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## Special Education and Spiritual Formation

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### Abstract

Faith-learning integration is a complex and sometimes challenging issue for university faculty, and something which our students have not likely engaged in. Rather than “integration,” emphasis will be on how Christian thought informs educational practice, and contributes to our spiritual formation, igniting flames of faith-learning and helping prepare caring and competent teachers.

## Special Education and Spiritual Formation

David W. Anderson, Emeritus Professor of Education, Bethel University

### Abstract

Faith-learning integration is a complex and sometimes challenging issue for university faculty, and something which our students have not likely engaged in. Rather than “integration,” emphasis will be on how Christian thought informs educational practice, and contributes to our spiritual formation, igniting flames of faith-learning and helping prepare caring and competent teachers.

### Introduction

As professors of education who desire to “ignite the flames of faith and learning” in our students, we recognize that more is involved than simply helping them master the knowledge-base and skills of teaching. Obviously we do our best to prepare competent teachers, the objective measure of their competence being academic grades and passing scores on state competency tests required for licensure or certification. But our task is not simply to present research-based ideas and practices, some of which may, in fact, be in conflict with biblical teaching or implications. It is also to help our students think biblically and critically about their discipline. As university professors, we recognize the power of education to shape how people think. But often education does more to conform us to the world than to promote transformation toward Christlikeness and “taking captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ” (2 Corinthians 10:5). The Apostle Paul claimed that believers have “the mind of Christ” (1 Corinthians 2:16). The Greek word translated “mind” (*nous*) means thinking, understanding, or insight. In the context of that passage, Paul specifically addressed understanding of spiritual things. But since Jesus is Lord of all, and all truth is God’s truth, having the “mind of Christ” also applies to seeing all creation, and all bodies of knowledge, as related to him who is before all things and in whom all things consist (Colossians 1:17). To have the mind of Christ means that in some way we share his views, understanding, even feelings toward the world and

toward our specific academic discipline and profession.

To bring our every thought into captivity to Christ, to think Christianly, to see all of life in relationship to the Creator and Lord of all, this is not an optional appendage of secondary importance, but is at the very heart of what it means to be a Christian. (Holmes, 1985, p. 11)

Darrow Miller (1998) held that “many Christians today suffer from ‘split personalities.’ Their lives are divided into compartments: the ‘religious,’ what they do when attending church or a Bible study; and the ‘secular,’ their jobs, recreation, and education” (p.44). Miller referred to this as “evangelical gnosticism,” the result of never being challenged to be consciously Christian in their daily lives (p. 45). Robinson (2010) acknowledged that Christian teachers often practice “operational secularism,” separating their faith from practice in their academic discipline. In my own case, studying special education at a secular university certainly did not encourage me to consider how my faith integrated with the discipline. From the very beginning of my studies I sensed that there was something obviously “Christian” about special education, though at that time I could not express that relationship (even though my undergraduate degree was in Bible/Pre-theology). I suspect that many Christian faculty in universities find writing about how faith integrates with their discipline a daunting task, despite having greater knowledge of their academic field and despite their being mature and maturing Christians. For junior faculty, this may be the first time they have wrestled with such an idea. Given the challenge faculty may face in writing about faith-learning integration, how can their students be expected to integrate their faith with the academic knowledge and skills they are struggling to acquire, especially since they may be of lesser spiritual maturity than their professors (at least in terms of the integration of faith and life)?

Marsden (1997) asserted, “In order to have Christians who take seriously their calling as Christian scholars, we must first have scholars shaped by deep spiritual commitments” (p. 107). Our role in the formation of Christian teachers includes helping them to be transformed by the renewing of their minds. We do this not by simply teaching educational philosophy and teaching methodologies, but by challenging them to reflect deeply on their core values, their curriculum (subject area), and society in the light of biblical truth. We must help them realize that Christian perspectives have great significance in any academic discipline, especially when it comes to the “big” questions of greater meaning (Marsden, 1997). Their vision must be transformed from focusing only on self and career goals to their role in the world as salt and light.

### **What is Faith-Learning Integration?**

Reflection on what is meant by “faith-learning integration” reveals the complexity of the issue:

- “Integration” is the action or process of intermixing things, combining or consolidating them into an integral whole. Does seek to integrate faith and learning implies that something is missing from either faith or learning? Do the two blend in such a way that something is “lost” or reformed as something “new”? Sometimes things do not integrate easily, like oil and water; they coexist but do not truly intermix. Might this also be true of how faith relates to some disciplines?
- Does integration occur simply by adding praise to God for the subject matter, or by opening a class with a devotional that may or may not be related to the topic being discussed: a “doxological” integration (cf. Moreland, 1999)? Does it mean looking for scriptural support for what is currently considered best practice: a “proof text” approach which seeks to “sanctify” our field of study by finding scripture verses which somehow seem to relate?
- Does integration of faith and learning simply mean showing excellence in our work as Christian teachers, in response to Paul’s teaching that whatever we do, in word or deed, should be done in the name of the Lord Jesus (Colossians 3:17) and to the glory of God (1 Corinthians 10:31)?
- What is meant by “faith” and “learning” adds another dimension to the problem. “Faith” can be used as a synonym for belief or trust, as in faith

that the chair upon which I am sitting will continue to support the weight of my body. But faith can also refer to a body of doctrine, a system of religious belief: the content of our faith. “Learning” can refer to a cognitive process, the act of being instructed or the impartation of knowledge or skill. Or, “learning” can be used as a collective noun to refer to a body of knowledge that forms the basis of a particular discipline. Wherein does the integration lie? Does integration involve all the possible combinations of these meanings?

- At what “level” are we seeking to integrate faith and learning? Borrowing terms from psycholinguistics, we can speak of the “surface structure” of teaching, meaning the design of our teaching and the specific procedures selected to help our students achieve a desired outcome. But there is also a “deep structure” to teaching, which draws upon our understanding not just of the discipline itself, but our beliefs about human beings, relationships, interdependence, and so forth (cf. Smith, 1999). At which level does “Christian thinking” enter in? Can we identify a relationship between our faith and the way we teach? How does our faith lead us to modify or alter methods or experiences designed for our students? What biblical assumptions about persons, relationships, etc., “feed” or “fuel” our approach to teaching?
- On a deeper, spiritual, level, are we asking students (and faculty) to consider how God fits into their academic field or discipline, or how their field of study fits into God’s design? How does our involvement in a particular field of study and practice relate to God’s “call” on our lives? Faculty and students in teacher training often speak of teaching as a “calling.” But is our calling as Christians to a specific academic discipline or profession? I suggest that our professional role relates more to our “gifting.” God’s “call” is the same for all Christians: a call to him and to honoring and “discovering” God in and through our discipline. A better question focuses on how what we are doing (i.e., our academic discipline) fits into God’s will. What relationship do we see between our involvement in a particular discipline and our life and mission as Christians? How does “having the mind of Christ” relate to our professional discipline? How do we get our Christian faith to function integrally to our

scholarship rather than it simply being something added on top of scholarship?

- How can a Christian educator integrate faith and learning in any discipline if that individual does not have a consciously Christian world view?
- Is “integration of faith and learning” something which is done once? Or is it an ongoing process?

### **A Personal Approach**

My professional life has centered on special education and disability studies. Although I believe what is said in the following can be generalized to other academic areas, particularly within teacher training, my comments focus on special education and reflect my own spiritual journey in understanding the relationship of Christian faith and special education. In exploring the relationship(s) between Christian thought and human knowledge as captured in the discipline of special education, rather than speaking of “integration of faith and learning” I find it more helpful to ask how my faith informs the discipline and practice of special education. Since there is no specifically Christian teaching method, and since the factual knowledge in any academic area is the same for Christian and non-Christian teachers (e.g.,  $2 \times 2 = 4$  no matter what religious or faith base a teacher professes), it is necessary to reflect on how faith informs our practice at a deeper level, the level of “control beliefs” (Wolterstorff, 1976).

To do scholarship Christianly, then is to consciously allow our faith to direct our studies. . . . One doesn't become a ‘Christian student’ simply by applying biblical texts of Christian theology to his or her discipline . . . We need to develop . . . a theoretical framework . . . which is sensitive to and rooted in the biblical world view. (Walsh & Middletown, 1984, p. 172)

Special education/disability studies draws heavily from developmental and behavioral psychology, medical studies, sociology and cultural studies, as well as pedagogical studies (from regular, remedial, and special education). However, in contrast to mathematics or history, the “content” is not facts, but the individuals who are affected by disability. When reflecting on how my faith informs the discipline, I have found it more productive to begin with biblical/theological themes about how Christians are to be, about the world, and about persons with disabilities. I view special education as a legitimate Christian ministry

focusing on reconciliation and healing (not “curing” as in the miraculous). Elements of God's sovereignty in creation, spiritual warfare, biblical justice, compassion, and hospitality are crucial “informants” of special education (cf. Anderson, 2003, 2006a, 2006b, in press [a], in press [b]) in that they provide both reasons for and motivation to be involved in special education. The basic control beliefs include this being God's world, people being created as the image of God, God's love for all individuals, and the principles of stewardship and servanthood, among other biblical teachings. The curriculum for training special education teachers includes such elements as theoretical and methodological issues; understanding of disabling conditions (their cause and effect) and their teaching implications; legal aspects related to provision of special education; technicalities of assessment, collaborative teamwork, and IEP development; and advocacy. This is no different whether one teaches in a Christian university or a secular university. But there are clear biblical principles related to human interaction, humility, grace, forgiveness, reconciliation, human worth, etc., which are relevant to these elements of special education practice. These biblical principles provide greater incentive for why special educators do what they do than simply “because the law requires it.” Recognizing biblical principles may help Christians involved in special education from feeling overwhelmed by the task and experiencing the burnout which continues to plague the field. There is a sense, then, that integration is most clearly seen in the area of attitude or character – something which we may not consciously teach, and which is not usually measured by state competency tests required for a teaching license, but clearly addresses the preparation of caring, competent teachers.

### **Special Education and Spiritual Formation**

John Perkins (2003) stated, “God's call to service for my life cannot be separated from God's intention to work in my life” (p. 157). Reflection on biblical themes which inform special education/disability studies can contribute in a very practical manner to our own spiritual maturation. As faculty share their own journey toward Christlikeness with their students, we invite or challenge them to move forward in their own spiritual development as well as professionally. This, then, is a critical aspect of “igniting the flames of faith and learning.”

Understanding how my faith integrates with or informs special education (perhaps I should say informs me as a special educator) has been an ongoing process of shaping and broadening my world view as a Christian. Noll (1985) remarked that “Christian world views are always in the process of reformation” (p. 31). This parallels our own reformation (transformation) as we are caught up in the process of being remade in the image of Christ.

There are several implications from 1 Corinthians 3:18 that help us understand what is involved in spiritual formation: it is a lifelong process of change from the inside out which affects the whole person (not just the mind); our formation is into the likeness of Christ (yet without losing our personal identity); transformation is an act of the Holy Spirit.

Mulholland (2001) defined spiritual formation as “the process of being conformed to the image of Christ for the sake of others” (p. 25). He held that we are a ‘word’ of God: God is “speaking us forth into the world” so that we become “God’s person in the lives of others” (p. 46). Since scripture is a primary means by which God speaks to us, it is important that our reading of God’s Word be formational, that we are open to God’s work in shaping us to be like Christ in every aspect of our relating to the world and to others. The means that scripture is not simply used to bolster our teaching approach or to supplement the concepts we teach our students (i.e., the doxological and proof-text ideas of integration). Rather, it recognizes that the world is God’s, and that all people and all areas of knowledge and endeavor belong to him. Hence, the concepts taught and, more important, the people who are the concern of special education are also God’s. Mulholland (2001) asserted “Human life is, by its very nature, spiritual formation” (p. 26).

The question is not whether to undertake spiritual formation. The question is what kind of spiritual formation are we already engaged in? Are we being increasingly conformed to the brokenness and disintegration of the world, or are we being increasingly conformed to the wholeness and integration of the image of Christ. (Mulholland, p. 26)

Moreland (1999) spoke of a spiritual dimension to integration. He described integration as a spiritual activity which has as its goal structuring the mind

and strengthening the belief structure which informs a life of Christian discipleship. Considering the spiritual dimension of faith-learning integration requires that we explore with our students what light God’s Word sheds on the field of special education. Becoming like Christ, having the mind of Christ, does not mean that we quote scripture whenever we believe it to apply to what we are teaching/doing, but that scriptural truth has shaped us – our thinking, valuing, doing. “A Christian mind . . . must take captive and subordinate scientific, technical, legal or other perspectives to the theological perspective” (Gill, 1989, p. 66). Having the mind of Christ means allowing God to illuminate facts, values, meanings, and the context in which these have significance. This allows us to reflect on special education, disability, and persons with disabilities within the context of biblical revelation, going beyond the medical model upon which much of special education has been based, and going beyond the disability studies model with its focus on social and cultural aspects. Such a biblical focus frees us to go “beyond the narrow field of vision in the world around us, crossing boundaries, exploring new possibilities” (Gill, 1989, p. 68).

Fundamental to our spiritual formation and to understanding how our faith informs the discipline and practice in special education is recognizing the Bible’s emphasis that Christians are called to serve others. Mulholland’s (2001) definition of spiritual formation – “the process of being conformed to the image of Christ for the sake of others” (p. 25, emphasis added) – succinctly captures the idea of servanthood. We need to help our students broaden their conception of special education from simply being a career to understanding it as a ministry. To have the mind of Christ is to be especially concerned with people who are in some way disenfranchised, as in the history of exclusion of persons with disabilities from education and community life (cf. Perkins, 2007). “The constant message of the Scriptures buttressed by the stunning example of Jesus is that God’s Kingdom people are to use their authority, power, and prestige to help and serve, never to hurt, those without authority, power, and prestige” (Kraft, 1996, p. 313; emphasis in the original). As Farnsworth (1985) asserted, “From a Christian perspective, one’s career emerges out of and is committed to seeking first the kingdom of God (Mt. 6:33)” (p. 101). His point is that our

focus must be on the kingdom, not on our career, and it must be seen within the sphere of stewardship. “The emphasis must be on giving, not taking, on furthering the kingdom through service to others, not advancing oneself by furthering one’s career” (Farnsworth, 1985, p. 101). Being a special educator must be understood as our way of living out the gospel in daily life as we seek to bring reconciliation between persons with disabilities and those who are temporarily able-bodied; as we promote justice and equality through advocating and practicing inclusive education; as we interact with families affected by disability and professionals who work with them; and as we seek optimal development – cognitively, physically, emotionally, and socially – of students with special needs.

### **Implications**

Preparing competent teachers is usually not in question. Who would want to prepare incompetent teachers? Since most states require those applying for licensure as teachers to pass state or national examinations (all of which focus on the professional “competencies” which have been identified by professional agencies, such as the Council for Exceptional Children, and state department of education), those without competence so defined would not be able to secure licensure. But we all are aware that passing a test based on your grasp of the knowledge-base of a particular discipline does not necessarily mean that one is a good (effective) and caring teacher. I know of several who are caring and able teachers, but who cannot pass the tests (often because of a learning disability of their own), and I know of others who can do exceptionally well on the test, but whom I would not want to employ as a teacher because of “attitude deficiencies.” I personally know several who entered the field of special education because the area in which they were licensed had an overabundance of applicants for a limited number of openings. And I know of others who entered special education with the thought that it was an easy job: how difficult can it be to teach someone with a disability, especially a cognitive disability? Clearly, the question of how one’s faith informs special education has not been something about which such students have thought.

So the real issue is with “caring” teachers. Again, most of those I interviewed as part of the application process for our program in special

education expressed a caring attitude (although some, perhaps, thought this was necessary to say in order to be accepted). Some even used the word “calling” in reference to their desire to become a special education. But when I would bring up the issue of how their faith informs their work as a special educator, the relatively blank expressions on their faces at the very least suggested that this was not something which they had ever considered.

How then do we teach about special education is a way that communicates our own wrestling with and understanding of the integration of our faith with the discipline and that stimulates students to reflect on this important area on their own? Is giving them an assignment to write on this sufficient? Can we trace how our own professional study and experience has contributed to our spiritual formation? Spiritual transformation is something which the Holy Spirit accomplishes, but not without the witness of others (Christian faculty) and not without effort on the part of the individuals. Romans 12:2 indicates that there is both an active (Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world) and a passive (but be transformed by the renewing of your mind) aspect to our spiritual (trans)formation. The end result of this transformation is that we are able to “test and approve” what God’s will is. This transformation and renewal result in a new way of seeing and being in God’s world, to “see the world through God’s eyes” (Swinton, 1999). This includes how we see, value, and respond to persons who are disabled, how we see our professional activity and responsibility, and how we see our place in God’s mission.

Since the “facts” about special education are no different in a Christian university than in a secular training program, it is easy to simply present those facts. As Christian faculty, however, we need to consider how to keep our presentation from being “just the facts” but not the Spirit. Is our own understanding of faith-learning integration evident to our students, both in our teaching about the topics and in how we relate to our students? Education is about change and growth. How do we promote both professional development and spiritual development through our teaching? Are there specific ways our curriculum can contribute to the student’s spiritual formation? How can we foster their own reflection on integration of faith and learning that contributes

to their development of a theology of disability or hermeneutic of special education?

### Conclusion

If we, as education professors, desire to “ignite the flames of faith and learning,” more is involved than simply helping our students to master the knowledge-base and skills of teaching. We need also to help our students think biblically and critically about our discipline. Reflection on biblical themes which inform special education/disability studies contributes in a very practical manner to our spiritual maturation. Sharing our journey toward Christlikeness with our students, and inviting or challenging them to move forward on their own journey is a critical aspect of “igniting the flames of faith and learning.”

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