

# What's Biblical integration?

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Exploring or learning about anything in God's world without considering God's revelation of His plans and purposes for His creation is foolishness. But of course, you know that the Bible, God's word, is important. Obviously, anything that claims to be Christ-centered must be Bible-based or it is merely the figment of our imagination. But what exactly is the role of the Bible in education? Why do many students struggle to see the relevance of the Bible? Why do many teachers find transformational interactions with their students so much easier outside the classroom, rather than in the midst of studying the details of what God has made, where Romans 1 says His power and nature are clearly seen (vv. 19-20)?

Twenty years ago, I was asked to teach a course on Biblical Integration in Bratislava, Slovakia, for a week and I had no idea what I would say. However, preparing that class was a turning point in a journey that continues today.

I grew up in a good Christian home. My parents were sacrificially committed to telling people about their need for a Savior. Family devotions with Bible reading were a regular part of life, as well as active involvement in a great local church. After high school, I attended Bible college, but struggled because my chosen profession—scientist—seemed to have no place in “Christian ministry.” It took an almost audible word from God to move me toward a career that combined my interests and gifting with “God’s work”—missionary teacher. At that time, I had only a glimmering of what was involved besides going overseas to teach science. After three years of Bible and theology, I graduated with all the academic qualifications to be a full-time pastor or missionary, but it was only after all of this that I began to realize that the Bible had something to say about all of life—things like traffic laws, finances, and the sciences. Eventually I ended up teaching at Black Forest Academy, but it was 20 years—in Bratislava—before I finally began to see how what I taught could be related to God’s word in a way that made sense to me and in a way that I could communicate to others.

What is wrong with this picture? It is clear from my experience that the presence of the Bible, knowledge of the Bible, or even study of the Bible, doesn’t guarantee that anyone can begin intentionally making connections between all of life and learning and God and His word. The most critical thing I learned that week in 1998 was to stop trying to find Bible verses to fit into my chemistry classes and begin thinking carefully about how chemistry—and everything else—fit into who God is and what He is doing. It required a 180° shift in thinking. However, I’ve discovered at least two symptoms of a debilitating problem in my autopilot, my view of the world when I’m not consciously thinking about it, that undermine the role of the Bible in my teaching.

The first symptom of my problem that I began to recognize was a limited understanding of redemption—“It’s all about me.” I had heard lots about redemption in Christ, but somehow my concept of redemption was too small. It wasn’t as big as the scope of God’s creation or man’s sin.

Probably the most well-known salvation verse in the Bible is John 3:16. It is quoted in all kinds of appropriate—and sometimes inappropriate places. “For God so loved the world.” But, I hadn’t thought about all that it means. For instance, what in the world does “world” mean? In 1 John 2:15, the same author says, “Love not the world, neither the things that are in the world.” How can both verses be true? Why would John tell us not to love what God loves? It seems we must be careful about our definitions, because there are at least two very different “worlds” being talked about. One talks about the sin-shaped system that tries to function independent of God, denying His involvement and thanklessly misappropriating His gifts, and the other talks about people—right?

Why didn't God clear up the confusion when He revealed His heart to John and inspired him to write both passages? Why didn't John just say, "For God so loved people?" Did God want to include more about Himself in this revelation? What about "For God so loved the earth and everything in it, including people?" After all, He made the whole universe with great creativity, an eye for beauty, even a sense of humor, and then He put people in His world to care for and develop everything. Does God still love everything He made even though people's sin has caused so much pain, destruction and death? Do we believe that redemption involves EVERYTHING?

What if John had written, "For God so loved the cows?" Does that sound sacrilegious? Consider what God said to the most famous and successful evangelist of the Old Testament? Jonah may have been reluctant, but that is understandable if we remember that his mission was liking sending a Messianic Jew to Tehran today for an open-air evangelistic crusade. However, in 3 days, hundreds of thousands of people repented, and the course of history was transformed. You remember Jonah wasn't pleased with the results. He didn't believe that Gentile "dogs" should be saved. They didn't even qualify as people in his mind. So, God had to set him down and reveal His heart to the reluctant evangelist. "Should I not pity Ninevah, that great city, which has more than 120,000 persons who do not know their right hand from their left"—children under the age of 3 or 4—"and also much cattle." God loves His cows on whichever of the 1000 hills they now live as Asaph (50:10) and David confirm in the Psalms (36:6).

There isn't anything in all God's creation that He isn't concerned about, that isn't cared for by Him, even if people are worth more than anything else. Jesus confirmed that people are worth more than many sparrows (Luke 12:7), but that doesn't give anyone the right to misuse or devalue the smallest part of His creation. As Abraham Kuyper said, "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!"

But is this just an Old Testament idea? Romans 8 is well known and verse 28 is often quoted ("we know that all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to *his* purpose"), but verses 19-23 don't seem to be as popular.

The creation waits in eager expectation for the sons of God to be revealed. For the creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God. We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time.

All of creation is waiting for its liberation from all the effects of sin. Christ not only has redeemed people but will also remove all the effects of sin from His creation. People are first, but not to the exclusion of everything else. Our understanding of redemption must be as big as God's. In Colossians 1:20-21, Paul reminds us that through Christ "God reconciled **everything** to himself. He made peace with **everything** in heaven and on earth by means of Christ's blood on the cross. **This includes [people]** who were once far away from God," but it is obviously not restricted to people. Somehow, we have interpreted the Bible so that the good news it contains is only about people, as if every other part of God's originally good creation is completely disposable and only people are "recyclable," redeemable.

But the "It's all about me" attitude wasn't the only evidence of a misapplied Bible. The second symptom of the problem was a limited understanding of God's calling—"It's just a job."

Probably everyone has heard some lightbulb jokes like, "How many folk musicians does it take to change a lightbulb? Five. One to change the lightbulb and four to write songs about how much better the old bulb was." Or one senior—but it takes forever. Or four alcoholics—one to hold the bulb and three to drink until the room spins. But what about this serious question, "How many people does it take for God to answer a prayer?" Well, it probably depends on the prayer, right? Let's consider a standard prayer, one Jesus told us to pray—"Give us this day our daily bread." How many people does it take to answer

that prayer? Let's try to count them: farmer, cook, store owner, truck driver. Four? What about all the employees at the store? Who built the store? What did they build it with? Who made the truck and tractor? Where did the metal come from to make the truck? Who made the roads? Who created the money? Who organizes the traffic laws? Who collects the taxes to pay for the roads? Who developed the paint on the truck and the tractor? Who produced the electricity for the store? The fuel for the truck and tractor? So how many of those people should be intentionally and worshipfully serving God's purposes—answering prayer—and meeting the needs of their neighbors? All of them!

Instead of encouraging the breadth and depth of God's calling, we focus on a limited few. We lift up those with special gifts and roles to equip others and act as if they are the only ones serving God. Church work is defined as the work of the equippers (Ephesians 4:11-12) instead of the work done by all members of the Body of Christ. Our vision of God's purposes for all He created and all that He's done to redeem everything can be completely distorted, even when studying the Bible, if we're not careful to deal with the pernicious problem of SSD—the sacred-secular divide.

I began to realize how devastating it is to work from the basic premise that God only cares about a subset of His creation and a subset of life—the sacred—and has little interest in the rest—the secular. We are set up for all kinds of problems. We end up arguing under pressure about a smaller and smaller subset of sacred things while abandoning more and more “secular things” to the enemy of our souls. Without challenge we let the Liar deceive everyone outside the Church, and almost everyone inside, about what belongs to him—nothing—and what belongs to God—everything. Instead of **all** creation directing our attention to God's goodness and greatness, we let anything and everything from creation steal God's glory, we heedlessly misuse and destroy what He has given us to care for and develop, and we kill anything that would dare restrict our myopic vision of the good life. Since we have absorbed so many non-godly ways of viewing God's world, we need to encourage each other to see beyond our blind spots. We must continue the good work that God gave people in the Garden even though the effects of sin make it hard to remember our God-given purpose to be stewards of His world (Genesis 1:26-27, Psalm 8, Psalm 115:16).

Biblical integration involves the development of the great themes of God's Word and not just cherry-picking Bible verses for specific lessons. Everyone and everything has a part in God's Kingdom where a great symphony of worshipful work is to include every instrument and every melody working in harmony, creatively using every unique gift. Biblical integration brings every area of life into the light of God's revelation to expose the lies that tempt us to live as practical atheists, as if He is irrelevant in huge swaths of life. There is no subject studied in any school that is not His subject, and no skill that is not relevant to His calling for all humans to govern well over His material world. Bible integration seeks to equip every new generation to flourish in their Father's world. As an act of obedience and sacrificial love, God's ways will be developed, demonstrated and defended to a world that desperately needs the way, the truth and the life.

Biblical integration isn't an added extra, but the essential core of every life lived under God's authority and certainly any education that seeks to transform any part of God's world by bringing it into the “Kingdom of His dear Son” (Colossians 1:13). Biblical integration recognizes our need for the indwelling Holy Spirit to give all of God's children the desire and power to do what pleases Him with everything (Philippians 2:13). Biblical integration rejects every attempt to separate any part of God's world from His influence. Biblical integration involves living in thankful acknowledgement that “everything come from him and exists by his power and is intended for his glory. All glory to him forever! Amen.” (Romans 11:36).