

## Integration: Theology and Methodology

by Chris Walker, Veritas Academy

As a teacher of ancient history and literature, I have often been amazed at the seemingly unrelated questions that spring to the front of seventh grade students' minds as we discuss books written by Herodotus or Plutarch. My presbyterian urge for a decently ordered classroom discussion quickly clashes with my desire to respond and engage the questions of my students. In the face of this struggle, I have tried, whenever possible, to tackle any question that will help integrate two subjects into a discussion. I have made this effort partly for the educational advantages of a multidisciplinary discussion, but more so for the theological importance of studying subjects in relation to each other. In fact, the educational advantage of bringing subjects together in the classroom is actually rooted in a more fundamental theological truth: that all the subjects we study are inherently integrated with each other through the creative, sovereign power of God behind them.

Christian education is built on our responsibility to educate children biblically. Because we want students to understand all that they learn in light of their knowledge of God, the integration of learning plays an important role in fulfilling this responsibility. A truly Christian education can't be limited to a standard handling of grammar and math with a Bible class added on and a creation study substituted for the unit on evolution, for this leaves a large portion of what our children learn in the hands of the

enemy. Rather, a truly Christian education must arise from the recognition that everything our children learn originated with the creative act of God,

Him completely. But in addition to His awe-striking creation and His sovereign guidance of history, God has also chosen to speak. He spoke in creation, He spoke to His

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Scripture makes it clear repeatedly that God's creation, revelation, and sovereignty in the world are the foundation for true knowledge of God. God's word declares repeatedly that God created all things by the power of His word. He spoke, and all things sprang into existence. As a result, the psalmist finds the glory of God and His righteousness written in the heavens (Psalm 19:1; 97:6), while Paul takes for granted that God's power, divinity, and invisible attributes are so evident from the created world that all men are without excuse for failing to worship Him (Romans 1:20). History also proclaims the sovereign reign of a glorious God. The beauty of His sovereign, saving plan accomplished in Christ and continued in His church is a clear indication of His goodness and His glory. His sovereign governance over all things is the basis for Scripture's repeated call for us to trust in

people, giving us His words in the Bible, and He spoke climactically in His Son, the *Logos*. In His speech, God has made it clear that all things hold together in Him, the One, True God who is the "revealer" of all knowledge.

It is these three great acts of God, His creation, His sovereignty, and His revelation, which form the basis for all areas of study and hold them together. Science, math, and logic are rooted in His creation of an ordered world, which includes a humanity capable of reasoning; history is a demonstration of His sovereignty; and our study of language—grammar, literature, Latin, Greek—is our effort to image our God who has spoken. As Vern Poythress argued, "The Bible reminds us, precisely in John 17, that what we call 'human' languages are not merely human, but shared with God, who speaks and listens."<sup>1</sup> Thus, each subject of study that makes up our curriculum is not an independent area of knowledge, but a different aspect of God's character revealed in creation, in sovereign history, and in divine revelation.

It should be evident, if all subjects flow from the creative, sovereign revelation of God, that

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each subject must be studied in light of our knowledge of God. Theology, the *regina scientiarum*, ought to illuminate each subject we study. But if all subjects not only flow from God, but are also bound to each other by the fact of God's creative, sovereign revelation, then each of the "secular" subjects also has much to say to the others. If science, philosophy, history, and language are all different means of studying reality as created and revealed by God, then each subject will by nature speak, not only about the author Himself, but also about what He has said in other aspects of His revelation. For instance, bringing our knowledge of history to bear on literature, or our knowledge of science to bear on history, is not just methodologically sound teaching, but theologically sound teaching if we recognize God's word and work as the foundation for each of these areas of study. Just as three books by the same author speak to each other and deepen our understanding of what that author is trying to say in each one of the books individually, so different subjects of study, rooted in God's revelation of His character, both strengthen our understanding of God's character *and* help us understand each subject He has revealed more thoroughly.

Of course, subjects ought to be studied in a rational way, which calls for some organization, direction, and focus. Our classes should be more than one long rambling discussion about whatever happens to wander through our minds. But as we teach each area of knowledge, we must draw upon what the student is learning in other classes, not just because this is good pedagogy, but because each

subject is inherently integrated as a result of God's revelation.

If subjects are inherently integrated, it shouldn't surprise us that even secular educators have seen the value of integrated learning. One of the trends in secular education today is to unify learning so that students are able to connect what they are learning in various classes. Of course, for secular educators, integration of math, science, history, and literature cannot be done for theological reasons or on the basis of God's character revealed across disciplines, so they are left to search for other unifying themes that can speak to every area of life and learning. Respect for the environment has, not surprisingly, been a popular theme. Mt. Rainier Elementary School used the theme of peace, beginning each week with each student promising to be peaceful and respectful, recording the number of "peace days" (days with no fights) on each blackboard, learning the importance of cultures getting along, and analyzing the positive characteristics of peaceful characters in literature.<sup>2</sup> But, to return to God's creative, sovereign revelation, God has, thankfully, given us a deeper and far more significant unifying theme to our education.

In the end, the glory of God should motivate the Christian educator to integrate learning in the classroom. The greatest danger in failing to integrate our classrooms is that segregated learning will impoverish our understanding of the fullness of God's glory. God's glory will awe our hearts most when we train our minds to look for it in all that we learn. A philosophical study of God's revelation, or a theological, scientific, historical, or linguistic

perspective on His creation all present new dimensions to our understanding of who God is. Of course, we could be content with just letting theology speak to each of our other subject areas. A student will certainly get a glimpse of God's glory by studying science, history, and literature separately, but through a biblical lens. But this approach remains incomplete, like examining all the parts of a car individually without bothering to assemble them into a complete vehicle. Our understanding of each subject and its contribution to our vision of God's glory will be greatest as we let each area of knowledge speak to the others.

One of my teachers in high school summarized his view on integration in the classroom by reminding us at the end of many class discussions that "the rabbit trails *are* the point." And why not, for a rabbit trail done well is nothing less than a chance to gaze at God's glory, walking around it and examining it from as many angles possible so that we might gain the fullest understanding of His character.

### NOTES

1. Vern Poythress, *God-Centered Biblical Interpretation* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 1999), 23.
2. Susan M. Drake and Rebecca C. Burns, "Meeting Standards Through Integrated Curriculum", <http://www.ascd.org/publications/books/103011/chapters/What-Is-Integrated-Curriculum%C2%A2.aspx>.