

## How to approach any intellectual discipline from a Christian worldview

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*In general it seems that Christian intellectuals are more prepared to question disciplines that are not their own. In this session we consider the painful process of thinking about our own disciplines in biblical ways. Biblical thinking about a subject does not just happen. It requires active scrutiny of the Scriptures for relevant teaching and principles, and an application of these principles to the axioms, values, rules, and definitions of the discipline, regardless of how much this is contrary to the practice of the scholarly guild. For instance, the Christian thinker must have a process to review and question every single piece of discipline-specific terminology before adopting terms and words for long-term use. The Christian thinker must also have a right understanding of human knowledge, including its limitations and the effects of sin on the mind.*

In the 1990s the UC Berkeley law professor Phillip E. Johnson caused something of a stir with the publication of his book *Darwin on Trial* in 1991 (InterVarsity Press). Though he cannot really be said to have founded the modern Intelligent Design Movement, he certainly galvanised it and the modern articulation of Intelligent Design entered a decisive new phase under his leadership.

If we may assess his message at the very broadest level it was that an area of academic study had taken some significant wrong turns and that the discipline most open to critique was biology. Of course, Johnson did not critique biology as a discipline so much as particular beliefs about evolutionary biology which many scientists identified as core parts of the discipline itself. Various factors contributed to ensuring that this critique of evolutionary biology could not be ignored, including Johnson's gifts as a writer and his tenure of a prestigious academic chair in a leading university.

My purpose here is not to assess Johnson's contribution to biology, which is debated, but rather to make the unoriginal observation that Johnson used his influence as a leading academic to seek to sort out a discipline *other* than his own. He critiqued most energetically the contemporary discipline of biology, but is not known for a similar critique of the contemporary discipline of law.

We recognize, of course, that lawyers are a breed who are trained to argue and this often gives them an ability to evaluate evidence outside their own discipline. Trial lawyers thus often need to deal with specialists in other disciplines. Nevertheless, it is my impression that the case of Johnson does fit a wider pattern, though this is not an impression which I can back up with any statistical rigor: there is a tendency amongst Christian scholars to see clearly problems with the manner in which disciplines other than their own are studied.

This is in many ways what we should expect. Just as any given culture finds it easier to perceive the eccentricities of other cultures, so scholars, including Christian scholars, occupy subcultures which have their own rules and norms that do not readily present themselves for scrutiny. But whether or not one accepts my impression that Christian scholars tend to be less critical of their own discipline than they are of others or sees such inconsistency as a more occasional phenomenon, there is an urgent need for Christian scholars to examine the basis of their own disciplines.

## **Listening to and interrogating scripture<sup>1</sup>**

Scripture reveals God as a God who speaks. The prime duty of the first human pair in the Garden of Eden was to obey God's voice. This was the prime duty of Noah and of Abraham, whether Abraham was to leave his homeland or to offer his unique son as a sacrifice. God called to Israel, '*Hear, O Israel*' (Deuteronomy 6:4), and the instruction that 'man shall not live by bread alone but by every word which comes out from the mouth of God' (Deuteronomy 8:3) was brought into special focus by its use in Jesus's response to the devil (Matthew 4:4). Our primary duty is not to be successful, nor even to eat food to keep ourselves alive, but to feed on the food which consists of every word which comes from God's mouth. In this meal, no food may be left on the plate.

From this it is obvious that the approach which a Christian scholar must take has to involve digesting all that Scripture says, whether it seems to be on the subject in question or not. The word of God is to be fed on and lived out. This means, of course, that no Christian scholar in any discipline can afford to get their primary acquaintance with Scripture secondarily. The idea of a Christian thought leader who is not an avid student of the Scriptures should be impossible. This is not to say that every Christian thought leader needs to pursue a professional or degree level training in Biblical Studies, though we should make it not only easier but also more normal for Christian thought leaders in any discipline to acquire a deep knowledge of the Scriptures and even to have opportunities to learn biblical languages.

The purpose of all this is driven by the prayer of the Christian scholar: 'Lord, teach me what your word has to say on all subjects, especially on those subjects of which I am held to be knowledgeable.'

## **Can Scripture address every subject?**

One preliminary matter to be cleared up is the question of whether Scripture speaks to every subject. After all, as Augustine noted, it would be a bad witness to the gospel if one were to claim that Scripture said a particular thing on a subject when Scripture does not speak on the issue and if the meaning claimed for Scripture were also manifestly at odds with what is known otherwise.<sup>2</sup> Can it be said that because Scripture is to make one wise to salvation (2 Timothy 3:15) that its teaching is essentially about soteriology and that it does not address how specifically one might study astrophysics, biology, chemistry, dentistry, economics, French, geography, history, IT, journalism, kinaesthetic learning, law, mathematics, neuroscience, obstetrics, physics, Qur'anic studies, religious education, sociology, thermodynamics, urban studies, veterinary medicine, war studies, youthwork, or zoology?

I want to argue here that the reach of the teaching of Scripture is in principle all encompassing. It may not only teach us general principles by which we may lead our lives, but also may give discipline-specific information, even if its primary purpose is not to do so. We must naturally take care not to read into the Scriptures information which is not actually there, but one must not prematurely rule out the notion that Scripture specifically addresses an area.

I believe that Scripture has nothing to say which is specific to the discipline of French literature that would not also apply to the literature of other language groups. However, it has much to say about values and worldview which may be in conflict or

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<sup>1</sup> Arguably, Scripture interrogates us (Hebrews 4:12-13), but I use this phrase to refer to the proactive cross-examination of what Scripture might have to say on a subject.

<sup>2</sup> Augustine, *De Genesi ad litteram libri duodecim*, 1.19/39.

accord with French writers. A proper approach to French literature will fully engage these questions.

A more controversial area could be the question of Scripture and Science. One of the reasons why one cannot divide these two as if they were subjects which do not overlap,<sup>3</sup> is that science today is presented as reaching into every area of knowledge. Almost any statement we claim that Scripture makes about physical bodies will involve an overlap between a statement of Scripture and a domain of science. This may be a trivial overlap, such occurs when it says that people came to John the Baptist. The ideas that there are such entities as people and that they are capable of movement involve overlaps with science, since science is claimed, in principle, to be open to investigating physical entities which exist or have existed (such as people) and their motion. This does not mean that any investigation using specifically scientific methods will ever investigate such a statement. The existence of people and their general ability to move are not controversial notions, nor ones which require specifically scientific methods to investigate. Nevertheless the statement overlaps with areas of science. It would be hard to write any text with narratives set in the physical world which did not have an overlap with science. There should thus be no in principle objection to finding information relevant to science in Scripture.

Nevertheless it is widely acknowledged that Scripture should not be used as a scientific textbook.<sup>4</sup> It should not be read as speaking in the scientific language of today. But there is a problem, namely that the Scriptures are perceived of as sometimes speaking on an issue in a clearly wrong way. Modern readers are therefore tempted to read Scripture as essentially accommodating to our ignorance. Thus even though it seems to address directly an issue of, for instance, scientific interest, it should be read as not in fact intending to do so. Such an approach asserts that what it is really intending to do is to communicate to us the way of salvation and the way of obedience to God. Any statement seemingly couched as a scientific claim needs to be read as having a more limited meaning.

A classic example of this might be found in texts which have at times been held to support the view that the earth is fixed. It might be concluded from these that Scripture tells us that the earth does not move through space or move round the Sun. Such texts have thus been taken to support geocentricity and to be incompatible with heliocentric models.<sup>5</sup> An excellent example of such a text is Psalm 96:10 where the KJV says:

‘Say among the heathen *that* the LORD reigneth: the world also shall be established that it shall not be moved: he shall judge the people righteously.’

There we have it: the world cannot move! Does not this speak against the Copernican Revolution? Surely this gives us ground to restrict the subject areas which we can say Scripture authoritatively addresses.

I would argue against this. The world is not the only thing which is said in the Psalms not to move. It is also said that Zion cannot be moved:

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<sup>3</sup> Stephen Jay Gould introduced the concept of Non-overlapping magisteria or NOMAs. Thus religion could address values while science addressed fact.

<sup>4</sup> E.g. Scott McKnight, ‘The Bible ... is not a scientific textbook.’ (<http://www.patheos.com/blogs/jesuscreed/2014/12/17/does-the-bible-contain-science/#ixzz3UyB3m7ZY>).

<sup>5</sup> Of course, to describe the Solar System as heliocentric might be seen as a simplification within a universe where every object may be described as in motion relative to other objects.

‘They that trust in the LORD *shall be* as mount Zion, *which* cannot be removed, *but* abideth for ever’ (Ps. 125:1)

Moreover, the addressee of Psalm 121 has a foot (just one?) which cannot be moved:

‘He will not suffer thy foot to be moved: he that keepeth thee will not slumber.’ (Ps. 121:3)

The psalmist also says:

‘I shall not be moved’ (Ps. 62:6)

I deliberately use the KJV for these verses since more recent translations tend to interpret the Hebrew word in terms of stability rather than immovability. The point is that the language is essentially the same in all the passages. One should not interpret Psalm 96:10 as asserting that earth cannot move under any circumstances unless one is also prepared to read Psalm 121:3 as a text telling its addressee that his foot is stuck or immobile.<sup>6</sup>

The fact that at times people have read scientific statements into Scripture when Scripture was not intending the texts to be so read is a warning to us, but it does not give us an adequate reason to claim that Scripture and science always address totally non-overlapping spheres. It has often, in fact, been argued that it was a scriptural worldview which led to modern science.<sup>7</sup>

My prolegomenon at this stage is simply to establish this: in principle Scripture may address any area, not merely indicating how any Christian should handle an academic discipline in general, but Scripture may even address an area of knowledge directly with specific information. With this prolegomenon out of the way, we may consider directly how a Christian scholar might ensure that he or she faithfully applies Scripture to his or her discipline.

I will leave aside the important matter of Christian virtues which should characterize all scholars, such as love, humility, and hope. Personal virtues are incredibly important, but I want to take questions of right attitude largely for granted for the sake of this exercise, and look at some of the more exclusively academic issues involved.

I should also say that many of the virtues which should govern a Christian academic are not exclusive virtues. A Christian academic should be honest, but others need to be and often are honest too. A Christian may be able even to say that she is honest because she is a Christian, but that would not have to mean that someone could not be equally or even more honest even though she were not a Christian.

I want thus to consider four areas which need great scrutiny in the light of the Scriptures: Axioms, Values, Rules, and Definitions, and then to consider the question of how we process our evaluation of these. In line with my view that we tend not to be bold enough in questioning our own disciplines, I am here proposing a somewhat radical approach.

## 1. Axioms

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<sup>6</sup> See also Psalm 10:6; 16:8; 21:7; 46:5; 112:6.

<sup>7</sup> For instance, Rodney Stark, *For the Glory of God: How Monotheism Led to Reformations, Science, Witch-Hunts, and the End of Slavery* (Princeton University Press, 2003).

An axiom is something on which everything else is based. It is not something which rests on anything else; it is a starting point. Of course, if one starts from the wrong place one is likely to get to the wrong destination and it is therefore essential that we think carefully about our starting positions. Axioms come so early in the thought process that often they do not receive the scrutiny which they should. We tend to begin our thinking when the agenda has already been set.

Often we find that a Christian approach begins from a fundamentally different starting position from that of other world-views. A secular materialist may believe, with Protagoras, that ‘Man is the measure of all things’: human rationality is the greatest rationality we know and should be the benchmark against which everything else is judged. When a Christian disagrees with this because we believe in the noetic effects of the fall and in God’s superior intellect, we disagree with the axioms of our materialist colleague.

Nowadays Christians typically have a different ontology from their secular colleagues. They disagree fundamentally about the nature of the things that are around them. This is well illustrated by the following quotation from C.S. Lewis of the dialogue between a retired star in the Narnian world and the boy Eustace from our world.

*“I am a star at rest, my daughter,” answered Ramandu. “When I set for the last time, decrepit and old beyond all that you can reckon, I was carried to this island. I am not so old now as I was then. Every morning a bird brings me a fire-berry from the valleys of the Sun, and each fire-berry takes away a little of my age. And when I have become as young as a child that was born yesterday, then I shall take my rising once again (for we are at earth’s eastern rim) and once more tread the great dance.”*

*“In our world,” said Eustace, “a star is a huge ball of flaming gas.”*

*“Even in your world, my son, that is not what a star is, but only what it is made of.”*

(C.S. Lewis, *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*, ch. 14)

We tend to disagree at a very basic level about what exists. If we are discussing with a physicalist—someone who believes that the underlying nature of everything which really exists is physical—then Eustace’s description of what a star ‘is’ is to the physicalist tolerably accurate. For examples, the physicalist simply cannot recognize the possibility of ‘mind’ having existence independent of ‘brain’. When therefore asked what psychology investigates, he may have a very different understanding from that of a Christian substance dualist.<sup>8</sup> A secular anthropologist will not think of humans as primarily in the image of God. A secular historian will ignore the possibility that there has been an omniscient observer of all the past, and will therefore view much of the past as lost, when, from a theistic perspective, it is every bit as fresh to God’s mind as the present is to ours.

The Christian scholar must ask what the axioms are which often associate themselves with a particular domain of study and expose them to the scrutiny of the Scriptures.

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<sup>8</sup> A substance dualist believes that there are two fundamental types of entity (1) person, mind or soul; (2) matter, space-time, and the physical. Person exists independent of the physical and is not something which merely arises out of the physical.

## 2. Values

One of the most pervasive problems in academic disciplines is the hiding of value systems, or even the persistence of belief that the academy can be value-neutral. Many academics see their task as to describe not to evaluate, but of course without a set of values it would not be possible to decide what is worth studying. No academic discipline can exist without a set of values and one of our prime duties is to identify what those values are. An attendee of a Forum strategy/project recently did this for economics, which had long posed as a value-neutral discipline.<sup>9</sup>

Perhaps one of the worst affected areas by the idea of neutrality is that of the natural sciences. Of course, there is no scientific experiment which can measure values, and yet without a system which ascribes value to the pursuit of knowledge one would neither fund science nor devote energy to it. Science research is generally much more expensive than humanities research and the science which gets done is, largely speaking, the science which has managed to get funded. Whereas it is common for individuals to fund themselves through higher degrees in humanities research this is relatively uncommon in the sciences. Therefore it is incumbent on scientists to consider well the question of why they are asking particular questions and not other ones.

When you look at the night sky you may see darkness or you may see stars. Both are interesting data, but if your research only gave attention to one and not the other it would be distorting. Scientists need therefore to be aware of potentially distorting research agendas since it is the research agenda which often influences the patterns we see in the data.

It is well known that certain words and topics are more likely to elicit funding during grant proposals and this can easily distort what is studied, but what gets funded is not merely a question of packaging the request. Western societies have a deeper interest in funding cancer research than in kidney research. They are more interested in funding search for extra-terrestrial life than whether abortion may damage a woman's mental health. The scientist sometimes needs to back up and consider what a research agenda would look like if they were able to allocate resources how they wished in accordance with the values of Scripture.

To this an individual scientist might well object that they have only been trained in a particular area of science. It is not reasonable to expect them to be a generalist or an ethicist. They are simply doing their job and cannot be expected to be responsible for building a science curriculum and judging what time and resources should be given to each subject. For instance, an individual trained as a pharmacologist does not necessarily feel equipped to conceive an overall science curriculum. That is certainly reasonable, but it does rather abdicate the responsibility of asking why one is a pharmacologist. Perhaps the chain went like this: one is a pharmacologist because one enjoyed pharmacology (nothing wrong so far); one enjoyed pharmacology because one had an inspiring teacher (nothing wrong with that either); one had an inspiring teacher by 'chance' and the teacher had been able to train because there was more funding in pharmacology than any other area. If this chain is true then it follows that one has become a pharmacologist ultimately because at some point someone else made the judgement that a subject was worth funding and this may have been for good reasons (they wanted to heal people) or bad ones (because they were motivated by greed) or for a mixture of reasons.

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<sup>9</sup> Vaclav Havel and Tomas Sedlacek, *Economics of Good and Evil: The Quest for Economic Meaning from Gilgamesh to Wall Street* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

Now none of this means that it's wrong to be a pharmacologist (or a professional in any other discipline I could have chosen). God used the greed of Joseph's brothers to make him in charge of Egypt's economy and it was the right thing for him to do. However, we all need to be active in looking both at what we can do and at what needs to be done. The Christian pharmacologist who is able to see how their work fits within a wider framework of work for God is blessed.

There are some other values other than just mammon which one needs to consider within academic research. One of them is novelty. The very definition of research for many people is pushing back the frontiers of human ignorance. Thus, if one could think of knowledge as consisting of measurable units we might say that the academy today prefers one unit of brand new knowledge (new to all humans) over two pieces of old and forgotten knowledge. This evaluation has some merit. After all, if the forgotten knowledge has at least been written down, someone may find it in the future. Nevertheless in certain humanities disciplines the desire for the novel can be distorting. For instance, in the academic study of the Bible if novel interpretations are privileged it is not likely to lead to greater insight into the truth since our primary responsibility is described in Scripture as to 'hear', 'listen', and 'obey',<sup>10</sup> which are not activities which major on the creative input of the receiver of the text.

### 3. Rules

We come now to consider the rules of the academy. Some of these arguably derive from Christian values. After all, all the early western universities had Christian foundations. There are various rules of academic behaviour which are widely held. One of them is the principle of properly crediting intellectual property by citation. We acknowledge where an idea originated and avoid plagiarism. This seems entirely appropriate, though one might possibly critique the modern notion of 'intellectual property' for giving excessive control of ideas to those who first originated them. Most Christians today seem comfortable that copyright is a good idea, though this may result more from inertia than from careful consideration of the case for and against its various forms. Scripture does, however, have a clear principle of giving honour where honour is due (Romans 13:7) and thus it seems highly appropriate to acknowledge those who first made discoveries.

There are other rules of the academy which are generally good: publication, transparent referencing, peer review, and so on. We can connect each one of these with biblical principles. However, there are *social* rules which are not always so helpful, especially, in the form of defined paths of progression.

Typically, in order to pursue a career of academic study there is a defined path of progression. One typically goes from undergraduate degrees, to masters degrees to doctoral degrees. In general, greater honour is assigned to people's ideas at a later stage than at an earlier stage. This is largely appropriate and in line with scriptural principles (James 1:19; Job 32:6–7). However, the defined path of career progression may involve other social rules in which those earlier in their career are not entitled to independent opinion and are put under pressure to conform their opinions to those of their academic seniors in order to get adequate marks for their work. Without good marks (grades) the individual may in fact be prevented from academic progression and thus of learning more. This system could, in theory, act as a filter ensuring that those with greater conformity in belief to that of their academic seniors have a greater

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<sup>10</sup> The Hebrew verb *šāma*<sup>c</sup> used in Deuteronomy 6:4 and elsewhere may involve any of these meanings.

probability of being accepted to study further and thus become the future guardians of the discipline.

An example of pressure within academic progression could be in the area of vivisection, or animal experimentation. In various biological disciplines extreme pressure can be brought to bear on individuals to partake in particular practical exercises experimenting on animals. One more or less has to undertake experiments on animals in order to progress. This probably was not obvious to those applying for undergraduate degrees and was not part of the biology prospectus. However, students find this out too late for them to be able to change discipline without great sacrifice. In this context it is hard for the student to take an objective view of vivisection. Christians have different views on vivisection, but there is at least a *prima facie* case that the practice may be in tension with Christian principles. A Christian might justify vivisection as follows: humans are of greater worth than animals since humans are in the image of God. Animal experimentation can save human life. Since human life is of infinite value and animal life of finite value we may use animals in experiments which lead to saving human life.

However, the argument from relative value can be turned on its head: it is precisely the superiority of humans which could be used as an argument against vivisection. Humans are capable of rationally choosing their destiny in a way unavailable to animals. We are also put in a position of stewarding animals and thus owing care to them which they do not owe to us. Arguably therefore we have a greater duty to protect them than we have even to protect ourselves. After all, does not the good shepherd lay down his own (more precious) life for the sake of his (less precious) sheep? (John 10:11). It is precisely the superiority of the shepherd over the sheep which is the ground for his putting their safety ahead of his.

Now whether or not a Christian accepts the arguments for or against vivisection is not the point of this paper. Rather my point is that we need to recognize that social rules of the academy have a huge influence on the opinions we adopt. If the conscience of a young student is overridden by pressure to conform we should not expect dissent from the rules to be expressed by those who have been involved in the discipline for many years. They will have become gradually comfortable with the discipline. Any spirit of resistance they may have had is likely to have suffered damage.

A Christian approach to an academic discipline must thus be prepared to take a critical approach to the ground rules which all other academics in that discipline take for granted. We must subject all rules of the discipline to the scrutiny of the Scriptures. In particular we must scrutinize the rules for career progression. If a discipline's rules for progression are set up so that certain beliefs are discouraged we need to ensure that such discouragement exerts no influence on the positions we adopt.

#### **4. Definitions**

Every academic discipline has its own language and terminology. Terminology is not neutral but is one of the ways we define reality. We group phenomena together and assign significance to things by the way we name them. Naming is an interesting phenomenon from a biblical perspective as God names various things in Genesis 1 (day, night, heavens, land, seas), and then allows the man to name the animals and the woman in Genesis 2. God does not micromanage the naming of all things, but allows humans delegated authority in naming.



Often it is the labels which we assign to things which more than anything else express the values and beliefs of a culture. Those within a culture find it very difficult to question the very language of that culture since the culture and the language have a deeply symbiotic relationship and have evolved together. We tend to think *in* and *with* our language and do not critique it adequately.

It was George Orwell who, in his novel *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, so clearly saw how ideology imposed itself through changes of terminology. If we as Christians are in a minority of academics and intellectuals we should expect that much of the terminology which is in use around us will actually conflict with our own beliefs and values. We should not conform to the language of those around us merely because the terminology which surrounds us is ubiquitous. The mere fact that a word seems to be an unavoidable part of everyday expression is no reason whatsoever for us to accept it.

Within English the twentieth and early twenty-first century saw considerable changes in the formal expression of gender. This affected not only the use of nouns ('actor' increasingly replaced 'actress'; 'chair' sometimes replaced 'chairman') but even pronouns. Generic 'he' became increasingly socially unacceptable and 'they' came to be allowed to denote a generic singular (as occurs in the NIV 2011).<sup>11</sup> These changes came in large part due to ideological objections which were made to the 'sexist' use of these terms. Thus we see that ideology is able to make major changes to language. Even the pronouns of a language, which may be viewed as at the core of its structure, are able to be changed if there is enough pressure to do so.

Ambitious ideologies often leave a large mark on a language. Thus the early Christians left a major mark on the terminology of Greek, Latin, Syriac, and Coptic, and other languages they came into contact with. The medieval languages are likewise thoroughly influenced by the forms of Christianity current then. It seems that by comparison Christians today have relatively little ambition for language reform.

I would maintain that every term within our academic disciplines should be open to question in the light of Scripture. It is not that we are necessarily seeking to imitate all aspects of scriptural language in our languages today. After all, the language and terminology of the Greek New Testament is different from that of the Hebrew Old Testament. There is no single model for our own language, though the Scriptures do give us examples of what is by virtue of its use by God clearly legitimate language. It is often by contrasting our own language with that of Scripture that we gain insight into the peculiarity of our own language and are given the opportunity to question some of the unwarranted assumptions we have adopted.

I want to take a word which seems to have a basically unquestioned status and show some of the unhealthy assumptions which surround it. I do this to illustrate how in undertaking any academic discipline we should be prepared to critique and abandon its terminology if we have reason to do so. No term is sacred, not even the name of our discipline itself.

The word I want us to consider is the word 'sex'. This word is widely used in our culture and its meaning is taken to be self-evident. Taking our cue from Scripture we may notice that this word is *absent* from the Bible. It is not found in Greek or Hebrew, and when it is adopted by modern Bible translations this is only done when they are paraphrased.<sup>12</sup> In addition we may note that the word, at least in its modern meaning, is absent from Latin and other ancient languages. Someone within our

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<sup>11</sup> This paper avoids generic 'he', but uses exemplary 'he' and 'she'.

<sup>12</sup> Strangely the NIV 2011 uses the term 'sex' only in regard to 'homosexual' 'sex': Genesis 19:5; Judges 19:22; 1 Corinthians 6:9.

culture might well wonder at this. Clearly the ancient Hebrews, Greeks and Romans 'did it'. After all, here we are. They must therefore have known about 'it' and had the concept of 'it', even if they did not use the word. But without denying that these ancient cultures procreated, is this analysis actually correct?

In the Old Testament some different words clearly refer to activities which include sexual intercourse, including the words literally rendered 'know' (Genesis 4:1), 'lie with' (Genesis 39:7), and 'humble' (2 Samuel 13:14). However, there is a difference between these terms and the term 'sex'. 'Sex' is used today to refer to activities which one might do on one's own, in twos, or in groups. It is used to refer to some connected but different biological activities, but crucially the term itself does not provide any details of the social context in which the activity is set. It labels various activities and thereby groups them together and labels them without regard to their consequences or morality. It also isolates these activities which it groups and thereby suggests that they may take place without any other effects. Our culture believes in 'mere sex'. Moreover, the word 'sex', in addition to its role in grouping and isolating certain activities, is often given an unconditionally positive presentation. This is at one level strange because so much of whether an activity is positive or not depends on its context, but the Durex slogan reads 'love sex', extolling the virtues of this supposed entity without further qualification. As 'sex' is positive, so the term 'sexy' is positive, and so on.

I wish to put a rather contrary view. I believe that 'sex' as defined by our modern culture is to a large degree a social construction. To put it more strongly: there is no such thing. To be sure there are certain activities behind the definition. These activities are real enough. Some of these activities are reproductive, some are not. Some are moral, some are not. Some are enjoyable, some are not. But while I affirm the reality of various activities, I deny the grouping or taxonomy which places masturbation, the intimacy of man and woman in lifelong covenant before God, and a gang orgy together in one category and labels them as essentially alike. To be sure, there is some legitimacy to such a grouping, in the common involvement of certain parts of the body, of certain hormones and so on. I do not deny that these experiences share common elements. My point rather is to say that there are different ways of grouping activities together—one which our culture has not chosen—and that I believe that our culture's terminology in this area is unhelpful except for very narrow purposes: I am happy for the word 'sex' to be used in medical and biological contexts. It is useful in such contexts to isolate certain phenomena for the sake of description and greater understanding.

However, for our societies, the word 'sex' today plays a more important role. 'Sex' is a commodity. One may 'have', 'get', and 'enjoy' it. When Durex tells us to 'love sex', the phrase suggests the following: rather than there being two becoming one in the bed expressing love to one another, we have two individuals each loving a third entity in the bed with them, namely the goddess 'sex'. The reification, deification, and commoditization of this supposed entity is an essential move in contemporary culture, to such an extent that our culture finds it almost impossible to imagine life without thinking of this object of worship.

Once you have invented the modern concept of 'sex' (as a set of experiences grouped and isolated), it is possible to build on the concept. A derived adjective makes the word 'sexual'. Derive a noun from the adjective derived from the noun we have invented and we get the word 'sexuality'. We can form secondary adjectives such as 'homosexual' and 'heterosexual'. We can replace the secondarily derived adjective 'homosexual' with the word 'gay'. We can replace the word 'gay' with a

mere letter in a chain such as LGBTQ, and so on. All of these moves which our culture takes to describe reality are merely socially conditioned and none of them are moves which humans need to make in order to make sense of the world or to have a meaningful culture.

Most of us cannot imagine that we could actually and legitimately dispense with the word 'sex' from all but very limited context.<sup>13</sup> It seems so normal and so necessary. Our culture wants to argue that 'gender' is socially constructed but that 'sexuality' is fixed and permanent. There are biological questions which need to be investigated to consider this, but there are also questions of vocabulary choice. If we are not deliberate about our vocabulary choices while those with competing ideologies are, we should not be surprised if we find ourselves trapped by the web of words which have been created round us.

## **5. Filtering**

We need to think about how to apply an analysis of the above four categories for our intellectual discipline and this is where I believe we need to think about what I call 'filtering'. This is because we cannot question everything simultaneously and still remain active and communicative. When therefore entering a discipline we should acknowledge that in principle everything about it can be questioned. Our initial impressions of the discipline may prove to be quite correct, but they are nevertheless provisional. However, whether we are on a degree course or in academic employment we need to have a programme to work through axioms, values, rules, and definitions, to ensure that we are not supporting any of these which we should not support.

I do not believe that it will be helpful to engage in the most rigorous scrutiny of each of these immediately. Apart from anything else, it is simply too much work. We may therefore accept terms such as Septuagint, Periodic Table, Big Bang, Human Resources, Laws of Nature, or Religion, as terms that we will use in our discipline in the short term because other people are using them. However, the fact that other people are using the terms is no guarantee that they are good terms. We should therefore schedule time to investigate the value of these terms and to consider whether there are better alternatives.

In this paper, I have questioned a number of things which may seem to some here to be so well established as to be a waste of effort to question. A word should therefore be said about how much we can question.

I am not suggesting that we should question everything simultaneously, or that we should take on more fights than we can reasonably carry on simultaneously. After all our secular counterparts, who saw considerable success in shifting Western academies in the direction of secular thought, did not launch a full-blown secularism in one go. One hurdle was crossed at a time, though those who could see into the distance were able to see the end goal. Our end goal is that every thought should be captive to Christ (2 Corinthians 10:5), but we do not need to take all our captives on the same day.

It might be thought to be more tactical to begin with some of the softer forms of questioning. Some terms like Septuagint, sex and science are so well established that we may decide there is less to be gained through questioning them than through accepting them. We may investigate them and decide that they are in fact good terms, which we wish to promote.

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<sup>13</sup> In the sort of contexts in which one may speak of 'respiration' or 'excretion', the term 'sexual reproduction' is not out of place.

If, however, we have found a term to be unhelpful, I believe that it is a tactical blunder not to begin any shift of terminology. One may continue to use all of these terms but instantly begin using other better terms to displace them. Or even if we think that it is not the term but the very concept (or confused set of concepts) which lie behind them which is the problem then we can begin at once to experiment with avoidance of a term. Avoidance of using an axiom, value, rule or definition may take some fairly passive and inconspicuous forms. On the other hand, it is also possible to denounce such axioms, values, rules and definitions publicly. Thus one has a range of options depending on how firmly one is convinced of one's alternative model, on the degree of importance of the issue at stake, and on the number of fights one currently has going.

However, I have certainly been too negative. To approach a discipline from a biblical standpoint is not merely about avoiding terminology, but also about the right creation of words and expressions. This is highly creative and as with all forms of human creativity, the more their context is a mind soaked in Scripture, the better.

Thus, in the long term we want not only to reject wrong axioms, values, rules and definitions, but to introduce Scripture-based axioms, values, rules and definitions in every structure and situation we encounter.<sup>14</sup>

#### **Addendum: Questions for discussion**

Are the categories of axioms, values, rules and definitions sufficient to ensure that we do not take on board wrong ideas? Are there other things we should also question?

What are the axioms, values, rules and definitions which we as Christians are most blind to in academic disciplines today? How can we promote Scripture-based axioms, values, rules and definitions

What are the major omissions of this paper in regard to how we should approach any academic discipline as Christians?

How can we develop habits of subjecting our academic disciplines to the scrutiny of the Scriptures?

Are there dangers to the approach taken here?

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<sup>14</sup> In an ironic twist, when I sought feedback from a friend on this paper, he suggested that my term 'value' is now one which carries with it dubious definitions. He commented that in recent decades the idea of 'values' had replaced truth, reasoning and morality. Thus the critique I have made in this paper needs to be applied to the paper itself.