

## Christian Scholarship at Calvin College

Scholarship . . . [is] concerted, persistent intellectual reflection in a field of study or of creative endeavor, the results of which are communicated to an audience within appropriate conventions.  
(*Expanded Statement of Mission* 41)

Calvin College has long been marked by its commitment both to undergraduate teaching and to Christian scholarship. Faculty are expected “to be excellent classroom teachers and to pursue personal, applied, and advanced research projects” (*Expanded Statement of Mission [ESM]* 42-44). The language used to describe such scholarship, however, has varied over time, as have the expectations for what constitutes *Christian* scholarship. This short paper surveys the development of Christian scholarship at Calvin, with particular reference to publications supported by the Calvin Center for Christian Scholarship (CCCS), and concludes with a discussion of the current priorities for the CCCS.

### Faith Seeking Understanding

Christian scholarship at Calvin College participates in the larger endeavor of “faith seeking understanding” inaugurated in Scripture by *'adam*'s naming of the animals as recorded in Genesis 2. In this biblical account, the human imitates not the word of creation (*amar*), but rather God's second, interpretive word (*qara*), the word that, on the first three days, names Day and Night, Heavens, Earth and Seas. That God does not name, on the subsequent days, the abundance of things he creates to fill those spaces—sun, moon, and stars; fish and fowl; creeping things and cattle—signals neither lack nor carelessness, but rather the choice to entrust this hermeneutic task to humans. In Genesis 2, God brings the animals to *'adam* and then steps back to see what the human will name (*qara*) them. In the naming process, *'adam* comes to understand the nature of the world, as well as human capabilities and limitations: *'adam*, for instance, needs a counterpart but cannot create her. God must create Eve, although her creation spurs a further naming on the part of Adam, a lyric poem of praise. *'Adam*'s recognition that something is lacking, even in the good world of Eden, mimics God's declaration in Genesis 2 that “It is not good for *'adam* to be alone.” Thus, the biblical naming story sets out the paradigmatic case of “thinking God's thoughts after him,” a phrase often used in the context of Christian scholarship. Later in scripture, within the theological framework that understands humans as gifted with the roles of prophet, priest, and king, scholarship falls under the kingly function: “It is the glory of God to conceal things, but the glory of kings is to search things out” (Proverbs 25:2, *RSV*).

These positive, and even triumphant, claims for human scholarship receive a more chastened articulation in the familiar phrase “faith seeking understanding.” Here faith precedes rationality and, in personified form, takes on the task of understanding as an ongoing quest, fully aware not only of finitude but also of the damaging effects of sin. The glory of Proverbs 25 is modulated by the recognition that “the king's heart is a stream of water in the hand of the Lord; he turns it wherever he will” (Proverbs 21:1). Or as Anselm classically states,

I acknowledge, Lord, and I give thanks that You have created Your image in me, so that I may remember You, think of You, love You. But this image is so effaced and worn away by vice, so darkened by the smoke of sin, that it cannot do what it was made to do unless You renew it and reform it. I do not try, Lord, to attain Your lofty heights, because my understanding is in no way equal to it. But I do desire to understand Your truth a little, that truth that my heart believes and loves. For I do not seek to understand so that I may believe; but I believe so that I may understand. For I believe this also, that “unless I believe, I shall not understand.” (*Proslogion*, chapter 1)

Although the understanding to which Anselm refers here is theology, the queen of the sciences, the quest of “faith seeking understanding” has, at least since the time of Augustine, been extended to the “beautiful book” of the universe as well as to God’s “holy and divine Word” (*Belgic Confession*, Article 2). In reading both books, scholars can hope only to know God’s truth “a little,” a confession of constraint that in no way dampens their desire—and their calling—to pursue such understanding.

Understanding God’s truth, however, remains an ongoing quest not only because human thought is constrained by finitude and sin, but also because it takes shape in particular times and particular cultures. As such, it necessarily utilizes the language and conceptual patterns of its own culture; it inhabits a rich but circumscribed imaginative universe. Christian scholarship, like Christian worship, is thus always both inculturated and countercultural; it is, to appropriate early Christian language, performed by those who are both “at home” and “aliens” in the world:

For Christians cannot be distinguished from the rest of the human race by country or language or customs. They do not live in cities of their own; they do not use a peculiar form of speech; they do not follow an eccentric manner of life. . . . Yet, although they live in Greek and barbarian cities alike, as each man's lot has been cast, and follow the customs of the country in clothing and food and other matters of daily living, at the same time they give proof of the remarkable and admittedly extraordinary constitution of their own commonwealth. They live in their own countries, but only as aliens. (“Letter to Diognetus” chapter 5)

To rephrase in the language of the Reformed tradition, Christian scholarship participates in the *yes* of common grace and the *no* of antithesis, but in both its “yeses” and its “noes” it is inevitably shaped—and limited—by its particular cultural moment.

It is well to keep in mind this long tradition of Christian scholarship when we turn to look at the ways in which such scholarship has been understood and instantiated at Calvin College. The historical perspective may help us to appreciate the particular gifts and strengths of the college as well as to recognize their inevitable limitations.

### **The Christian Mind**

According to the *Expanded Statement of Mission*, Christian scholarship at Calvin prior to 1960, “spoke by and large through elite but non-technical journals to educators and the educated laity in conservative Reformed circles, and in critique of the secularistic worldviews that dominated American culture. This effort aimed at establishing, reaffirming, and legitimating the cardinal premises of a ‘Christian mind’ in contradistinction to those of ‘secular minds’” (37). This early phase of scholarship at Calvin, then, took the church (broadly conceived as the people of God) as its primary audience and the articulation of applied theology as its main goal. Just as Calvin College itself was “our school” for “our children,” scholarship was primarily “our thinking” for “our people.”

## Christian Perspective

*Christian Liberal Arts Education (CLAE)*, the curriculum revision document of 1965, does not speak directly about Christian scholarship but it does address Christian scholars in its “Faith and Learning” section. Although the document is primarily concerned with the undergraduate curriculum, it assumes faculty who are actively engaged in their academic disciplines. Furthermore, it understands Christian scholarship as a function of faithful Christian vocation, such that scholars strive to see “reality” in the perspective of authoritative biblical revelation. While acknowledging that the Bible is not an academic handbook, it argues that Scripture does “provide us with a framework and a structure for our thought” which both directs inquiry and mitigates the distortions of sin and, in this regard, appeals to John Calvin: “The Christian religion . . . is the spectacles with which we are enabled to see the facts aright” (54). *CLAE* thus argues that “It is our duty and privilege as Christian scholars to roof and side the posts and beams” of the Christian academic house. To the question “but how can this be accomplished,” *CLAE* sidesteps specifics by noting that such an answer is “the business of the college,” but then lays out seven areas in which biblical revelation provides a perspective on academic pursuits:

- It informs our view of the place of disinterested theoretical inquiry;
- It speaks to the conceptual schemes, methodologies, and presuppositions employed in a discipline;
- It places a discipline in a larger philosophical perspective;
- It resists the tendency to make a single discipline or “facet of reality” the center of all knowledge;
- It informs the direction we take and the emphases, and claims we make in our discipline;
- It shapes and forms evaluations of the discipline;
- It speaks to the ends to which we put knowledge. (55)

The “Faith and Learning” section of *CLAE* concludes with a call for personal faith, academic competence, and ongoing work:

The task calls, of course, for personal Christian faith and commitment; no less obviously it calls for scientific competence, continuous study, creative reflection, intellectual initiative, courage, and imagination. Such qualities are indispensable if we are to avoid the ever-present temptation to replace the impact of a vital Christian faith with a sterile and mummified system of propositions labeled Christian, from which one can, as occasion demands, extract a proposition and bring it into external contact with the subject matter under discussion, allowing living, dynamic Christian faith to be increasingly relegated to a sphere of its own. (56)

*CLAE* does not use the word “integration” in the “Faith and Learning” section, although it does later use the verb: “That which is to integrate our education and give it unity and purpose is the Christian religion” (83). But by making the claim for Christian scholars to work in the academic disciplines and by rejecting the dichotomy of sacred and secular spheres, *CLAE* does prepare the way for the language of “integration of faith and learning.” Similarly, by stressing the biblical perspective and using Calvin’s image of the spectacles, it presages the notion of “worldview.” Significantly, however, *CLAE* puts the burden for being faithfully Christian on the person rather than on the product, although clearly it expects such scholarship itself to be faithfully—if not distinctively—Christian.

## Integration of Faith & Learning and Worldview

Integration language, however, does dominate the discussion of Christian scholarship in the Faculty Handbook. At each reappointment, faculty are asked to discuss the integration of faith and learning in the classroom and in their scholarship, and the catch-phrase “integrating faith and learning” is reiterated several times in the document (3.7.2.3.4).

Although the *CLAE* document stressed the relationship between biblical perspective and academic disciplines, suggesting the Christian scholar herself as the mediating link between Word and world, the practice of integration at Calvin after 1965 tended to interpose worldview or “the philosophy of” scholarship between scripture and disciplines. Indeed, in the outline of the proposed required course on Christian Perspectives on Learning (CPOL), a subcommittee tipped its hand by noting that the Christian view of learning at Calvin College is “grounded in a Christian theological-philosophical perspective” (95). On the other hand, the Constitution of the CCCS, written a dozen years after *CLAE*, is somewhat less specific in its description of what constitutes Christian scholarship. While reaffirming the perspectival language of *CLAE*—“our calling as Christian scholars obliges us to contribute, from the vantage point of the Christian faith, to the solution of . . . complex problems”—the CCCS defines the Christian scholarship it will support merely as that which develops “a distinctively Christian position” (Articles 1 and 2). This emphasis on “distinctively Christian positions,” as articulated both in *CLAE* and in the CCCS Constitution, resulted historically in two models that came to dominate Christian scholarship at Calvin.

The gold standard was the deductive, comprehensive, trickle-down approach to reformed scholarship:

Reference to Scripture  
Articulation of Christian Philosophy or Worldview  
Christian Critique of Discipline  
Articulation of Christian Theory of Discipline  
[Reformation of Disciplinary Practices]

One premier example of such CCCS-funded scholarship was the publication in 1983 of *Faith and Rationality: Reason and Belief in God*, edited by Alvin Plantinga and Nicholas Wolterstorff, but this approach also directed the formation of year-long projects on creation care (*Earthkeeping: Christian Stewardship of Natural Resources*); hermeneutics (*The Responsibility of Hermeneutics*); technology (*Responsible Technology: A Christian Perspective*); science (*Portraits of Creation: Biblical and Scientific Perspectives on the World's Formation*); medicine (*Christian Faith, Health, and Medical Practice*); and popular culture (*Dancing in the Dark: Youth, Popular Culture and the Electronic Media*). Later projects also attempted the reformulation of entire disciplines as in Hank Aay and Sander Griffioen’s *Geography and Worldview: A Christian Reconnaissance*.

The second model took a more inductive approach to transforming local issues, theories, practices, or pedagogies within disciplines through the application of Christian worldviews or perspectives. Here one might reference *Christian Faith, Health, & Medical Practice* and the more recent *Transforming Care: A Christian Vision of Nursing Practice* as well as such books as *Christianity and Culture in the Crossfire*, *Rethinking Secularization: Reformed Reactions to Modernity*, and *Mathematics in a Post-Modern Age: A Christian Perspective*.

In recent years, both “integration” and “worldview” language have come under attack. Charges include indictments of *de facto* dualism (because integration suggests two spheres that must be stitched together); the privileging of philosophy; the perpetuation of conflictual and warfare

models; static intellectualism; the emphasis on critique; monolithic and uni-directional scholarship (from worldview to world); and the neglect of scientific and creative practices. Partly in response to these criticisms, the language of Christian scholarship at Calvin has moved toward metaphors other than those of sight and sphere.

### **Faithful, Faith-based, and Faith-shaped Scholarship**

Integration and worldview models tend to emphasize the transformation of academic disciplines, suggesting distortions that need to be corrected rather than continuities that might be explored. To redress this potential imbalance, Nicholas Wolterstorff in his lectures to young faculty in the 1980s differentiated between “faithful” scholarship and “distinctive” scholarship: “Christian scholarship is faithful scholarship. By this I mean that it is to be defined not by its difference but by its fidelity” (“The Point of Connection” 78). While not discounting that faithful scholarship might also be distinctive, Wolterstorff suggested that it need not necessarily look much different from standard scholarship in the field.

A recent CCCS publication, *Faithful Imagination in the Academy*, oscillates between notions of distinctive and faithful, using the language of both integration and faith-based in its preface:

These essays are contributions to the ongoing and widespread revisionist project that asks the question: “What can it mean for scholars to *integrate* their faith with their academic work?” As much for scholars in so-called secular universities as for colleagues in church-related liberal arts colleges, we offer this work as an example of what *faith-based* discourse might possibly amount to. (vii, emphasis mine)

C. Stephen Evans, the first Dean of Research and Scholarship at Calvin College, in a lecture to new faculty also returned the definition of Christian scholarship to *CLAE*'s emphasis on the vocation of Christian scholars by speaking of faith-shaped scholarship:

Christian scholarship . . . is done to further the kingdom of God, carried out as part of a calling by citizens of that kingdom whose character, attitudes, emotions and convictions reflect their citizenship, and whose work as scholars is *shaped* by their Christian convictions, emotions, and character. (“Calvin’s Expectations,” emphasis mine)

Both the image of faith-based and the image of faith-shaped expand and clarify the concept of faithful Christian scholarship introduced by Wolterstorff.

In practice, faith-shaped scholarship has taken many forms. In *The Gift of the Stranger*, for instance, a particular biblical image/classical virtue is employed to reform the teaching of foreign languages. Jim Bradley and Kurt Schaefer use Christian principles to inform a standard text on *Uses and Misuses of Data and Models: The Mathematization of the Social Sciences*. Through performances and CDs, Pearl Shangkuan recovers the music of a neglected Christian composer, Stephen Paulus, and Hyesook Kim rehabilitates Messiaen as a man of faith. The 2009 Indonesian-North American art exhibit reconfigures the world of Christian art through example rather than argument.

### **Implicit and “Creational” Christian Scholarship**

Within the college at large, all scholarship that is performed by faithful Christians “to the glory of God” has come to be viewed as Christian scholarship. As the 2009 *Calvin College Statement of Identity and Mission* notes:

As a community of mutual service, Calvin College honors the scholarly work of all its members. It recognizes that the type of work a Christian scholar carries out will be a function of the nature of the discipline, that scholar’s particular gifts, and the opportunities that arise in the course of an academic career. Some are called to *explicitly* Christian

scholarship, in which religious commitments have manifest impact on the design, argument, conclusions, or implications of the work. Others aim for similar ends but by more *implicit* means. Still others observe the *standard practices of their guild* in such a way that nevertheless fulfills their calling, honors God, and contributes to the common good. (emphasis mine)

Although dispositional qualities or sensibilities—fulfilling vocation, honoring God, and contributing to the common good—ought to mark all forms of Christian scholarship, here they particularly modify “standard practices of the guild.” Such scholarship might be called “creational” or perhaps “new creational” in that its Christian character is distinguished by virtue of the one who performs it. In this sense, it lives up to John Calvin’s notion of vocation: “[I]n following your proper calling, no work will be so mean and sordid as not to have a splendor and value in the eye of God” (*Institutes*, 3.10.2-3).

Although the valuing of implicit and creational scholarship accurately reflects the practice of college, it leaves open the question as to how to determine when “standard practices of the guild” are being performed in such a way as to constitute them as “Christian scholarship.”

### **Intentional Christian Scholarship: The Mission of the CCCS**

The Constitution of the CCCS situates the projects it will fund more narrowly within the parameters of explicit and implicit Christian scholarship. Christian scholars are to contribute “to the solution of the complex problems facing humankind today” and they are to do so by focusing “on areas of life and thought in which it is reasonable to expect that a *distinctively* Christian position can be worked out; and for which traditional Christian positions have been too parochially expressed, too superficially developed, or too little in accord with the Christian faith” (Articles 1 and 2, emphasis mine).

Each CCCS-sponsored project, therefore, must engage in *intentional* Christian scholarship which is defined as

research and reflection that deliberately bring the resources of the Christian faith to bear upon a subject, whether by scrutinizing the fundamental premises of a theory or a field; by elaborating the ethical consequences of social structures, research methods, or ways of thought; by creating imaginative or artistic works; or by helping Christians understand their world better through the critical appropriation of new work being done in the academy.

Here, the phrase “intentional Christian scholarship” suggests that the adjective “Christian” consciously marks the scholarly product, whether implicitly or explicitly expressed in the actual publication or performance. In other words, the CCCS assumes that, if asked, the scholar could articulate the ways in which such scholarship is distinctively, deliberately, and thus faithfully Christian.

The CCCS continues to encourage intentional Christian scholarship that is written for a wide variety of audiences—church, academic, lay, and professional communities—and also endorses the three types of scholarship outlined by the *Expanded Statement of Mission*:

**Conserving scholarship** promotes understanding of the various Christian traditions in order to provide the Christian community with the integrity, vision, and wisdom needed both to frame and to energize its ongoing work. From caring for historic documents to recovering voices of the faithful who have lived long ago or far away, Christian scholarship serves the community with a fuller appreciation of its heritage. Fundamental to conserving scholarship are the research skills of ordering materials, observing significant patterns, and interpreting patterns for the community.

**Transforming scholarship** may establish Christian criteria for knowledge or for its application, or may implement those criteria in a particular field in such a way as to challenge the wisdom prevailing there or to show the critical, redemptive, or reconciling power of the Christian faith. Transforming scholarship brings to research materials a method for applying analytic skills to a given body of material, theorizing about the significance of that material, and interpreting a body of knowledge under such ethical rubrics as justice and reconciliation.

**Enriching scholarship** brings the insights or methods of the arts and sciences to bear on Christian thought and the understanding of creation and culture. Such scholarship can enhance appreciation for God's creation and human experience, expand the fund of human knowledge and wisdom, help Christians engage in proper self-criticism or self-understanding, and enrich the testimony of the Christian message. The primary focus here is the scholar's engagement of materials of his or her discipline, or the expression of a creative gift. It includes a range of scholarly endeavor from scientific work in the laboratory, to the writing of a book on a literary figure, to the presentation of a creative performance. Such work is marked by its originality and by its contribution and significance to a field of study. (ESM 40-1)

For example, the CCCS has supported conserving scholarship, both as it recovers or preserves the Christian tradition (e.g., *Recovering 19<sup>th</sup> Century Women Interpreters of the Bible*) or more particularly the Reformed tradition in “heritage projects” (e.g., the Johan Herman Bavinck Translation Project). Transforming scholarship—both applied and advanced—has marked the majority of CCCS-funded projects. Enriching scholarship begins with “the insights or methods of the arts and sciences” and then moves to Christian thought. Because such scholarship places the primary focus on “the scholar's engagement of materials of his or her discipline, or the expression of a creative gift,” it may be more challenging for faculty to articulate clearly its intentional Christian character. Nevertheless, such articulation is expected of successful proposals.

In sum, the CCCS favors projects that demonstrate the following:

- Clear sense of theoretical basis and appropriate methodologies, chosen with an eye toward their congruence or promise of fruitful dialogue with Reformed Christianity;
- Familiarity with current discussions and bibliography in the relevant disciplines;
- Ability to significantly advance disciplinary and Christian scholarly conversations and practices;
- Relevance to the identity and mission of Calvin College, particularly by employing rich theological themes from the Reformed tradition. Here the CCCS cautions applicants not to resort to formulaic statements of the Reformed faith, but rather to consider deeply how to engage current questions in the light of historic Christianity.

In addition, a proposal should answer the following questions:

- What is the significance of this project and for what audience(s) is it intended?
- What doors does this project open or what gaps does it fill within one or more disciplines and in terms of Christian scholarship?
- Why ought this project to be undertaken by Calvin College faculty? What particular expertise or “value added” do Calvin faculty bring to the project?
- Why is this a timely project?
- How does this project speak to and enrich the Reformed tradition?

## **A Concluding Word**

The Calvin Center for Christian Scholarship exists to serve the academy, the church, and the public square by promoting and supporting rigorous, creative Christian scholarship. Such scholarship, as the *Expanded Statement of Mission* notes,

is not needed in the Christian academic community just for intellectual vitality, prestige, or adornment, but it is needed for that community to do its part in the church's larger mission of being God's agent of witness and reconciliation in the world. Preserving the beauty of the world and redressing its pain do not proceed from scholarship alone; neither do they proceed far without it. Scholarship is not just a registering or responsive activity but a shaping, driving force, particularly over the long run and in the echelons of power and authority. Without seeking to dominate the world coercively, Christians must work persistently, intensively, and communally to make their voice heard in the world: as a witness against secularistic pretensions and idolatries, as a witness against their own perversions of the faith, and as a witness for that reconciliation among the peoples and between God and humanity that is offered in Jesus Christ. Committed Christian scholarship is vital to forming, guiding, correcting, and forwarding that witness. (*ESM* 40)

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