

The Distinctives of the Christian Scholar

JAKE AGUAS
Biola University

ABSTRACT: Christian scholars conduct quantitative research using many of the same standards and methodologies as those who operate from a secular or non-faith-based perspective. There is considerable overlap—so much so that it can often be difficult to differentiate between each when evaluating their praxis from the surface. However, one only needs to dive deeper into the research process to find the source of the Christian scholar’s purpose and methodology, as they apply their values based on a biblical worldview. This essay explores the theologically based distinctives of a Christian scholar conducting quantitative research. In simpler terms, the essay investigates the “why,” also known as the purpose, behind the research conducted and the “how,” the integrity (ethical standards and practices) embedded in the methodology of the research of the Christian scholar. These characteristics elevate the Christian researcher’s quantitative praxis to a higher, God-honoring standard.

KEYWORDS: Christian scholar, quantitative research, purpose, integrity, God-honoring commitment

INTRODUCTION

You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the first and great commandment. And the second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself (Matthew 22:37-39, New King James Version).

Through these words, Jesus provides clear guidance as to how Christians are to live their lives. The heart, mind, and soul represent the whole person, and the second command here is not an imperative to love one’s self (since humans tend to naturally be self-centered). Instead, it is a command to be the best for ourselves in order to attend to and share in the concern for the welfare of others. For the Christian scholar, these decalogues provide clarity and direction for their methods in conducting research. The Christian quantitative researcher seeks to practice and demonstrate a methodology that is driven by a purpose that exemplifies the highest degree of ethical integrity combined with a God-honoring philosophy. How might these unique characteristics separate the Christian scholar from those who practice with a different priority system and perspective? How might these differences influence the research praxis and the accompanying results for the Christian researcher?

According to Creswell and Creswell (2018), there are three framework approaches to research that address methods of data collection, analysis, and interpretation:

qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods. Qualitative research focuses on “exploring and understanding the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem” (Creswell & Creswell, 2018, p. 4). Quantitative approaches, on the other hand, test objective theories by investigating the relationship among variables. This form of research relies on measuring variables using a numerical system, analyzing measurements using a variety of statistical models, and reporting relationships and associations among the studied variables (Williamson & Johanson, 2018). Babbie (2010) and Muijs (2010) posit that the data collected through polls, questionnaires, and surveys assist in the process of generalizing findings across groups of people to explain a particular phenomenon. In its simplest form, the quantitative research approach focuses on behaviors that can be counted (quantified) from larger samples than qualitative studies (Cozby & Bates, 2018).

The Christian scholar conducts quantitative research in an environment influenced and shaped by a God-honoring, biblical worldview. This research differs from those who do not practice Christian scholarship by the purpose for which the research is conducted and the integrity (ethical standards and practices) utilized in the methodology of the research process. As Fambro (2016) claims, “Without distinct elements, the Christian researcher is just another scholar like every other researcher” (p. 109).

THE TWO DISTINCTIVES

Purpose

To the Christian scholar, conducting research is an extension of their calling and vocation in life. Originating from the Latin term *proponere* (meaning “to propose”) and the Middle-English term *purpos*, “purpose” is defined as the reason for which something exists or is done, made, or used (Dictionary.com, 2019). The construct of purpose highlights the central motivating aims of one’s life, the reason one gets up in the morning. According to Leonard and Kreitzer (2019), purpose equals the sum of one’s gifts, passions, and values, and is driven by the following three questions:

- Who am I?
- Where do I belong?
- When do I feel fulfilled?

To the Christian scholar, these questions become even more specific and significant. In fact, they can be explored in more detail and with more precision:

- Who am I in Christ? (identification)
- Why has Christ put me here? (existence)
- How might my life matter for Christ? (significance)
- What am I here on earth to do? (purpose)
- How can I use my gifts to honor him and further his Kingdom? (vocation)

These questions create a foundation base, unique to the life of a Christian scholar—a perspective with eternal repercussions. The good news is that Jesus Christ demonstrated a clear model of purpose and conviction for those who follow him. A study of the Synoptic Gospels and the Johannine account provides valuable insight into the significance and purpose of Christ’s life. From his interaction with Jerusalem’s top teachers at the temple after the Festival of the Passover to his ultimate sacrifice on the cross, Jesus exemplified a purpose-driven life, laser-focused on completing his Father’s work.

The narrative of a 12-year-old Jesus in the Book of Luke provides an early glimpse of the attributes and purpose of Jesus’s life and serves as a roadmap for the Christian scholar. Jesus is described as a young man with an “impressive level of knowledge, wisdom, and understanding” (Aguas, 2017, p. 4). While his parents and relatives sought to find him after he had been separated from them, Jesus is seen interacting with teachers and students alike, demonstrating an advanced level of mental and spiritual prowess. To the sophisticated scholar, this example demonstrates preparedness, excellence, and courage, even when interacting with and being challenged by experts in the field—a distinctive that may separate the Christian researcher from the pack.

Table 1: Scripture that Characterizes Purpose

Verse	Text
Proverbs 11:28 (The Message)	A life devoted to things is a dead life, a stump; a God-shaped life is a flourishing tree.
Jeremiah 17:7-8 (New Living Translation)	But blessed are those who trust in the Lord and have made the Lord their hope and confidence. They are like trees planted along a riverbank, with roots that reach deep into the water. Such trees are not bothered by the heat or worried by long months of drought. Their leaves stay green, and they never stop producing fruit.
Colossians 1:16 (The Message)	For everything, absolutely everything above and below, visible and invisible... everything got started in him and finds its purpose in him.
Proverbs 3:5-6 (New International Version)	Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways submit to him and he will make your paths straight.
John 16:20-23 (New International Version)	Very truly I tell you, you will weep and mourn while the world rejoices. You will grieve, but your grief will turn to joy... So with you: Now is your time of grief, but I will see you again and you will rejoice, and no one will take away your joy. In that day you will no longer ask me anything. Very truly I tell you, my Father will give you whatever you ask in my name.

Another attribute of a God-honoring Christian practitioner (modeled by Jesus) is the establishment and tenacity to stay focused on a task despite challenges and distractions. The Lukan account says:

So when they saw Him, they were amazed; and His mother said to Him, “Son, why have you done this to us? Look, your father and I have sought you anxiously.” And He said to them, “Why did you seek Me? Did you not know that I must be about My Father’s business?” But they did not understand the statement which He spoke to them (Luke 2:48-50, New King James Version).

At an early age, Jesus knew what his purpose here on this earth was: to serve his Father in heaven and do his will. He was so focused and centered on his Father’s plan that even his earthly parents could not comprehend what he was talking about. The secular space may not always understand why tasks are done in a particular fashion or why a specific methodology with high ethical standards is used. Often, the secular spaces place a higher priority on profit or some other tangible result that does not align with the same biblical priorities that Jesus Christ exemplified for the Christian scholar. According to Concioni (2019), one only needs to study the country’s recent ethical challenges such as the Wells Fargo account fraud scandal, Boeings handling of its 737 Max 8 airliner, Elon Musk’s dalliance with securities fraud, and the Harvey Weinstein sexual abuse allegations to capture a vivid portrait of this misalignment.

Jesus lived by this purpose-driven focus his entire life. From the moment he declared his purpose at the temple to his last breath on the cross, Jesus demonstrated what a life living for Christ involved—sacrifice, suffering, and pain.

After this, Jesus knowing that all things were now accomplished, that Scripture might be fulfilled, said, “I thirst!” Now a vessel full of sour wine was sitting there; and they filled a sponge with sour wine, put it on hyssop, and put it to His mouth. So when Jesus had received the sour wine, He said, “It is finished!” And bowing His head, He gave up His spirit (John 19:28-30, New King James Version).

Jesus also described the benefits, joys, and eternal rewards of living a God-honoring life with purpose, a distinctive more common to the Christian scholar.

Perhaps Warren (2012) said it best: “We were born *by* His purpose *for* His purpose” (p. 17). These points clarify the “why” behind and reasons for conducting research as a Christian scholar—reasons that separate the Christian research community from secular scholars.

Integrity

Integrity is defined as the quality of honesty, trustworthiness, and adherence to a strong set of principles while also taking responsibility for one’s own actions (Northouse, 2019). Integrity inspires confidence, dependability, and credibility for those who practice it. According to Yukl (2013), integrity means that a person’s “behavior is consis-

Table 2: Scripture that Characterizes Integrity

Verse	Text
1 Chronicles 29:17 (New International Version)	I know, my God, that you test the heart and are pleased with integrity. All these things I have given willingly and with honest intent. And now I have seen with joy how willingly your people who are here have given to you.
Proverbs 11:3 (New International Version)	The integrity of the upright guides them, but the unfaithful are destroyed by their duplicity.
Psalms 112:5 (New International Version)	Good will come to those who are generous and lend freely, who conduct their affairs with justice.
Proverbs 12:17 (New International Version)	An honest witness tells the truth, but a false witness tells lies.
1 John 3:18 (New International Version)	Dear children, let us not love with words or speech but with actions and in truth.
Proverbs 28:18 (New International Version)	The one whose walk is blameless is kept safe, but the one whose ways are perverse will fall into the pit.

tent with espoused values...is honest, ethical and trustworthy” (p. 143). Unless one exhibits trust, it is often difficult to gain authentic and genuine followership in today’s society. The integrity of one’s character represents traits associated with eminent leadership maturity (Bass, 2008). The values system and ethics of the Christian researcher may differ considerably from others who do not believe in a God-honoring methodology. Griffin (2017) found that one’s ethics are developed over one’s life and are influenced by peers, family, significant events, and one’s moral compass. Although there are many different dimensions that shape a value system (education, socioeconomic status, culture, geography, etc.), there is one element that remains uniquely constant to the Christian scholar—a theologically and biblically based instruction manual, complete with guidelines in regards to integrity and ethical behavior.

For the Christian researcher, honesty is a significant part of integrity as is sound ethical praxis; there are verses in Scripture that specifically address the construct. For example, Matthew 5:8, “Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God,” and Proverbs 10:9, “Whoever walks in integrity walks securely, but whoever takes crooked paths will be found out,” both highlight the importance of being honest. There is no shortage of verses regarding honesty for the Christian scholar.

Scripture provides examples of dishonesty as well. In the 13th chapter of the Book of Numbers, the Lord spoke to Moses and instructed him to send men out to spy on the land of Canaan, determine what they could about the people of their cities, and observe the produce and forest. When reporting back to Moses, Aaron, and the children of Israel in the Wilderness of Paran, the spies provided “poor data” in their report. Their dishonest briefing included exaggerations; they described the land as evil and the inhabitants as giants. Only Caleb dared to speak out against the negative reports and, with Joshua’s support, gave a good report of the land in the context of robust faith in God—a model for the Christian scholar. As the people conspired together in despair, Moses, Aaron, Joshua, and Caleb wept for the people’s sins against the Lord and for his mercy. The spies’ contentious description of their account had been an attack on God.

Outside of Caleb and Joshua, the research methodology used by the leaders of the 12 tribes that went to Canaan modeled a poor and dishonest code of ethics in the research process, opposite from what is demanded from the Christian researcher. The Christian scholar instead adheres to Scripture first, then to the ethical and legal principles of leading authorities, such as the American Psychological Association (APA), which addresses:

- Benevolence and nonmaleficence
- Fidelity and responsibility
- Integrity
- Justice
- Respect for people’s rights and dignity

The APA ensures the accuracy of knowledge, protects the rights and welfare of research participants, and protects intellectual property rights (American Psychological Association, 2010). The Christian Association for Psychological Studies (CAPS) also provides overarching guidance and criteria that may be unique to the Christian scholar. The organization’s statement of faith reads:

The basis of this organization is belief in God, the Father, who creates and sustains us; Jesus Christ, the Son, who redeems and rules us; and the Holy Spirit, who guides us personally and professionally, through God’s inspired Word, the Bible, our infallible guide of faith and conduct, and through the communion of Christians (Christian Association for Psychological Studies, 2019).

This distinctive sets a biblical tone and biblical worldview for Christian scholars as they are called to function beyond reproach. This includes being cautious of confirmation bias and internet resources such as Google and Wikipedia, which make it quite easy for scholars to find information and studies “that support whatever it is that we already believe, without bothering so much as to look at research that might challenge our position—or the research that supports our position for that matter” (Oxenham, 2015, p. 1). Philippians 2:3-4 provides a scriptural path that encourages Christian scholars on their journey to conduct research in a God-honoring manner: “Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility, value others above yourselves, not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others” (New International Version). This verse provides insight and direction to the biblical treatment of human subjects and study participants. Biblical guidelines provided by the Christian Association of Psychological Studies also address conflict of interests, paid studies, and the manipulation of data.

CONCLUSION

Although Christian and non-Christian scholars have similarities in their philosophy of conducting research, the Christian scholar follows a God-honoring path that distinctively separates them from scholars who may be influenced by a secular value system. Jesus exemplified and modeled the priorities for the Christian researcher through his words and

actions. As a result, the Christian scholar operates using a biblical worldview with clarity and direction regarding purpose (the why) and intended audience (for whom) research is ultimately conducted. Integrity plays a non-compromising role for Christian scholars as they leverage a God-honoring code of ethical standards and practices in their methodology, distinctively different from non-Christian scholars.

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