Lord. Christian scholars need a robust biblical imagination in order to make the Bible their control story, and the willingness to stake their reputations, if not their lives, by entering into it intellectually. When they do enter into what Karl Barth called "the strange new world of the Bible," they become witnesses to and participants in a great historical drama, the drama of redemption in Christ.⁸⁷ It's as if the chief character in the drama, who is also its producer and director, is calling them up on to the academic stage and saying, "This is your part. Play it to the glory of God."

To be a disciple is to be a follower of words. The privilege and responsibility of teaching in a Christian university is to work out what discipleship to God's word, Jesus' words, and Jesus the Word looks like in each and every discipline. "The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few" (Matt 9:37).

4. Christian universities must not simply teach the content of a subject matter but train students to bear true witness to it.

Christian universities should form students to bear true witness to God, and to all things in relation to God. This requires a modicum of theological competence: one has to know how to follow the story of the Bible in order to know the God of the gospel and the gospel of God. It also requires the intellectual virtues. An intellectual virtue is a habit of mind that is conducive to the truth.⁸⁸ By way of contrast, an intellectual vice is a habit of mind that is more likely than not to lead you away from the truth. Unfortunately, intellectual vices abound in the academy: dishonesty, stubbornness, impatience, carelessness and, most devastating of all, pride. In the pluralistic academy, the manner of Christian witness matters, almost as much as the content. Christian scholars must display clarity, charity, honesty, patience, and, above all, humility. After all, this is what Paul held out to the Philippians as "the mind of Christ" (Phil 2).

⁸⁷ Karl Barth, "The Strange New World of the Bible," in *The Word of God and the Word of Man* (Gloucester, MA: Peter Smith, 1978), 28–50.

⁸⁸ See further Linda Zagzebski, *Virtues of the Mind: An Inquiry into the Nature of Virtue and the Ethical Foundations of Knowledge* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996) and Robert C. Roberts and W. Jay Wood, *Intellectual Virtues: An Essay in Regulative Epistemology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

Students need to learn character as well as content. Truth telling in Scripture is not simply an impersonal procedure, but an ethical affair. Sometimes our witness to the truth will be costly. Indeed, we may have to take up our cross into the academy, and look foolish to those who reject the Bible's story. We must have the courage, not complacency, of our convictions.⁸⁹

Conclusion: Seeking Wisdom; Learning Christ; Getting Real

Dallas Willard shrewdly notes that there is no "department of reality" to be found in the university.⁹⁰ Of course, this does not stop various departments from making assumptions about reality as a whole. The problem is that most scholars rarely give a justification for these covert metaphysical assumptions. That is no surprise, because oftentimes what passes for metaphysics (a theory of reality) is often no more than a set of "cleverly devised myths" (2 Pet 1:16).

As we have seen, reductionism is the cardinal sin of the university. Reductionism is the notion that only one level of reality is "really" real. For example, naturalism is the faith that all things can ultimately be reduced to matter in motion, elementary physical particles. Edward Wilson's theory of sociobiology is essentially the attempt to explain sociological phenomena by explaining them in terms of biological categories.⁹¹ This is a classic example of disciplinary pride that considers one's own specialization and level of reality as the one that explains all the others.

The reality is more complex. Rather, *reality* is more complex. The book of Nature, like texts in general, is a multi-leveled reality. Just as texts are composed of letters, words, and paragraphs that can combine into more complex semantic realities, so physical reality can be studied at various levels and *no one level is "more real" than another*.⁹² Created reality is composed of a hierarchy of levels: the higher (i.e., more complex) levels depend on the lower (i.e., less complex) levels, but may not be reduced to them. For example, biology depends on physics, but you cannot understand a cell with Newton's laws of motion. Each level of reality brings with it new complexity, and thus the need for new concepts, theories, and academic disciplines.

The Book of Nature is unified and legible. It is the handiwork of a single Author. And yet, like written texts, you can study different aspects or levels of the Book of Nature. Some people—call them physicists—are interested in the phonics, as it were; others, like biologists, are interested in larger literary forms (i.e., organisms). Instead of viewing the university as an arena in which the

⁸⁹ See further, my "The Trials of Truth: Witness, Martyrdom, and the Epistemology of the Cross," in *First Theology: God, Scripture & Hermeneutics* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2002), 337–373.

⁹⁰ Willard, "The Bible, the University, and the God Who Hides," 20.

⁹¹ See note 72 above.

⁹² I owe this crucial insight to Peacocke, *Theology for a Scientific Age*, ch. 12.

disciplines vie for bragging rights, or a competition where only one department gets to explain reality, consider a different analogy. Just as the church is “one body, many members,” so there is one university, but many departments. Being biblical in a pluralistic academy means viewing each member (academic department) as having its own unique spiritual gift (perspective on the whole). Only when they work together can we get “thick,” intellectual satisfying answers to the big questions, rather than the “thin” gruel offered by reductionist accounts of reality.

And this brings me back to the place of theology in the university. There is tremendous pressure in Western universities for theology to become religious studies, that is, to admit that it is not the study of God but rather the study of human religious behavior. This, after all, is the key assumption of the secular academy, namely, that reality is *this-worldly*. For two hundred years, universities in the West have therefore been theology-free zones. But what is secularism if not the belief that the only real explanatory factors are immanent to the space-time causal nexus—in other words, the belief that the earth is *flat*?⁹³

Christian theologians must never back down when reality is the topic. One of the most important tasks of Christian doctrine is to set forth in speech *what is* “in Christ.” The evangelical fact of the matter is that God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself (2 Cor 5:19). What is in Christ? The short answer is “grace and truth” (John 1:14). The longer answer includes true deity, true humanity, reconciliation, and a renewed created order. What is in Christ, in a word, is *eschatological* reality: the first fruit of the new heaven and the new earth.⁹⁴ To the extent that Christian doctrine contributes to our understanding of reality by saying what is “in Christ,” it belongs in the university, as the discipline that describes reality at its higher levels.

All concepts of reality that do not take account of the person and work of Jesus Christ will be abstractions at best. For the world has neither reality nor intelligibility apart from Jesus Christ. Christ is the ground, grammar, and goal of the universe: the One by whom all things were made (John 1:3), in whom all things now hold together (Col 1:17), and will eventually be summed up (Eph 1:10).

Being biblical in the academy is ultimately a matter not simply of apprehending, but living out our knowledge of the real in Jesus Christ. Lived knowledge is, of course, wisdom, and its price is beyond rubies—and tuition!

⁹³ Charles Taylor’s name for what I am calling “flat earth” is the “immanent frame,” a way of describing a way of thinking that excludes all reference to the transcendent or supernatural. See his *A Secular Age* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007), ch. 15.

⁹⁴ See further, my *Faith Speaking Understanding: Performing the Drama of Doctrine* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2015), 129.

In my ideal university classroom, students would learn not only theory, nor skills alone, but good judgment: the ability to choose what is good, true, and beautiful—what best fits with the story of what God is doing in Jesus Christ—and this requires not only specialized knowledge, but the big theodramatic picture—and lots of practice learning how to read the Bible as a unified story.

Creation is the context for wisdom, Christ the content for wisdom, and the canon is the curriculum for wisdom.⁹⁵ Everything in the Bible, not just the book of Proverbs, is part of the divine pedagogy that leads us deeper into the mystery of what God is doing in Jesus Christ through the Spirit.

Every discipline, regardless of the particular aspect of reality it studies, needs to rethink its ground, grammar, and goal in relation to God's plan to create, hold together, and restore all things in Christ. We are to present our bodies, including our bodies of knowledge, as an offering to God. It is the privilege and responsibility of Christian academics to participate in the triune economy of light, to be "little lights" through whom the light of truth can shine on others. This is the spiritual or authentic reasonable (*λογικῆν*) worship (Rom 12:1) of the academician. May we all, regardless of our disciplinary homes, learn this lesson about how to be biblical in a pluralistic academy: to see and to say how all things in the universe, and the university, find their place in Christ Jesus.

⁹⁵ I deploy the "ground, grammar, and goal" triad in similar fashion in my "The Theology of Wisdom," in *Where Wisdom May Be Found: The Eternal Purpose of Christian Higher Education*, ed. Edward P. Meadors (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2019), 43–55.