

Toward a Missional Approach to Christian Scholarship in the Theological Disciplines:

Learning for Shalom

By David Beldman

Quote from George Marsden's Outrageous idea

When *The Chronicle of Higher Education* reported on proposals such as that just stated [for religious perspectives in the academic mainstream], a leading American intellectual historian responded that '...the notion that scholars' personal beliefs are compatible with their academic interests is "loony" and reflects "a self-indulgent professoriate."' He added (in the reporter's words) that 'an important distinction must be made between supernatural and non-supernatural ideas. Gender and race are empirical constructs: one's faith is not.' Such comments reflect widespread...opinion. Almost any public discussion of this issue will elicit similarly strong reactions from some thoughtful people. It is very common, for instance, for academics to dismiss religion as simply non-empirical and therefore worthy of no serious consideration. One letter to the *Chronicle* claimed that professors who are religious believers refuse to rigorously examine their own religious beliefs. 'If they'd research even the religious philosophies they've accepted, then they could actually call themselves "scholars." But they won't.' Another academic wrote that 'those professors who wish to present their religious views in the classroom would do well to state frankly: 'Many of my beliefs respecting supernatural phenomena are beyond what we have accepted as standards for scholarly proof in modern universities.' Another went even further, asserting that matters of religion are 'by definition not amenable to logic.'

(Marsden, *The Outrageous Idea of Christian scholarship*, 5)

If you are thinking—that's all fine and good for other disciplines but surely no one would rule out religious perspectives in biblical studies and theology

See quote from Michael Fox ('Bible Scholarship and Faith-Based Study: My View')—this comes from the SBL forum which is the Society of Biblical literature's online publication and goes out to thousands of biblical scholars around the world.

Recently, claims have been made for the legitimacy of faith-based scholarship in the forum of academic scholarship. In my view, faith-based study has no place in academic scholarship, whether the object of study is the Bible, the Book of Mormon, or Homer. Faith-based study is a different realm of intellectual activity that can dip into Bible scholarship for its own purposes, but cannot contribute to it... Any discipline that deliberately imports extraneous, inviolable axioms into its work belongs to the realm of homiletics or spiritual enlightenment or moral guidance or whatnot, but not scholarship, whatever academic degrees its practitioners may hold...

Those who choose a faith-based approach should realize that they cannot expect the attention of those who don't share their postulates. The reverse is not true. Scholars who are personally religious constantly draw on work by scholars who do not share their postulates. One of the great achievements of modern Bible scholarship is that it communicates across religious borders so easily that we usually do not know the beliefs of its practitioners...

Trained scholars quickly learn to recognize which authors and publications are governed by faith and tend to set them aside, not out of prejudice but out of an awareness that they are irrelevant to the scholarly enterprise. Sometimes it is

worthwhile to go through a faith-motivated publication and pick out the wheat from the chaff, but time is limited.

The best thing for Bible appreciation is secular, academic, religiously-neutral hermeneutic.

M. Fox, 'Bible Scholarship and Faith-Based Study: My View' *SBL Forum*

<http://www.sbl-site.org/publications/article.aspx?articleId=490>

- In preparing for this I realized just how inadequate I am to present on this—I'm no expert.
 - But I have learned from folks who have reflected deeply on what it means to do Christian scholarship. People like Nicolas Wolterstorff, Alvin Plantinga, George Marsden (generally) and then folks like Tom Wright and Craig Bartholomew who have focused on theology and biblical studies
- this is a vitally important topic and a good one to be thinking about at this time and in this place
- This is not meant to be the last word on what Christian scholarship should be
 - Rather the beginning of a conversation which wrestle with what it means to do God-honouring scholarship. I hope this conversation will continue into today and spill over into the coming academic year.

Toward a Missional Approach to Christian Scholarship in the Theological

Disciplines:

Learning for Shalom

Missional

- I take my definition of mission from Chris Wright's *Mission of God* where he defines mission as such
 - Fundamentally, our mission (if it is biblically informed and validated) means our committed participation as God's people, at God's invitation and command, in God's own mission within the history of God's world for the redemption of God's creation
 - Now this assumes a grand narrative which includes fundamental elements like
 - God's creation of a good world and his mandate to humans to cultivate and have dominion over creation
 - Humanity's fall into sin which affected our relationship to God, our relationship to each other, and our relationship to the creation
 - God's promise to reconcile all things through the choosing of Abraham and then the Jewish nation, and ultimately in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ
 - Redemption in Christ works to restore the relationships that were affected by the fall
 - Now this may be a contentious point but Wright does not reduce the redemption of Christ to saving humans but includes the whole of Creation—redemption is cosmic! Wright doesn't reduce mission to evangelism and, I'd argue, neither should we.
 - Therefore, Engaging in Christian scholarship, whether in physics, psychology, the arts, OR biblical studies or theology, can be part of working out the implication of Christ redemption in the world

Christian Scholarship, in my opinion, means

- Doing scholarship in submission to the one who is the ultimate focus and fulfillment of Scripture and history
- Though faith in Christ doesn't give us the answer to all of the issues we face in our academic work he is the appropriate starting point for our scholarship
- Lesley Newbigin uses the language of the Cross as the clue to creation:
 - He recounts a vision he had early in his Christian life:
 - A vision came to my mind of the cross, but it was the cross spanning the space between heaven and earth, between ideals and present realities, and with arms that embraced the whole world. I saw it as something which reached down to the most hopeless and sordid of human misery and yet promised life and victory. I was sure that night, in a way I had never been before, that this was the clue that I must follow if I were to make any kind of sense of the world. From that moment I would always know how to take bearings when I was lost. I would know where to begin again when I had come to the end of all my own resources of understanding or courage.
 - Perhaps the Old Testament way of articulating this would be the "fear of the Lord" as the "beginning of Wisdom" or St Anselm's familiar phrase: "faith seeking understanding"
 - So doing Christian scholarship does not necessarily have to do with the object of study but rather the orientation or perspective from which we engage in Scholarship

Theological Disciplines

- perhaps it is less controversial to argue for a Christian approach to biblical studies, systematic theology, pastoral theology, etc.,

- Especially so since we are doing our research at Trinity which is anything but hostile or opposed to the idea of integrating faith and scholarship.
- But see the quote by Michael Fox.
- For now suffice it to say that we do need to think critically about how we can integrate faith and scholarship in the theological disciplines. And the current postmodern context which we find ourselves is as good a time as any to do so.

Learning for Shalom

- I like the phrase which I got from Wolterstorff's *Reason within the Bounds of Religion*
- Peace is the state from which Adam and Eve fell and to which history is moving—so for Wolterstorff, “to dwell in shalom is to enjoy living before God, to enjoy living in nature, to enjoy living with one’s fellows, and to enjoy life with oneself.”
- The vocation of the scholar, like the vocation of everyone else, is to contribute to the cause of shalom in this sense.

Tension of Participating in Two Scholarly Traditions

- It struck me as I was researching for this talk that there is an uneasy tension that we face as Christians doing serious academic work here at Trinity.
- I think what it comes down to is that we are straddling two time honoured scholarly traditions.
 - First is the western academic tradition which goes all the way back to the ancient Greeks.
 - The second is the Christian tradition with its roots in the earliest church fathers
 - And the demands of each of these traditions can create conflict within us

- we can alleviate this tension any number of ways
 - For example we may immerse ourselves in the Western academic tradition and christen it by having our quiet time in the morning and worship on Sundays.
 - This is a difficult road to take since many of the assumptions of modern scholarship are antithetical to a Christian worldview
 - On the other hand we can reject the western academic enterprise as anti-Christian and simply forge our own way according to our Christian convictions
 - This too is difficult, not least because the University of Bristol needs to validate our degrees!
 - In my opinion developing a Christian academic ghetto is not way forward.
 - What we need is to participate and be at home in the modern academy while remembering that we are at odds with it.
- HOW do we do this...well we need to

1. Acknowledge genuine insights from secular scholarship BUT ALSO critique the ideological frameworks within which those insights are embedded

- Since God does not forsake his creation, and showers rain upon believers and unbelievers alike, as it were, we can expect to find genuine truth in unbelieving scholarship
- But as Craig Bartholomew and Mike Goheen suggest, ‘Christian scholars should attempt to distinguish between the creational insight and structure [on the one hand], and the idolatrous religious direction, in *all* theories, *including their own*, working humbly, faithfully and prayerfully to re-direct theoretical work in alignment with a biblical worldview

- Thus Marxist criticism and feminist criticism will indeed bring light to the areas we are working on but we should be able to expose the idolatry which reduces reality to say economic or gender issues.
- 2. We need to have an awareness of key issues in modern scholarship BUT set our own agenda based on the needs of the Christian community**
- need to be aware of the key issues of the day and to engage in them as appropriate.
 - but the important issues of the modern academy may not necessarily be those of Christians
 - so Plantinga says that: The Christian academic does indeed have a responsibility to the academic world at large; but his fundamental responsibility is to the Christian community, and finally to God.
- 3. As Christians we need to Critically engage with modern scholarship AND work toward constructive scholarship**
- This point about critical engagement and constructive scholarship is related.
 - We can easily devote all our energy debating the hot issues in our discipline so that we don't get around to doing the kind of constructive work that can serve the Christian academic community and the body of Christ as a whole.
- 4. Listen to the narratives on offer AND tell our own narratives**
- By narrative I'm thinking here especially the history of our disciplines
 - The way the stories of our disciplines are told says a lot about the one who is telling.
 - E.g., the standard narrative which breaks the history of biblical interpretation into pre-critical era, the critical era

and possibly the post-critical era has a specific prejudice—
what do I mean by that?

- Another example is John Baron's *Reading the OT: Method in Biblical Study*.
 - It is actually a very helpful book and on the whole Barton is quite balanced Yet his bias comes to the surface in places
 - In his handling of source criticism he says, "Pentateuchal criticism did not arise because a number of ill-natured or blasphemous scholars said, 'here is a beautifully unified and coherent work; how can we chop it up into little pieces.'" This is fair enough.
 - What did give rise to source criticism? according to Barton, was the existence of **OBSERVABLE DISCREPENCIES** within the Pentateuch itself.
 - All I want to say at this point is that this is a typically modern move which reduces the problem to the **facts of the text** BUT remains completely uncritical of the **MODE of observation**
- So we want to cast a quizzical eye on the narratives on offer but we would do well to tell our own narratives.
 - In our narratives we'd want to draw genuine insights from all the major periods of interpretation (pre-modern, modern and postmodern), while exposing the idolatrous tendencies in each period.
 - E.g.: Stephen Neil and Tom Wright's history of NT interpretation is an insightful telling of the narrative of that discipline

5. We want to work toward Academic/professional formation BUT within context of spiritual formation

- We should be working hard meeting the standards set by the modern academy
 - But we want to develop our academic skills within the context of Christ's transforming work in our lives as whole people
 - Where does our academic work fit within our many priorities?
 - Does it crowd out time with our family, time in prayer, and time with the Christian community—and the list goes on?
 - Christ is forming us into new creations which includes all these areas of life.
 - And how does spirituality function in your scholarship—I'm a poor example but I'm convinced we need a robust spirituality that infuses our scholarship and would like to hear how you are developing your spiritual life while doing research
6. I've added a final note here and that is that participating in these two academic traditions involves both **Sacrifice AND shalom!**
- This is the tension of the Christian life—Christ calls us to take up our crosses **and yet** he says that his yoke is easy and his burden is light
 - Doing authentic Christian scholarship will involve sacrifice—we may not get the top jobs, or get published with the top publishers.
 - And yet there will be great joy and shalom as we work in Christ's service, working to the mutual benefit of other academics, teaching and forming students, and so on.

Toward an Agenda for Christian Scholarship in the Theological Disciplines

I'll finish off by highlighted just a few points which I think will contribute to an Agenda for missional Christian Scholarship.

- **FIRST**, we need to see our research here and now as Christian service
 - If you're like me perhaps you have a tendency to think of your research as preparation for service either in teaching or full time ministry.
 - We need to start thinking and acting like our postgraduate research at Trinity is our humble service to King Jesus—which it is!!
 - How does our academic work serve Christ, the Christian community and the world?

- We need to cultivate Christian academic community
 - This is one of those aspects of scholarship that so many people have said is essential—these are people who are integrated into a community and have been so blessed by it or those who do not have a Christian academic community and desperately want it.
 - Of course this is somewhat intuitive (though not everywhere) and there are signs that this is taking place at here
 - make the most out of the postgraduate seminar—there is loads of potential to develop deeply meaningful relationships which will enrich your scholarship!
 - Trinity has just this year made it possible for more of us to be involved in the pastoral groups, which is fantastic!, and as I understand it there will be one for the postgraduates

- Make use of these things!
- Perhaps there are other ways for us to be blessed by this sense of community so let's be creative!

➤ Emphasis on constructive research

- Touched on this earlier
- When we are thinking about topics and areas of study we should ask not only what would I *like* to study but also, what *needs to be addressed* in our discipline or what sorts of issues are important for the Christian community?
- Not what heresies do I need to debunk but what can I contribute constructively.

➤ Interdisciplinary orientation

- Meir Sternberg says that biblical study is not a discipline but the intersection of the humanities par excellence
- Not only should we be well read in the other theological disciplines, we do well to read broadly in other academic disciplines.
- Philosophy, hermeneutics, history, literary studies, social sciences, etc. are all so important for theology and biblical studies--quite depressing if you think about it
- However, there is a lot of good work out there
- plus the interdisciplinary nature of our disciplines is another reason why developing Christian academic communities is so essential

➤ Integration of scholarship with spirituality

- Again I touched on this earlier but individual and corporate prayer and worship are absolutely essential and we need to develop patterns that integrate our scholarship with our spiritual formation

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Tension of Participating in Two Scholarly Traditions

7. reap insights from secular scholarship

BUT

8. critique the ideological frameworks within those insights are embedded
9. awareness of key issues in modern scholarship

BUT

- set agenda based on needs of Christian community

10. Critical engagement

AND

- constructive scholarship

11. Listen to the narratives on offer

AND

Dr Heath Thomas on doing academic work before the face of God and on reading broadly:

One of the crucial realities in doing Christian scholarship is the recognition that all of life is lived before God (coram deo), and 'ministry' is not merely relegated to church work, missionary endeavour, etc. Rather, how we go about thinking about study practices, how we engage in lectures and conferences (cooperative and encouraging rather than competitive and egocentric), how we live life and study together (am I a hermit or a part of a community), how we treat our families in the process of education --- all these comprise what it means to be a follower of Christ in the midst of the calling in academic life. So postgrads must learn the dictum: not part of my life, not compartmentalising my life, but all of my life is the Lord's. A number of my students (postgrads) treat their postgraduate education as the great build-up to when they actually 'do' ministry or academic work, forgetting that their time doing postgraduate work is the time of ministry in academic life...now. It is difficult to break down the walls of compartmentalisation that the segmentation of life in the modern world has entrenched...but Rom. 12:1-2 is a good start.

Second, read broadly and deeply. That is, don't pigeon-hole your thought processes. Most of my students are heavily indebted to folks like John Piper or CJ Mahaney or NT Wright or some other figure. All good in their own right, but what happens when we read them together or alongside one another? Now take this to another level with readings in the academy, and you get a feel of what I mean. Christian scholars need to have multiple-angle vision so they can see the contours of culture and the clarity

12. tell our own narratives

13. Academic/professional formation

BUT

14. within context of spiritual formation

Dr Aubrey Spears on the communal nature of Christian scholarship (especially for doctoral students):

One of the things that comes to my mind is the tension created by the academic demand for large blocks of time spent alone in one's study and the opposing demand we have as humans for think community. It's so important for students to have a true community where they can love and be loved, serve and be served while they are writing their dissertations. This carries over into academics directly and indirectly. Directly: I think part of what makes Christian scholarship distinctively Christian is that it is communal. Indirectly: one's worshipping community / church community should not be neglected because it is such an important ballast to the ravages of academia.

Dr Mary Healy on Christian scholarship as service to Jesus Christ:

Since being a biblical scholar or theologian is first and foremost a service to Jesus Christ and his Church, it is important not to view it primarily in terms of a career (even though practical realities of livelihood, support of a family, etc., have to be considered). St. Paul is a great model - he preaches and teaches the gospel not for earthly gain, but because "woe to me if I do not!" The more we see what we do as a service to Christ, the less we're liable to be set off balance or discouraged by the vagaries of faculty politics, academic opportunities, success and failure, etc. We serve at his pleasure, and he works all things for good. Also the more likely we are to see it as an inexplicable privilege rather than something deserved... which leads to joy. In a real way, teaching Scripture, or theology which is simply interpretation of Scripture in the Church, or by extension other areas of Christian scholarship, is a mission rather than a career, though unfortunately few see it that way.

Toward an Agenda for Christian Scholarship in the Theological Disciplines

- Theological research as Christian service
- Need for Christian academic community
- Emphasis on constructive research
- Interdisciplinary orientation
- Integration of scholarship with spirituality

Dr Aubrey Spears on the importance of community:

One of the things that comes to my mind is the tension created by the academic demand for large blocks of time spent alone in one's study and the opposing demand we have as humans for thick community. (This is similar to what Ryan addressed, but I'm thinking in terms of Ph.D time in particular) It's so important for students to have a true community where they can love and be loved, serve and be served while they are writing their dissertations. This carries over into academics directly and indirectly. Directly: I think part of what makes Christian Scholarship distinctively Christian is that it is communal. Indirectly: One's worshiping community/church community should not be neglected because it is such an important ballast to the ravages of academia.

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(Marsden, *The Outrageous Idea*, 5)

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Dr Ryan O’Dowd on the negotiating the demands of the academic endeavor:

My first recommendation is that you try and consult Mary Rose O’Reilly’s book *The Garden at Night: Breakdown and Burnout in the Teaching Life*. She has whole lists of recommendations for young scholars. It is particularly interesting to note her honest reckoning with the fallen condition of academia! I wasn’t prepared enough for this. Where and how will you build friendships? What if your department is divisive or inept? How will you find balance? What if you lose your rhythm for good teaching? You must plan for these things ahead of time - find a few trusted peers early in your career and commit to supporting each other.

Two other things she discusses I think I would consider. One, she wants young scholars to be aware that the climb through academia never ends. The PhD only qualifies you to get reappointment, then tenure, then professorship. The expectations for publishing, teaching and committee work are ongoing and take a toll on you year after year. It often leads to burnout, depression or isolation. You will never arrive at a place of peace unless you create it.

I also think scholars need to think very carefully about what they (we) are called to. I watch so many peers in their early years trying to give every paper and talk they can. Many of us can look so tired and unexcited about really good teaching and research. It’s the problem of quantity over quality and it affects teaching and the spiritual, physical and family life.

M. Fox, 'Bible Scholarship and Faith-Based Study: My View' *SBL Forum* <http://www.sbl-site.org/publications/article.aspx?articleId=490>

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