

International Journal for Faith Integration

Volume 2

June 2021

Number 1

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Recommended citation:

Taylor, J. W., V. (2021). Faith Integration: The Missing Links *International Journal for Faith Integration*, 2(1), 1-9. Retrieved from https://ijfi.org/vol2no1/Integration_of_Faith

The *International Journal for Faith Integration (IJFI)* is an open access journal published by the Institute for Faith Integration at Babcock University, Ilishan-Remo, Ogun State, Nigeria. This article was accepted for publication in *IJFI* after completion of a double-blind peer review process. For more information, please contact ijfi@babcock.edu.ng

Faith Integration: The Missing Links

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ABSTRACT

While the concept of faith integration, in and of itself, is not the missing link in Christian education, what is heralded as “faith integration” is often merely a veneer, a sugar-coated secular pill. What is missing is authentic faith integration. This article examines two links frequently missing in faith integration, links that can carry integration from pretense to reality and whose absence can place the entire faith process in critical jeopardy. These end links connect faith integration to its Source and to its object.

Introduction

We begin with a simple statement of fact: The *concept* of “faith integration” is not the missing link in Christian education. Nurturing the faith of students is an implicit goal, if not a stated priority, in almost every Christian school, college, and university. Nearly every institution that bears the name of Christ has highlighted core Christian values in its official documents. And if you were to ask them, the teaching and non-teaching staff would state that they endeavor to treat their students in a Christ like manner.

When you glance quickly, everything looks fine. When you listen briefly, everything sounds right. But when you probe beneath the surface, when you talk with students, when you assess those who have graduated, a different picture begins to emerge. What was heralded as “faith integration” is but window dressing—a pretense, a veneer, a façade, Christian icing on a plastic cake; a sweet spiritual coating around a pagan pill; and, it is the pill and not the coating that ultimately takes effect.

What then is missing? *Authentic* faith integration! What makes the difference between a mere concept of “faith integration” and authentic faith integration? Are not prayers and proof texts sufficient? Is it not simply a matter of having a friendly, Christian person at the front of the classroom?

A *broken* link can appear anywhere in a chain. It is simply the weakest link, the one that first disintegrates under stress. Sometimes there are, in fact, broken links in the chain of faith integration. Official statements of the institution may not set out clearly the faith commitment of the institution. Course descriptions or course syllabi may not intentionally identify faith elements, such as biblical values or spiritually focused objectives. Teachers may not be aware of effective faith-nurturing strategies, and consequently, these are not utilized throughout the teaching-learning experience. Broken links can clearly compromise the effectiveness of faith

integration. Perhaps the most problematic, however, are not the *broken* links. After all, their brokenness is often quite apparent and motivates us to seek solutions. The more challenging situations are the *missing* links. These are particularly difficult because many times we are not even aware that they are missing.

You see, the *missing* link of a chain is not usually in the middle; rather, it is where the chain makes a connection. It is these attaching links that are most often absent. They can go missing precisely because they are able to open and connect. If we are not aware of the risk, or if we are not intentional about ensuring their integrity, they can simply drop away. In this article, we will consider the two links most frequently missing in faith integration. We will examine the two end-links that can potentially yield the greatest effect on spiritual development, and whose absence places the entire faith process in critical jeopardy. These end links connect faith integration to its Source and to its object.

End link 1: Connect to the Biblical foundation

The first attaching link in faith integration approaches the academic discipline and its subject matter at the deepest level, that of worldview. It connects the discipline to its biblical base. It seeks to understand content through the lens of faith. What does it mean to approach life and learning from a biblical worldview? Various authors, such as Juster (1996), MacCallough (2016), and Phillips & Brown (1996), have delineated core elements of a biblical worldview. To help students develop a biblical worldview, several formative actions are involved.

1. *We make Scripture relevant.* This action affirms the pertinence of God's Word. It is based on the intersection of two basic concepts: (a) The Word of God speaks with relevance to each dimension of life; and (b) Every discipline should connect with our lives in meaningful ways. Consequently, God's Word should be significant to each academic discipline. This leads us to seek for a thoughtful understanding of Scripture in relation, not only to life, but also to learning.
2. *We affirm that all truth is God's truth.* This principle is anchored in Scripture. James writes, "Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, and comes down from the Father of lights" (James 1:17, NKJV [unless stated otherwise all Bible references are taken from the NKJV]). Similarly, the book of Proverbs declares, "The Lord gives wisdom; from His mouth come knowledge and understanding" (Proverbs 2:6), while John affirms, "Grace and truth came through Jesus Christ" (John 1:17). When we hold that all truth is ultimately God's truth, as Holmes (1977) early proposed, we will intentionally seek to connect all knowledge back to its Source.
3. *We clarify and assess assumptions.* Every discipline involves underlying assumptions. These include: (a) the nature of the discipline and how it should be conducted; (b) the origin, meaning, and purpose of life; (c) the nature of truth and reality; and (d) our relationship with God, with other human beings, to the world around us. Our task is to evaluate how these assumptions align with the biblical position.
4. *We trace the great controversy theme.* Every dimension of life is affected by the conflict between good and evil. The great controversy theme is, in fact, the sense-making narrative

for life. Here we endeavor to understand how our discipline is shaped by this cosmic conflict.

5. *We consider the gospel commission.* Here we view profession as ministry. We endeavor to live a life of service, a life with an outward focus. We see witness, not so much as an event—something we do, but as a lifestyle—someone we are (see Figure 1). “You are My witnesses” (Isaiah 44:8).

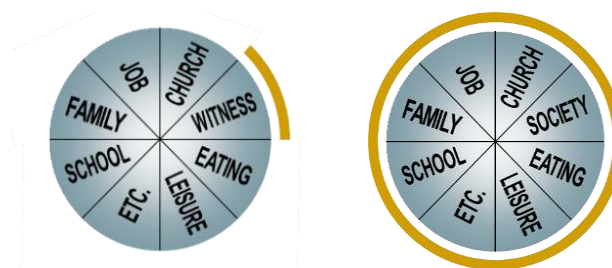


Figure 1. Witness: an event or a lifestyle.

Formative actions, such as these, construct an underlying biblical worldview, which, in turn, becomes evident in three key dimensions—paradigm, themes, and issues. These dimensions enable us to make the biblical worldview real for our students.

Paradigm

The biblical worldview brings a distinctive paradigm to each discipline. The contours of this paradigm affect our beliefs and influence our priorities as we interact with a discipline and its applications. Here are some examples:

Arts. A biblical paradigm for the arts sees God as the Author of beauty and creativity (Genesis 1; Psalm 96:6). It maintains that we must assess both the medium and the message, referencing divine values (Exodus 32:15-19; Philippines 4:8), and that consideration must be given to both the purpose and the effect of a work of art, whether self-serving or God-directed (Isaiah 14:12-14; Matthew 7:20; 1 Corinthians 10:32). It examines the relationship between Christianity and cultural expression, exploring matters of the spiritual and the secular, of the sacred and the common (Leviticus 10:1-2; 1 Corinthians 10:31).

Language. A biblical paradigm for language and literature views God as the Master Communicator, expressing ideas through oral, written, and visual modalities (Genesis 1:3; Exodus 34:28; Psalm 19:1). It maintains that humanity was created in the image of God, with the gift of expressive communication (Genesis 1:26-27; 2:19, 23). Language, however, reveals values and worldview. While sin distorts language and communication (Genesis 11:4-9), God seeks to restore language and bridge the communication gap (Acts 2:7-12; Revelation 7:9, 10). Ultimately, language in its noblest form, involves communication with and about God (Matthew 6:9-13; 28:19-20).

Mathematics. In a biblical paradigm, the elegance, beauty, and coherence of mathematics is a witness to God, the Master Mathematician (Matthew 10:30; 18:21, 22; Psalm 147:4; Revelation 21:10-17). Numerical and geometric patterns in nature are evidence of God’s design in the deep structure of the universe (Psalm 104:24). The paradigm also includes the application of mathematics to alleviate real problems in a fallen world (Leviticus 19:36; Proverbs 11:1; Amos 8:5), and the identification of spiritual concepts illustrated through mathematical relationships and processes (Taylor, Lapat & Oberholster, 2001).

Science. A biblical paradigm for the sciences holds that God is the Designer, Creator, and Sustainer (Jeremiah 1:5; Matthew 6:26; John 1:1-4; Hebrews 1:3). While we find in the physical world evidence of sin distortion (Romans 8:21-22), there is a divine plan for restoration (Isaiah 35; Revelation 21:5). Meanwhile, human beings are to engage in a responsible stewardship of the environment and its ecosystems (Genesis 2:15; Deuteronomy 20:19; Ezekiel 34:2, 18). The paradigm acknowledges the reliance of scientific process and prediction on underlying order, and examines the role of research, reason, and faith in the acquisition of knowledge (1 Thessalonians 5:21; James 1:5, 6; 1 Peter 3:15).

Overall, the paradigm that a Christian worldview brings to an area of knowledge is Christ-centered, Bible-based, service-related, and Kingdom-directed. This biblical paradigm, in turn, informs themes and issues inherent within the discipline.

Application: What biblical paradigm concept could I highlight in a subject that I teach? How could I go about building that concept into the course?

Themes

Themes are broad ideas that reappear multiple times throughout a course or program of studies. These concepts may be identified by examining course goals, unit titles, and lists of key terms. Themes are of value in faith integration as they lend themselves readily to spiritual connections. Christ highlighted the importance of themes when He critiqued the Pharisees for focusing on minutia while ignoring “the more important aspects of the law—justice, mercy, and faith” (Matthew 23:23 NLT).

While every discipline incorporates multiple themes, here are a few examples:

- *Art:* beauty, creativity, emotion, harmony, reality, talent
- *Business:* accountability, control, equity, organization, planning, stewardship, success
- *Geography:* change, culture, environment, globalization, interdependence, poverty, tradition
- *History:* conflict, consequence, heritage, liberty, peace, struggle
- *Language:* hero, imagery, plot, stereotype, structure, surprise
- *Mathematics:* assumption, infinity, logic, order, proof, transformation
- *Physical education:* fairness, fitness, perseverance, recreation, teamwork, winning/losing
- *Psychology:* behavior, development, individuality, intelligence, motive, relationship, self-worth
- *Religion:* community, faith, forgiveness, grace, law, love
- *Science:* cause/effect, design, energy, life, origin, symbiosis, truth
- *Technology:* confidentiality, copyright, information, invention, privacy, security

From the faith perspective, a key purpose of themes is to help the student: (a) understand the relationship of a theme with the character of God and His plan for humankind and the universe, (b) view the theme in the light of the great controversy between good and evil and of the gospel commission, and (c) discover spiritual insights and foster Christian attitudes and convictions.

Application: What would be an important theme in one of the subjects that I teach? How might I connect this theme to the spiritual life of my students?

Issues

Real-life issues, with ethical implications, exist in every discipline and subject area. Some of these issues are cross-disciplinary, such as the right to privacy (in business, psychology, technology, and research), vegetarianism (in science/health, geography, philosophy, and religion), and plagiarism (in the arts, business, literature, and technology). Other issues may be more discipline-specific.

Issues in the arts include the acceptance or rejection of culture, the lifestyle of the artist, nudity, and violence, among others. Business issues include equitable taxation, fair profit, monopolization, sexual harassment, unionization and strikes, and deception in advertising.

Geography issues could include immigration policies, squatter settlements, foreign aid, and national debt, exploitation of natural resources, and waste disposal. Issues in history include justification for war, spying, sabotage, and the utilization of chemical, biological, or nuclear weapons.

Language and literature present a variety of issues, such as freedom of speech, pornography and eroticism, defamation, stereotypes, and sensationalism. In physical education, contentious issues include competition, deception, hormone enhancement, sponsorship, and contract fulfillment. In psychology, there are issues of hypnosis, IQ testing, sexual expression, codependency, confidentiality, and informed consent. Global warming, cloning, animal rights, euthanasia, nuclear energy, and waste recycling are some of the controversial issues in science. Issues in technology include piracy, hacking, virus creation, netiquette, respect for privacy, and intellectual property.

When considering a controversial issue, we ask: (a) What are the purposes God intended for this area of human activity? (b) What biblical response is called for? Throughout, we seek to identify guiding principles and moral values with the intent to “teach my people the difference between the holy and the common and show them how to distinguish between the unclean and the clean” (Ezekiel 44:23 NIV). Figure 2, adapted from a presentation by Harold Heie (2008), presents some examples of discipline-specific integrative questions that can help students to examine issues from a biblical perspective.

Application: What could be a critical issue in one of the subjects that I teach? How might I address this issue in such a way as to contribute toward the moral development of my students?

Examples of Integrative Questions by Discipline

- Biology: To what extent, if any, should genetic engineering be used to enhance human well-being?
- English: What are the similarities and differences in interpreting a biblical text and interpreting other literature texts?
- Sociology/Social Work: To what extent are social problems caused by inadequacies in societal structures or by individual or group irresponsibility?
- Business: What social responsibility, if any, does a business enterprise have toward its employees and the geographical region in which the business is located?
- Political Science: What is the role of forgiveness in international relations?
- Criminal Justice: To what extent should the penal system be retributive or restorative, or both?
- Fine Arts: What are the limits, if any, on the freedom for human creative expression?
- History: How do alternative views on the "direction of history" (e.g., linear, cyclical, teleological) fit or not fit with the Christian narrative?
- Computer Science: What are the ethical implications of the use of the internet?
- Economics: What is the relationship between the quest for profitability and the Christian call for compassion and justice?
- Education: What is the relationship between subject-centered and student-centered teaching pedagogies considering a Christian perspective on personhood?
- Physics: What are the similarities and differences between the use of models in scientific inquiry and the use of models in theological inquiry?
- Sports Medicine: What are the limits, if any, on allowable means for enhancing athletic performance?
- Communications: What is the potential for finding common ground through dialogue when the conversationalists are embedded in different traditions?

Figure 2. Integration of faith and learning in the classroom: Posing integrative question

End link 2: Connect to the student

Many times, we operate “faith integration” as if it were a closed system, a self-contained process in which the means become the end. The purpose of Christian education, however, is not merely self-preservation. It is not a self-perpetuating cycle, where you collect a paycheck every time you pass GO. Learning must connect to life. Faith must link to experience. It is not enough for the student to know about God. The student must know God personally. It is insufficient for the student to describe the faith construct. Faith must be experienced in the life. This is the second attaching link, where faith connects to student experience. Here is where faith becomes tangible, where spirituality becomes real. This occurs through reflection, through cooperation and service, and through worship and witness.

Reflection

Many times, we seem to have the misguided idea that learning is effective only when students are active. A better goal might be student engagement. Engagement occurs when we pose matters for introspection and contemplation, and then allocate time and avenues for reflection. In a science course, for example, we might ask students to examine the relationship between faith and science: How does faith inform science? In what ways, does science inform faith? What is the Christian to do if it seems that faith and science contradict each other? Or we might encourage students to explore evidences of the processes of creation and restoration in the natural world. To document the contemplative process, we might ask students to keep a reflective journal.

In a mathematics class, in studying coefficients, we might pose the question: To what would you compare the positive and negative coefficients in your life? Write in your journal an example or two of how positive influences have improved your life or how negative influences could reduce the quality of your life. Or, on the topic of the number line, we might ask our students to consider that there is an infinite number of points between zero and one, yet each of them can be represented by a real number. Then, imagine all the people that exist and have existed, yet each is unique and special. Reflect: Who am I to others? To myself? To God? Or in discussing mathematical symbols, it might simply be the question: What do I stand for?

More broadly, we can create quiet places of beauty where students can meditate and pray. We can organize a weekend retreat for students, where there are opportunities to quietly think and ponder. Or, we can simply provide opportunities for students to explore the great questions: Who am I? Where did I come from? Why am I here? Where am I going? How do I know what is right? What is wrong around and/or within me? What is the solution? (adapted from Walsh & Middleton, 1984).

Application: What is something that I can do to help my students reflect on their spiritual life?

Cooperation and Service

Faith is nurtured in students' lives when they engage in cooperative endeavors and in selfless service. Each of these concepts is biblical. Regarding cooperation, Paul writes, "Those of us who are strong and able in the faith need to step in and lend a hand to those who falter" (Romans 15:1, *The Message*), and further, "Carry each other's burdens, and in this way, you will fulfill the law of Christ" (Galatians 6:2, NIV). There are ways in which we can build a cooperative learning community. These include involving students in collaborative projects, small group discussions, fieldwork dyads, group research, and as student mentors.

In terms of service, Paul writes, "Through love serve one another" (Galatians 5:13), while Peter adds, "Each one should use whatever gift he has received to serve others" (1 Peter 4:10 NIV). Jesus stated the matter succinctly: "It is more blessed to give than to receive" (Acts 20:35). As educators, we can involve our students in service through community assistance projects, outreach activities to the disadvantaged, drug prevention programs, service-oriented field experiences, and mission trips, among others.

Application: What is something that I could do to build community in my classroom, or to make a service activity meaningful?

Worship and Witness

From the Christian perspective, the ultimate purpose of life is found in worship and witness. When we involve students in these actions, spiritual life develops, and faith is strengthened. There are various aspects of worship that provide meaningful faith experiences for students.

- **Prayer:** Scripture enjoins, "Oh come, let us worship and bow down; let us kneel before the Lord, our Maker" (Psalm 95:6). Paul inquires, "So what shall I do? I will pray with my spirit, but I will also pray with my mind" (1 Corinthians 14:15 NIV84). Invite your

students to share prayer requests, pray together for these, and celebrate answered prayer. Also, pray with and for your students.

- **Praise and thanksgiving:** We are invited, “Enter His gates with thanksgiving and His courts with praise; give thanks to Him and praise His name” (Psalm 100:4 NIV), and “Let us offer through Jesus a continual sacrifice of praise to God, proclaiming our allegiance to His name” (Hebrews 13:15 NLT). Share with students specific reasons for which you praise God. Ask your students to share experiences from their lives for which they are thankful.
- **Music:** A faith-focused life finds expression through music. “Sing to the Lord with thanksgiving. Sing praises on the harp to our God” (Psalm 147:7). “Sing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs among yourselves; make music to the Lord from your heart” (Ephesians 5:19 NLT). Spiritual songs, especially if connected to the topic and/or life experiences, are powerful means of impressing God’s truth on the minds of students. Maximize music, with creativity and joy.
- **Offering:** Sometimes we think that an offering is solely monetary, something of which students are often in short supply. An offering, however, is any gift that we present to God. Discuss diverse ways in which we can give gifts to God. Provide avenues through which your students can present these offerings. “Ascribe to the LORD the glory due his name; bring an offering and come before him” (1 Chronicles 16:29). “LORD, accept my offering of praise” (Psalm 119:108).

Regarding witness, Christ told his followers, “You shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be witnesses” (Acts 1:8). It would seem strange, if we were preparing surgeons, to have them take the many necessary courses, such as anatomy and physiology, endocrinology, immunology, and pharmacology, but never provide them with training or experience in surgery. It would likewise seem strange to expect our graduates to suddenly become effective witnesses for God, if they have never had training or experience in witnessing. What can we do? Intentionally incorporate course activities that will help prepare students to communicate God’s truth. This witness can be done through a variety of modalities: creating and presenting mime, speeches, articles, radio or TV spots, posters, songs, and works of art. The message can also present variety: health, conservation, interpersonal relationships, or specific moral values, among others. The goal is for students to develop a worldview in which they see themselves as active witnesses for God (John 17:15-18).

Application: What activity could I have my students’ do that would involve them in worship or would provide them with an opportunity to witness for God?

Conclusion

For a chain to function effectively, it must be connected. For faith integration to work powerfully, it must link both to the biblical foundation and to student experience. This occurs on the Biblical Foundation side when we incorporate a God-centered paradigm, and when we examine themes and issues from a biblical worldview. It occurs for the Student connector when we provide guided experiences that involve reflection, cooperation and service, and worship and witness (see Figure 3).

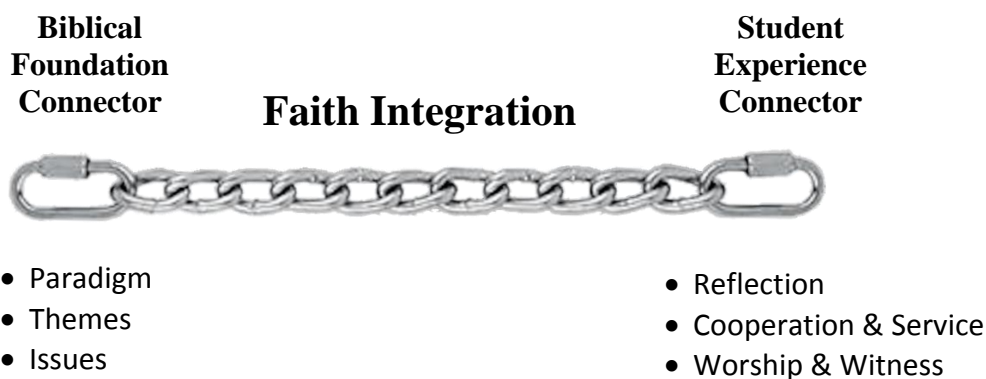


Figure 3. The connecting links of authentic faith integration.

Only then will spiritual development and the formation of Christian character take place authentically in the lives of our students. Only then will we have provided the best opportunity for our graduates to view their vocation as a divine calling, to have solidified a life commitment to witness and service, and to have forged a personal relationship with God. Only then will we, as Christian educators, fulfill the ultimate purpose of faith integration: “In all your ways acknowledge Him.” (Proverbs 3:6)

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