

SCHOLARSHIP AND MINISTRY

QOHELET WEB MINISTRY

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If you are like me, when you hear the word, "scholar," you think of long, dry, tasteless lectures that have little practical bearing on life. Many people see scholarship as a dull, irrelevant, enterprise. The average person often feels that scholarship is beyond their grasp to handle and have little desire to try. From my own limited academic experience, I have to concede that there is a note of truth in these perceptions. Is it any wonder, then, that most children and teens do not express aspirations of being a "scholar" when they grow up?

Then there is that other related word, "theology." Many people have the same perceptions concerning theology as they do scholarship. Many people see theology as something done in a musty study in a back office of a library. Some hear the word, "theology," and think of nerds who are interested in brain teasers and nothing more. For this reason, many people are not interested in doing theology. Some are actually opposed to the theology because they see it as nothing more than the product of human reasoning and reflection.

What exactly is scholarship? What is theology? Perhaps it is best to begin with a definition of each before proceeding.

The generic definition of scholarship is simply, "The methods and research used by scholars." That doesn't help much, so I will elaborate on what "Biblical" scholarship is from my own experience.. In Biblical studies, scholarship is the use of various methods of study that would enable the student of the word to accurately translate, read, interpret, and understand the meaning of the text of the Bible. This interdisciplinary approach would involve things such as reading the documents in their original language. But it

goes beyond this. It would also involve word studies of key words and/or phrases in the passage that you are studying. It would also involve investigation of the cultural, economic, political, and linguistic backgrounds of the text. Of course, each of these areas of study requires a level of technical expertise in order to do it well.

Theology, which is related to scholarship, involves the application of the text. After establishing the translation and meaning of the text, you would naturally reflect on how the text relates to other parts of the scriptures and how it applies to us in our current setting. This, in a nutshell, is theology.

With those definitions in place, we can now reflect on the question of whether scholarship and theology has any place in ministry.

The Necessity of Good Scholarship in Ministry

If theology is the struggle to understand and apply the truths of scripture, then everyone does theology. To some extent, even ministers who are "anti-theology" practice a certain level of theology without even being aware of it. Many do theology without calling it "theology". The issue is not whether one will do theology or not, but whether one will do good theology. In order to do good theology, you must have sound methods. Sound methods means sound scholarship. The two go hand in hand. The goal of theology is to determine God's message for man. The goal of scholarship is to ensure that the method for doing theology is sound. On one hand, scholarship is useless without theology. On the other hand, theology can be seriously skewed and flawed without good scholarship. Since the two go hand in hand, I will often refer to "scholarship" and "theology" interchangeably.

Is scholarship needed in ministry? Should we not just minister and leave the hard work of Biblical studies for the university professors? I submit to you that scholarship is not only beneficial, but necessary for ministry. A short look at the history of scholarship supports this contention. The early evangelists practiced scholarship and theology. Paul is but one example. He "reasoned" with both Jews and Greeks about Jesus (Acts 17:2,7; 18:4,19; 19:8,9). The manner of his approach depended on whether his audience was Jewish or Greek.

The teachers of the second century used scholarship to defend the Christian faith.¹ In the first centuries of the church, central doctrines of the Christian faith were given a confessional, creedal expression. The early church leaders felt this was necessary in order to express the particulars of Christian faith in a concise, simple formula. This helped to protect against the early heresies such as Gnosticism, Montanism, and Arianism. Without theology and scholarship to hammer out the particulars of Biblical doctrine, the church would have succumbed very early to these threats. Some of the earliest conclusions on Biblical doctrine included such basic things as the divinity and humanity of Christ. This emphasis on scholarship and theology did not continue through the middle ages. The attainment of nearly absolute power by church leaders led to various abuses of it. They suppressed scholarship and new learning. The majority of the populace was not able to read and study for themselves. Those privileged few who did have the education and access to the tools for scholarship were only allowed to teach the traditions of the past. To challenge tradition was to invite a mock trial and execution. This plunged the western world into the Dark Ages.

¹ Thomas H. Olbricht, "Religious Scholarship and the Restoration Movement," *Restoration Quarterly* 25 (1982): 195

With the coming of the Enlightenment and the Renaissance, emphasis on good scholarship was restored. Applying this emphasis in Biblical studies led to the Reformation. Luther, Wycliffe, Tyndale, and a host of other early reformation leaders were university trained and used scholarly methods. Zwingli, followed by Luther, adapted the secular scholars' gown for liturgical dress, which underscored the centrality of scholarship in their respective reformation movements.² Without their scholarly training, the Bible would not have been translated into the languages of the common people. It would have remained in Latin and out of reach of the commoners. Protestant, evangelical theology would have still been obscured under centuries of Dark Age traditions.

In the same fashion, our own Restoration Movement was begun and continued by men of great learning. In the nineteenth century, there were many men among us who were skilled in the expertise of scholarship, including Alexander Campbell. He believed that Biblical scholarship would enable Christians to dispose of man-made traditions and creeds and unite on Biblical teaching alone.³ Many converted to the Restoration Movement because they were convinced of the correctness of positions put forth by scholars of the Restoration Movement.⁴ This underscores the prominent place scholarship has played in our religious heritage.

You only need to consider what bad scholarship has produced to see the necessity for good scholarship. Bad scholarship has produced things such as the Jehovah's Witnesses New World Translation, Jim Jones, and missions by conquest. These tragedies, which are now a part of Christian history, underscore the need for good theology.

² Joel Stephen Williams, "The Ministry and Scholarship," *Restoration Quarterly* 36 (1994): 173-4.

³ *Ibid.*, 198.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 199.

Since our own restoration movement is now a thing of the past, why would scholarship would still be needed? If the church is now reformed or restored, why do we still need to have scholars? A quick look at the divisions, doctrinal questions, and church splits today should make the answer to this question self-evident. Reformation and restoration is an ongoing process that depends on good theology and scholarship. Good scholarship is still needed in order to continually make theological course corrections.

Avoiding the Pitfalls of Scholarship and Ministry

In order for scholarship and ministry to be effective, one must be aware of several pitfalls. These pitfalls involve underlying assumptions regarding the purpose of scholarship and the manner of communicating the results of it. Some believe the purpose of scholarship is simply to gain more knowledge. The Apostle Paul encountered this attitude in Athens (Acts 17:16-34). The scholars there had amassed information from various religions and philosophies. To them, it was nothing more than "head" learning. It was knowledge with no heart. Since, they did not appropriate it into their daily lives, it was impotent and useless.

This is not the purpose of scholarship. Those with the ability to use good scholarship in biblical studies should avoid using language and terms that the general public would not understand. One who uses obscure, scholarly jargon in Bible classes and conversation may actually do so because he is a novice rather than an expert.⁵ The novice is eager to use his newfound vocabulary and show off what he knows. If this temptation is not avoided, one may appear arrogant without intending to. The motivation behind scholarship should never be to call attention to self. In my experience, this

⁵ Douglas Brown, "Theological Training in Ministry," *Restoration Quarterly* 28 (1985): 2.

motivation quickly becomes self-evident and has a tendency to be repugnant. I believe this is part of the reason for the aversion to scholarship in our churches.

The Scribes and the Pharisees in Jesus' day loved to tout their abilities. They loved the title "Rabbi", wearing distinctive clothing, and receiving places of honor for their academic accomplishments. Jesus taught that the underlying attitude for every believer should be one of humility (Matt 23:5-12). However, ignorance is not a substitute for humility. Consider an analogy from the field of medicine. A doctor is highly trained to perform his trade. Does a patient appreciate the doctor's use of technical jargon when speaking to him? Unless the patient knows what he is talking about, the patient is likely to get irritated. But that does not mean that the patient does not expect the doctor to know all the technicalities of his trade. On the one hand, the patient wants to know that the doctor knows his practice well. On the other hand, the patient wants the doctor to communicate to him in an understandable way. The person in the pew expects no less from those who are trained to communicate God's word to them.

Another potential pitfall in theology is syncretism. Due to the many approaches and presuppositions in theology, a good, faithful scholar must develop critical thinking skills while maintaining faithfulness to the Biblical text. He must have the ability to think objectively and evaluate all of the data he is working with. This will present challenges for any honest scholar and theologian. It may mean at times that he will have to re-evaluate traditional practices and beliefs that he has held so dear. It may also mean that the church or the academic community, blasts him. It is often tempting, in order to keep peace, to accept positions that either undermine Biblical theology or the integrity of the Biblical text.

Although the early days of our movement sought to eliminate the gap between the clergy and the layman, the gap has widened. Is it any wonder, then, that people see scholarship as an "ivory tower" enterprise? Should we marvel if people see scholarship as a mere academic exercise meant for religious "nerds?" If no one applies the results of scholarship to the everyday lives of ordinary people, then it is useless. Scholarship needs to inform theology. Theology needs to intersect with everyday life. Theology should not be something that only university professors do.

Theology belongs "in the marketplace."⁶ The marketplace represents the everyday lives of the people in the pew. It is where the paths of so many people cross. It is where real life is happening. Scholarship and theology must wrestle with the struggles and the issues of every day life. If it is not relevant to the questions and conflicts associated with life in the marketplace, then it is poor theology.⁷ It is the job of the preacher and scholar to help close that gap between scholarship and ministry. A preacher would fall short of his calling if he has not brought the fruits of scholarly labor into the lives of the person in the pew.

The Meeting of Two Worlds

Scholarship and ministry come together in the application of the results of rigorous study to every day life. In order for this to be a fruitful endeavor, the preaching minister must recognize his priorities. The preaching minister can get caught up doing many important yet peripheral things in the service of God and his church. When this happens, it is fairly typical that these peripheral things crowd out quality study. Instead of

⁶ Brown, 4.

⁷ Michael Weed, "The Layman, the Theologian, and the Church," *Restoration Quarterly* 23 (1980): 4.

being the main thing, quality study becomes the peripheral thing. In the long run, this backward focus will have devastating effects on the preaching minister's ministry.

One must understand that study itself is a ministry. The Apostles recognized the importance of this when they delegated an important task in the church so they could concentrate on prayer and "ministry of the word" (Acts 6:1-6). Deep study and prayer is like clear, life-giving water. A minister who has a steady supply of refreshing water coming consistently into his life will be healthy and able to minister to others effectively. A minister who has streams of water constantly going away from his life and ministry will dry up. Without revitalization, he will not be able to minister to others effectively and may eventually burn out. This does neither he nor the congregation any good. A mediocre ministry is usually the result of a mediocre life of study.⁸ However, many churches fail to understand a minister's need to study regularly and often. Many believe that regular study is not needed because the minister has "been to school." Why should he need to study? Isn't that what he went to school for?

Since many do not understand the importance of study for the minister, it is the minister's responsibility to help the congregation to understand the importance of being constantly refreshed in order to be effective. The preaching minister must communicate his priorities to the leaders of the congregation. In order to be faithful to his calling, a minister needs to make study a central part of his ministry.⁹

Once the minister has studied the text using the scholarly skills, tools, and training he has received, his task is still not finished. He is only halfway through. The next step is the effective communication. An effective preaching minister must interpret more than

⁸ George R. Beasley-Murray, "The Preparation of the Gospel," *Review and Expositor* 73 (1976): 211.

⁹ Fred Craddock, "Life of Study," In *Preaching* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1985), 70.

just the Biblical text. He must also interpret the culture in which he is preaching. This calls for what may be called "apologetic preaching". Many people today do not think theologically about their life, culture, and world. It is not unusual for people to struggle with the intersection of their faith and life. The preaching minister must teach his hearers to ask questions such as, "What does the Bible say to me in my specific situation?" In order to do this effectively, the preaching minister need to be in touch with his hearers enough to understand their values, dreams, goals, and challenges. Only then can the preaching minister bring the biblical world and the world around him together. This is apologetic preaching. "Apologetic preaching helps people to grasp the world theologically."¹⁰

There are a couple of considerations in helping people to grasp their world theologically. First, we live in a postmodern world. Old methods of giving an answer for the hope that lies within you do not work effectively with a postmodern culture. The modern model of argumentation to support an objective proposition does little in a post-modern setting. This worked well in the modern culture, which began with the Enlightenment and Renaissance. The Modern World View is one that valued objectivity. Most social scientists recognize that we are now experiencing a major shift in world views in the Western world. Many are now calling the emerging world view "Post-Modern." Subjectivity and skepticism characterize the postmodern world view. More than ever before, people must be led to the truth by an inductive rather than a deductive method.

¹⁰ Craig A. Loscalzo, *Apologetic Preaching: Proclaiming Christ to a Postmodern World*. (Downers Grove: Intervarsity Press), 26.

"Induction in preaching often begins with human experience and moves people to the truth of biblical revelation. The inductive method, then, does not require a prior commitment to a premise or proposition. The homiletic leads the hearers [emphasis mine] to the theological conclusion presented in the biblical text."¹¹

One can readily see the strength of this method. Since it begins with the experience of the hearers, the relevance of the message is obvious from the start. For those hearers who reject scholarly methods of study, this method of presentation will naturally help them to understand the plausibility of the conclusions that challenge cherished traditions. The people will also learn how the study process works since they are led through the process step by step. Above all, leading people inductively to a conclusion will assist in making it their own conclusion, they will "own it."

Second, an interdisciplinary approach should be considered. Psychology, anthropology, sociology and communications theory can all contribute to making the truths of the Biblical message understandable and adaptable to life. There are those who shy away from an interdisciplinary approach in any way, shape, or form. This concern often comes from a world view that does not understand the unity of truth. Truth is truth whether the discovery of that truth comes from scripture or the social sciences. The social sciences can help ministers to effectively communicate God's truth. I suspect that foreign missionaries have done a much better job of this on the foreign mission field than our domestic preachers have. It seems that the preachers of today that can drive a Biblical truth home in a memorable and transforming way are typically not the men in the pulpit, but are our Youth Ministers and Missionaries. A likely reason for this is the emphasis on

¹¹ Loscalzo, 40.

cross-cultural communication and cultural anthropology in the training of Youth Ministers and Missionaries. As a result, the ministries of many missionaries and youth ministers are powerful and life changing. This should serve as a wake up call to those who do not consider what we can learn from other disciplines in trying to communicate God's truth.

The social sciences can help the preaching minister to understand the phenomena of what is called "pop culture". Phyllis Tickle has said "more theology is conveyed in, and probably retained from, one hour of popular television than from all of the sermons that are also delivered on any given weekend in Americans' synagogues, church, and mosques."^[12]¹² The conception of God, truth, morality, and ethics are highly influenced by Hollywood.

In regard to this, Stanley Grenz says of modern theological education, "What is needed is to bring 'pop cultural artifacts' into the theological classroom."^[13]¹³ It is absolutely necessary to understand how the secular, post-modern mind thinks. Therefore, theological education should include training on methods of understanding culture, its symbols, and the meanings behind those symbols. On the surface, one might think this is a matter of common sense rather than education. However, those raised in a Christian church are part of a subculture that is at least one step removed from the secular, post-modern culture. Those who have been in the church a long time have adapted to the church "sub-culture." As a result, they think, talk, and view the world differently than the

¹² Phyllis A. Tickle, *God Talk in America* (New York: Crossroad, 1997), 126; quoted in Stanley J. Grenz, "What does Hollywood Have to do with Wheaton? The Place of (POP) Culture in Theological Reflection," *The Journal for the Evangelical Theological Society* 43 (June 2000): 303.

¹³ Stanley J. Grenz, "What does Hollywood Have to do with Wheaton? The Place of (POP) Culture in Theological Reflection," *The Journal for the Evangelical Theological Society* 43 (June 2000): 303.

people in their neighborhood. Therefore, interpretation of the culture as well as the text is absolutely necessary in order to communicate God's word. The minister who practices this type of interpretation would be able to relate theologically to everyday life and help others to relate theologically to everyday life as well.

Conclusion

Scholarship, theology, and ministry go hand in hand. Good scholarship avoids the pitfalls associated with it, especially the pitfall of becoming an ivory tower, academic enterprise only understandable to those with Ph.D's.

Good scholarship recognizes that it has the purpose of bringing everyone in closer conformity with God's will, not just a few "specialists." Scholarship is to be done for the church at large, not for a few academicians. It must be communicated to people in the context they live in. This calls not only for interpretation of the text, but of contemporary society as well. Not only are scholarship and ministry allies, but also they are indispensable to Christian ministry, both in the pulpit and in the street.

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