

What Hath Nature to Do with Grace? A Theological Vision for Higher Education

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Introduction

This essay argues that Scripture is the norm for all of life, including the teaching and learning that take place in higher education. It begins by outlining five historical views of the way God's saving works and word relate to higher education, revealing that many Christians deny that God's special revelation should be a source or norm for non-theological or non-ministerial disciplines. It proceeds to argue in favor of the "grace renews nature" view, which posits that special revelation does in fact shed light on problems in every discipline of a university or seminary. Next, it summarizes the way in which the "grace renews nature" view goes against the plausibility structures established by modern scientism. Finally, it articulates some of the educational benefits of the "grace renews nature" view.

In an essay entitled, "The Intellectual Vocation," R. R. Reno suggests that the intellectual crisis in the West has less to do with relativism, per se, than with the fragmentation or diminishment of the truth. This crisis is crystallized in the modern university. No longer does the West believe that the disciplines of the modern university can come together to teach us about life. In this situation, reason has not been *denied* as much as it has been *demoralized*.¹

Similarly, Gerald Graff, in his book *Clueless in Academe: How Schooling Obscures the Life of the Mind*, describes his experience as a college student in the mid-twentieth century. As he took courses in the various disciplines required as an undergraduate, he felt like he was being shuttled back and forth between incommensurate paradigms. He writes:

What was striking about my experience . . . was how little cognitive dissonance there actually was. Since the perspectives of the literature and sociology courses never came together to be compared and contrasted, they remained in separate mental compartments. . . . Clearly, it is crucial to begin providing students with a more connected view of the academic intellectual universe, one that lets them recognize and

¹ R. R. Reno, *Fighting the Noonday Devil: and Other Essays Personal and Theological* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011), 94–98.

enter the conversation that makes that universe cohere and relates it to the wider world.²

Indeed, modern higher education lacks a connected view of the academic intellectual universe.

It is presupposed in this essay that Christ himself is the unifying factor for higher education, existing as he does as the one who created all things and in whom all things consist (Col 1:15–18). If Christ is the “clue” to the universe, as Lesslie Newbigin once put it, why would he not be the clue to all teaching and learning? If he holds together the universe, how could it not be that he is the coherence of the academy and its curriculum?

The real trick, however, is demonstrating the way in which he is the clue to all teaching and learning, and for this reason the question we intend to answer concerns the relationship between God’s written word and higher education. If, as we confess, Scripture is a divine word and if, as we confess, Christ is divine, then Scripture is his word. Christ—the pre-incarnate and incarnate Word—speaks and rules through the written word.

What, therefore, is the relationship between Scripture and our life in this world? Consider the words of the Psalmist, “Your word *is* a lamp to my feet and a light to my path” (Ps 119:105), or, similarly, “The entrance of Your words gives light; it gives understanding to the simple (Ps 119:130). What does it mean that Scripture provides light for feet on a dimly lit or dark path? What does it mean that the Bible illumines one’s mind and gives understanding? Is the Bible’s helpfulness limited to private spirituality, church life, and certain ethical concerns? Or does it help us to see more clearly and know more truly in other areas of life, such as the ones investigated in the halls of a university or seminary?

This essay will argue that Scripture is the norm for all of life, including higher education and the teaching and learning that take place on campuses. The world we study in higher education is, as I will seek to demonstrate, created by God and it will be renewed and restored by him in the future. It is his world, and therefore the truth about his world is unified in him who is the Creator of it. The Creator’s word sheds light on problems in every discipline of a university or seminary. Because truth is unified, the disciplines are united, forming a whole. Truth in one discipline sheds light on truth in another discipline.

Not only non-Christians, but also many conservative evangelical Christians deny that God’s special revelation is a source for disciplines such as philosophy, literature, anthropology, natural science, or education. But, if special revelation is viewed as irrelevant to the various disciplines, God’s people in the academy will have great difficulty working together to discover truth. H. Evan Runner writes:

² Gerald Graff, *Clueless in Academe: How Schooling Obscures the Life of the Mind* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2004), 65, 77.

If God's Word therefore has no *intrinsic* connection with the world of learning, we shall never have the exhilarating joy of working together as members of Christ's Body to bring to manifestation *in our studies* patterns of God's glorious Kingdom.³

I will begin by outlining several historical views concerning the Bible's relationship to life in general and to teaching and learning in particular. After doing so, I will argue for my view, summarize the way it goes against the plausibility structures established by modern scientism, and then finally articulate some of its benefits.

Nature and Grace: Competing Visions of the Relationship between the Bible and Learning

The question of how to relate nature (human creation and culture, as it has been perverted by sin) and grace (God's saving work and word) is not a question about "teaching and learning in higher education," *per se*, but it is a deeper and more foundational question that must be answered before one can arrive at a coherent conclusion about the relationship of the Bible to teaching and learning. This question concerning the relationship of nature and grace is one which can be answered only by looking at the overarching biblical narrative, discerning the *meaning* of creation, fall, and redemption, and the *relation* between those three plot moves. What one decides about the meaning and relation of creation, fall, and redemption will make all the difference in how one views the relationship of the Bible to life in general and to teaching and learning specifically. Bernard Zylstra writes:

These differing visions [of nature and grace] have exerted a phenomenal impact on the way Christians live in the modern world. For these visions are the human responses to the meaning of the Gospel itself, and they thus shape one's life practice, spirituality, ethic, worldview, and interpretation of Scripture. In the realm of scholarship, these confessional visions shape one's philosophy, theology, and one's understanding of history and science.⁴

This essay enumerates five historical visions concerning the relationship of nature and grace. It should be noted that the healthiest proponents of visions A, B, C, and E tend to look more like each other than they do the unhealthy proponents of their own vision. The only exception is vision D, which is essentially atheistic. For this reason, proponents of the four Christian visions can treat each other as mutually beneficial conversation partners arguing together toward truth, rather than as mere opponents needing to be

³ H. Evan Runner, *The Relation of the Bible and Learning* (Jordan Station, Canada: Paideia, 1982), 42.

⁴ Bernard Zylstra, "Preface to Runner," in Runner, *The Relation of the Bible to Learning*, 23.

dismissed or defeated. Let us examine four of these visions, therefore, before turning to a fifth vision, and the one for which I argue in this essay.

A. Grace above Nature (“Bottom-Floor Education”)

The first vision is one we call “grace above nature.” This vision has many Roman Catholic proponents, but also finds adherents in certain Anglican and more broadly Protestant circles. In particular, this vision is represented by manualist Thomists. Proponents of this vision understand the world as being composed of two stories—nature and grace—which are hierarchically related. A Christian splits his time between the two stories. When he is at church, doing theology, or having personal devotions, he is in the upper story. When he is interacting with his family, working his job, talking politics, or going to college, he is in the lower story. Upper story activities are affected by the Fall and are in need of God’s gracious revelation and redemption. Lower story activities are not affected by the Fall in any way that would necessitate reliance upon God’s special revelation for those activities.

This vision has a distinctive view of the way Christians should live in this world. Proponents of this vision assign special revelation to the upper story of grace, and general revelation to the lower story of nature. When a Christian interacts in the lower story by, for example, building a business, debating politics, or going to work, he draws upon general revelation. Only when he goes upstairs to the second story, the story of grace—in order to go to church, do theology, or spend time in prayer—does he find special revelation waiting to be used.

This vision also has a distinctive view of the way Christians should do scholarship. Not surprisingly, the way Christians of this vision approach scholarship is similar to the way they live in the world. When a Christian professor or student is downstairs studying philosophy, biology, or literature, he should draw upon general revelation. If he wishes, he can draw upon special revelation as he does, say, philosophy. But special revelation is not intended for a task such as philosophy, and if one does bring special revelation into philosophical reasoning, one’s task ceases to be philosophy and becomes a branch of theology, namely, philosophical theology. When a Christian professor or student is upstairs studying theology or ministry, however, he not only can but should draw upon special revelation.

Within the realm of scholarship, Christian professors who teach on the lower floor can easily accommodate the insights of non-Christian professors as long as their insights are drawn from general revelation rather than from religion or biased ideology. In other words, there are no specifically Christian principles or criteria by which one judges what suits the first-floor disciplines best. In this vision, there is no such thing, for example, as *Christian* philosophy. Philosophy can, of course, be done by Christians, but their philosophy is not informed by special revelation and, as such, is not Christian philosophy.

This view has certain strengths. Most significantly, it considers lower-realm activities significant and worthwhile. It values things like teaching and

learning, or politics, or the workplace. It rightly recognizes that sin cannot corrupt ontologically this lower story that God created good. Unfortunately, this view swings too far in the other direction, failing to recognize the misdirecting power of sin in the lower realm, the way that sin and idolatry warp and distort our teaching and learning, or political interactions, and our workplaces. Accordingly, this vision fails to see the necessity of bringing God's grace and his special revelation to bear in that realm in order to redirect it toward God. But we must bring grace and special revelation to bear. After all, if the roof is leaking, the whole house will have water damage, not just the upper story, and the subsequent repair job should affect the rest of the house, and not just the upper story. In short, this view does not recognize sufficiently the necessity of drawing upon special revelation when we find ourselves engaged in lower story activities.

B. Grace against Nature (A Plague on the Educational House)

The second vision is one we call "grace against nature." Historically, proponents of this vision include certain Anabaptists and monastics, as well as some Christians influenced by these streams of Christianity. In the twentieth century, many conservative evangelicals promoted this vision. Proponents of this vision view the natural realm as having been ontologically corrupted by the Fall. The Fall destroyed the goodness of God's creation, and therefore we now experience a barrier between us and God's original creation, to which we no longer have access. The Fall was so devastating to creation that the natural realm (the lower story of the previous view) cannot be saved. Redemption cannot be applied to the lower realm. Instead, redemption includes not only salvation from our sins, but deliverance altogether from the fallen natural realm.

This vision sets forth a distinctive view of the way a Christian should live in this world. Since the world is fallen, we should not view it as our home. After all, in the end, God will not redeem this world. When the Bible says that God will make *all things new*, proponents of this view interpret it as meaning that God will make *all new things*. Accordingly, just as God will build an entirely new world next to this one, we Christians should focus on building the church next to this world, instead of in the midst of it. The good Christian should separate himself as much as possible from the goings-on of the natural realm, as he waits for a salvation that will separate him from it once-and-for-all.

There are varying, and sometimes conflicting, ways this vision affects the way a Christian would go about doing scholarship. Some proponents of this view manifest an indifference toward scholarship and higher education, and a few even reject such things out of hand. Other proponents draw upon special revelation in order to analyze and criticize the myriad ways sin has corrupted this fallen world, to proclaim the dissimilarity between this created-but-fallen world and the entirely new world which God will create one day.

This vision has one especially great strength: its proponents have a keen eye to discern the evil operative in society and culture today. Because they tend to draw upon special revelation regardless of whether they are dealing with matters of grace or matters of nature, and because they are attuned to the warping and distorting power of sin, they are able to wield incisive and prophetic critiques of current social, cultural, and political realities.

However, we reject this vision for several reasons. First, and unlike “grace above nature,” this vision gives sin too much credit. While we agree that the natural realm has been corrupted, we do not agree that it has been made ontologically or essentially bad. The Evil One is not powerful enough to make bad what God has made good. His power is always derivative and parasitic. He can only warp and distort, and such warping and distorting are *directional* rather than *structural*. In other words, even after the Fall, God’s world remains fundamentally good according to his creational design, and is only made bad directionally as human beings orient their social and cultural activities toward false gods and idols rather than toward the one true and living God.

Additionally, this vision unintentionally undermines Christ’s universal lordship. Its proponents view the real kingdom work as being done in the realm of the private heart and the four walls of the church. We respond that Jesus’ lordship is as wide as creation and his kingly reign extends to the natural realm and every sphere of social and cultural life within it. All authority has been given to him in heaven and on earth, and he will not use that authority to decimate the natural realm, but to renew and restore it so that we can live with him in the midst of it.

Lastly, proponents of this view might find themselves trapped. Because they consider nature so corrupt, they tend to attempt to escape culture. But as humans who are part of the created order and who God created as thoroughly cultural beings, we can no more escape these cultural realities than we can jump out of our own skin. Gospel preaching, church planting, theology writing, political discussion, art creation, scientific research—each of these is profoundly and thoroughly cultural, and at the same time should be profoundly and thoroughly informed by God’s gracious revelation and redemption.

C. Grace in Tension with Nature (Pastors and Educators, Dual Ministers of God)

The third vision is one we will call “grace in tension with nature.” Proponents of this vision include Martin Luther, many Lutherans, and a significant number of Reformed evangelicals. Similar to “grace above nature,” proponents of this view divide the world into two separate realms, or kingdoms, but unlike “grace above nature,” they do not relate the two kingdoms hierarchically in the same manner.

In this vision, the two kingdoms live in an uneasy tension beside one another. Both kingdoms are under the rule of Christ, but he rules them in two

different ways. The *natural* kingdom concerns temporal and earthly matters. God rules it as creator and sustainer, and does so through general revelation and common grace. When a Christian finds herself studying philosophy, debating politics, or going to work, she does not need to draw upon special revelation. The natural kingdom is a common kingdom ruled by a common revelation—general revelation—and assisted by common grace.

The *spiritual* kingdom concerns matters of eternal and ultimate spiritual importance. God rules it as redeemer, and does so through special revelation and saving grace. This kingdom is already manifested in the life and ministry of the church, and will one day be fully manifested on the new heavens and earth. When a Christian finds himself praying, worshiping in church, or doing theology, he should draw upon both general and special revelation and will find God assisting via both common and saving grace. The two kingdoms run on parallel tracks and should not be conflated. Each has its own integrity and both live in tension with one another during this time between the times.

This vision has a distinctive understanding of how a Christian lives in the world. As we mentioned above, Christians should not “spiritualize” the natural realm by drawing upon special revelation, or by pursuing cultural activities in the hope that we can transform this world, change the culture, create a distinctively Christian civilization, or bring “healing” to the natural realm. According to this vision, we should respect the natural kingdom as its own autonomous realm. Although our work in the natural realm does have value, it is not “kingdom work” and it is not a part of the Christian mission. Some proponents of this view argue that the cultural mandate no longer holds today and that, when we find ourselves engaging culture, we should do so with a deep sense of detachment.

This vision has a distinctive approach to Christian scholarship. Similar to the “grace above nature vision,” proponents of this view takes scholarship seriously as a task in the natural realm, but most of them argue that it can be accomplished via general revelation and common grace. Biblical revelation is not necessary for non-religious scholarship. Unlike “grace above nature,” however, it does not conceive of the two kingdoms hierarchically.

We reject this vision because it underestimates the power of sin to warp and distort the natural realm. Craig Bartholomew and Michael Goheen write that this vision “does not sufficiently recognize the twisting power of sin on the creation. Those who hold these views may not see the cultural mission of the church as a life-and-death battle. They may feel that the Christian is free to participate in scholarship, politics, economic life, and so forth in precisely the same way as his or her unbelieving neighbors do.”⁵ Indeed, our social and cultural activities are affected profoundly by who or what we worship.

Because this vision underestimates sin’s misdirecting power, it likewise fails to grasp the epistemological insufficiency of general revelation. General

⁵ Michael W. Goheen and Craig G. Bartholomew, *Living at the Crossroads: An Introduction to Christian Worldview* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2008), 62.

revelation never was sufficient, even before the Fall. In the Garden, God came down specially to instruct the first couple about good and evil, and about the tasks he wished for them to fulfill in this world. After the Fall, the insufficiency of general revelation is multiplied. Instead of relying on general revelation alone, we should interpret the world through the lens of God's word, allowing special revelation to bring general revelation into focus and, of course, to bring additional knowledge of its own. John Calvin writes, "Indeed, man's mind, because of its dullness, cannot hold to the right path, but wanders through various errors and stumbles repeatedly, as if it were groping in darkness, until it strays away and finally disappears. Thus it betrays how incapable it is of seeking and finding truth."⁶ Indeed, this vision fails to understand the breadth of the Bible's relevance to cultural tasks, to life in the natural realm.

Finally, this vision can foster an unhealthy social passivism. In *The Question of God*, mid-twentieth-century theologian Heinz Zahrnt tells the story of the German church during the WWII years, arguing that the Lutheran "two kingdoms" theory combined with liberalism to lull the German church into social and political passivity during Hitler's ascendancy.⁷ After the war, in what is now known as the *Stuttgart Confession of Guilt*, leaders of the German Lutheran church confessed, "we reproach ourselves that we did not bear witness more courageously, did not pray more faithfully, did not believe more joyfully and did not love more ardently." However, as Zahrnt, Karl Barth, and others pointed out, if this confession would be more than merely an emotional moment, the German church would have to build a theology which espouses Christian responsibility for ordering the world, rather than merely for ordering one's interior life and ecclesial activities.

D. Nature without Grace (A Naked Public Quad)

The fourth vision is one we will call "nature without grace." The primary proponents of this vision are atheists such as Friedrich Nietzsche, Bertrand Russell, and Richard Dawkins, but also include a small number of liberal-revisionist theologians whose theological frameworks are functionally anti-supernatural. Proponents of "nature without grace" envision the world as an entirely natural realm, devoid of divine grace and special revelation. It has a distinctive vision of how a person should live in the world and engage in scholarship, namely, by doing so without the illusion of divine grace and special revelation. We reject this view because of its denial of God's grace and revelation, because of the many logical, empirical, and existential failings of a naturalistic worldview, and because of the way such a view leaves humanity without transcendence.

⁶ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, vol. 1 (Philadelphia: Westminster John Knox, 1960), 270.

⁷ Heinz Zahrnt, *The Question of God: Protestant Theology in the Twentieth Century* (London: Collins, 1969), 171.

E. Grace Renews Nature (An Educational Preview of a Coming Kingdom)

The fifth vision is one we will call “grace renews nature.” In the modern era, its foremost proponents included Abraham Kuyper and Herman Bavinck. Today, proponents of this vision include John Frame, Peter Leithart, Craig Bartholomew, and Michael Goheen.⁸ In this vision, there is only one kingdom. God created the world as his *good* kingdom (Gen 1:4, 10, 12, 18, 21, 25, 31). After the Fall, his good kingdom remained good structurally, good in the way it is ordered, even though it is corrupted directionally, as human beings direct their social and cultural activities toward false gods rather than the one true and living God (Rom 1:18–32). Unlike “grace above nature” and “grace alongside of nature,” there are not two distinct realms or kingdoms. Unlike “grace against nature,” the Fall has not corrupted the world structurally or ontologically. Unlike “grace above nature,” the Fall has, however, corrupted the world directionally.

In this vision, God covenanted the world into existence and ordered it a theater for his glory. His covenant word sustains creation in its structured order, an order that provides the framework for our creational-cultural lives. God created humanity in his image (Gen 1:26–28; 2:15), instructing them to be fruitful and multiply (a social command), till the soil (a cultural command), and have dominion (a regal-political command). They would fill the earth with God’s glory by multiplying worshipers of God whose cultural activities would reflect God’s designs and God’s glory. The first couple’s sin affected creation and culture, but did so directionally rather than structurally. Satan and sin do not have the power to corrupt God’s creation in its very structures.

⁸ This vision finds some interesting and diverse conversation partners in contemporary theology. For example, Henri de Lubac and other Nouvelle Theologians have given sharp critiques of nature-grace dualism. De Lubac pushed back against nature/grace dualism in general, and against the idea of “pure nature” in particular. The idea of “pure nature” is wrong-headed and prepared the soil for modern secularism which makes nature an autonomous realm with no need for grace. Instead of a pure realm of nature, set apart from grace, de Lubac views nature itself as a gracious gift and indeed a gift which longs for something which exceeds itself. This something—God’s new gift of grace—reorders and redirects nature. John Milbank and the Radical Orthodox theologians have been influenced by de Lubac and similarly reject nature-grace dualism and the idea of a realm of pure nature. The conversation and debate surrounding de Lubac’s work is complex, multi-faceted, and prolix. Two concise articles will benefit readers who wish for a brief initiation to the debate. Nicholas J. Healy, “Henri de Lubac on Nature and Grace: A Note on Some Recent Contributions to the Debate,” *Communio* 35 (Winter 2008): 535–64; Reinhard Hutter, “Desiderium Naturale Visionis Dei—Est autem duplex hominis beatitudo sive felicitas: Some Observations about Lawrence Feingold’s and John Milbank’s Recent Interventions in the Debate over the Natural Desire to See God,” *Nova et Vetera* 5 (2007): 81–131.

They are not as powerful as God's word and therefore cannot destroy creation, but can only misdirect it. Additionally, after the Fall, God provides a "common grace" that keeps the world from being as evil as it could be and sustains the created realm in such a way that we humans can build a common life together.

In this vision, Christ's atoning work renews creation. Unlike "grace above nature," this vision recognizes the misdirecting effect of sin on the creational realm and the subsequent need for that realm to be renewed and restored. Abraham Kuyper writes:

For if grace exclusively concerned atonement for sin and salvation of souls, one could view grace as something located and operating outside of nature. . . . But if it is true that Christ our Savior has to do not only with our soul but also with our body . . . then of course everything is different. We see immediately that *grace* is inseparably connected with nature, that grace and nature belong together.⁹

Unlike "grace against nature," it recognizes that the creational realm has not been corrupted ontologically, and therefore can in fact be renewed and restored. Through Christ's atonement, we are redeemed from sin in order to glorify Christ by exercising our Christianity and drawing upon special revelation to inform all of our activities, including those which others bifurcate as "spiritual" and "natural." When Christ returns, he will renew the heavens and earth so that it can fully be the theater of his glory, a theater without the misdirection caused by sin and its consequences (Acts 3:21; Rom 8:21–22; Eph 1:10; Col 1:20; Rev 21:1–4). The renewed heavens and earth will be profoundly cultural, replete with language, song, art, and architecture, and its cultural activity will never again be marred by sin. God's original creation was "very good," but the new creation will be "even better."

This vision posits a distinctive way in which a Christian should live in the world. Christ's atonement transforms us in the entirety of our being, across the entire fabric of our lives. God's specially revealed word directs us in the entirety of our being, across the whole landscape of our cultural lives. Christ's Lordship is as wide as creation, and therefore as wide as our social and cultural lives. Abraham Kuyper writes, "In short, everything is his. His kingdom is over everything. . . . His kingdom is a kingdom of all ages, of all spheres, of all creatures."¹⁰ The Christian mission therefore, is correspondingly deep and wide. Herman Bavinck is worth quoting at length:

⁹ Abraham Kuyper, "Common Grace," in *Abraham Kuyper: A Centennial Reader* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 173 (emphasis original).

¹⁰ Abraham Kuyper, *E Voto Dordraceno. Toelichting op den Heidelbergschen Catechismus*, 4:465–66. Cited by Timothy P. Palmer, "The Two-Kingdom Doctrine: A Comparative Study," in Steve Bishop and John H. Kok, *On Kuyper* (Sioux City, Iowa: Dordt, 2013), 147–48.

Calvin completed the Reformation and saved Protestantism. Calvin traced the operation of sin to a wider extent than Luther, to a greater depth than Zwingli. But it is for that reason that the grace of God is more restricted in Luther, less rich in Zwingli, than it is in Calvin. In the powerful mind of the French Reformer, re-creation is not a system that supplements creation, as in Catholicism, not a religious reformation that leaves creation intact, as in Luther, much less a new creation, as in Anabaptism, but a joyful tiding of the renewal of all creatures. Here the Gospel comes fully into its own, comes to true catholicity. There is nothing that cannot and ought not be evangelized. Not only the church, but also home, school, society and state are placed under the dominion of the principle of Christianity.¹¹

The resurrection, Dietrich Bonhoeffer reminded us, sends us back to earth in an entirely new manner, affecting all that we do.¹²

This vision takes a distinctive approach to Christian scholarship, a view upon which we will elaborate for the remainder of this essay.

Thesis and Antithesis: Discerning between Real and Imaginative Structurations of the World

In the “grace renews nature” vision, therefore, God’s word holds for all of life. God created the world and ordered it normatively by means of his word, he sustains it even today by means of his word, and he will renew it in the future by means of his word. In this vision, God’s word is unified.¹³ He created the world by means of his word, and that word for creation was confirmed and expanded by the prophets and apostles, by the Son, and by the inscripturated word. His inscripturated word is authoritative, meaning that not only do we hold to his word and read it closely, but we should allow it to have us in its grip as it exegetes us and conforms us to Christ. God’s word reveals to us true knowledge of God, humanity, and the rest of the created order. As Runner writes, “The Word of God is the power by which God

¹¹ Bavinck, *Katholociteit*, 32 (ET 237 ff), cited in Veenhof.

¹² Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison in Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works*, vol. 8 (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2010), 447–48.

¹³ Scripture is not God’s only revelation. He has also revealed himself in creation and in Christ, but Scripture is needed in order to hear clearly his creational word and know personally his incarnate Word. God’s word is single and unified, containing, as it does, God’s consistent message and unalterable will. Gordon Spykman writes, “God’s Word exercises its normatively steadying power from creation, through fall and redemption, onward toward the re-creation of all things in Christ Jesus. The full sweep of cosmic history stands under the holding and healing power of God’s Word. In the march of time the mode of revelation changes. But its essential meaning remains constant. There is no inner tension or contradiction between the creational Word, the inscripturated Word, and the incarnate Word.” Gordon Spykman, *Reformational Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), 86.

opens our hearts to see our human situation in the framework of the whole of reality.”¹⁴

Runner encourages us to view God’s word as his thesis for the world, his ordering principle for life. *Higher education, therefore, should approach its task as one in which teachers and students seek to discern God’s thesis for the world as it relates to their subject matter.* When God created the world, he did so by means of his word. His word ordered the world normatively. One could say that his word served as his “thesis” for the world, his normative declaration of the way things should be. However, the serpent immediately issued an “antithesis,” a word against God’s word. The first couple, and all of humanity since, succumbed to this antithesis, to an imaginative structuration that presents itself against the real structuration of the world as revealed by God.

That antithesis remains today. We can speak of The Antithesis in the singular, or many antitheses in the plural. Sin and evil take many forms. Every human being is born holistically depraved, and as soon as he is able to desire and think, he conjures up for himself a principle of life and an imaginative structuration that suits him. Such antithesis is found in every human heart (including believers, because we are not yet fully sanctified), every sector of society, and every dimension of culture.

Indeed, the antithesis is the great struggle between the kingdom of light and the kingdom of darkness, Christ and Satan, and between truth and error. This great struggle manifests itself in different ways in human history, and right now, for the Western world, it manifests itself in challenges posed by modernism, postmodernism, secularism, consumerism, Islam, etc. As Christians, it is incumbent on us to resist this totalitarian assault on social, cultural, and political life. We should resist it, not only from the pulpit, but in every sphere of culture, including higher education.

Religion (including false religion) is heartfelt, and because it is rooted deeply in the heart, it radiates outward into all that we do, including our teaching and learning. When we walk into the classroom as teachers or learners, we bring with us into the classroom our alternative principles of life and our imaginative structurations.

Apostate man is driven by his religious needs to find a substitute to fill in for the true root-unity of his life he is religiously eluding, to *absolutize* one of the relative aspects or sides of our religious life and *elevate* it to the place of the heart. . . . His rational analysis is accompanied by the deeper drive, which in the fallen state requires a distortion of the very ‘facts’ he is in the process of analyzing.¹⁵

¹⁴ Runner, *The Relation of the Bible to Learning*, 56.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 70–71.

Sinful people do not always agree on what they are absolutizing—sex, money, power, or any number of other things—but they are always absolutizing something, and that something distorts everything they do, including their teaching and learning.

Christian teaching and learning, therefore, is a process of discerning God’s creational design (thesis) in relation to the subject matter at hand, and sin’s misdirection of that design (antithesis) so that it can redirect the subject matter to its true end in Christ. This sort of teaching and learning would bring about a significant reformation of the Christian university. Professors and students would work hard to excavate the idolatrous underpinnings of their disciplines so that they could redirect that discipline toward its true end in Christ. They do would do this out of a genuine love for learning about and loving the Lord and his good creation, and as a witness to the world around them. In other words, they would do this out of love for God and neighbor.

Christian professors and students should draw upon all of the knowledge they have when seeking to understand the subject matter of their discipline, whether that knowledge comes from general revelation or special revelation. We draw upon special revelation in the disciplines because it helps us to read general revelation more faithfully. It provides for us the true story of the whole world, an overarching narrative framework within which the stories of our academic disciplines fit. It teaches truths and provides principles that relate, at one level or another, to our subject matter. “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge” (Prov 1:7). In short, all other variables being equal, faith gives an epistemological edge.

Take, for example, a course in political philosophy. A political philosopher who is not a Christian and who does not draw upon Scripture might provide very helpful insights into the state’s right to “wield the sword” against invaders, into the positives and negatives of living in a monarchy versus a democratic republic, or into the different views of distributive justice. However, without special revelation, she would not know that the world we live in and study is in an abnormal state. In its normal state, before the Fall, politics would not have needed the sword because there was no sin or violence. Rather than punishing evil doers within the state, or fighting off invading armies external to the state, politics would have focused on the constructive ordering of our common life. A Christian professor would also know that there is a day coming when politics as we know it will be no more, because the Lord Christ will return to order our common life such that there will be no more crime or war. In sum, the Bible provides for the Christian professor an understanding of the broader framework for understanding politics. Second, Scripture also gives the Christian professor a uniquely helpful perspective on certain specific issues in the political realm. For example, she will be able to fund the notion of human rights in a way that a non-Christian cannot. A Christian professor might note that the Declaration of Independence grounds our rights in the will of a Creator, while the United Nations’ Declaration of Human Rights grounds human rights in nothing at all. In the former

document, it is recognized that human rights are ordained. In the latter document, they are merely posited by a group of humans, and one can question therefore whether they are really “rights” at all. Third, Scripture equips the Christian professor to teach her students how to live lives of public righteousness. With Christ as their example, her students can carry out their public and political activities with genuinely Christian love and concern even—and especially—when they are faced with opposition.

Does this mean that a person who is unaware of special revelation or who rejects it cannot gain truth from general revelation? Does it mean that he cannot make scientific discoveries, create stunning art, emerge as a premiere political scientist, or produce powerful work in the field of history? Certainly not. Researchers and scholars can make brilliant discoveries and do field-standard work even when they are not drawing upon special revelation. They can do so because of God’s common grace to all humanity after the fall. In fact, researchers and scholars might make their best discoveries and do their best work precisely at the point of their greatest idolatry. But their work, at one level or another, will be deficient at the very points where special revelation could have contributed.

Does this mean that it is wrong for a Christian to try to build theories without relating them to special revelation? Again, certainly not. Many professors find themselves in restrictive environments in which special revelation is not considered knowledge and therefore is ruled out-of-bounds in the classroom or in the pages of a journal. In such instances, a professor might draw upon special revelation when conceiving his theory or honing his hypothesis, but might not articulate his theory or state his hypothesis in a way that reveals his epistemological hand.

The Antithetical Nature of Scientism

Challenges to the type of Christian scholarship recommended in this essay come not only from the competing views of nature and grace listed above, nor from isolated objections, but from the atmosphere of scientism that pervades today’s academy. Scientism is antithetical to the Christian faith and to true teaching and learning. It consists of an inordinate faith in science, a situation in which too great of a role has been ascribed to science. Scientism “is that faith that science will redeem the world by breaking down boundaries of superstition and gradually setting up a human community in the truth, a faith that conflicts with what Scripture reveals about how Christ will establish His Kingdom of Truth.”¹⁶ Western scientism tells the story of the world as having reached its destiny with the rise of scientific modernism; Christian Scripture, on the other hand, “tells the story of the world as having reached its destiny,

¹⁶ Ibid., 129.

its climax, when Jesus of Nazareth came out of the tomb on Eastern morning.”¹⁷ These two narratives, both purporting to be the true story of the whole world, cannot both be true.

The road toward scientism has been paved by evolutionary naturalism and secular humanism. *Evolutionary naturalism* holds that God does not exist and that human beings are merely component parts of nature who originated by genetic mutation and were perpetuated by means of natural selection. *Enlightenment humanism* holds that humans creatively project order onto the universe. Under this view, it is not God but humans who are the architects of the universe as we know it.¹⁸ Taken together, evolutionary naturalism’s disenchantment of the world and secular humanism’s promotion of creative anti-realism have created a situation conducive to scientism.

In fact, the modern university ceased having to argue for scientism many years ago; now it can afford to assume scientism. A Christian attending public university (or even many private Christian universities) probably will never be exposed to a sustained debate or discussion about the matter. The university “will not only teach him the science he so eagerly covets just at this period of his life, but will also feed him large doses of a *view of life* which sees the pursuit of scientific knowledge as *the* human ideal, leading to human blessedness.”¹⁹ Under scientism’s reign, the natural and social sciences are viewed as the ideal path to knowledge or, more likely, the only path to knowledge. For this reason, science functions as a cultural authority in the way that Christianity used to. Indeed, the heart of the problem is that scientism views science, instead of God’s unified word, as the fundamental principle of our lives.

In the face of scientism’s ascendance, Christian scientists and educators have responded in various ways. One response has been to view science and theology as overlapping and warring magisteria. As David Clark notes, some young earth creationists fit this model.²⁰ On the other side of the coin, atheists such as Richard Dawkins argue that theology is a pseudo-science and therefore cannot yield rational knowledge. Under the warfare model, one is forced to choose between scientific ways of knowing and theological ways of knowing. Another response has been to view science and theology as non-overlapping magisteria. Under this view, held by, for example, Paul Tillich, science and theology have different objects of study and therefore say different things about those different objects. Conflict is not even possible. As

¹⁷ N. T. Wright, *Surprised by Scripture: Engaging Contemporary Issues* (New York: HarperOne, 2014), 137.

¹⁸ Plantinga, “Reformed Thinking: Christian Scholarship,” 125–32.

¹⁹ Runner, *The Relation of the Bible to Learning*, 129.

²⁰ David K. Clark, *To Know and Love God: Method for Theology* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2003), 266–70.

Clark notes, although there are various strategies for delineating which phenomena lie in which sphere, as a general rule it is said that science treats rational things while theology treats irrational things.²¹

Proponents of the “grace renews nature” vision will reject both of these models, proposing instead that science and theology are mutually beneficial conversation partners. God created the world, ordered the world, and sustains the world by means of his word. He also inscripturated his word in the book we now know as the Bible. God reveals himself generally through creation and specially through the Bible, but above all, he reveals himself in a unified manner. Although there may be conflict at times between scientists and theologians, there never has been and never will be any final conflict between creation and Scripture, or between theology and science.

Theologians and scientists access overlapping but different dimensions of reality and they use overlapping but differentiated methods to do so. “What we really need,” Alvin Plantinga writes, “are answers to our questions from the perspective of all that we know—what we know about God, and what we know by faith, by way of revelation, as well as what we know in other ways.”²² For this reason, dialogue between them is crucial. Without such dialogue, the disciplines are ghettoized and left unable to give fuller and more fecund accounts of the objects they seek to understand. Through such dialogue these frames can be integrated in order to access reality more fully. Such dialogue and integration holds forth the possibility of a unified curriculum, one which will enhance not only science and theology, but the entire curriculum.

Instead of conflict, God’s word complements and supplements the best findings in the academy. Consider mathematics. One might have difficulty imagining how God’s self-revelation in Scripture might be relevant to this particular college discipline. However, as theologian and mathematician Vern Poythress has demonstrated, it is. Take, for example, the three competing approaches among mathematicians to describe the essence of mathematics. One is *intuitionism*, in which mathematics reduces to human intuition concerning number and space. Another is *logicism*, in which mathematics reduces to logic. A final approach is *formalism*, in which mathematics reduces to the manipulation of formal language systems. But each of these approaches has difficulty explaining why and how mathematics applies to well to our physical world. Each approach is reductionist. A Christian professor, however, would be able to explain mathematics’ coherence with the real world by explaining that it finds its source in God. God created the human mind which has *intuitions* about numbers and space, just as he created the *form* of the physical world to be characterized by numerical and spatial order, and as he ordered the world *logically* such that myriad consequences derive from relatively few

²¹ Ibid.

²² “When Faith and Reason Clash: Evolution and the Bible,” in *Christian Scholar’s Review* 21 (1991): 30.

starting assumptions. This approach avoids the reductionism of an approach that cannot posit God as the source of coherence.²³

But technically, the former example only illustrates the need for theism of the sort that could be posited by the Qur'an. We need an example that necessitates the self-revelation of Christianity's Triune God. Consider the problem of unity and diversity, which plagues not only mathematics, but other disciplines such as philosophy, sociology, and law. Non-Christian approaches to the problem have exceeding difficulty in explaining the relationship between unity and diversity, and tend to reduce one concept to the other. On the one hand, philosophers such as Parmenides have argued that diversity is an illusion and that really and truly "all is one." On the other hand, atomistic and nominalistic philosophies tend to reduce the world to diversity. A Christian scholar is able to avoid such reductions because of his understanding of the Trinity. As Augustine, Aquinas, and numerous Christian scholars have done, he can argue that God's nature as Triune demonstrates final coherence of unity and diversity in this world.

How the "Grace Renews Nature" Model Helps a Christian University Be Its Better Self

In light of the antithesis that cuts through every heart, across all of life and through every academic discipline, and in light of the scientism that would perpetuate that antithesis by denigrating and even dismissing knowledge gained by special revelation, it is incumbent upon the Christian community to build Christian universities, and to collaborate with and support such universities. These universities will recognize Christ as the clue to all learning and Scripture as his word, and accordingly will allow special revelation its rightful place.

The benefits of the "grace renews nature" vision for higher education are manifold, and we will conclude by mentioning only three. *First, the consistent outworking of this vision will enable a Christian university to provide a truly Christian education.* In such an education, special revelation will provide for students a framework for understanding the world as a whole and, within that framework, will equip them with distinctively Christian questions and categories to employ within their disciplines. T. S. Eliot put it well when he wrote, "The purpose of Christian education would not be merely to make men and women pious Christians. . . . A Christian education must primarily teach people to be able to think in Christian categories."²⁴ Whereas in the other visions the role of special revelation is reduced or eliminated, in the "grace renews nature" vision its role is maximized.

²³ Vern Poythress, *Redeeming Science: A God-Centered Approach* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2006), 324–25.

²⁴ T. S. Eliot, *Christianity and Culture* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1940), 22.

It should be noted, however, that this vision pushes back not only against visions that reduce or eliminate special revelation but also against views that diminish special revelation by employing a simplistic biblicism. Biblicism of this sort tends to view the Bible as a storehouse of isolated facts that exist in an apple-to-apple relationship with some corresponding set of facts in a particular discipline. For example, an astronomer who is a simplistic biblicist might read Psalm 19:4c–6 and conclude that the earth is in the center of the universe and that the sun actually rises and sets. This sort of approach parades as a high view of Scripture but in fact actually parodies Scripture by forcing it to answer questions in a way in which it was never intended. The more appropriate insight from Psalm 19 and other passages is that God’s creation, in its entirety, testifies to God. Creation’s patterns, including the “rising” and “setting” of the sun, display his glory. A Christian professor might also note how Jeremiah 33:20–21 illustrates this point when it states that nature’s regularity points to God’s dependability. He also might note that God’s dependability is the reason for nature’s regularity and therefore is the reason we can even embark upon scientific research (which is based on nature’s regularity). But the perceptive Christian professor will not conclude from Psalm 19 that the earth is at the center of the universe and that the sun moves around the earth.

Second, the consistent application of this vision provides for the curriculum the center—Christ, via his word—it has been missing since the rise of modernity. It provides for teachers and students a connected view of their academic intellectual universe. With the rise of scientism, modern universities abandoned their roots, including their Christian metaphysics and epistemology, and embraced a “naked” classroom, a classroom shorn of its religious apparel. The results have been deleterious, and none more so than the resulting loss of a curricular center. Without Christ—via his word—at the center of the curriculum, modern universities have experienced an increasing fragmentation and, with such fragmentation, an intellectual crisis. With Christ at the center, however, teachers and students may once again embrace the entire spectrum of knowledge from the same vantage-point of Christian faith. Stephen Fowl writes:

While Paul’s demand to take every thought captive to Christ is incumbent on all Christians, the ecclesially based university provides a distinct context within which Christians can be introduced to the habits, practices, and dispositions that will enable them to think Christianly across the entire spectrum of knowledge. There is no aspect of knowing that Christians can rule out of bounds.²⁵

A Christian university such as this will be able to bequeath to its students a sturdy and holistic education, one which takes into account natural knowledge of the world as well as knowledge gained via special revelation.

²⁵ Stephen Fowl, “The Role of Scripture in an Ecclesially Based University,” in *Conflicting Allegiances: The Church-Based University in a Liberal Democratic Society*, ed. Michael L. Budde and John Wright (Grand Rapids: Brazos), 172.

The “non-theological” and non-ministerial disciplines will draw upon God’s special revelation to inform their research and the subject matter of their disciplines, thus being able to see their disciplines in light of the grand narrative of Scripture and, accordingly, in light of the Lord who stands at the center of both Scripture and the universe. In so doing, they will be able to avoid giving distorted and fragmented views of reality, and instead will be able to give their students a truly Christian and unified view of reality. Only this sort of university will be equipped to teach its students to experience reality in its wholeness of meaning, and thus to abstract and research from within that holistic experience.

In other words, a student can only know truth in its fullness when she allows God’s self-revelation to get a hold of her in the depths of her heart, uniting her to Christ and enabling that union and revelation to radiate outward into her studies. Allowing Christ and his word to stand at the center of our hearts and the center of the university enables her to be thoroughly equipped, as Paul urges in 2 Tim 3:17.

Third, the pattern of thought operative in this vision will foster in students and teachers alike a reminder of the cosmic battle being waged all around us. A Christian student will learn from his professor how to draw upon the full epistemological resources available to him—both special revelation and other knowledge—in order to subject every theory and concept to a holistic critical analysis from within that theorist’s own system of thought. If the theorist being studied is a non-Christian such as Nietzsche or Marx, the student will be able to analyze and evaluate that person’s theories and concepts in light of God’s word and his world, exposing them for what they are—antithetical theories and concepts at odds with God’s truth. He will be able to appreciate significant insights from that theorist, but never without bringing those insights “to the cleaners,” divesting them of any antithetical elements. Plantinga writes:

We need deep, penetrating, thoughtful, informed analyses of the various cultural movements and forces we encounter. . . . Christian scholars have an obligation to discern and analyze these perspectives, to plumb the full extent of their influence, to recognize the way in which they underlie vast stretches of contemporary intellectual life, to note how they manifest themselves in the intellectual projects and pursuits that are currently fashionable. We have an obligation to point out what we see, to react to it, to comment upon it. We must be aware of the broadly religious conflict in which scholarship is enmeshed.”²⁶

Along the way, as they learn to discern the antithesis operative in their chosen discipline, students will learn by way of analogy to spot it also in their homes and in the streets. As they learn to redirect academic realities toward Christ, they are likewise forming the habit of redirecting personal, ecclesial, familial, and political realities toward him.

²⁶ Plantinga, “Christian Scholarship,” 138.

Conclusion

Christian professors and students who wish to conduct their studies in this manner will likely find themselves lonely on campus, whether they are at Ivy League universities, public universities, or, regretfully, at any number of Christian colleges. Plantinga writes:

A student who wants to think seriously about these topics is very much on her own; more than that, she is likely to be thought weird, peculiar, marginal, out of the mainstream. Scholarship is an intensely social activity; we learn our craft from our elders and mentors; but we can't learn how to do Christian scholarship from our mentors at these universities. That is why it is of first importance that there be Christian universities, institutions where these questions do take pride of place, and where a student can think about the bearing of Christianity on her disciplines in a regular and institutionally sanctioned way.²⁷

Indeed, it is incumbent upon the Christian community to commit to the hard work of building distinctively Christian universities. Additionally, it must encourage Christian scholars who find themselves teaching in public universities and other institutions not committed to Christian teaching and learning. Christian scholars in such institutions have a vocation—a calling from the Lord—to be salt and light on their campuses, a vocation which no doubt will require much wisdom and discernment.

Christians can take heart in knowing that many or most of the world's premiere universities gained ascendancy by seeking to do authentically Christian scholarship. For example, the mission statement of the founders of Harvard College (published in a pamphlet in 1643) states: "Let every Student be plainly instructed, and earnestly pressed, to consider well [that] the maine end of his life and studies is *to know God and Jesus Christ which is eternall life*, Jn 17:3, and therefore to lay *Christ* in the bottome, as the only foundation of all sound knowledge and Learning."²⁸ Like Harvard's founders, we must affirm that Jesus Christ is the foundation of all learning. His Lordship is as wide as creation and therefore as wide as the university's curriculum.

²⁷ Plantinga, "Christian Thinking: The Twin Pillars," 161.

²⁸ "New England's First Fruits," quoted in Perry Miller and Thomas H. Johnson, *The Puritans* (New York: American Book, 1938), 702.