

TEACHING A RESEARCH COURSE FROM A CHRISTIAN PERSPECTIVE--
INTEGRATING FAITH WITH LEARNING

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INTRODUCTION

At a first glance, reconciling Christian faith with research appears to be an impossible task. Christianity is founded simply on faith in God and His inspired Word. In contrast, and according to Holm and Llewellyn (1986), "Research is characterized by empiricism; that is, its methods can be verified objectively by another investigator" (p. 5).

Tertullian asked, "What has Jerusalem to do with Athens?", and the question here is "What does faith have to do with research?" If a relationship does exist then a second question may be, should findings through research supersede beliefs through faith or vice versa when conflict between both exists?

One of Richard Niebuhr (1951) "Ideal Types" of relationships between Christ and culture is "Christ above Culture." An analogy can be made in the matter of faith and research where faith would be placed above research when teaching the subject from a Christian perspective. In other words, findings from research should be subordinate to beliefs based on faith for a viable integration of faith with learning. If faith is not placed above research, one will identify with the Gnostics who, wishing to raise Christianity

from the level of belief to that of "intelligent scientific knowledge" in order to increase Christianity's attractiveness, failed miserably. At the other end of the spectrum is Tolstoy who vehemently opposed science and experimentation and declared unequivocally that, "Science rests on falsehood." The gulf between faith and research may be great and should be recognized, but eliminating the one altogether to favor the other is not an acceptable alternative in a Christian college or university. Ellen G. White (1907) sums it up this way, "To many, scientific research has become a curse. God has permitted a flood of light to be poured upon the world in discoveries in science and art; but even the greatest minds if not guided by the Word of God in their research, become bewildered in their attempts to investigate the relations of science and revelation" (p. 522).

Keeping this thought in mind, steps in the research process will be considered from a Christian perspective. Similarities and differences will be discussed. Brink and Wood (1988) and Treece and Treece (1986) suggest various steps in scientific research. Those considered here will be

- 1) Statement of the question or problem leading to the purpose of the study.
- 2) Formulation of the hypothesis for testing.
- 3) Gathering of facts.
- 4) Collection and interpretation of data.
- 5) Drawing conclusion.

QUESTION/PROBLEM and PURPOSE

"God looks into the tiny seed that He Himself has formed, and sees wrapped within it the beautiful flower, the shrub or the lofty wide spreading tree" (White 1905, p. 397). Likewise, a researcher looks creatively at a question/problem and proceeds with hope and eager anticipation for the culmination of his study, answering the question or resolving the problem.

When venturing in this type of enterprise one would do well to remember that "there are many things beyond the comprehension of finite beings" (White 1905, p. 431). Consequently, choice of questions or problems to be investigated must be done with great care and wisdom. Complex situations are all around us and exist in every area of life including the spiritual dimension. There are levels of complexity extending from the simple "what" to the more complex "why." From observation of people and things and from reading current events one may wisely select the appropriate level of the research question for the study.

Scientific research has its limitations since those undertaking it have "finite" minds and thus are limited in their understanding of the universe. Holmes (1983) states that science "is an empirical and theoretical inquiry into natural processes and relationships. As such, its domain

does not include the meaning and purpose of human existence nor the exposition of a unifying perspective on life" (p. 41). We must be wary of investigating areas beyond our limited human comprehension e.g. predicting the future through astrology when God's revelation affirms that only God is cognizant of future happenings. Ratzsch (1986) states that "Christianity puts science in proper perspective as being valuable, but not the ultimate value; as being competent, but not all competent; as being a proper part of human life, but not the whole; as being something humans do, but not our highest calling; as providing solutions to some problems, but not [solutions] to the most fundamental human problem, alienation from our Creator" (p. 127). E.G. White (1905) adds to this thought that "The highest intellect may tax itself until it is wearied out in conjectures regarding the nature of God, but the effort will be fruitless" (p. 289).

Each researcher brings to the total research venture one's own value system, although some researchers may insist on their total objectivity. We are told repeatedly that there is "no completely value-free science." One's subjective feelings are incorporated in the questions formulated or observations made for the purpose of drawing conclusion unconsciously biased towards one's own value system. This in no way means that a researcher is bent on falsehood but rather that "the personal and cultural

influences on our thinking logically do not prevent what we think being true. We must distinguish between the truth of a belief and how we come to think that way, or even justify believing it to be true" (Holmes 1983, p. 47).

Once the question/problem of the study is delineated, it serves as a frame of reference for that study. The natural outcome in this line of thinking becomes the purpose for which the research study is undertaken in the first place. Question and purpose are interwoven together. The purpose becomes then the central focus from which are derived all the steps in the research process.

For example, the question of a study could be: "Is research taught from a Christian perspective in a selected Christian college?" The purpose of such a study would be to explore the level at which faith is integrated with learning research concepts at said college. A second example of a question more specific to nursing could be: "What is the relationship between the quality of nursing care and type of nursing personnel." The purpose of such a study may be to compare nurses who exhibit loving characteristics with nurses whose main focus is monetary gain or other extrinsic rewards in terms of the care provided. Ideally the purpose of research is to discover an unknown for some good end. To reinforce this thought and, speaking of Biblical Truth,

Holmes (1985) says that, "Nothing in all creation lies outside its perview, for nothing in all creation is unrelated to the purposes of God" (p. 13).

HYPOTHESIS FORMULATION

The purpose of a study is reflected in the stated hypothesis which is also considered to be an outcome of the study. In the second example given above, we may hypothesize that nurses exhibiting loving characteristics will provide more effective care than nurses with a focus on financial remuneration. Because generally research is an explorative process between variables, the researcher probes to discover positive or negative relationships between them. A hypothesis, which is also referred to as an "educated guess," serves to guide the study towards an end result which will accept or reject that relationship.

As a Christian researcher one cannot select a hypothesis in a vacuum. It should be based on a Christian perspective as well as a theoretical framework. In Desire of Ages we read, "God designs that men shall not decide from impulse but from weight of evidence, carefully comparing Scripture with Scripture" (White 1898, p. 458). Likewise, Castles (1987) states that "a study should be based on the thinking and research that have preceded it" (p. 45). Polloch (1984) adds that "much can be learnt from the labor, method and findings of previous researchers" and, a literature search "will give

your research a sound basis" (p. 40). Thus a hypothesis inferred from the review of literature, Biblical and/or other sources, allows for a sound basis and a secure starting point in the comparison of one variable with another.

In nursing intervention research, the independent variable (intervention) is expected to influence or have some bearing on the dependent variable (outcome). It is important that nursing procedures be tested creatively and intelligently in order to determine the measure of their effectiveness on the subjects in the study. Holmes (1975) counsels that "the educated person shows independence and creativity of mind to fashion new skills and techniques, new patterns of thought. She has acquired research ability, the power to gather, sift and manipulate new facts and materials, and to handle altogether novel situations. The educated Christian exercises critical judgment and manifests the ability to interpret and to evaluate information particularly in the light of the Christian revelations" (p. 5).

One must be selective in the choice of research study topic to avoid unacceptable and inappropriate hypotheses. For example, the use of hypnosis has no place in Christian-oriented research because in hypnosis one subjects his will to another which is not the original purpose of God's creation of man. The all-wise Creator intended for man to use his faculties to the fullest. These faculties

complemented with His power will enable man to find answers and resolve problems appropriately. Eliminating man's and God's potentials by testing the use of hypnosis will result in a study outside the Christian thinking domain.

Instead of the use of hypnosis, for instance in relation to surgery and the reduction of pain, a researcher could hypothesize that preoperative support (including spiritual) is more effective in reducing surgically related anxiety than postoperative encouragement (i.e. comforting words). It is necessary, of course, to operationalize the concepts under study in order to gather data that is observable and measurable.

GATHERING FACTS

Once the concepts have been operationalized important decisions are made based on related fact gathering. This exercise must be done in all honesty and integrity. Here one might assume that the gathering of facts for scientific research is in complete opposition to faith because faith does not depend on empirical data. Wrong! The plagues of Egypt at the time of the Exodus were observable, "light was turned to darkness; the river ran like blood; frogs and locusts became devastating pests; the cattle died" (Holmes 1983, p. 59). Later in Jesus' time, the fig tree dried up instantly when He cursed it; the lame walked, the blind saw and the dead rose at His command. In more modern times, in

one's own personal life, faith has caused observable changes that could be attributed to nothing less than a miracle.

"In special acts of providence [God] achieves what otherwise would not occur, and miracles transcend the limitations of creative process" (Holmes 1983, p. 64).

It is true that some happenings that take place through faith are inexplicable. Similarly, in the scientific world certain events which cannot be logically explained or tested, have been accepted as truth. e.g. Darwinian evolutionists, who claim to be scientists and who have proposed the theory of evolution, cannot test and/or demonstrate the process of evolution through scientific research. Thus, speculations are made in both realms: Faith and Science. Faith is based on Biblical utterances and personal experiences while science may sometimes be based on questionable so-called facts found in the universe under study. Unfortunately, the naturalistic world view greatly influences scientific investigators. "In the schools of today the conclusions that learned men have reached as the result of their scientific investigations are carefully taught and fully explained; while the impression is distinctly given that if these learned men are correct, the Bible cannot be" (White 1905, p. 439).

For every Biblical truth there is the spurious so-called truth or as Walsh and Middleton (1984) put it, "scientism is thus the first absolute in our modern religion. It is the first false god in which secular man has historically put his trust" (p. 132).

For this reason, Christians must constantly be on the alert and keep truth in its proper perspective. They must prayerfully and wisely differentiate between the secularly inspired "facts" and the Christianly inspired truth.

COLLECTION and INTERPRETATION OF DATA

Burns and Grove (1987) define data collection as "the process of acquiring subjects and collecting the data needed for the study. ... Data may be collected on subjects by observing, measuring, testing, questioning, recording and/or gathering" (p. 445). No matter what strategy is used in the collection of data, Burns (1987) points out that "the pragmatics of data collection require personal discipline, alertness, quick thinking, interpersonal skills and flexibility" (pp. 445-446). In relating these characteristics to nursing research specifically, Burns and Grove (1984) state further that "the professional nurse conducting clinical research often experiences a conflict between the role of researcher and that of clinician during the data collection period. ... In some situations, the needs of patients must take precedence over the needs of the study. The dilemma is to determine when the needs of patients are great enough to warrant researcher intervention" (p. 451). This is where honesty and integrity are essential added characteristics for quality Christian nursing practice.

In looking through indexes of half a dozen nursing research books in search of words such as "honesty" or "integrity", I discovered that only one book referred to "honesty" and defined it thus, "Honesty means free from fraud. It can mean admitting failure. Honesty is making clear the separation between opinions and facts" (Treece and Treece 1986, p. 468). Ratzsch states that, "If scientists lacked honesty toward their fellow scientists, integrity concerning their work, humility before the results of their investigation, generosity with the information they gain, self-control in the face of frustration, perseverance through experimental failure, patience in times of slow progress and so on, there would be little effective science. But Scripture points to those virtues, offers help in moving toward them, and gives them a foundation in God's law and commandments" (p. 126).

Through surreptitious measures one may try to investigate the thinking and feelings of subjects about certain issues in health care. The reason given for using such measures is that "straight forward questions will bias answers." This gives leverage to the researcher when interpreting data and allows for researchers' subjectivity and bias. An alternative to this measure is establishing a trust relationship between the researcher and the subjects in order to eliminate the need for devious procedures resulting in unreliable data.

Data findings through the scientific method may not coincide with Christian principles and the interpretation of such data may result in false theories accepted today as truths. Walsh and Middleton (1984) state that "Foundational to the modern world view is the deeply religious belief that human reason, especially in the form of scientific method, can provide knowledge of the world of nature and of mankind. Science becomes the source of revelation" (p. 132).

How one interprets data is generally determined by one's educational experience and values. A Christian's educational experience will allow for honest interpretation even if such an interpretation will mean "failure." Several psychological theories advocating permissiveness, individualism and autonomy have been inspired by the penchant of the researcher. e.g. Benjamin Spock (1945) "laissez-faire" type theories allowed for a whole generation of permissive and unruly children.

From a Christian perspective then, the crux of the matter in gathering and interpreting data is avoiding "deception" and the possibility of "lying with statistics." These are mandates for drawing appropriate and truthful conclusions from the study.

DRAWING CONCLUSION

Conclusive results from scientific research have led to the discovery of unprecedented innovations. These have had

an impact on the health care delivery system and on every aspect of our lives. Rifkin (1980) puts it this way: "We regulate our lives by a machine - the watch. We communicate by a machine - the telephone. We learn by machines - the calculator, the computer, the television set. We travel by machine - the automobile, the jet. We even see by a machine - the electric light. The machine is our way of life . . ." (p. 17).

Scientific research and the resulting technology and other creative findings are a sign of progress until they become gods in themselves. In a booklet entitled Technology: Abandon, Endure or Advance, this startling statement is made "Science and technology must answer our problems. If they don't nothing else will" (p. 12).

Sometimes for material or status gain, a researcher may draw erroneous conclusions based on "facts" derived from a scientific investigation. For profit, products have been labeled "scientifically tested." False advertising about toothpaste, baby formula, baldness, or make-up are sometimes thus motivated at the expense of consumers. This is not Christianity but rather selfishness and greed in action. Polit and Hungler (1987) state that in interpretive situations, "It is sometimes tempting to go far beyond the data in developing explanations for what the results mean, but conscientious scientists avoid doing so" (p. 484).

Christian students must draw from their well designed studies, honest conclusions and implications from a Christian perspective. The truth they discover may be different from, and unpalatable to some; albeit their reporting must be accurate and their recommendations appropriate and relevant to their findings. Truth must prevail. According to Blamires (1978), "You cannot construct truth at all: you can only discover it. ... You do not make truth, you reside in the truth" (pp. 112-113).

As Christian researchers we dare not allow the prevailing secular thinking to erode truth. There are external forces that will appear to compel one to do so. But when we "reside in the truth," we will be shielded and protected from plunging into the abyss of falsehood, just to rise to a triumphant and true Christian experience. "Truth will win out, it cannot be suppressed; for in the final analysis all truth is God's" (Holmes 1975, p. 65).

CONCLUSION

As a result of this endeavor, the line of demarcation that once existed between faith and the learning of research has slowly faded away. A division between scientific research and faith is no longer possible when adopting a world view based on Christian principles. Faith becomes the all encompassing uniting thread which will bring harmony

throughout the steps of the research process.

It is my goal in teaching research to start off by identifying the perspective from which research is done. This will be based on the premise that God "the Truth" is Reality. The Truth is the ideal that each student must pursue in order to be more effective in nursing intervention oriented research. The end result of such studies will be Christ likeness in one's healing ministry. The means to this end should be considered just as carefully as the desired end. Thus a new dimension, the spiritual, must be added to each construct under study and consequently to all data collected in order to discover facts from a Christian standpoint.

An open dialogue in the classroom will be fostered to allow for intellectual exchange. This will probably result in an awesome challenge with students' creativity pointing possibly in different directions. But this is a chance one must take in learning research from a Christian perspective. The development of a new course syllabus and objectives will reflect the creative changes made as a result of this new partnership between teaching/learning nursing research and faith.

This whole exercise will be indeed an exciting and invigorating discovery worth pursuing in the task of integrating faith with learning.

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