

Learning Any Subject Biblically—An Article for the Chalcedon Report

by Ronald Kirk, November 2002

Binding Theory and Practice

If God's Word accurately reflects reality, then for the Christian there ought to exist little gap between theory and practice, except what faith requires. The Reformation launched a movement toward directly applying the Faith of Jesus Christ to every area of life. Such a universal view of Christianity found a high expression in the American Pilgrims. In his memorial, Daniel Webster declared that they sought to "diffuse its influence through all their institutions, civil, political, or literary."¹ Many of America's great institutions can trace their lineage to the Pilgrims' applied faith. Today, Christians in our country universally bear a responsibility to build upon this legacy. Without such an integral view of faith and life, only a tiny portion of the power of the gospel is available to our evangelism—the mere vocal part. Furthermore, to deny through our practice God's power over all aspects of our lives in practice is to hold Him in contempt. God saved us to an abundant life! Eternity for us begins now. The dominion mandate remains. God rewards faithful responsibility with blessings and more responsibility (*Matt. 25*). One knows a tree by its fruit. Theory and practice ought to be inseparable.

After two hundred years of increasingly pietistic Christianity, the evangelical church largely denies the importance of "ordinary life" except as a holding cell while we await heaven. Meanwhile, Christians increasingly labor under the influence of godless, mainstream, statist education, culture and civil government. We have all but lost the vision and ability for applied Biblical learning. To bring every thought captive to the obedience of Christ, Christians must regain the scholarly tools to learn and practice the art of life on God's terms. My experience avows that virtually any serious Christian can master applied Biblical scholarship with a modest investment.

A Brief Apologetic

Such scholarship begins with the understanding that Christ is indeed Lord of all life—this one and the next. God created man in His image. However, while man thus possesses certain potential and responsibility, sin corrupts the faculties needed to receive God's bounty toward him. The Lord commands dominion over the earth. Yet from birth, sin so confounds man's faculties that men from infancy acquire the necessary rational skills only with considerable effort. God provided this educational imperative. The Christ-centered man desires to know God's view of life, accepting His revealed will by faith. We thus accept the difficulty of learning and make every effort to learn of God on His terms and put that learning into practice. God rewards such acceptance of His ways, just as He rewards the farmer who plants his crop by faith. The end of scholarship is *application* such that Christ is glorified. The end of all education is to love God and love one's neighbor in particular ways.

Note that we do not seek perfection of knowledge or ability in this life. We will always remain finite and, in this life, sin-compromised to some degree. Apart from enduring trials with faith, we would

tend to trade our dependence upon Christ for pride and, thus, break fellowship, leading to our own destruction. In a word, we *need* trials and faith. We ought then routinely to repent and accept God's way in all things. He will bring the fruit of accomplishment and blessing according to His good pleasure. Education and growth in Christ are the norm. Hence, applied Biblical scholarship ought to be universal.

Objects of Biblical Scholarship

One may expect important results from an applied Biblical scholarship. The ordinarily gentle trials of learning prove character and faith, and strengthen the skills needed for serving the Lord. Wisdom emerges from faithful effort to view life as God requires it. Accomplishment with an integrated Gospel view of life in a given discipline creates opportunities to influence others. A systematic approach to Biblical scholarship in all areas of endeavor will tend toward a general repentance, bringing increasing glory to God before men as its fruit in the scholar grows.

The ability to represent God in the earth with respect to any human discipline or endeavor is a powerful tool for the gospel. Any subject may become an effective instrument of godly civilization. Better apprehension of God's reality will enable higher craftsmanship and accomplishment in all endeavors. Valuable and useful products will result. Mastery should lead toward making a historic personal contribution. Christians should once more realize the potential for great individual contribution.

More particularly, learning God's mind in a particular discipline leads to better decision-making ability. Applied Biblical scholarship should enable discernment of appropriate frontiers and limits—the liberty and law of the subject—leading to appropriate expressions. A Biblical scholarship utilizes God's fundamental relational principle. This principle derives from God's Trinitarian nature and its imprint on His creation. God unites individuals of any and every kind into greater wholes, without diminishing the meaning of the parts. The say creation is the *universe*—one harmonious system consisting of myriads of individual things of every kind, all related in some manner. Men utilize this fact: we *organize* the subject to support ever further mastery and practice. A Biblical method of scholarship will provide a ground of wisdom for choosing appropriate teachers and appropriate learning instruments. As Jesus declares, the student will become like his teacher. This fact of discipleship holds great historic ramifications either for evil or for good. These perhaps homely-sounding ends actually represent powerful means for taking Christian dominion.

The Method

Here is a primer of sorts for applied Biblical scholarship. First, identify the philosophic nature of the subject and describe it in propositions or theses. Historic definitions provide an initial vocabulary for Biblical inquiry. Webster's 1828 *American Dictionary of the English Language*² provides an excellent instrument for this purpose. I use Webster because of his Reformed view of the world. He defines words philosophically from a Biblical and theological perspective to enable understanding of the nature of the subject and its application. For example, of *philosophy* Webster says in part, "The objects of philosophy are to ascertain facts or truth, and the causes of things or their phenomena; to enlarge our views of God and his works, and to render our knowledge of both practically useful and subservient to human happiness. True religion and true philosophy must ultimately arrive at the

same principle.” In Webster, one may find a rudimentary philosophical vocabulary of virtually any subject, even technical ones. Then we can continue to define the subject’s defining terms until an articulate composite definition in one’s own words results.

A simple example: Webster defines music, in part, as “Melody or harmony; any succession of sounds so modulated as to please the ear.” Music ought to be pleasing. Webster immediately defines two major elements of music, *melody*—pleasing sounds individually over time—and *harmony*—pleasing sounds taken together. Variation or modulation also appears as a principle of music, suggesting much of music’s interest to us.

Next, we seek the subject in the Scriptures, using its vocabulary. We note its origin and purpose, and the character God requires for handling it. We seek how God’s Law governs the subject. Principles that rightfully govern the subject, such as that making music ought to glorify God, should appear. This step often requires a kind of detective ability, and working cleverly with synonyms, as the Scripture’s vocabulary in English may not easily coincide with any given subject. Faith and perseverance rule the day. For technical subjects, one seeks philosophical understanding and not necessarily technical data, though the Bible often contains very specific information. A young student once amazed me with his finding a perfect description of a volcano, though the word *volcano* is itself nowhere found in the Bible. Revisiting music as our sample subject, we note the Biblical injunction to make a new song, to praise God with instruments and with skill, but at least with a joyful noise. Such propositions guide our investigation and will tend to beg important questions. Is worship music alone allowed to the believer? Does Scripture forbid music for personal enjoyment? We seek systematic and balanced answers to such questions. Scholarship in systematic theology provides tremendous support for efforts to identify particular disciplines Biblically.

Third, we identify the subject historically to find our place in the lineage of godly thinking, seeking God’s providence upon it. History is the record of God’s providence. We should note where pagan thinking failed to produce godly results, and where Providence gave some degree of success to pagan or clouded Christian efforts. Such observation highlights God’s sovereignty and may provide hints as to the need for particular repentance. We seek those expressions found in the hands of faithful Biblical thinkers to ascertain the best legacy as a starting place for new contributions. And we should be aware of those countries most influenced by the gospel, those that knew the greatest blessing and liberty. It also helps to know and understand the Biblical and historic language of institutional Christian liberty. Civil liberty, a gift of God, reflects godly thinking among a people. Such qualities as personal restraint and magnanimity help to identify the best expressions of Christian faith as exemplified in the ability to love one’s neighbor. We may also expect to observe a debasing of expressions as a society increasingly secularizes, as for example, with the poor literacy which results from behavioral psychology-based methods education.

For example, the investigations that some Christians are now undertaking in physics hold some promise of a return to physical models of matter and energy, possibly relieving us of the apparent mysticism and mere mathematical constructs of contemporary quantum and relativistic physics.³ With respect to music, it is interesting to observe how music grows from a folk art or worship expression to a high art as it is more exquisitely wrought. Higher expressions typically build upon more homely ones. J.S. Bach worked the historic material, self-consciously for God’s glory, to a high degree of development of both melody and harmony. Unfortunately, what often begins as a

Christian expression, men appropriate for the glory of man. Much of the music of the Classical, Romantic, and twentieth-century eras reflects this predisposition. In an age of superb technical attainment, Christians now possess a tremendous opportunity to assume creative leadership if we will once more master the craft of musical composition beyond contemporary fashion.

Finally, we should collate the vocabulary and Scriptural and historical research to compose a distinctly Christian model of the subject in terms of propositional truth. Working accurately with the internal qualities of any thing will yield appropriate expressions. A rock will act like a rock and water will act like water due to their constituting qualities. Soup made from rocks makes poor fare. Water makes a poor fire fuel. Evil assumptions will yield corrupt results. Righteous understanding should lead to righteous expressions. Reasoning ability is central here. Paul the Apostle reasoned daily from the Scriptures. So ought we to learn to do in everything that concerns life and living.

Of course, initial efforts may be very rudimentary and may not offer much improvement over existing expressions. However, it is wise to remember that scholarship is learning, and that accomplished scholars are merely experienced learners. Even mere academic exercise can be useful toward subsequent efforts. Nonetheless, I have watched early application to favored subjects light zealous fires for such humble subjects as grammar and accounting! Moreover, discovery through the Scriptures and history can revolutionize a subject for the student. I suggest choosing a limited topic and one that may ordinarily be considered “secular,” as an appropriate initial exercise. This will help to drive home the truth that God is Lord over the most ordinary of concerns.

Understanding Van Til’s learning spiral may be encouraging.⁴ One returns cyclically to the topics that naturally compose a subject. Each new visit gains a greater understanding of any subject topic in terms of the rest. Innovative concepts may arise from such research. Christians bear responsibility to test and prove such novelty as true to the Scriptures. A Berean faith (one that searches the Scriptures) and charity, not skepticism, should rule.

Understanding one’s goal—namely the true nature of and God’s purpose for a subject—leads to a curriculum for learning and implementing it. Determine how the subject breaks into its natural departments for scientific understanding. Organize the subject for skill acquisition—its art—from its rudimentary to its more advanced skills. This is particularly important for subjects such as music, mathematics, or grammar that require skill upon skill in a definite order.

Ultimately, the goal of applied Biblical scholarship is the mastery of a discipline such that its practitioner is capable of contributing to it in history, leaving some legacy for future Christians to build upon. Imagine society’s best musical composers, authors, statesmen, scientists, and teachers being Christians!

Conclusion

To accomplished scholars, all of this may appear a little quaint and elementary. In practice, I have found that appearances are deceiving. How many of us actually possess the tools to apply theology directly to specific subjects, particularly those usually classified as “secular”? How many have mastered a given discipline for application in purely Biblical terms? However, elementary proficiency in applied scholarship can lead to amazingly sound results even among people of little previous accomplishment. Such scholarship provides a God’s-eye-view (by faith) of the subject. I believe God honors in every way the effort to see our work from His point of view. Psalm 91

petitions God to reveal His works and to bless the work of our hands. Many people are using such a homely, self-conscious discipline to accomplish some very interesting work. Some may not pan out; others may lead to startling new frontiers. In any case, God will certainly glorify Himself as we take applied Christian scholarship to heart.⁵

¹ Verna M. Hall, *Christian History of the Constitution* (San Francisco: Foundation for American Christian Education, 1975), 248.

² Available either as a facsimile reproduction from Foundation for American Christian Education, <http://www.face.net>, or P.O. Box 9588, Chesapeake, VA 23321-9588, or on CD-ROM from Christian Technologies, <http://www.christiansoup.com/>, or P.O. Box 2201, Independence, MO 64055

³ See David Bergman, et al, at Common Sense Science, <http://www.commonssencescience.org>.

⁴ Rousas John Rushdoony, *By What Standard? An Analysis of the Philosophy of Cornelius Van Til* (Vallecito, CA: Ross House Books, 1995), 29, available at the Chalcedon Foundation website, <http://www.chalcedon.edu> or P.O. Box 158, Vallecito, CA 95251.

⁵ For more in depth treatments of the subject see *The Philosophy of the Christian Curriculum*, and *Foundations of Christian Scholarship* by R.J. Rushdoony, both available through Chalcedon Foundation.