



# Dangerous detours

**When anecdotes and diversions  
become the primary pedagogical  
method for Christian curriculum**

By Chris Parker and Michael Street



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**W**e've all experienced the richness, community building, and opportunity to share the gospel that can come through a spontaneous personal anecdote from a student or from you as teacher. The curriculum content of the lesson you are unfolding might inspire a personal story from a student, "Miss, that's like when my family were on holidays and a man came up to us and said . . .", or, "Mr Street, studying the crazy exploits of this historical person has made me wonder if . . .". Something from the lesson content may trigger a story from your life, or a thought you have been nurturing. You might think of a content link with a news report you heard on the radio in the car on the way to school that you can't help but take the opportunity to highlight. These can be rich teaching moments; powerful opportunities to share your faith and a biblical perspective on life. They can add beautiful layers of context and authenticity to the material you are unfolding, and in so doing, may bring a richness to the culture of your class that cultivates a relational community.

There is also no doubt that these curriculum detours can provide powerful opportunities to share your faith, invite faithfulness in your students, and bring a perspective framed by the Bible to the content you are exploring. God has made us to be creatures who love and inhabit narratives. This seems to be why personal narratives always hook the attention of listeners; the advertising industry knows and uses this to great effect. Narratives, personal narratives in particular, are an addictive passion for us humans.

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I (Chris) recently had a teacher say to me something like this, "I am an organic, relational kind of teacher. I love telling and nurturing stories as I teach. The biblical perspective in my teaching pretty much comes entirely from the curriculum detours that spontaneously pop up during lessons." Although this is a rich, authentic, and relational way to bring a Christian perspective to our lessons, might there be some compromises worth considering when this is leaned on as the primary time a biblical perspective is unfolded during class?

In this article, we seek to question a reliance on such diversions and detours to deliver the Christian perspective in our teaching.<sup>1</sup> Just as early career teachers might rely on textbooks, worksheets, structures, etc., to scaffold their lessons initially, those that find themselves in Christian education, with little experience of it, might also tend towards separating and presenting their Christian perspective and curriculum content only through the curriculum detours that spontaneously appear. We are certainly not wanting to point any fingers here; we have all done this at some stage! However, authentic Christian education will seek a greater intentionality in presenting a worldview shaped by the Bible on everything that happens

in the classroom. Without a deliberate intent to unfold the perspectives of the unit/lesson content through a biblical lens, it may not simply be that an opportunity is lost, but in fact the primary reliance on detours to bring the Christian worldview may actually be working against the vision of Christian education by fragmenting the gospel and promoting a dualism.

### **Ad hoc and fragmented**

Due to the unplanned nature of *relying* on personal anecdotes, the way that the Bible informs how we understand God's world may become ad hoc. The lack of intentionality might sometimes mean that biblical input is completely absent. Even when it occurs it might be shaped by personal bias, the whims of the teacher, the culture of sharing (or lack of) in the class, etc. The contrast to this sees a teacher intentionally develop and plan a biblical perspective on the curriculum content through prior reflection, collaboration, and prayer.

Emphasising detours for your biblical perspective might also result in a piecemeal fragmenting of Scripture. The Bible has integrity as a whole. A healthy interpretation of any part of Scripture has the wider context of Scripture informing the

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interpretation. A lack of intentionality may also mean that we fall into a simplistic use of memory verses resulting in a fragmentation that is at best underwhelming, and at worst open to a distortion of the original meaning as the biblical context of the passage has been de-emphasised.

This fragmentation and distortion of the biblical story can be particularly seen in the ‘tacky’ morality that is sometimes imposed within Christian classrooms. Despite the totality of Scripture’s application to reality, unplanned attempts at a Christian perspective can result in an overemphasis on the ethics of Christianity: “OK guys, quick discussion, what should a Christian do in this situation?” Ethics are an important aspect of the Christian life, but they are limited if our students don’t know why they need to be ethical in the first place. We don’t want our students to think that the Christian life is defined by their actions . . . and yet, this seems to be the case for a number of our graduates. Again, to be clear, we are not suggesting that these curriculum detours are wrong and that they shouldn’t happen; a biblical perspective and the beauty of the gospel can come, and should come, through everything that is done, taught, said, modelled, etc. It’s the reliance on them for the Christian ‘content’ of lessons that is worthy of reconsideration.

### **Danger of dualism**

A Christian perspective emphasised through curriculum detours only, may produce a dangerous dualism in our students. The dualism we refer to here, exists when we operate with the uncritical assumption that there are some aspects of our thinking/living that are shaped by one narrative and other aspects of our thinking/living shaped by a different narrative. This may often be associated with a deception; we think we have a certain worldview shaped by a stated narrative (the biblical ‘story’ for example) but some aspects of life and belief are evidently shaped by an alternative worldview/s.

In our personal lives, this might evidence itself with us having our view on prayer, morals, and relationships shaped by the Bible (its theology and metanarrative), while our view on success, security, and self-worth is shaped by the dominant secular narrative. This expresses itself in Christian schools occasionally when some aspects of the life and times of the school are formed and nurtured by an intentional biblical framing, while others are uncritically framed by secular views on education and schooling. This form of dualism runs counter to the Bible’s claim that Jesus is Lord of all of life and that the worldview shaped by the Bible is all-of-life encompassing.

One might ask, “Why is this so dangerous to young minds?”. Dualistic practices shape a subconscious acceptance of dualistic frameworks of thinking. Thinking and practice then tend to influence each other in an endless loop of reinforcement. When a dualistic framework is present, and the seductions of a secular narrative (the siren call of the world) begin to entice, the cleft has already been put in place that reinforces the dualism or may even give credence to the notion that the biblical view is increasingly irrelevant and can be discarded. In Western society this cleft first appeared in the Middle Ages when faith and spirituality were confined to the church, leaving village life largely devoid of any spiritual emphasis. This paved the way for the cleft to widen when the Bible’s explanatory power was ‘threatened’ by the discovery of the Americas, the steady acceptance of the heliocentric model of the solar system, and the development of the modern scientific method during the Enlightenment, etc. When our Christian school graduates meet the workforce or university, with their persuasive alternative storylines, if we have nurtured a dualistic framework of thinking, then we may see the cleft widen in their hearts and watch them set their faith free to slowly drift away.

When we limit the biblical perspective (which should be all of life) to the curriculum detours of our lessons, and at the same time offer the content of the lesson with no intentional critique of the worldviews assumptions shaping it, we not only flirt with an ad hoc fragmented Bible, but we teach and reinforce a dualism. Through this hidden curriculum we teach the students that the Bible’s influence on life is compartmentalised and they are free to compartmentalise their faith and Jesus’ Lordship.

We mention here again the dangerous place this dualism puts our students in when they face the temptations and pressures of life in an increasingly secular world.

A cursory reading of the above might wrongly conclude a devaluing of cultural engagement. Quite the contrary. Authentic Christian education will have a rigour in its engagement with culture as it deliberately and intentionally brings the Bible to bear on the strands of the curriculum being explored. This may include the use of personal narratives, items of pop culture, current affairs, etc. However, this is quite different from *relying* on ad hoc personal anecdotes to unfold the Christian perspective.

### **Shall we then avoid detours?**

As we mentioned at the beginning, curriculum detours can provide rich opportunities. Use them; enjoy them; nurture them (while also realising that part of the art of teaching is

knowing when to shut them down!). The concern we have raised in this article is the overemphasis on curriculum detours at the expense of an intentional biblical perspective lens being brought to bear on the curriculum content. Paul commanded Timothy to, “set the believers an example in speech, in conduct, in love, in faith, in purity” and to, “Practice these things, immerse yourself in them, so that all may see your progress” (1 Timothy 4:12; 4:15). Like Timothy’s church, our classrooms are incubators of faith, led by models of faithfulness. If we are to grow and support the growth of our students, we should model the holistic Christian life by embracing the completeness of the biblical story in our classrooms—through the perspective of the content and through personal sharing. This begins with a contemplation of the gospel and the way that it transforms our curriculum content well before we even take a step toward our classroom.

We completely acknowledge that emphasising the Christian perspective through curriculum detours is easier and quicker. We also acknowledge that this pedagogical approach is indeed more accessible for teachers finding their feet in Christian education. However, *as we find our feet, and grow in our faithfulness to the task of authentic Christian education, may we embrace the richness of opportunity for contributing to God’s Kingdom that comes from seeking to see all of life through the lens of the Bible—including the curriculum—and then discipling our students to do the same.*

## Conclusion

Our language, structures, lazy habits, and pedagogical practices all contribute to the worldview formation of our students in some discernible way. The liturgies of life and learning within the school, play a critical role in faith formation of our students. This is no less the case—and perhaps even more so—when we limit biblical perspective to anecdotes and diversions.

## Footnotes

1. We note here that an unequal emphasis might also express itself in the reverse to what is being presented. It might be that a healthy attention is given by the teacher to presenting all curriculum content through a biblical lens but the curriculum detours (and wider class interactions) are devoid of evidence of being shaped by the gospel and a Christian worldview. This may also bring a plethora of problems and compromises. However, this article does not seek to address this situation.

## For discussion

1. Define in your own words what the authors mean by a “detour”. What are they not referring to?
2. Can you think of a memorable ‘detour’ from a lesson that has stuck in your mind through your career?
3. How do you respond to the suggestion that teachers early in their careers might tend to an over emphasis on ‘detours’ for the Christian perspective?
4. Why is dualistic thinking dangerous for our students?
5. Why is it “easier and quicker to emphasise the Christian perspective through curriculum detours”?
6. Write a paragraph in response to this article indicating how your teaching practice might now be influenced (or not) from its suggestions.



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