

INTERDISCIPLINARY EDUCATION WITHIN BIBLICAL THEOLOGY: A SCRIPTURAL- PHILOSOPHICAL-EDUCATIONAL- PRACTICAL OVERVIEW



Mark Eckel

Capital Seminary & Graduate School

Abstract: Universal truths found throughout the disciplines need to be taught through a biblical mindset. Christian interdisciplinarity hinges on the doctrine of coherence “by Him are all things held together” (Col 1:17). Framed within the boundaries of biblical theology, interdisciplinarity honors God-given reason under the rule of Divine revelation. Christian education, thoroughly permeated by biblical thinking, creates the possibility for transformational outcomes, essential questions, interactive methods, interrelational collaboration, and imaginative projects. Examples of interdisciplinarity include syllabi objectives, class creation, film discussion, crosscurrents between literature with science, as well as how economics intersects with poverty. A final diagram gives a visual implication for history, creativity, assessment, collaboration, coherence, and legacy.

Key Words: Interdisciplinary education, biblical theology of reason, project-based learning, praxis

Introduction

What does biomimicry have to do with God’s command to “subdue” creation (Gen 1:28)? How are poverty and economics engaged by Leviticus 19? Why does Gothic horror literature provide a lens through which to view the intersection of science with ethics? Where would movies fit within the context of God’s story? How could hermeneutics be taught in every collegiate course? When could culture come under the investigative lens of theology? John C. Polkinghorne, a theologian-scientist, sets a precedent for answering such interdisciplinary questions. Stressing the unity of knowledge as non-negotiable for the believer, Polkinghorne evangelizes with his words:

The true university’s quest for interdisciplinary truth may be properly called “Christian,” not because of some imperialist attempt at takeover

by the churches, but because those who seek the truth without reserve, whether they know it or not, are ultimately searching for the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. (Polkinghorne, 53)

Polkinghorne pulls no punches: Jesus is the center of the learning universe. Education is not simply an access to knowledge but a development of wisdom. Reason and purpose are central to Polkinghorne's argument, "why?" being the most important question anyone can ask. Beauty in math gives example for the claims of interdisciplinary studies. "The indispensability of theology" gives the basis for properly interpreting all knowledge accessible because of God's transcendent unity of all knowledge (Polkinghorne, 61). "God is the ground of all reality, the integrating factor that ties together the multidimensional richness of human experience" (Polkinghorne, 64). Philip Ryken, Wheaton College president, establishes the foundation for integration:

In conducting this exploration we will exercise our theological imagination. But we will also make deductions that are grounded in the prophecies of Scripture, governed by the principles of sound doctrine, and guided by the wisdom of the Holy Spirit as we gather together the strands of revelation that lead toward engagement in the liberal arts as an eternal enterprise. (Ryken, 2012, 295)

The intersection-unification of academic disciplines is dependent upon supernatural revelation for grounding and guidance resulting in biblical theology. This essay will define, describe, and depict interdisciplinary education within biblical theology.

Burgeoning documentation on both interdisciplinarity and biblical theology exists. The following caveats are necessary for focused attention: (a) a biblical-theological construct as foundation for interdisciplinary studies will be primary; (b) main applications will be include interdisciplinary student outcomes; (c) the essay is neither a primer on interdisciplinarity nor biblical theology; (d) the espousal of a frame for the parameters of interdisciplinary education is key; and (e) prescriptive, praxis-driven ideas for an approach to biblical interdisciplinarity are in full view.

Caveats along with definitions create structural guidelines for any discussion. The following definitions will provide formation for the examination: (a) *interdisciplinarity* is the intersection-unification of academic disciplines; (b) *education* is the teaching-learning process engaged by the whole person; (c) *within* is the preposition which forms the parameter, the boundary for biblical theology; and (d) *biblical theology* is knowledge from the Bible allowing Christian interpretation of life.

Biblical Theology

Reason and intelligence are effective, God-given instruments that cannot be dismissed (1 Kings 4:29–34; 2 Chron 2:12), though their use must be tempered with humility (1 Cor 8:1, 2; James 3:13). Reflection of God's omniscience—he knows everything—is imprinted within people having been made in God's image (cf. Ps 94:10, 11). Logic, rhetoric, and wisdom are patterns of thought resident within God's nature mirrored in human nature (1 Sam 2:3; Col 2:2, 3). Humans certainly do not know all things (Ecc 7:23–25; Jer 33:3), nor do we always use our knowledge with discernment, wisdom, and virtue (2 Peter 1:5–9). We must be careful, then, of the pride of knowledge and the snobbery of anti-intellectualism (Acts 18:24–28; 1 Cor 8:1).

Genesis 3 explains the ruination of God's intention for knowledge described in Genesis 1 and 2. According to innumerable scriptural sources, sin has adversely affected human intellectual capabilities (Rom 1:18, 25, 28; 8:6, 7; Eph 4:17–19; 1 Tim 6:5; 2 Tim 3:8; Titus 1:15, 16). The corrective for people's cerebral incapacitation is a renewal of the mind by the saving grace of Jesus (Rom 8:6, 7; 12:2; Eph 4:20–24; Col 1:21–23; 3:10; Heb 8:10; 10:16). While sin continues to distort truth, we must always be on the lookout for the kernel of verity and allow the chaff of error to be blown away. In order to allow the oft-repeated phrase “all truth is God's truth” to permeate our lives, we must reorder our thinking biblically (Gaebelein, 1954, p. 20).

How does this change in thinking occur? Both Ephesians 4:17–5:2 and Colossians 3:1–17 provide a pattern to follow. Depraved minds (Eph 4:17–19) are reformed by the grace of God at salvation (Eph 4:20–24; Col 3:9–10) and should be in a constant state of renewed thinking (Col 3:1, 2). Christians, more than anyone else, should be regularly and biblically exercising their mental faculties. Only in this way can we lead lives that are *semper reformata, reformans, reformanda*—“always reformed, reforming, and to be reformed.”

Faith that is reforming has a factual base. It is objective, reliable belief based on factual confirmation, certainty shown by incontrovertible data (Luke 1:1–4; John 20:8; Acts 1:1–3; Heb 11:1). Some mistakenly believe faith is a “blind leap” or a “well-I-can't-prove-it-but-I-know-it's-true” mentality. Paul maintained that God offered “proof to all men” by raising Jesus from the dead (Acts 17:31). Christians believe in *someone* who did *something*—a real person who came in real space and time, died a real, physical death, and literally and historically rose again from the grave—Jesus (1 Cor 15:1–4).

So, debated, argued, proved, disputed, explained, persuaded, and confuted are words of reason used to plead the Christian faith (cf. Acts 9:22, 29; 17:2–4; 18:4, 19, 28; 19:8, 9; 24:25). While the Christian faith is *reasonable*, it is also something *beyond reason*. Clearly the work of the Holy Spirit is necessary to change individuals' thinking from a human-centered to a

God-centered perspective (Rom 8:5–9; 1 Cor 2:10–16). The supernatural process of transformation is outside the scope of ordinary experience (Rom 11:33–36).

But pagan neighbors would see the difference in a nation given the supernatural revelation of God (Deut 4:5–8). Indeed, Yahweh expected his people would lead others to the truth (Ex 19:5, 6). Solomon, who gained his knowledge from God, honored his maker by using his mind for the study of everything from botany to zoology (1 Kings 4:29–34). Unbelievers came from the great empires of the day to sit at Solomon's feet and benefit from his wisdom (1 Kings 4:34; 10:24). As a result of his erudite witness, some even came to faith commitment in Israel's God (1 Kings 10:1–9).

Ecclesiastes, written by Solomon later in life, provides an examination and refutation of all worldviews apart from that of the self-revealing God. The apostles' concern for Christians to know what and why they believe (1 Peter 3:15) is premised on the wisdom of Proverbs 22:17–21:

Incline your ear and hear the words of the wise, and apply your mind to my knowledge; for it will be pleasant if you keep them within you, that they may be ready on your lips. So that your trust may be in the LORD, I have taught you today, even you. Have I not written to you excellent things of counsels and knowledge, to make you know the certainty of the words of truth that you may correctly answer to him who sent you?

Reason, rightly controlled by revelation, is a biblical perspective. Personal (i.e., the individual) and societal (i.e., the group) reason is normally the premise for Western thinking. Oriental influence suggests that there is a revelation based upon human tradition most often referred to as a myth or story. Some in the West suggest that reason interprets revelation. In each of the three cases—individual, collective, revelatory—human intellect in some way interprets thinking. Biblical thinking mandates that transcendent (i.e., outside) truth be the arbiter of all intellectual pursuits. Christians should be the first to encourage study and the last to be fearful of knowledge since God has established the study of knowledge as necessary for the Christian (cf. 2 Cor 10:3–5).

No better place can engender a Christian view of reason governed by revelation than a biblical institution, which employs intentional Christian professors. Christian revelation maintains there is no bifurcation of secular-sacred, so there is no dichotomy between the study of all things and God as the Source of everything. Interdisciplinary education in Christian venues can establish answers to the questions “how does everything fit together?” and “how does life make sense?” There is an intersection and unification of heaven and earth, supernatural and natural. From the very first statement in

Scripture, unity and wholeness were necessary—“the heavens and the earth” meant “everything from A to Z” in the Hebrew mindset. There is a unity of truth (Gen 1:1; Josh 2:11; 2 Kings 19:15; 2 Chron 2:12). All truth is inclusive within his truth. Since God alone made “the heavens and the earth” (Neh 9:6; Prov 30:4; Isa 44:24) and the whole of creation gives him praise (Ps 69:34), Christian thinkers must answer the question “how do our studies give praise to God?” Enter the need for interdisciplinary education.

Interdisciplinary Education

Clement of Alexandria answers the question, “How do our studies give praise to God?” In his writing *Stromateis*, Clement seeks to take fragments of knowledge and make them complete in Christ. He writes, “The expert is the one who brings everything to bear on the truth. He culls whatever is useful from mathematics, the fine arts, literary studies, and, of course, philosophy, and protects the faith from all attacks” (Clement, 1.9). The Christian faith unifies truth since all truth has its origin from God. Christian educators, interested in the unity of all truth, are drawn to interdisciplinary education.

Objectives for Interdisciplinary Education

The unity of all things under the lordship of Jesus necessitates an educational process infused with biblical thought. Christians understand that pedagogical-andragogical practice is premised on mindset models. If one methodology is used to the exclusion of others, not only does one framework usurp the educational enterprise but the multifaceted unity of God’s truth is insufficiently enacted. If “the one and the many” are perfectly portrayed in the Trinity, it is incumbent upon the Christian educator to engage all of God’s creation within the unity-diversity model of the Trinity. Interdisciplinary studies education conforms to a broad, biblically based, Christian construct of the wholeness of God’s world. Interdisciplinary education course objectives could include the following:

1. Biblically—the Scriptures interpret all disciplines (2 Cor 10:3–5)
2. Apologetically—the Christian faith is defended (Titus 1:9)
3. Ethnically—the unity of the church is maintained (Gal 3:29)
4. Experientially—the creation is open for exploration (Ps 65:5–8)
5. Interactively—the student engages creational order (Ps 8:5–8)
6. Relationally—the campus is involved in collaboration (Ps 67)
7. Practically—the learning outcomes are for the common good (Titus 3:1, 8, 14)

Outcomes for Interdisciplinary Education

Scripture maintains that the teaching-learning process goes both ways. Indeed, one Hebrew word (*lamad*) is translated as both “teaching” and “learning” (Kaiser, 1980, p. 480). If all people are created in God’s image with worth-value-dignity, then each person can contribute to her studies in a worthwhile manner. Choices of study formats can be created from various modalities including but not limited to field experiences, lectures, classes, internships, colloquia, retreats, seminars, films, overseas study, and so on.

Student learning outcomes could include but are not limited to the following:

1. Create a biblically based, Spirit-driven intersection with contemporary culture.
2. Evaluate dominate cultural-truth claims through a biblical lens.
3. Explore the experience of believing cultural agents with a Christian mindset.
4. Employ scriptural guidelines to deduce a culture’s ethos.
5. Communicate Christian teaching as the synthesizing guide for culture decisions.
6. Assess the church’s lifelong way of living with community customs.
7. Apply biblical principles that interact with the current culture.
8. Critique multiple cultural categories from a Christian vantage point.
9. Compose a Christian bibliography of current websites, journals, and books on culture.
10. Propose a project that intersects biblical teaching with cultural content.

All courses of study taught by interdisciplinary Christian scholars should (a) initiate *why* the subject should be studied, without apology, through a biblical lens; (b) detail *what* syllabi, outcomes, objectives, and daily lessons contribute to any discussion from a Christ-centered point of view; and (c) create an interpretive approach to the subject explaining *how* the subject will be pursued Christianly. In his letter to Gregory, Bishop of Caesarea, the church father Origen said,

I wish to ask you to extract from the philosophy of the Greeks what may serve as a course of study or a preparation for Christianity, and from geometry and astronomy what will serve to explain the sacred Scriptures, in order that all that the sons of the philosophers are wont to say about geometry and music, grammar, rhetoric, and astronomy, as fellow-helpers to philosophy, we may say about philosophy itself, in relation to Christianity (Origen, Letter, 1:1).

The whole world and all of life belong to the personal, eternal, triune Creator. From beginning to end, the unity of all things is found in Jesus, who unites all things in heaven and on earth. Interdisciplinary education intersects all disciplines, all approaches, and all methods. The biblical-theological concept of coherence forms a framework within Christian educational function. Teaching God's intention for unity in creation and life creates a comprehensive, consistent, cosmic, creational Christian educational construct. Examples abound.

Examples of Interdisciplinary Education within Biblical Theology

Kevin is an Indianapolis environmental architect. In my class *Theology of Culture*, I asked Kevin and the other class members to tie biblical themes learned in class with their vocation. Kevin's interest in architectural landscaping introduced his classmates and me to biomimicry. Humans mimic biology in their building design. All of us were fascinated to discover that biomimicry exists as an industry. Kevin showed us pictures of a cathedral that incorporates plant patterns in its construction. A planetarium in Spain looks exactly like the human eye. The Turning Torso Tower in Sweden is built like a turning human torso. Desert bugs drink water from fog captured by their wingtips. Now builders recreate the bug's wingtip coating on buildings to gather water from fog. The Galapagos shark is free of bacteria build up on its skin. Technologies use the shark's skin design to keep bacteria from clinging to hospital surfaces; it stops infections, saving lives. We were all so enthralled by Kevin's presentation about biomimicry that his conclusion caught us off guard. Kevin said,

Frankly, up until now, I have always had a bent toward the tree-hugger, do-gooder side. Do the right thing, just because it is the right thing. But now I understand a theology of culture. Doing "the right thing" is intimately tied to its Creator. I am a steward of the Creator's creation and must manage creation well.

Interdisciplinarity has no cohesiveness without biblical theology. The framework of scriptural thinking creates the structure for addressing the whole world and all of life from God's perspective.

Theology of Culture. The *Theology of Culture* course was offered not just to students but to the community and churches. The course content created a biblical framework for worldview development and cultural engagement. Educational processes included a scriptural grid through which to pass information. A Christian colloquium of cultural entrepreneurs was included. Leaders who worked in and were engaged through the culture included those

in the arts, business, community development, economics, journalism, literature, movies, music, philanthropy, politics, rhetoric, and science. The list of speakers included a newspaper president, online book review website editor, philanthropist, president of a non-profit, director of an arts museum, an Abraham Kuyper scholar, and professors of urban ministries, science, literature interdisciplinarity, and Bible. Attendees and students were given an opportunity to hear from a variety of voices and viewpoints. Theology of Culture was a course to begin building broadminded Christian thinkers. Thinking broadly about any subject is a key concern for any Christian education interested in interdisciplinarity.

Hermeneutics through All Disciplines. In Christian higher education we tend to isolate the study of hermeneutics to Bible courses alone. My suggestion is that we instill a study of hermeneutics in every field, discipline, program, course, and seminar. Hermeneutics should not be a stand-alone class. Everything involves interpretation; therefore, the interpretive process should be invested throughout the warp and woof of institutions. Thoughtful Christians need to learn hermeneutics as a process in all disciplines. Four major, summary ideas and questions could infiltrate every course of study:

- (1) Selection: What was chosen to be included in a textbook, lecture, or project? Why is the choosing of material to study, read, or consider directional in the creation of any curricula?
- (2) Rejection: What was left out of the lesson plan, article, or resource? Why is it important to know the reason for the exclusion of any viewpoint or material?
- (3) Interpretation: Whose point of view establishes meaning? What preconceptions or perceptions are woven through the individual's intellectual upbringing? Are there other voices being heard? Why or why not?
- (4) Origination: What was the source of knowledge asked to be studied? Does the study of the topic begin with the study of epistemological assumptions? If so, what are they? If not, why is the study not included?

Instituting these four processes for interpretation across the institution begins interdisciplinary education within a biblical theology.

Storytelling through Film. All epic tales contain the same theological elements: good-evil, lost-found, road-destination, despair-hope, acceptance-rejection, and beginning-end. Genesis to Revelation is the Christian understanding of story; indeed, God's story makes all other stories possible. We are not surprised to learn that a majority of the Bible is story, the narratives

taking us from the beginning and pointing to the end. So we follow God's wooing with narrative as we tell stories that point to his story:

Story is the most natural way of enlarging and deepening our sense of reality, and then enlisting us as participants in it. Stories open doors to areas or aspects of life that we didn't know were there, or had quit noticing out of over-familiarity, or supposed were out-of-bounds to us. They then welcome us in. Stories are verbal acts of hospitality (Peterson, 2005, p. 13).

Movies invite us to ponder important ideas through story. Immigration questions could be well engaged by discussing *A Better Life* (2012). Questions could include "What would you do to make sure your child was safe, fed, and had hope for a better future than you?" Eschatological discussions in theology could connect the attributes of God's mercy compared to his wrath through alien movies. Alien movies take on two forms in science-fiction. One alien may be beneficent, helping humans (*E.T.*, 1982). Another extraterrestrial creature may bring destruction in the form of judgment (*The Thing*, 1982). Science-fiction appropriates its storyline from the pages of Scripture. Psychology classes could employ *Rails and Ties* (2007), a movie that wrestles with terrible pain and loss. *Temple Grandin* (2010) could be required viewing as a sociology assignment asking the question, "If it were possible to know how people thought, learned, felt, lived, or became who they are, how would we be changed?" The invitation of story is embedded within biblical theology. Innovative professors could apply real-life lessons across a wide variety of disciplines with the use of film as classroom participation.

Literature Connecting with Science. Invited as an interdisciplinarian to a university science seminar, I presented this title: Humans and Humanities: Joining Literature with Science. My comments came from classic works of fiction such as *Frankenstein*, *Dracula*, *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, and *The Island of Dr. Moreau*. My remarks included multiple avenues of faith-learning integration that were translated through the theological concept of coherence. Everything fits together because there is a personal triune Creator who holds all things together. Scientists were reminded of the lessons learned in literature. Gothic horror prose exposes the problems of unbounded pursuit of knowledge and unbridled curiosity; unfettered from community standards, one is led to addiction and ultimately idolatry. So we engaged a series of questions to ponder:

- (a) What is the end result of human beings loosed from their ethical tether?
- (b) What do these novels say about human attempts to overcome designed limitations?

- (c) What are the biblical teachings on addiction, curiosity, unbounded pursuit of knowledge, evil, monsters, mystery, idolatry, and so on, which give foundation and permeation for a Christian understanding of classic horror literature with science?
- (d) How much does science conflict with conscience in any of these novels? Is this intentional or a byproduct of the times? Do other novels contend with the same issues?

The monster within is clearly the point of classic works of Gothic horror. In each case, real, awful monsters exist. And in each case, these monsters can be traced back to our original idol making: our God-usurping problem in Genesis 3. Disciplinary crosscurrents benefit our commitment to theological coherence.

Poverty, Gleaning, and Economics. Post-bachelor fellows, committed to inner city work, were discussing class disparities in the city. They asked questions about government welfare programs, non-profit agencies, taxes, and economic development. I encouraged them to consider Old Testament teaching about caring for the poor. Leviticus 19:9–10 explains the process of gleaning. Land owners could harvest their fields but were instructed to leave anything that fell to the ground or was found on field's edge for those who had little or nothing. God gave land owners both benefit from and responsibility for wealth. This law encouraged a type of "work-fare." God's law demanded that those with more give a hand up, not a handout. Tenant and landlord principles arise out of Leviticus as well. Care for the ground, trade practices, anti-discrimination, and the problems of debt can all be traced back to Hebraic teaching. Market theories, urban revitalization, asset-based community development, and a score of other studies could be invested with new life from Old Testament principles. We should be consistently aware of intersections of thought between theology and reality. Christian higher education has the advantage of transcendent truth guiding all studies.

Classroom Questions. Questions provide a means by which interdisciplinary education professors can prompt student thought. Interdisciplinary questions allow honesty, approve respect, and lead discussions. Interdisciplinary questions, such as those that follow, help create a biblical-theological-educational curricular context.

1. Do we ask ourselves, "How do I impact my students with the biblical doctrine of coherence, encouraging the intersection-unification of all things in the classroom?"
2. Do we teach knowledge or do we teach knowledge in relationship to our students, ourselves, and "the heavens and the earth?"

3. Do we ask, “How does God’s interpretation of his world show all things working together?”
4. Do we believe that all of life is interrelated and then give “pat answers” to our students’ questions about “the heavens and the earth?”
5. How does the biblical phrase “the ends of the earth” relate to my teaching? Do I follow the biblical pattern of *arche* to *telos*—“the beginning and the end”? Do we teach God’s original intention leading to his final consummation of all things?
6. When we speak of “integrity,” do we understand and teach its connection with “integer,” “integral,” “integration,” and “intelligence” (comprehension of the whole)?
7. Do we use words in our teaching that provide “pointers” toward the God who made “the heavens and earth”: laws, prediction, sequence, possibility, direction, properties?
8. Do we separate spiritual, emotional, mental, physical, psychological aspects of our person without seeing them as the whole that is the essence of our personal makeup?
9. Do we consider that all the aspects of our individual lives are interwoven within the fabric of “the heavens and the earth” for all people, places, cultures, and times?
10. What other interdisciplinary questions are helpful for our life and teaching?

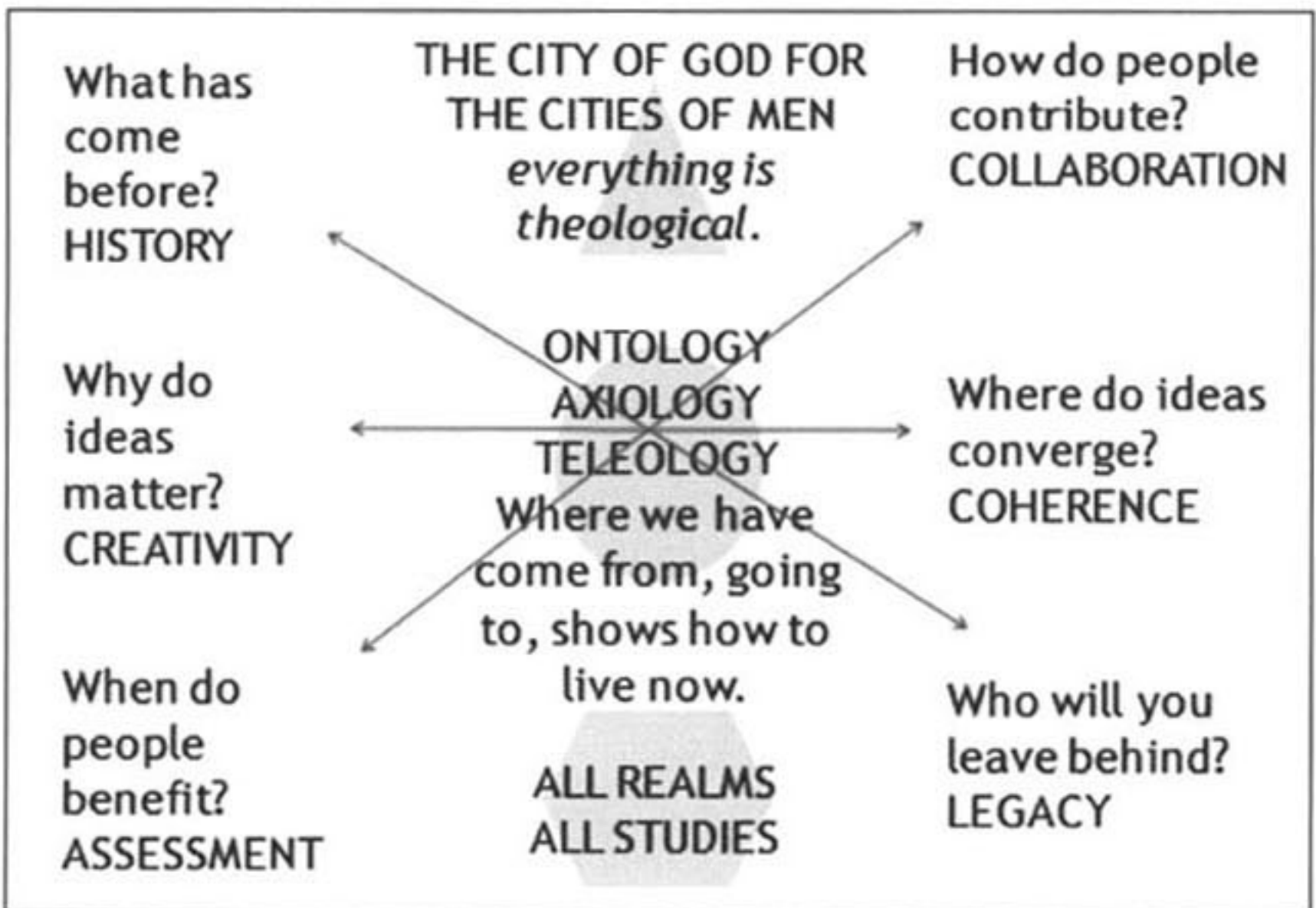


Figure 1

Conclusion

Interdisciplinary education has a long Christian history. Basil the Great wrote *To Young Men, on How They Might Derive Profit from Pagan Literature*:

So we also must consider that a contest, the greatest of all contests, lies before us, for which we must do all things, and in preparation for it, must strive to the best of our power, and must associate with poets and writers of prose and orators and with all men from whom there is any prospect of benefit with reference to the care of our soul (Basil, 1961, Profit, 1.4).

All Christian professors could broaden and deepen the thinking of their students intersecting their disciplines with biblical theology. Scriptural thought might direct learners to discover answers to the following interdisciplinary questions (Figure 1):

- **What has come before?** *History*: timeless truths and timeless texts.
- **Why do ideas matter?** *Creativity*: theory and practice, theorists and practitioners.
- **When do people benefit?** *Assessment*: wholeness, distinctiveness, excellence.
- **How do people contribute?** *Collaboration*: in content, life, service.
- **Where do ideas converge?** *Coherence*: diversity within unity.
- **Who will you leave behind?** *Legacy*: contribution measured in people.

Christian professors can encourage an eternal mindset through a biblical-theological interdisciplinarity. Impacting the Christian soul has its origins in heaven and its integration on earth. Teachers who themselves have been changed by Jesus' salvation may offer the model of students' change. Indeed, a mantra for Christian interdisciplinarians may form the centerpiece to engage the whole world and all of life: Knowing where we have come from (ontology) and where we are going to (teleology) will help us know how to live now (axiology).

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AUTHOR

Mark Eckel (Ph.D., Southern Baptist Theological Seminary), serves as Professor of Leadership, Education, and Discipleship at Capital Seminary and Graduate School, in Lancaster, PA. E-mail: meckel@lbc.edu