

# A STATEMENT OF THEOLOGICAL INTEGRATION EXTENDED

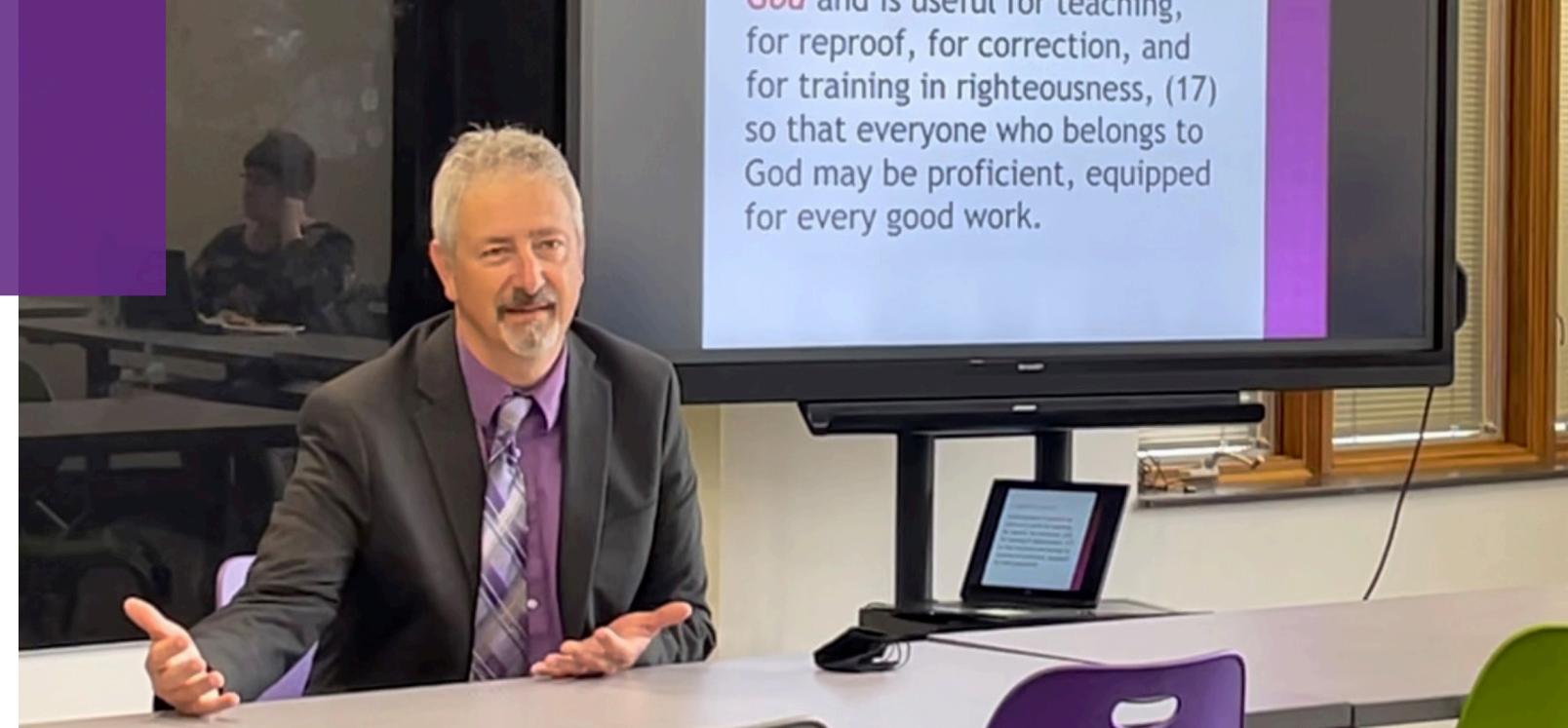
By Dr. Dean Nicholas, Head of School

Cincinnati Hills Christian Academy is intentional about being academically excellent as well as Christ centered in all we do. In order to do this thoroughly, we challenge our students to think about all disciplines and subjects through the lens of a thoughtful Christian worldview. To achieve this, our students must have a general understanding of the Bible, Church history, theology, and Christian spirituality. They must also be forced to consider connections between these fields of knowledge and their other academic disciplines. But this does not happen by accident. The key to this endeavor is training our faculty in a methodology we refer to as Theological Integration. Let me explain the reason for this approach, what it looks like in the classroom, and how we are raising the level of understanding and practice for all our teachers.

CHCA holds to a high view of Scripture. Our first article in the Statement of Faith reads, “We believe the Bible to be the inspired, the only infallible, authoritative Word of God.” Therefore, the Bible shapes the way we think about theology and all of life. For this reason, we study to interpret the Bible so that we can understand key principles inherent in its teachings (“biblical principles”). But this is no simple task! Reading Scripture to mine key principles from a complex book that was written millennia ago in various cultures and in numerous languages takes concentrated effort and careful discernment. And as a multid denominational school made up of over 160 different churches, there are many “biblical principles” that we all agree on, but others are rooted in denominational understandings and sectarian theological readings. When Presbyterians and Roman Catholics think about Holy Communion, they interpret John 6:53 very differently from each other. Similarly, when Baptists and Pentecostals are interpreting Acts 2:1-4 and how Christians should

think about speaking in tongues in the church, they will have very different ways of interpreting the “biblical principles” for how we should think about this passage today. Therefore, we are careful to use the language of “Theological Integration” rather than the older term, “Biblical Integration” for how we attempt to enrich our curriculum with Scripture. This alludes to the fact that in a multid denominational school, certain sectarian or denominational interpretations of the Bible should not be given priority by teachers, in their CHCA curricula, based on their personal interpretations or their church’s views. So as a school, we focus on what all of us as Christians believe, and we condense that belief into five key theological “Big Ideas” based on Cornelius Plantinga’s *Engaging God’s World: A Christian Vision of Faith, Learning, and Living*. These “Big Ideas” are the central components to the overall story of Scripture that traditional orthodox Christians have believed throughout history no matter their church tradition or denomination. Our five theological “Big Ideas” are: 1) all humans have a longing and hope for something greater; 2) God is Creator; 3) all creation is broken because of the Fall when sin entered the world; 4) Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection provide redemption and restoration to what is broken; and 5) we can be a part of God’s restoration through our vocation to bring shalom to a broken world.

So, on a practical level, when we talk about Theological Integration, it is the process by which our teachers engage students to think deeply in a “Christ-centered” way in all areas of study. And we do this by helping them see the intersections of their learning—be it social studies, science, math, literature, art, music, world language, technology—with our theological “Big Ideas.” When our faculty design curriculum, they are trained to find ways to prompt our students to



consider our theological “Big Ideas” in their lessons and broader units. Borrowing from an Understanding by Design curriculum model, we use “essential questions” to lead to deep thinking and learning. Some of the characteristics of “essential questions” are that they are important open-ended questions that we keep coming back to throughout our lives; they relate to core ideas and inquiries within an academic field of study; and they help students to make sense out of complex ideas and knowledge. So, we ask theological essential questions, essential questions that incorporate aspects of our theological “Big Ideas.” In this way, students are stretched to make connections between theological understandings and other areas of learning. As educators, we find ways to do this at age-appropriate levels to help students grow in their theological thinking as they develop their other cognitive skills. This requires students to reflect on their knowledge and synthesize it with theological understandings. In this way, we believe that our students grow intellectually and in faith development in a way that fosters faith formation without simple indoctrination. We regularly emphasize that we want students to leave CHCA as people who “own” their faith, not those who merely know how to recite the “right” answers.

This all might sound a bit abstract, so let me share a few concrete examples. When I train our teachers, I give an example of a good social studies theological essential question: What is history? While simple on the surface, it is deeply complex. In fact, the more we study history, the more complex that question becomes. But a fourth grader studying the history of CHCA and an AP U.S. History student thinking about various methodological constructs used by modern U.S. historians can talk about that same question in meaningful ways. What if we tweaked the question to make it theological? If we believe in a God who engages in human history, from the stories of the Old Testament to the most dramatic example of all—the Incarnation where God becomes flesh and dwells among us, “How does God act in history?” A second grader studying the Exodus might answer that question one way that seems simple and straightforward, but a more complex variation

of the question in an Upper School AP Government class might be, “Does God decide the outcome in democratic elections?” That question challenges a student to take into account their understandings of history and government, determinism and free will, God’s providence, and the effects of a fallen world, and formulate a response that demonstrates their best thinking at that moment. And they might answer it differently a decade later. If you worry that such thinking feels heavy and complex, remember that ‘age-appropriate’ is a key term in this process. A kindergarten teacher might ask an appropriate form of the same question to her students: “How did you see God today?” That simple variation of the question is preparing our youngest students to begin thinking about how a transcendent God is also imminent, always nearby, and connected to our lives.

It takes work and thinking to prepare lessons and units that reflect theological integration. And it also takes work for teachers to learn to think that way themselves. Consistent theological integration does not happen by accident! So, over the past two years, I have been working with the Theological Integration Cohort—a group of 21 educators from all buildings, grade levels, and academic disciplines. We studied Bible, Theology, Church History, Faith Formation, and even experienced the backdrop of our faith as we traveled to the Holy Land. This incredible group is now going to lead their colleagues in a two-year training in theological integration. All of our faculty and student-facing staff are divided into seven cohort groups that will study Bible, Theology, Church History, Faith Formation as well. I will be leading my own cohort of administrators, helping us think through how we are thoroughly integrating not just into curriculum but into all aspects of school life. This two-year program will become part of all new teacher and staff onboarding in the future. We believe that for CHCA to live out its mission as a school that prepares young people to learn, lead, and serve in the world, we need to be even more intentional in how we train and execute theological integration throughout all areas of our school. We are excited for the journey ahead and for all the ways God will use our efforts!

