



Guide Series

Academic Faith Integration in Christian Higher Education



Center for Academic
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Academic Faith Integration in Christian Higher Education

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Executive Summary

The faith-based mission of authentically Christian colleges and universities permeates their structures and actions. This report provides an introduction to Academic Faith Integration (AFI), a pedagogical approach that operationalizes this mission by bringing theological perspectives into conversation with disciplinary knowledge. After presenting an overview of the AFI framework and its characteristics, principles for institution-wide implementation are reviewed. The piece concludes by describing the policies and practices that support AFI and by outlining action steps to empower various stakeholder groups to encourage and strengthen the approach across campus.

About the Author

Paul Kaak is Senior Consultant and Lead Trainer at *TheoMetrics*, an organization dedicated to advancing Academic Faith Integration (AFI) through high-quality faculty development resources, keynote speaking, and multi-year consulting partnerships with Christian colleges and universities across North America. Dr. Kaak previously taught in the Honors College and served as Executive Director of Faith Integration within the Center for Teaching, Learning, and Assessment of Azusa Pacific University, where he led dozens of annual faculty workshops, coached hundreds of professors, and worked alongside key university leaders to strengthen the institution's philosophical and practical commitment to AFI, while also serving as Faith Integration Section Editor for *Christian Higher Education: An International Journal of Research, Theory, and Practice*. Prior to his career in higher education, Dr. Kaak ministered to emerging adults as Lead Teaching Pastor and Director of Equipping at New Song Church in San Dimas, California. He holds a B.A. in Speech Communication from California State University, an M.Div. in Theology from The Master's Seminary, and a Ph.D. in Leadership from Andrews University.

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Director's Preface

The modern academy finds its origin in the cathedral schools of the medieval era, which served as forerunners to the first European universities. Shaped by the dominant Christian worldview of their day, faculty serving in these institutions viewed faith not as a veil to knowledge, but as the gateway to true learning. Medieval scholars confidently engaged both sacred and pagan sources from a conviction that every academic discipline rightly understood would constructively contribute to man's comprehension of God and His creation. This same conviction animated the American colonial colleges and those founded by Christian denominations prior to the Civil War.

Today, most of these institutions have been rendered explicitly or effectively secular, such that students are admonished to check their faith at the classroom door lest it cloud their objective learning. However, a remnant of authentically Christian colleges and universities continues to take their founding commitments seriously. These institutions not only reject the view that Christian faith is antithetical to academic pursuits, but they have implemented a signature pedagogical approach that intentionally brings theological perspectives into conversation with disciplinary knowledge. Although this approach is often conceptualized differently across denominational and theological traditions, the full range of these efforts can be rightly classified as exercises in Academic Faith Integration (AFI).

A remnant of authentically Christian colleges has implemented a signature pedagogical approach that intentionally brings theological perspectives into conversation with disciplinary knowledge.

In pages that follow, Paul Kaak offers a robust introduction to AFI, why it matters, and the principles and practices that support its consistent and effective exercise. Readers will learn about how AFI bridges and brings to life the academic and spiritual purposes of Christian higher education and, in so doing, produces both desired student outcomes and favorable institutional positioning within the wider marketplace. Wedding a detailed theoretical framework with clear action steps for implementation, the report equips faculty to more fully embrace their scholar vocations, administrators to foster an environment where AFI flourishes, and trustees to advance and defend the heart of Christian higher education.

P. Jesse Rine, Ph.D.

Executive Director

Center for Academic Faithfulness & Flourishing
Greenville, SC

March 2026



Introduction: Why Academic Faith Integration Matters

For decades, Christian colleges and universities have publicly celebrated their commitment to “integrating faith and learning,”¹ typically with sincere intention and real investment.

This widespread public affirmation, however, has sometimes obscured a surprising reality: though nearly every member of the campus community may affirm the importance of Christian education, few can clearly define Academic Faith Integration (AFI), what it actually means in their work, what it requires of faculty as Christian scholar-specialists, or how it should shape teaching and research. Moreover, it is not unusual for working definitions of AFI to vary dramatically across

campus, and sometimes within the same academic department. Some community members may believe integration simply means opening class in prayer, or adding a weekly devotional thought, or sharing one’s personal testimony (all of which are worthy practices in the right setting). Others might hesitate to engage thoughtful Christian perspectives at all, convinced that their academic discipline has no legitimate place for Christian ideas, whether conceptual or practical. Still others may think that faithful teaching is simply the reliable dissemination of the subject matter they know best, because *all truth is God’s truth*, and teaching the truth honors God. Another group may

¹ Arthur Holmes, *The Idea of a Christian College* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1975, 1987), 47-62.

desire to pursue integration but finds they do not have time to prepare or deliver what seems to be “additional” content.

What prompts these differences in perspective is rarely, if ever, grounded in malice or a contrarian spirit. The overwhelming majority of faculty serving in Christian higher education do so because they want to honor Christ, and, at some level, their choice to work at a Christian college or university communicates their support of integrating academics and faith. From an institutional perspective, however, the presence of varied perspectives on a single campus can produce a patchwork of activities that are unmoored from a coherent and useful understanding of how Christian faith meaningfully enters intellectual life. The primary challenge is not a lack of goodwill or commitment among faculty, but a lack of clarity. And, consequently, a lack of action.

Responding to this reality, the following report seeks to articulate an explanation of Academic Faith Integration robust enough to guide the selection of institutional priorities, accessible enough for a diverse faculty to energetically embrace, and flexible enough to facilitate learning in both particular situations² and more comprehensive areas of study.³ It is written especially with faculty in mind, but it also provides guidance to deans, provosts, presidents, trustees, and student affairs professionals. In addition, the report addresses common misunderstandings of AFI that may exist among parents, pastors, and those who

Academic Faith Integration is the intellectual and spiritual heart of Christian higher education.

employ Christian college graduates. All of these groups share a stake in the integrity and quality of Christian higher education.

The conviction underlying what follows is this: *AFI is not one among many institutional goals; it is the intellectual and spiritual heart of Christian higher education.* If a Christian college or university clearly defines Academic Faith Integration, it can then support, assess, and affirm the exercise of AFI among faculty serving in the classroom. This, in turn, will increase the likelihood that the institution in question will achieve its intended educational outcomes and keep its public promises. Conversely, if an institution does not pursue and achieve definitional clarity, its attempts to express its fundamental nature as a Christian college will be confusing to everyone serving on the inside as well as to those who are paying close attention from the outside. It is essential, therefore, for campus leaders to cultivate a deep and specific understanding of the central role and appropriate expressions of AFI in the life of the Christian college.

² See 1 Kings 3:16-28.

³ See 1 Kings 4:29-34.



A first step in defining AFI is acknowledging its import. Five major facets of AFI illuminate its essential nature within Christian higher education:

Intellectual Discipleship

AFI treats the intellectual life as a nonconvertible element of Christian discipleship. AFI's success is apparent when, as Rabbi Jesus renews the mind, the intellects of professors and students incline them to

greater love for God, wonder at His creation, and service to their neighbors. While much of higher education teaches students *what* to think, Christian students must also learn *how* to think Christianly within their field of study. Faculty may pursue this aim through the disciplinary *modus operandi* they deem most useful, with the aid of faith-based frameworks, vocabulary, and methods,⁴ and by practicing intellectual virtues⁵ conceived in light of biblical faith. AFI trains students in habits of mind that are analytic, theological, and humble yet bold, making them capable of exercising conceptual analysis and creativity in a distinctly Christian manner.⁶

Formation in Wisdom

Many Christians, concerned about the postmodern erosion of absolutes, regard *truth* as the ultimate aim of faith-based education. However, as Jeffrey Greenman argues, “Knowing right doctrine (in our heads) and living it (in our hearts and with our hands and feet) are two different things. The former is for the sake of the latter.”⁷ He adds that “the gospel is more than a new ‘worldview.’... The historic Christian commitment is that following Christ is a matter of right knowledge put into faithful

⁴ See, for example, Travis Dickinson, *Logic and the Way of Jesus: Thinking Critically and Christianly* (Nashville, TN: B&H Academic, 2022); James P. Moreland, *Love God with All Your Mind: The Role of Reason in the Life of the Soul* (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 2012); Roger E. Olson, *The Essentials of Christian Thought: Seeing Reality through the Biblical Story* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2017); Howard W. Stone & James O. Duke, *How to Think Theologically*, 4th ed. (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2023); Amos Yong, *Learning Theology: Tracking the Spirit of Christian Faith* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2018).

⁵ See Jason Baehr, *Deep in Thought: A Practical Guide to Teaching for Intellectual Virtues* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press, 2021).

⁶ See James E. Taylor, *Learning for Wisdom: Christian Education & the Good Life* (Abilene, TX: ACU Press, 2017).

⁷ Jeffrey P. Greenman, “Concluding Sapiential Postscript: ‘Get Wisdom,’” in Edward Meadors (ed.), *Where Wisdom May Be Found: The Eternal Purpose of Christian Higher Education* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2019), 325.

action.”⁸ This is an invitation to wisdom, which is what believers are called to ask for (James 1) and obtain at all costs (Proverbs 4).

While much of higher education teaches students *what* to think, Christian students must also learn *how* to think Christianly within their field of study.

Although intellectual formation is the unique focus of schooling, the Christian approach always couples knowing with doing,⁹ as evidenced by Jesus’ teaching in the Sermon on the Mount (see esp. Matt. 7:24-27) and Paul’s instructions offered in Philippians 4 (i.e., “put it into practice,” v. 9). When rightly pursued, AFI cultivates discernment, moral imagination, and the ability to navigate complexity in the application of Christian convictions. It helps students ask not only “What can we know?” but “What can we do in keeping with the way of Jesus, wisdom personified?”¹⁰ Simon Kennedy notes that “wisdom is embedded in the order of reality and accessible to all

people,”¹¹ such that the “aim of Christian education is to apprehend reality in all its elements: God, self, and the world. In reaching for this reality through the gradual gathering of wisdom, Christian educators are giving students the gift of Christian worldview.”¹² In his important book on Proverbs and other sacred wisdom texts, Brown notes that “for the biblical sages, the world—both natural and international—was their classroom. The will, specifically its desire and formation, was their goal. They recognized that moral conduct was informed and shaped by the world’s order and that the world’s order, in turn, was established and sustained by right conduct.”¹³

Preparation for Public Witness

Not only is wisdom expressed through individual lives, but it is part and parcel of Jesus’ Great Commission call to “make learners” of all nations (Matt. 28:19).¹⁴ Early and medieval Christians made profound strides regarding “cultural sanctification,”¹⁵ and the life of the mind was a key factor in this regard. Origen, Augustine, and Aquinas are prime examples of Christian educators who carefully studied the cultural stories of their day and reimagined them within the

8 Greenman, “Concluding,” 326.

9 Richard J. Mouw, “Knowing and Doing: The Christian College in Contemporary Society,” in Joel A. Carpenter & Kenneth W. Shipps (eds.), *Making Higher Education Christian: The History and Mission of Evangelical Colleges in America* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1987), 217-230.

10 See Eugene Peterson, *The Jesus Way: A Conversation on the Ways That Jesus Is the Way* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2011).

11 Simon P. Kennedy, *Against Worldview: Reimagining Christian Formation as Growth in Wisdom* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2024), 82.

12 Kennedy, *Against Worldview*, 94.

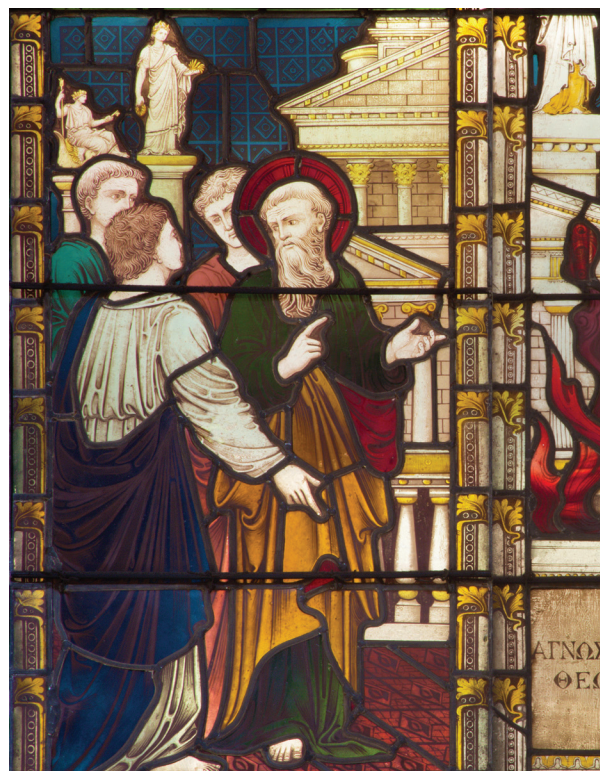
13 William P. Brown, *Wisdom’s Wonder: Character, Creation, and Crisis in the Bible’s Wisdom Literature* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2014), 5.

14 My translation; NIV: “make disciples”; Greek: *mathēteusate*.

15 Stephen O. Presley, *Cultural Sanctification: Engaging the World Like the Early Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2024), 94-105.

gospel metanarrative.¹⁶ Likewise, academic disciplines each have their own narratives, and as Christian educators teach these ideas, expertly analyze them, and reframe them Christianly, they are helping students to *be ready with answers* (see 1 Pet. 3:15) when encountering questions beyond the walls of the university. Christian intellectuals have a long history of providing such education in the arts, social services, health care, and business, and AFI is the key to seizing opportunities in every domain and in every era, including emergent fields of study with the advent of digital technologies.

When professors facilitate the critical integration of what are accepted as cutting-edge perspectives on a given issue with relevant Christian knowledge and then apply that understanding reasonably and faithfully to contemporary dilemmas, students are equipped to be salt and light in a world needing the good works of God's kingdom (Matthew 5). As missionary and theologian Lesslie Newbigin boldly stated, "We are called, I think, to bring our faith into the public arena, to publish it, to put it at risk in the encounter with other faiths and ideologies in open debate and argument, and in the risky business of discovering what Christian obedience means in radically new circumstances and in radically different human cultures."¹⁷ He further argues that Christian faith "must be heard in the conversation of economists, psychiatrists, educators, scientists and politicians. We have to proclaim it not as a package of estimable



values, but as the truth about what is the case, about what every human being and every human society will have to reckon with."¹⁸

The Christian college is the ideal rhetorical laboratory to experiment with the varied kinds of dialogue students will inevitably face. Moreover, Christian higher education has a unique obligation to facilitate preparation for public witness, including witness that results in criticism or persecution. As faculty facilitate AFI in the classroom in tandem with services offered by co-curricular partners across campus, students receive well-rounded instruction in how to "stand firm in all the will of God, mature and fully assured" (Col. 4:12).

¹⁶ Curtis Chang, *Engaging Unbelief: A Captivating Strategy from Augustine and Aquinas* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2007), 26.

¹⁷ Lesslie Newbigin, *Truth to Tell: The Gospel as Public Truth* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1991), 59-60.

¹⁸ Newbigin, *Truth to Tell*, 64.

Academic Stewardship and Engagement

College faculty are not only stewards of their program's curriculum but also caretakers of the disciplinary knowledge that has been (and continues to be) bequeathed to them. They have a responsibility to dispense this knowledge, systematically and diagnostically, in order to prepare students to enter domains where disciplinary and professional knowledge are the currency that creates conversation, collaboration, and contribution.

Faculty working within the Christian tradition are also purveyors of relevant theological wisdom. While trained theologians and biblical scholars transmit broadly applicable doctrinal and spiritual principles, Christian scholars from other fields impart Christian knowledge pertinent to the academic disciplines where God has situated them for service. To do this, intellectually equipped Christians attend to God's general revelation from a practical theological perspective¹⁹ and make application to their respective disciplines, all the while doing so with a spirit of wonder and eagerness to know God and His ways.

Exhibiting a Missional Signature

In a crowded higher ed marketplace, AFI is *the* signature differentiator for Christian colleges and universities. A campus that shares a common vision for AFI, and appreciates its value, works together to communicate and implement this vision. While professors

The Christian college is the ideal rhetorical laboratory to experiment with the varied kinds of dialogue students will inevitably face.

are busy professing, the marketing team, admissions staff, and president are busy telling the college's story to external audiences. This story must align with how faculty understand and deliver AFI in the classroom, so that there is no gap between presentation and reality.

This institutional distinctive does require broad-based and consistent implementation both within and outside the classroom. It is vital that presidents, provosts, deans, and trustees recognize that AFI is not simply a market niche, but ultimately a fundamental component of institutional identity, and one that must be pursued with intention. Budgets, ten-year plans, vision casting, hiring, program review, fundraising, and communication with alumni should all reflect a common understanding of AFI and the influence it warrants. This is the case no matter how much (or how little) the current administrators on campus have themselves engaged in scholarship or theological training. Ideally, the campus culture of AFI should transcend particular individuals in key roles, permeating the whole and persisting even during seasons of leadership transition.

¹⁹ Timothy Pickavance, *Knowledge for the Love of God: Why Your Heart Needs Your Mind* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2022), 50-57. See also Carisa A. Ash, *A Critical Examination of the Doctrine of Revelation in Evangelical Theology* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2015); Herman Bavinck, *Philosophy of Revelation: A New Annotated Edition*, eds. Nathaniel Gray Sutanto & Cory Brock (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Academic, 2018); Robert K. Johnston, *God's Wider Presence: Reconsidering General Revelation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2014).

In a crowded higher ed marketplace, Academic Faith Integration is *the* signature differentiator for Christian colleges and universities.

The Essential Differentiator

These five facets of AFI demonstrate its essential nature within Christian higher education. Without integration, a Christian university may offer godly role models, encouragement toward moral formation, and opportunities for worship (all of which are available elsewhere), but it does not offer Christian higher *education*. What differentiates Christian higher education from its postsecondary counterparts is the convening of a significant cadre of faithful academic professionals who engage in unambiguous AFI. This is also what distinguishes Christian colleges and universities from their vital partner, the local church.





The Necessity of Coherence and Alignment

Implementing and maintaining AFI within a Christian college or university requires both coherence and alignment. *Coherence* is made possible through the clear articulation of a vision for AFI that is specific enough to provide operational clarity yet broad enough to encompass all areas of the institution. *Alignment* is achieved when each division buys into the faith-based academic vision and ensures that its actions support and reinforce that vision according to its unique role within the institution. But what are the keys to cultivating these two essential institutional qualities?

Missional Clarity

Christian universities frequently declare an unambiguous mission: the truth of Christ will be proclaimed in every classroom. Yet, perceptions of what this means in practice vary widely across audiences. For instance, parents and pastors often expect the university to reinforce the faith their students learned at home or church, sometimes imagining a kind of residential youth ministry transported into the academy. Non-Christian or nominally Christian students may enter their programs assuming the Christian pieces are peripheral or optional, hoping to be able to disregard anything outside their religious comfort zones. And external skeptics may assume that “Christ-centered

The presence of diverse perspectives across various interest groups underscores the need for missional clarity.

education” implies anti-intellectualism and a much “narrower” approach to learning than students would encounter elsewhere.

To complicate matters, the group responsible for implementing the promise of Christian education—the faculty—also may have divergent and even conflicting understandings of how faith relates to their academic practice. In many cases, faculty arrive at Christian colleges with strong personal faith but little exposure to the theological or pedagogical frameworks needed to assess their disciplinary content in light of a Christian worldview or to meaningfully apply faith-based wisdom to their academic discipline. Others, trained in strictly secular research environments that de facto reject religious viewpoints, carry an internalized norm that theological reflection sits outside the bounds of their professional role. The loud echo of Max Weber’s assertion that the professor “is simply a teacher and nothing more” and that no teacher should “sell” students “a *Weltanschauung* [worldview] or code of conduct”²⁰—as well as the more recent exhortations from prominent voices such as Stanley Fish that “faculty as individuals should [not] advocate personal, political, moral, or any other kinds of views except

academic views”²¹—may weigh heavy on the professorial psyche. Pronouncements like these have impacted the collective bent of higher education, even exerting influence within Christian colleges and universities.

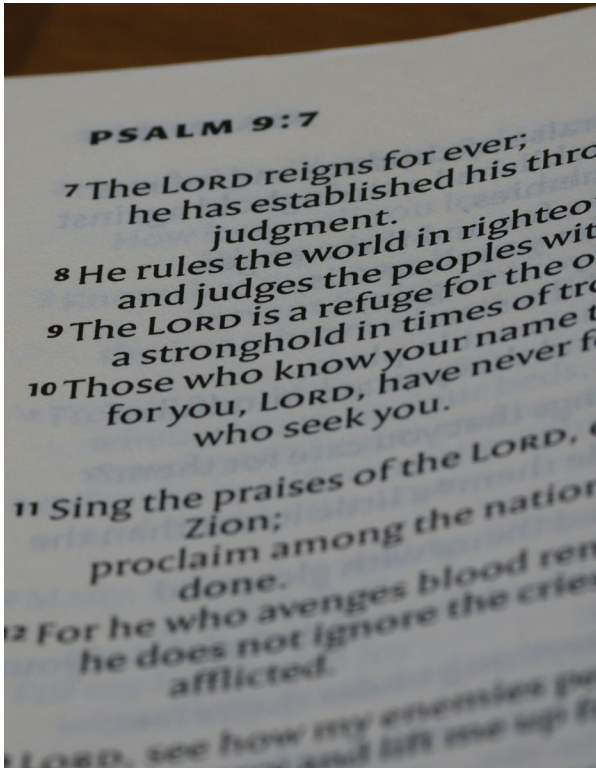
The presence of diverse perspectives across various interest groups underscores the need for missional clarity. Otherwise, a Christian college will struggle to function faithfully under the pressure of such divergent assumptions. Missional clarity requires establishing practical guidelines regarding academic expectations that address the following questions: What is a Christian institution of higher learning? What does it look like to teach Christianly in the university? What counts as faithful intellectual work for frontline educators, both full-time and adjunct? How should theological wisdom and disciplinary knowledge encounter each other in the classroom? How can and should a faculty member’s love for Christ impact their love of their discipline and their students? In the absence of shared answers to these questions, institutions risk inconsistency across academic departments, confusion within the student experience, and possible mission drift.

Missional Guidance

Faculty are naturally oriented toward intellectual pursuits, which means they appreciate having the freedom to explore new ideas, make connections, and share their discoveries. However, this desire for academic freedom must be tempered by two realities: (1) Christian colleges are

²⁰ Max Weber, *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*, ed. C. Wright Mills (Oxford, England: Oxford University Press, 1958), 150.

²¹ Stanley Fish, *Save the World on Your Own Time* (Oxford, England: Oxford University Press, 2008), 19.



mission-driven organizations, and (2) mission statements are not self-executing. Even when a university formally and publicly affirms the lordship of Christ over all knowledge, the implications of such a confession must be translated into actionable academic directives. This means that campus leadership should provide clear and concrete answers to these and similar questions: What are faculty expected to do with respect to AFI? How will faculty be equipped to do this well? How much time will they be given to develop the competency necessary to meet these expectations? How will successful achievement be recognized and rewarded?

When missional guidance is ambiguous or absent, faculty are forced to improvise the “faith” part of their teaching assignment.

While some may do so excellently, many will do so nominally or inconsistently, drifting at times toward practices that resemble either a church program with limited rigor or a secular classroom with little integrative engagement. By contrast, when clear guidance is offered, the unified pursuit of AFI establishes the conceptual center that keeps Christian higher education rooted, reminded, unified, and missionally grounded.

While Christian colleges are mission-driven organizations, their mission statements are not self-executing.

Gaps and Pressures

Most authentically Christian colleges and universities sincerely desire to fulfill their stated mission across the institution. Yet, gaps often remain between the espoused ideal and the on-the-ground reality, and these gaps undermine institutional coherence and alignment. Three gaps that commonly arise between a Christian college’s aspirations and its classroom pedagogy warrant further discussion.

The Promises versus Practices Gap.

Despite public pronouncements or private expectations to the contrary, some students attending a Christian college may move through an entire program without experiencing challenging and meaningful Christian connections. This inconsistency can arise for various reasons: faculty preparation in AFI varies widely; assessment systems

Christian universities must help both faculty and students see intellectual formation as a vital element of spiritual formation.

are not typically calibrated to measure faith-informed learning; academic leaders such as department chairs and program directors may not be encouraged or equipped to support their faculty's AFI efforts; workload structures rarely protect integrative preparation time. To address such concerns, aspirational mission language must be joined by operational clarity and courageous institutional practice.²² This may involve adapting official language to existing practice, moving practice closer to the expressed institutional aims, or both.

The Faculty Formation Gap. This is perhaps the most consequential gap. Many Christian colleges hire faculty as disciplinary experts and assume (on the basis of a written Christian testimony and/or a signed statement of faith) that they will intuitively know how to incorporate Christian ideas, practices, and virtues into their classroom teaching and disciplinary scholarship. Such an assumption is not well grounded, though, because many faculty were trained at secular institutions where theological engagement was highly discouraged, if not completely absent. Additionally, even those with a strong personal faith might never have systematically studied the Bible or

read advanced theological materials, much less learned how to connect worthwhile faith-based knowledge to their discipline in a scholarly way. AFI requires, at minimum, biblical literacy, theological imagination, and the ability to access and use faith-informed scholarship. All of this must be learned, not presumed. Moreover, academic administrators should expect that early professional development and a minimum of three years of diligent study and reflective practice will be required before AFI begins to become second nature for most faculty members.

The Religious Knowing Gap. This gap emerges when so-called religious knowing is pitted against “other” ways of knowing. Many Christian institutions unintentionally perpetuate a false split between intellectual formation (“the academic work”) and spiritual formation (“the devotional work”). This shows up when faculty “start with a devotional thought” before moving into class content, or when students think of chapel as the time they will meet Jesus and the classroom as a place where *Deus absconditus*. It also is evidenced when the theology faculty (and their classes) are thought of as the (only) dispensers of faith-based learning on campus, as opposed to the view that Christian truth can—and should—be encountered across the curriculum.

Together, these three gaps ignore Scripture's witness that knowing God includes knowing and loving His world and His wisdom, and that deep intellectual inquiry is an aspect of whole-person discipleship when it is pursued in dependence on the Spirit of truth.²³

²² See Gordon T. Smith, *Institutional Intelligence: How to Build an Effective Organization* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2020).

²³ See John 14:17, 26; 16:13; Ephesians 1:17-18.



Christian universities must help both faculty and students see intellectual formation as a vital element of spiritual formation alongside, but different from, mentoring relationships, service requirements, inspiring chapel speakers, and stand-alone courses focusing on the Bible or Christian worldview.

Vocational and Institutional Alignment

If coherence and alignment are to be achieved and sustained, three primary vocations within Christian higher education—the university, the professor, and the student—must be understood and reinforced.

The Christian University. A first category mistake that is sometimes made is that the university is conflated with the church. However, a Christian university is *not* a church. The two will share commitments, but their purposes differ. The church forms disciples primarily through liturgies of worship and sacrament, communal spiritual disciplines, and exhortation, and that exhortation comes from one authoritative and sacred text, the Bible. The university forms learners through intellectual inquiry, research, disciplined study, and education in the liberal arts and/or professional preparation. The university is a place of many books containing conceptual and practical knowledge that can be perennial or cutting edge, wise or sometimes foolish.

Both institutions serve Christ; both pursue truth; both aim for the flourishing of God's people and whole-person formation—but in different ways. Blurring the two leads to distorted expectations: classrooms try to be youth camps, assignments are designed to favor “heart” over “head,” and curriculum privileges “ministry/missionary” preparation, narrowly understood. Christian universities must honor their unique calling not by mimicking the church but by excelling as academic communities submitted to Christ's lordship over all true knowledge. In so doing, they play an important role in Christian sanctification,²⁴ and, ideally, strengthen the church without becoming a substitute for it. *The Christian university is not a church, but a school under Christ.*

²⁴ See Ronni Kurtz, *Fruitful Theology: How the Life of the Mind Leads to the Life of the Soul* (Nashville, TN: B&H Publishing, 2022).

Professors. Faculty serving within Christian higher education often feel as if they are expected to be chaplains or counselors as well as instructors. Of course, many intend to care for their students as whole persons and, rightly, endeavor to treat their students with pastoral sensitivity. But pressure (real or imagined) for faculty members to be a kind therapist or preacher clearly goes beyond their training and is typically outside their job description.

Thankfully, many colleges have co-curricular offices devoted to supporting students in these ways. The professor's calling is, rather, to be a faithful steward of knowledge, an exemplar of Christian intellectual life, a guide whose love-infused character models how Christian wisdom illuminates disciplinary inquiry (and vice versa), and an agent of the kingdom who helps students (whether they are confessing Christians or not) to imagine redemptive vocational futures. Christian higher educators must be equipped and freed up to do so, as frequently as is appropriate, by helping students develop a theological and moral imagination vis-à-vis the subject they are there to learn. *Though professors are not professional pastors, they are kingdom agents.*

Students. Students come to a Christian university with a calling to be shaped intellectually, morally, and vocationally for service in God's world. Their task is to develop intellectual virtues²⁵ and engage in the activities of study that will make them successful as learners in school and beyond.²⁶



They are not in classrooms to passively absorb information or to mimic the activities of a church-based small group. Instead, their purpose is to develop habits of inquiry and understanding, exhibiting an appreciative stance toward worthwhile contributions from both the relevant academic disciplines and the breadth of Christian teaching.

Academic programs in Christian higher education are designed to help students develop the capacity to integrate thinking critically with thinking Christianly, fine-tune their skills for interpreting and analyzing texts, media, art, and sociocultural ideas, and

²⁵ See Nathan L. King, *The Excellent Mind: Intellectual Virtues for Everyday Life* (Oxford, England: Oxford University Press, 2021); Elmer J. Thiessen, *Healthy Christian Minds: A Biblical, Practical, and Sometimes Philosophical Exploration of Intellectual Virtues and Vices* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2024).

²⁶ See William H. Armstrong, *Study Is Hard Work* (Jaffrey, NH: David R. Godine, 2005); Ken Bain, *What the Best College Students Do* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2012).

Academic programs in Christian higher education are designed to help students develop the capacity to integrate thinking critically with thinking Christianly.

engage in scholarly reflection for a life framed by a redemptive worldview and shaped by Christian wisdom. Moreover, Christian higher education calls believing students to practice loving God with their minds (Matt. 22:37) and simultaneously invites nonbelieving students to “learn Christ” in way that is informative, inspiring, and perhaps even transformational (see Eph. 4:17-25). *Being a student in a Christian college is not just about passing classes or mastering content; it is about practicing and developing skills for lifelong Christian learning.*



An Organizing Framework for Christian Higher Education

Academic Faith Integration (AFI) is a practical concept, and as such it is central to the academic identity of Christian higher education. It is not merely a slogan, a vibe, or an emotionally uplifting supplement to the oft-considered “drudgery” of academic learning. It is a set of disciplined activities through which Christian scholars pursue understanding, in the presence of a loving and all-knowing God, and prepare meaningful ways to share their evolving learning with their students. The widespread embrace and commitment to growth in this practice is the most telling marker of whether the faculty of an institution is invested in its Christian mission.

Here is a concise definition of AFI that can serve as a touchpoint for faculty development and/or discussions:

Academic faith integration is the work carried out by Christian faculty members when they meaningfully bring the scholarship of their discipline or

Academic Faith Integration is not merely a slogan, a vibe, or an emotionally uplifting supplement to the oft-considered “drudgery” of academic learning.

professional practice and the scholarship representing insights and perspectives from Christian faith into dialogue with each other, applying that dialogue and its results to their research, the courses they teach, and their discipline-related products resulting in disciplinary perspectives that are uniquely informed by faith and/or faith perspectives that are uniquely informed by the discipline or profession.²⁷

This definition clarifies the *who*, *what*, *how*, and *why* of AFI.

Who Performs AFI?

Faculty are the frontline implementers of AFI. Harry Lee Poe contends that “the role of the faculty is the critical factor in the Christian identity of the institution. More than the formal ties to a denomination, the policies of the board, or the initiatives of the president, the extent to which students ever see any relationship between God and what they study depends on the faculty.”²⁸

Before students can participate in the task of AFI, the Christian scholar-educator’s own mind and imagination must be engaged. This is done by allowing the Holy Spirit to lead, enlighten, and bring transformation on a personal level. This transformation must happen on an intellectual plane, as the reconciling of two very different ideas can be puzzling and may require

extensive thought work. Once settled, even tentatively, the Christian teacher must think pedagogically, seeking to determine the best ways to bring students into the learning process. Holmes explains that students “need a teacher as a catalyst and guide, one who has struggled and is struggling with similar questions and knows some of the pertinent materials and procedures.”²⁹

Faculty are the frontline implementers of Academic Faith Integration.

What Is Being Integrated?

Integration involves not merely one person’s individual faith experience—though that matters deeply—but *the* Christian faith as a historically rooted, theologically attuned body of truth and wisdom. Augustine elucidates the distinction as follows: “But that which is believed is a different thing from the faith by which it is believed. For the former is in things which are said either to be, or to have been, or to be about to be; but the latter is in the mind of the believer, and is visible to him only whose it is.”³⁰

Thus, one’s subjective trust in Christ (faith-as-*believing*) rests upon the objective truths clarified by the church over time (faith-as-*believed*). It is important to add that while

²⁷ Paul Kaak, “Academic Faith Integration: Introduction to a New Section within Christian Higher Education,” *Christian Higher Education* 15, no. 4 (2016), 192.

²⁸ Harry Lee Poe, *Christianity in the Academy: Teaching at the Intersection of Faith and Learning* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2004), 49.

²⁹ Holmes, *Idea*, 46.

³⁰ Augustine, *On the Trinity* XIII.2.5, in Philip Schaff (ed.) and Arthur West Haddan (trans.), *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, First Series, vol. 3 (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1887). Rev. and ed. for New Advent by Kevin Knight. <https://www.newadvent.org/fathers/130113.htm>

there is an identifiable “pattern” for the what-is-believed,³¹ the global church’s understanding of the Christian faith tradition has been continually *formulated, criticized, refined, and tested* across centuries.³² Its nuances, implications, and applications have been found to touch on all things, which, as St. Paul notes, are held together by Christ (Colossians 1). The apex of Christian faith is the saving work of Christ and the glory of the one true God, yet the full scope of the Christian’s purview is much more vast. To wit, it wasn’t long before the early Christians discovered that their faith was “the story of everything.”³³

The faith that is integrated must therefore be *grounded in its common core*, as agreed upon, for example, in the creeds. It is impossible, however, for any creed to be all-encompassing.³⁴ As Timothy Tennent notes of just one theological category, “Despite my strong affirmation of the Christology expressed in the Nicene Creed (AD 325), it would be a mistake to understand even this powerful statement as the final word on Christology as if no more conversations are either needed or desired.”³⁵ In the pursuit of faithful AFI, Christian scholar-educators will inevitably learn new things, “albeit never ones that are absolutely novel. Any innovation faithful to Scripture,” says theologian Yong,

The apex of Christian faith is the saving work of Christ and the glory of the one true God, yet the full scope of the Christian’s purview is much more vast.

“will retain some measure of continuity with the past even as it gestures toward a richer expression in a new moment in anticipation of the full revelation to come.”³⁶

Furthermore, neither the Bible nor the creeds speak directly about all that Christian faith has the potential to address. This faith, grounded in the theo-drama of Scripture, has something to say about all areas of human endeavor, from language to robots, from chemistry to incarceration, and from athletic training to architecture. And why is this so? Because thoughtful believers have prayed over, studied on, and imagined out the possible implications of faith in that corner of the world where God has called them to work, learn, and teach. So, the practice of AFI asks Christian faculty to draw from their deep reservoir of disciplinary knowledge *as well as* from the vast repository of faith-based knowledge. A commitment to essential doctrines is necessary and frequently

31 See Philip Carrington, *The Primitive Christian Catechism: A Study in the Epistles* (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1940); Timothy George, “The Pattern of Christian Truth,” *First Things*, June 1, 2005, <https://firstthings.com/the-pattern-of-christian-truth/>.

32 Robert Wilken, *Remembering the Christian Past* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1995), 51.

33 C. Kavin Rowe, *Christianity’s Surprise: A Cure and Certain Hope* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2020), 11ff.

34 Allen Yeh, “Theology and Orthopraxis in Global Evangelicalism,” in Mark Labberton (ed.), *Still Evangelical: Insiders Reconsider Political, Social, and Theological Meaning* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2018), 97-119; see also Yong, *Learning Theology*.

35 Timothy Tennent, *Theology in the Context of World Christianity: How the Global Church Is Influencing the Way We Think About and Discuss Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2007), 107.

36 Yong, *Learning Theology*, 37.



useful for Christian educators.³⁷ But if faith is delimited too narrowly, its potential in terms of Academic Faith Integration will be short-circuited.³⁸ Roger Olson explains that “the faith part [of the faith-learning integration project] is not the whole system of doctrines or inward spirituality but the biblical-Christian view of reality.”³⁹

How Does Integration Occur?

There is neither one single method for AFI, nor does just any method work. Integration occurs most naturally through meaningful dialogue, not forced blending, superficial “faith add-ons,”

or a generic hope that one’s vital spirituality will automatically enrich students by osmosis. Instead, significant, ongoing interaction between disciplinary scholarship and Christian theological insight is what Christian professors must facilitate in order to achieve integration.

In the AFI paradigm, neither disciplinary scholarship nor Christian theological insight is procedurally subordinated; both are taken seriously as sources of learning, and sincere attempts are made to engage and comprehend both. In this dialogical exchange, the scholar’s role is interpretive, imaginative, and constructive as they follow hunches and investigate where and how insights may align, challenge one another, and/or yield new understanding through mutual encounter.

That this approach is decidedly intellectual in tenor is not to say that there isn’t room for reflective practice as well. But “knowing” in a cognitive sense is core. The Bible affirms the value of both relational knowledge and rational knowledge.⁴⁰ Therefore, rather than indulging the rational extremes of modernism or the relational extremes of postmodernism, AFI engages both forms of knowledge through a posture of critical realism. Christian anthropologist Paul Hiebert explains this epistemological stance as follows:

Knowledge in critical realism is the correspondence between our mental maps and the real world; it is objective reality subjectively known and appropriated

³⁷ See Jacob Shatzer, *Faithful Learning: A Vision for Theologically Integrated Education* (Nashville, TN: B&H Academic, 2023).

³⁸ See Clark Pinnock, *Flame of Love: A Theology of the Holy Spirit*, 2nd ed. (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2022)

³⁹ Olson, *Essentials of Christian Thought*, 9.

⁴⁰ See 2 Peter 1:3-9, esp. vv. 3, 5, 6.

in human lives. Critical realism also restores emotions and moral judgments as essential parts of “knowing” and argues that these do not necessarily negate the objectivity of scientific observations.⁴¹

In our pursuit of absolute truth, Christian scholars must remember that Paul himself acknowledged both the potential of intellectual progress—“When I became a man, I put the ways of childhood behind me” (1 Cor. 13:11)—and the reality of intellectual limits: “For now we see only a reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known” (v. 12). Thus, for the Christian, faith seeking understanding is marked by both confidence in the reality of objective truth and humility concerning our precision in apprehending it.

Why Is AFI Essential to Christian Pedagogy?

AFI is essential because its dialogical engagement results in conceptual transformation that may be intellectual and/or practical, but is always an instance of maturation. It may result in new insights about disciplinary ideas and practices, or clarity and deeper wisdom related to Christian ideas and practices, or both. AFI enables Christian scholars to honor God with the full range of human knowing—allowing faith to shape understanding and allowing expert understanding to refine how Christians faithfully imagine the world God has invited them to creatively and wisely steward.

When Academic Faith Integration is clearly named and practiced in routine and pervasive ways, faculty have pedagogical purpose, administrators know what to reward, trustees can better perform their governance duties, and students find greater significance in their learning.

In sum, AFI provides an essential organizing framework for pedagogy within Christian higher education. In the absence of such a framework, faculty will likely remain uncertain as to whether their pedagogical and/or scholarly practice is what the university advertises to constituents and expects of its academic employees. Administrators are unable to support and celebrate what they cannot articulate, and trustees cannot protect what they do not sufficiently understand. Perhaps most vital of all, students cannot fully benefit from what they are unable to recognize. However, when AFI is clearly named and practiced in routine and pervasive ways, faculty have pedagogical purpose, administrators know what to reward, trustees can better perform their governance duties, and students find greater significance in their learning.

⁴¹ Paul G. Hiebert, *Missiological Implication of Epistemological Shifts: Affirming Truth in a Modern/Postmodern World* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 1999), 74.



Principles for Academic Faith Integration

To practice AFI faithfully and fruitfully, Christian faculty need more than goodwill and intuition; they require clarity about what integration looks like in practice, particularly at the institution where they currently serve. The following five principles articulate what institution-wide AFI must include in order to be successfully practiced across the academic disciplines and within a diverse array of historic Christian traditions. These principles leave much flexibility regarding *how* faculty

integrate, since each discipline requires different methods⁴² and features its own signature pedagogies.⁴³ Additionally, these principles establish standards for designing integrative teaching, organizing faculty development, assessing student learning, and guiding institutional language and culture.

Christian faculty need clarity about what integration looks like in practice.

⁴² See Janet G. Donald, *Learning to Think: Disciplinary Perspectives* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2002); Carolin Kreber, ed., *The University and Its Disciplines: Teaching Within and Beyond Disciplinary Boundaries* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2008).

⁴³ See Regan A. R. Gurung, Nancy Chick, & Aeron Haynie, *Exploring Signature Pedagogies: Approaches to Teaching Disciplinary Habits of Mind* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2008).

Principle #1: AFI makes use of what is broadly recognized as typical within its larger academic context.

Academic Faith Integration incorporates intellectual practices rooted in disciplinary inquiry and is carried out through relevant activities common to higher education.

AFI is “academic” in that it involves generating, testing, interpreting, and applying knowledge. It takes place in classrooms, laboratories, seminars, studios, and the surrounding community. It involves activities such as analysis, interpretation, evaluation, case studies, disciplined dialogue, group projects, service learning, clinical rotations, and field experience.

AFI, therefore, must be sensibly anchored in the scholarly tools, methods, and knowledge structures of the academy as expressed within a particular field of study. It engages epistemologies, methodologies, evidentiary norms, analytical procedures, theoretical frameworks, best practices, alternative arguments, and seminal and current readings. It is not a substitute for spiritual formation programs as typically understood, but by being true to its academic identity, it is spiritually formative in a unique way.

Being clear about the academic nature of AFI protects both the church and the academy. Faculty are freed from pressure to become quasi-pastors, and students receive what the university exists to provide: rigorous intellectual formation illuminated by Christian wisdom (even as churches continue to engage in authoritative preaching ministry).



When educational institutions fail to keep AFI academic in aim and orientation, they unintentionally malform students, teaching them that Christian thinking is thin, emotive, or ornamental rather than intellectually substantive, even with its mysteries and paradoxes. When AFI is done well, students will see faith as intellectually compelling as they witness professors thinking Christianly in front of them and with them, and in ways that are clearly central, not peripheral, to what the syllabus promises they will learn.

In practice, this means that integration is carried out through disciplinary reading and research, structured classroom inquiry, academic assignments and evaluations, and scholarly communication both within

Academic Faith Integration is not a substitute for spiritual formation programs, but it is spiritually formative in a unique way.

the discipline and in consultation with faithful perspectives.⁴⁴ The academic focus protects AFI from either drifting into undue sentimentalism or becoming an alternative church service. It honors the distinctive calling of Christian universities to help students think *Christianly*, as emerging *scholars* within the discipline.

Principle #2: AFI requires an integrative encounter between disciplinary knowledge and Christian wisdom in which either or both may be refined and/or challenged (if not in substance, then in expression).

Academic Faith Integration is underway when some aspect of the Christian faith and some aspect of the discipline enter into genuine dialogical encounter respectfully, honestly, critically, and generatively.

The idea of disciplinary knowledge and Christian wisdom mutually informing one another is perhaps the most misunderstood aspect of the AFI enterprise, but the concept is

essential to its successful execution. Consider the following examples of AFI that might occur within various disciplinary contexts:

- » The topic in a political science class may be *power*. The professor may want to dig deep into definitions and illustrations from the field, but then invite verses from Proverbs, contemporary writings on kingdom ethics, and theological reflection on the cross of Jesus to interrogate prevailing assumptions about power, leadership, and governance.
- » The topic in a clinical psychology class may be treatment of *anxiety*; the Christian's Bible has something to say about that topic as well. Comparing and contrasting the vocabularies, recommendations, and proposed responses to anxiety in the scholarly literature and in Scripture can lead to questions about whether the scholarship accounts for faith-based perspectives or how Christian teaching should engage clinical categories.
- » A topic in a cyber-security class is *safety*. The NIV Bible uses the word "safety" 34 times, which may be a good place to start—including whether or how the term "safety" is commonly used in today's discourse. But a word study certainly won't exhaust insightful theological perspectives about topics such as God our Protector, Christian views of violence, and biblical teaching on trust, decision making, and discernment. Pushing further into this topic may result in situating "safety" in light of the Christian vision of

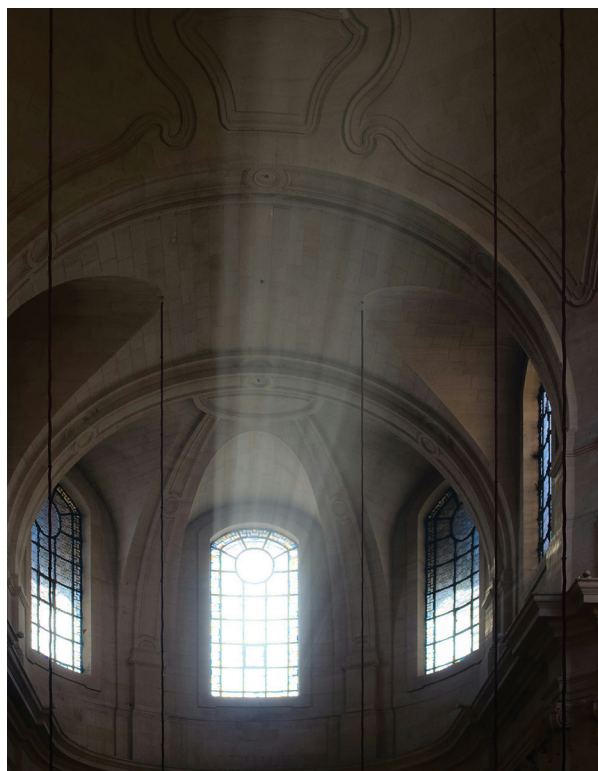
⁴⁴ See John Polkinghorne, *Exploring Reality: The Intertwining of Science and Religion* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2006); John Swinton, *Dementia: Living in the Memories of God* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2012).

supernatural realities, or exploring how God's promises about the safety of those who trust in Him intersect with the digital world.

- » The topic in an art class is *beauty*. The professor could explore the notion of God as Creator, man's creative faculties stemming from bearing the *imago Dei*, and historic Christian approaches to aesthetics. These considerations could provide a meaningful backdrop to the physical work of drawing, painting, and sculpture, and students could also discuss how Christian accounts of beauty support or complexify secular art criticism.

In well-crafted AFI, each vantage point must be invited to suggest questions, clarifications, refinements, expansions, amendments, or perhaps even modifications to the other. Why? Because integration is not merely placing "faith next to learning." According to Wolfe, that sort of side-by-side approach is "pseudointegration."⁴⁵ In contrast, he explains, "Genuine integration occurs when an assumption or concern can be shown to be internally shared by (integral to) both the Judaeo-Christian vision and an academic discipline."⁴⁶

Fundamentally, AFI is a dialogue between different perspectives about something that both find important. It is an authentic intellectual exchange through which theological paradigms probe at or pull from disciplinary assumptions, while disciplinary themes raise valuable questions or offer



distinct perspectives for theological reflection or Christian practice. For example, such dialogical AFI is likely to encounter an androcentric perspective on the human person that Christian anthropologists will strongly refute while also offering cross-cultural practices that Christian practitioners can affirm. One might also imagine a dialogue in which biblical or theological texts raise questions about the sin of greed that classes on Consumer Science or Models of Economics are likely to avoid in non-religious academic settings. This dialogue may also allow empirical evidence or historical realities

⁴⁵ David L. Wolfe, "The Line of Demarcation between Integration and Pseudointegration," in Harold Heie & David L. Wolfe (eds.), *The Reality of Christian Learning: Strategies for Faith-Discipline Integration* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 1987), 4.

⁴⁶ Wolfe, "Line of Demarcation," 5.

that prompt a reconsideration of an overly simplistic “Christian” view of motivation, spending, and wealth accumulation.

In all of this, the guiding assumption is not that secular and Christian sources of teaching are equally authoritative, but that each represents a distinctive voice and there is value in seeking to understand how the two relate. When looking at one’s academic discipline through the lens of faith, scholars have suggested three ways that a faculty member might approach the task of assessing its findings and methods.⁴⁷

The *Compatibilist Strategy* “seeks to emphasize areas of harmony or compatibility between knowledge from special revelation and academic inquiry. [It] seeks to highlight areas of common ground in basic assumptions, etc.”⁴⁸ It is important to note that this strategy must move beyond simply asserting that “my faith and my discipline are broadly compatible” to the hard work of facilitating a serious, honest encounter between the two, after which the scholar becomes capable of explaining *why* and *how* the two are compatible.

The *Transformationist Strategy* recognizes that “there are areas of commonality between the discipline and the Christian worldview ... [but there are] some areas in which the discipline is seriously lacking” or incomplete.⁴⁹ In this strategy, the Christian scholar draws upon his or her faith to expand

upon the academic field in question and to address its shortcomings. Again, to say this can happen in reverse is not to suggest that, in its essence, Christian faith is inadequate or lacking. But it does incline us to admit that God can use various means (including our areas of study and practice) to move us closer to a more accurate understanding of the truths we believe, or to draw out Christian thinking regarding topics that have previously been only nominally explored.

Fundamentally, Academic Faith Integration is a dialogue between different perspectives about something that both find important.

The *Reconstructionist Strategy* is the most radical of the three approaches. Here the Christian scholar perceives differences that “are severe enough to warrant a rejection of the foundation of the discipline” and start over from the ground up.⁵⁰ For example, some (though not all) Christian sociologists, anthropologists, psychologists, and scientists have taken this approach.

⁴⁷ Ronald R. Nelson (“Faith-Discipline Integration: Compatibilist, Reconstructionist, and Transformationist Strategies,” 1987) and William Hasker (“Faith-Learning Integration: An Overview,” *Christian Scholars Review*, 1991) suggest three ways, summarized here by Beers and Beers (Stephen T. Beers and Jane Beers, “Integration of Faith and Learning,” in Stephen T. Beers, ed., *The Soul of Christian University: A Field Guide for Educators* [Abilene, TX: ACU Press, 2008], 29-52).

⁴⁸ Beers and Beers, “Integration of Faith,” 41.

⁴⁹ Beers and Beers, “Integration of Faith,” 42.

⁵⁰ Beers and Beers, “Integration of Faith,” 43.

Regardless of the strategy employed, Christian college faculty facilitate integration when they encourage students to discover—through inquiry, discussion, case analysis, or research—how disciplinary insights and theological truths may illuminate, refine, or critique one another. Without dialogical engagement, AFI collapses into either isolated monologue or easy capitulation, both of which are epistemologically and pedagogically unsatisfying and, at times, can lead to error.

The aim of AFI is to model and encourage a form of Christian intellectual humility that welcomes critique, expansion, modification, and sometimes disruption. It should be strongly noted, however, that faculty must carry AFI out with Spirit-led prudence and instructional sensitivity, taking into account institutional context as well as the backgrounds and capacities of their current students. The college experience will, in many ways, be a natural season of exploration, questioning, and deconstruction across many dimensions for most students.⁵¹ While the Christian educator may discern that intellectual integrity requires that he or she take part in such a process, it is (at best) irresponsible not to also carefully facilitate reconstruction, particularly related to matters that are explicitly faith-based (see Matthew 18; James 3). The value of intentional AFI is that it does not leave these matters to chance or to student-directed searches for knowledge from peers or internet sources, but rather enables faculty

The guiding assumption is not that secular and Christian sources of teaching are equally authoritative, but that each represents a distinctive voice and there is value in seeking to understand how the two relate.

to bring the relevant discussions directly into the classroom and to offer supportive guidance in their fields of specialization.

Principle #3: AFI Draws on Meaningful and Relevant “Scholarly” Resources.

Integration must be grounded in the best scholarship available, from discipline-specific to biblical, theological, and historical, rather than mere intuition, experience, or inherited assumptions.

AFI is a scholarly practice and demands, as a fundamental baseline, disciplinary excellence. Faculty cannot integrate well if they are not strong in the seminal and current literature of their field. They must bring respected scholarship, evidence-based research, and theoretical sophistication to the integrative encounter. In addition, as mentioned above, faculty engagement with their tradition of Christian faith must go beyond simple recollections of what they learned in church

⁵¹ See Sharon Parks, *The Critical Years: The Young Adult Search for a Faith to Live By* (New York, NY: Harper & Row, 1986).



or from an author whose written work once provided spiritual encouragement. Academic Faith Integration relies on the ancient but ever-new Christian scholarly tradition at its best: the full reach of biblical studies/theology, Christian philosophy and ethics, historical theology, practical theology, and spiritual/theological inquiry both representing one's own place of conviction and appreciating what can be learned from diverse denominational traditions.⁵²

This principle underscores the central role of the school's library. On the one hand, there is much that Christian scholars can learn from non-Christian sources. Surprisingly, perhaps, John Calvin offers this applicable advice regarding secular writers: "Let that admirable light of truth shining in them teach us that the mind of man, though fallen and perverted from its wholeness, is nevertheless clothed and ornamented with God's excellent gifts."⁵³ John Wesley agrees, noting that "to imagine none can teach you but those who are themselves saved from sin is a very great and dangerous mistake. Give not place to it for a moment: it would lead you into a thousand other mistakes."⁵⁴ Indeed, many Christian scholars have discovered enduring insights on certain matters from secular sources. Even though there is much in their overall worldviews that must be rejected, educational philosopher John Dewey and sociologist C. Wright Mills are relevant examples (among many others) illustrating this point.

On the other hand, educators endeavoring to engage in AFI must not stay in the stacks that became most familiar while completing their terminal degree and in teaching their particular classes. They should also access Bible commentaries, theological reference materials, academic journals that publish at the intersection of faith and the disciplines,

⁵² See, for example, Barry L. Cullen, *The Holy River of God: Currents and Contributions of the Wesleyan Holiness Stream of Christianity* (Indianapolis, IN: Aldersgate Press, 2016); Anthony L. Chute, Christopher W. Morgan, and Robert A. Peterson, *Why We Belong: Evangelical Unity and Denominational Diversity* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2013); Richard J. Foster, *Streams of Living Water: Celebrating the Great Traditions of Christian Faith* (San Francisco, CA: HarperOne, 2001); John M. Frame, *Evangelical Reunion: Denominations and the One Body of Christ* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1991); Richard T. Hughes, *The Vocation of a Christian Scholar: How Christian Faith Can Sustain the Life of the Mind* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2005).

⁵³ John Calvin, *Institutes* 2.2.15, in John MacNeill (ed.) and Ford Lewis Battles (trans.), *Calvin: Institutes of the Christian Religion*, vol. 1 (Louisville, KY: The Westminster Press, 1967), 273.

⁵⁴ John Wesley, *A Plain Account of Christian Perfection* (London, England: Epworth, 2007), 87.

Academic formation, spiritual formation, moral formation, and professional formation are often discussed separately from one another, yet they are always interrelated.

and faith-focused materials with explicit connections to discipline-specific themes. These resources, combined with more narrowly disciplinary sources, create the possibility of meaningful integration, although some equipping in how to make good use of such materials may also be needed. Discussing this with the institution's purchasing and reference librarians may generate helpful recommendations in this regard.

To narrow down which faith-informed resources might be most suitable for work in AFI in a particular discipline, the following practical recommendations may prove helpful to faculty:

- » When possible, determine whether a book comes from an academically oriented publishing company or one that has an academic imprint.⁵⁵
- » Research the author to learn more about that person's background, such as where they studied, what else they have written, where they teach, and what their theological tradition is, if discoverable.

- » Read book reviews from reputable Christian journals to understand the relative merits of the work and how it has been received by other Christian scholars.

Principle #4: AFI should be formational and useful for life and work beyond the classroom and beyond the student's short season of formal study.

AFI seeks to produce wisdom and good character as well as to prepare students to engage the common good as an outgrowth of the intellectual focus during their years as students.

Christian higher education is not only about providing information; more fundamentally, it involves personal formation. Academic formation, spiritual formation, moral formation, and professional formation are often discussed separately from one another, yet they are always interrelated. As a result, AFI is a doorway for Christian universities seeking to cultivate practical and theoretical wisdom, kingdom citizenship, the ability to make sense of God's world, and the commitment to live lives of love within it. Not "equipping" *period*, but equipping "for works of service" and "so that the body of Christ may be built up" (Eph. 4:12, emphasis added). Not "You heard many important things from me" *period*. Rather, "the things you have heard me say ... *entrust to reliable people who will also be qualified to teach others*" (2 Tim. 2:2, emphasis added).

⁵⁵ Examples of such faith-informed academic resources (from both secular and Christian publishing houses) can be found in the "For Further Reading" section at the close of this report.



This principle can be very countercultural for faculty engaged in the scholarship of discovery or those in the liberal arts tradition who customarily contend that learning is valuable for its own sake. And yet, it is vital to recognize that knowledge is (often) meant to be instrumental. Christian knowing is rational, but it also awakens the imagination and invites creative applications for solving problems, both personal and public.⁵⁶

In practice, this means that faculty practitioners of AFI should shape how students imagine the redemptive purposes within their discipline; inspire

broad applications for related vocational opportunities, work, and service; cultivate personal and professional virtues connected to the field (e.g., justice in social work, humility in science, stewardship in business); introduce students to the temptations that lie in wait in this particular field (as well as various God-given “ways of escape”);⁵⁷ and draw students together to discuss shared meaning rather than leaving them isolated in a tangle of irrelevant knowledge and religious ideals. The breadth of these outcomes testifies to the fact that Christian truth produces a vision of the good life, and AFI offers an intellectual path into that vision.

Principle #5: AFI must be pedagogically hospitable to all students.

AFI welcomes every enrolled student—Christian and non-Christian, those who are unsure, sure, and even the resistant—into meaningful faith-related academic exploration without coercion or assumptions about their religious experience, their religious literacy, or their religious motivations.

Many Christian universities serve an increasingly varied student population. AFI must therefore be intellectually welcoming, educationally accessible, and ethically respectful to those they choose to enroll. Exhibiting hospitality does not mean watering down Christian commitments; it means ensuring that a bountiful range of relevant

⁵⁶ See Miroslav Volf and Ryan McAnnally-Linz, *Public Faith in Action: How to Engage with Commitment, Conviction, and Courage* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2017); Nicholas Wolterstorff, “Theology and Praxis,” in Don W. King (ed.), *Taking Every Thought Captive: Forty Years of the Christian Scholars Review* (Abilene, TX: ACU Press, 2011), 46–52.

⁵⁷ See 1 Corinthians 10:13.

ideas and scholars are accessible to all students.⁵⁸ It means that nominal and non-Christian students are invited to contribute and participate in relevant scholarly inquiry with dignity and without shame, all while the explicitly Christian educational goals of the institution are pursued apace. A hospitable classroom is a space of generous academic freedom, invites questions without fear, and welcomes disagreement and differences in life experience.

Christian faculty do vital work when they model civil engagement with alternative scholarly viewpoints and do not require assent to contestable issues for academic credit, even if they do require a reasonable comment or critique on such issues. This principle is crucial for institutional credibility, and it demonstrates that AFI is not indoctrination. Most importantly, it models for students that scholarly engagement is gracious, but not cowardly; it is rooted in the hard work of blending charity and truth.

Because hospitality is the relational posture of AFI, educational aims should be made transparent to students through actions such as including AFI-related student learning outcomes in the syllabus and leading an unambiguous conversation about AFI during the first week of class. In addition, grace-based hospitality requires avoidance of manipulation and shame; welcoming questions, doubts, and ideas that might seem strange to a person with a “strong” faith; and the practice of honoring students’ intellectual agency when engaging faith-related ideas, truths, and practices.



Christian truth produces a vision of the good life, and Academic Faith Integration offers an intellectual path into that vision.

This does not mean, however, that AFI must be “neutral.” A Christian university and its faculty have convictions that should not be compromised. But for schools who do choose to enroll non-Christians, it would be unethical (at best) to make learning, including faith-based learning, elusive, unattainable, or irrelevant. Intellectual hospitality means

⁵⁸ See Karen Swallow Prior, “How to Love Your Ideological Enemy,” *Christianity Today*, May 18, 2017, <https://www.christianitytoday.com/2017/05/how-to-love-your-ideological-enemy>

students are invited to explore all ideas (including religious ideas that may be new to them) as scholars, without putting pressure on them—even subtly—to adopt and believe them. This also allows the many students at Christian colleges who do confess Christ but are still maturing in their knowledge of Christ to honestly consider multiple points of view.

In practice, hospitable AFI may include providing a handout to students with relevant faith-related content. This can “level the playing field” in a classroom characterized by mixed religious backgrounds and may also be important for students whose biblical literacy is low or lacking entirely. Pedagogical hospitality may also involve letting students articulate how faith-related insights align or diverge from their own current beliefs. AFI carried out in this way will present integrative models that do not require personal assent on every point being discussed. At the same time, such approaches may also encourage students with a strong faith to dive in more

Exhibiting hospitality does not mean watering down Christian commitments; it means ensuring that a bountiful range of relevant ideas and scholars are accessible to all students.

deeply rather than confidently assuming that they have already mastered a topic. Respectful AFI encourages both safe dialogue and reflective critique when engaging class materials, the professor, and fellow students, and it designs assignments and assessments so that both “insiders” and “outsiders” have equal opportunities to succeed and benefit. Hospitality strengthens rather than weakens AFI because it reflects confidence in Christian truth and respects both the intellectual dignity and spiritual journeys of all learners.



Structures That Sustain Effective Practice

For AFI to flourish, institutions must establish the practice not just as an option for the willing, but as a signature academic commitment.

Faculty cannot meaningfully participate in integrative scholarship without supportive systems that honor the foundational aims of Christian higher education. What follows is a framework for institutional scaffolding that aligns practices with mission.

Mission-Aligned Hiring

Hiring is the earliest moment for detecting AFI competency (or at least its potential) among candidates and for articulating that AFI is both a privilege and a core expectation. Institutions must develop clear, honest, and missionally

aligned hiring practices that are reaffirmed in every interview, from the search committee to the president. This approach communicates the priority of AFI up front, assesses candidates' capacity in this area as well as their willingness to invest in learning how to engage in integrative work, and clarifies that AFI is not simply confessional loyalty or sincere spiritual enthusiasm. Implementing this approach requires search committees that understand AFI, can identify effective integrative work in the academic discipline for which a position is being filled, and know how to discern the difference between mere affirmation and probable ability. While more will be learned once the candidate is a new employee, due diligence must be done at this stage.

Mission-Consistent Evaluation and Advancement

Promotion and tenure systems often reveal what a university hopes its reputation to be, for it rewards what it wants to be known for. If AFI is genuinely central, then faith-integrative teaching must be evaluated fairly, earnestly, and consistently, and integrative scholarship must be recognized as legitimate and valuable—not just in the abstract, but in concrete ways. As a formal consequence, faculty should be rewarded for creative, discipline-informed theological engagement in their teaching and scholarly output, while recognizing that not all disciplines are created equal in terms of faith-based publishing possibilities. There are many ways this can be achieved, but when evaluation systems honor AFI along with—or as an expression of—their teaching, scholarship, and relevant service, faculty will be clear that AFI is not an add-on but a core academic opportunity and responsibility.

Aligned Syllabi, Student Learning Outcomes, and Program Learning Outcomes

To encourage continued focus on AFI at the program and course levels, educational aims related to AFI should be strategically articulated in the assessment documents for each academic program. Course-specific AFI student learning outcomes (SLOs) should then map onto these more comprehensive program learning outcomes (PLOs). While every class won't have the same *quantity* of AFI, most syllabi will express at least one clear AFI-related SLO. Discernment is needed regarding whether and how to “measure”

Faculty should be rewarded for creative, discipline-informed theological engagement in their teaching and scholarly output.

a student's competency in regard to these outcomes; regardless, when doing so, rubrics that are fair to all students, no matter where they are in their faith journeys, are essential.

Examples of AFI student learning outcomes include:

- » Students will create a dialogue between psychological theories, human nature, and a Christian theological understanding of personhood using Proffitt's model.
- » Students will be able to compare, contrast, and connect contemporary economic systems with Scripture's vision for justice and human dignity.
- » Students will provide a weekly journal entry of 2–3 paragraphs linking their social work internship experiences to assigned readings that provide a Christian view of pertinent social theories.
- » In their encounters with cadavers in the anatomy lab, students will reflect on virtues appropriate to a Christian view of death.
- » Students will articulate ways that Christians argued for and against war in writings that emerged from the Civil War Era to the events of 9/11.

Faculty Formation & Development

Learning to engage theological scholarship, disciplinary theory, and whole-person student formation simultaneously is not intuitive, and faculty often need institutional grace, patience, and support to develop competency across all of these dimensions. Three to five years of intentional input, guided practice, collegial coaching, and reflection is typically necessary before faculty demonstrate confident, robust AFI.⁵⁹ For this reason, robust AFI-related orientation and onboarding for new faculty should begin on day one of year one, continuing with development opportunities at every stage of the faculty member's academic career.

Having such programming addresses one common challenge in Christian college hiring—namely, recruiting faculty who affirm the mission broadly but lack the skills or interest to practice AFI in scholarly ways because they were trained in secular or less seriously Christian contexts. In some cases, academic departments will have chairs who prioritize AFI and can serve as an internal mentor to new faculty. However, if the institution overlooks the importance of guiding new hires to start experimenting with AFI at the ground floor of their employment, this will make engaging in AFI more difficult later. It's worth noting that the library is a co-laborer in this regard since AFI requires access to theological resources, interdisciplinary journals, Christian scholarship, and databases that support integrative work.



Learning to engage theological scholarship, disciplinary theory, and whole-person student formation simultaneously is not intuitive, and faculty often need institutional grace, patience, and support to develop competency across all of these dimensions.

⁵⁹ Paul Kaak, "Designing School-Based Faculty Development Programs for Academic Faith Integration," *Integration: A Journal of Faith and Learning*, no. 5, Summer 2025, <https://iace.education/journal-blog/udtenl8to4kr1c4ryqa12abuee745r>

An Institutional Ecosystem of Reinforcement

Integration *in* the classroom occurs in cooperation with certain ethos-building programs, opportunities, and people *outside* the classroom. For example, chapel programming should support—but not try to replace—the intellectual formation that is the focus of the classroom. Student Life professionals and academic faculty should collaborate, based on their particular roles, to enrich overall learning. Student Success staff and advisors can reinforce the students' calling to learn faithfully and support a vision for an emerging sense of Christ-honoring vocation. Institutional Research should find meaningful methods, both quantitative and qualitative, to capture and communicate the institution's success in offering academically sound, faith-based programs of study. All of these functional areas within the Christian college must work in concert to produce a robust institutional ecosystem wherein AFI can fully flower.

Christian higher education flourishes when all stakeholders—faculty, administrators, trustees, and students—embrace their part in accomplishing the mission of Academic Faith Integration.



Flourishing through Intentional Action

Christian higher education flourishes when all stakeholders—faculty, administrators, trustees, and students—embrace their part in accomplishing the mission of Academic Faith Integration.

Heeding the Call to Faithful Practice

Faculty: Embrace the Scholarly Vocation of AFI. Christian faculty are stewards of truth-seeking under Christ and must reclaim teaching and research as a ministry of intellectual discipleship aimed at cultivating

Christian wisdom among students. Those who teach in the Christian academy must be “bilingual”—able to understand both the language of the academic discipline and the language of Christian theological reasoning—and then become translators to students and other scholars. John Henry Newman is a quintessential example of this.⁶⁰ While Newman was uniquely gifted with high intellectual capacity and a legendary academic vision, his commitment to continual growth in disciplinary expertise, theological literacy, and bringing both together under the guidance of the Spirit of Truth is exemplary of the

⁶⁰ See Frederick D. Aquino, *An Integrative Habit of Mind: John Henry Newman on the Path to Wisdom* (DeKalb, IL: Northern Illinois University Press, 2012); Mervyn Davies, “Newman’s Challenge to the Contemporary University,” in Oliver D. Crisp, Gavin D’Costa, Mervyn Davies, and Peter Hampson (eds.), *Christianity and the Disciplines: The Transformation of the University* (London, England: T&T Clark, 2014), 12–27.

lifelong pursuit required of any Christian who is called to serve in an academic setting. Faculty members' purpose must be to see their scholarly work and classroom presence emerge from a life marked by both curiosity and humility, as well as by a practical love for truth and the steady cultivation of godly wisdom.

Administrators: Shape the Ecosystem

That Makes AFI Possible. Academic leaders are the visionary architects of institutional culture. For a Christian college to excel in AFI, its leaders must align hiring, evaluation, and professional development with the purposes and desired outcomes of AFI. Practically, this means protecting faculty time for integrative scholarship and recognizing it when done well. It also means providing theological resources, peer support structures, and institutional practices that reinforce missional coherence. Finally, academic administrators must model leadership that transparently unites intellectual rigor and spiritual authenticity, such that wise decision-making and good communication with institutional stakeholders and the larger community are the end results.

Stakeholders: Sustain the Mission with Prayer, Understanding, and Partnership.

Families, churches, alumni, and employers are also necessary partners in the work of AFI. This group can serve the Christian academy by praying for institutions to remain faithful to their calling, especially for faculty to whom this is new and for faculty who teach students from religious backgrounds that may not be Christian. They can also encourage current and prospective students to view education not just as credential acquisition but as an instrumental factor in their Christian intellectual formation.

Finally, this constituency should hold universities accountable to missional integrity and encourage them to support their faculty's efforts in doing the challenging work of uniting faith and disciplinary wisdom for the sake of the world (2 Corinthians 4).

Stewarding the Heart of Christian Higher Education

Academic Faith Integration stands at the heart of Christian higher education's calling. It is neither an optional enrichment nor a nostalgic inheritance; it is the disciplined, communal, scholarly work through which a Christian college or university lives out its identity with integrity. AFI frames learning within a kingdom worldview and forms students in godly wisdom, anchoring the institution in theological substance and demonstrating that Christian faith can engage the world's knowledge with intellectual courage and spiritual depth. But AFI also requires partnership. Faculty must pursue integrative hunches as a core expression of their vocation. Administrators must build systems that cultivate and reward it. Stakeholders must sustain, pray for, and hold accountable the institutions that carry it forward. When these communities labor together, AFI becomes not just a method for learning, but a way of life, a faithful pursuit of truth under Christ for the flourishing of students, the renewal of disciplines, and the witness of the Christian academy and her graduates in this age and the age to come. 🏰

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