

QOHELET WEB MINISTRY

THE VALUE OF GOOD SCHOLARSHIP
IN MINISTRY

BY JOHN TELGREN

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The foundation for sound ministry is sound theology. Without a sound theology to act as a rudder to guide ministry, it could go in the wrong direction. It is never a question of whether one will engage in theology or not. This is because everyone engages in theology when they attempt to understand God's word for humans today. The question is whether one will engage in good theology. The foundation for good theology is a sound understanding of God's word. A sound understanding of God's word can be attributed partially to centuries of good scholarship. If scholarship refers to an expert level of learning and a scholar is one who has become well-learned and skilled in his discipline, then it would seem that good scholarship would not only be desirable, but necessary in biblical studies. There is a continuity that moves from scholarship to theology to ministry. Therefore, it is necessary for good scholarship to be part of the foundation for ministry.

There are those that have made what appears to be a compelling case against religious and biblical scholarship. Some point out that the Apostle Paul did not speak in persuasive words of wisdom (1 Cor 2:4). God did not choose the wise, which some interpret as educated, but choose the foolish things, which some interpret as uneducated (1 Cor 1:25-29). Jesus did not choose the religious scholar, but simple men to be his Apostles. The New Testament authors typically portray the scribes and lawyers in a negative light. The biblical evidence seems to put higher education and scholarship in a negative light.

History adds to this unfavorable light. For example, the 19th century German schools of higher criticism suggested the Bible was merely a human product at the hands of redactors and editors.¹ More recently, the Jesus Seminar, a collection of biblical scholars, doubted much of what the Gospels claim Jesus said was accurate.² Many religious scholars studied religion from

¹ Gleason L. Archer, *A Survey of Old Testament Introduction* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1974), 83-93.

² Robert W Funk, Roy W. Hoover, and The Jesus Seminar, *The Five Gospels: The Search for the Authentic Words of Jesus* (San Francisco: Harper, 1993), 21-24.

a strictly academic or sociological point of view rather than from faith, which placed Christianity on the same level as other religions. Taken together, all of these factors suggest strongly that scholarship is more harmful than helpful to Christian faith. As a result, there are those who believe that scholarship has very little to do with effective ministry. Some almost treat it as a virtue to reject scholarship in favor of that which is practical, simple and right rather than that which is theoretical, esoteric, and wrong.

However, there is also a compelling case in favor of biblical scholarship. The Bible applauds a diligent study of Torah in places such as the 119th Psalm. There were wise, educated men in the Bible such as Solomon and the sages whose wisdom the Bible portrays favorably (1 Kgs 4:29; 10:24; Prov 1:6; 24:23; 25:1). Jesus did not criticize the teaching or education of the Pharisees, but their actions (Mt 23:3). The Apostle Paul did not disparage mature discourse, but reserved it for those who were able to hear it (1 Cor 2:6-9). Paul's education served him well in that he was able to quote pagan poets (Acts 17:23), Cretan prophecy (Tit 1:12), and was able to articulate tenants of the Christian faith in a compelling way (Acts 26:24-28). Paul's education enabled him to reason with both Jews and Greeks about Jesus (Acts 17:2,7; 18:4,19; 19:8,9). The Bible declares that preachers are to be diligent workers who rightly explain the word of truth (2 Tim 2:15). This, along with the fact that we are far removed linguistically, historically, socially, and culturally from the world of the Bible, establishes the need for good scholarship.

The testimony of history adds a persuasive voice to the testimony of scripture on the benefits of good scholarship. The second century apologists became conversant with the pagan worldview in order to defend the faith. This served to strengthen the faith of Christians³ In the early centuries, the church faced heretical threats such as Gnosticism, Montanism, and Arianism.

³ Thomas H. Olbricht, "Religious Scholarship And The Restoration Movement," *Restoration Quarterly* 25.4 (1982), 195.

Without good scholarship and theology to hammer out the particulars of biblical doctrine, the church would have succumbed very early to these threats.

The biblical text as we have it today is the work of a long line of scholars standing on the shoulders of those before them. Men such as Origen, Jerome, Erasmus, Westcott, Hort, and others helped to refine the Greek text closer to the autographs than ever before, making the biblical text one of the most accurately preserved ancient literary works in existence. The English translations that many Christians read, study, and meditate on exist due to centuries of good scholarship in biblical Hebrew, Aramaic, Greek, and related disciplines.

Throughout history, Christian scholars, teachers, theologians, and other educated men were often the ones who led Christian reformatory movements. John Wycliffe was a professor in Oxford. John Calvin was university trained. William Tyndale taught at the University of Cambridge. Martin Luther was a professor of theology at the University of Wittenberg. It was Luther who adapted the scholar's gown for liturgical dress, which underscored the centrality of scholarship in the reformation.⁴

Nathan Hatch has documented what could be called a revolution against the professions after the Revolutionary War.⁵ In the decades after the war, there was a popular rejection of authority and tradition in nearly every area of life. The popular disdain for authority and education in law, medicine, and religion led to a breaking away from traditional sources of authority among the masses in these disciplines. This meant the rejection not just of the professionals, which in religion were the clergy, but also of formal education with its credentials. For a time, many practiced medicine, law, and religion with little to no education or training. Hatch points out that this was the climate that gave rise to things such as Mormonism, the

⁴ Joel Stephen Williams, "The Ministry and Scholarship," *Restoration Quarterly* 36.3 (1994), 173-4

⁵ Nathan O Hatch, *The Democratization of American Christianity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), 27-30.

willingness to accept dreams and ecstatic experiences as a spiritual guide without scrutinizing them against orthodoxy, and a host of other religious views and movements that any man with charisma, a tree stump, and an audience might promote.⁶ This highlights the tremendous importance of good scholarship as the foundation for sound theology.

The Stone-Campbell movement began and continued with those of solid learning and scholarship. Alexander Campbell himself was an accomplished scholar who believed that biblical scholarship would move Christians to dispose of man-made traditions and unite on sound biblical teaching alone.⁷ Many converted to the Stone-Campbell movement because they believed in the correctness of positions of scholars in the movement.⁸ Men such as Alexander Campbell, J.W. McGarvey, and H. Leo Boles made significant contributions using their scholarly skills. Clearly, biblical scholarship played a significant role in the early history the Stone-Campbell movement.

Scholarship has continued to have a role in Churches of Christ, one of the heirs of the Stone-Campbell movement. For instance, there was the emergence of a scholarly journal for Churches of Christ in the later part of the twentieth century. Even though there was a feeling of caution about having a scholarly journal in Churches of Christ with contributors that received terminal degrees from Harvard, *Restoration Quarterly* has proven itself over the last half century to be a valuable asset by providing a means for those with the tools and skills of good scholarship to share their work.⁹ One of the results of the scholarship that developed in relationship to *Restoration Quarterly* was the development of the *Living Word Commentary Series*. Over the years, many ministers and teachers have used these commentaries to build up

⁶ Hatch, 4-10.

⁷ Williams, 198.

⁸ Ibid., 199.

⁹ John M Tucker, "The Ministry Of Scholarship: The Jubilee History Of Restoration Quarterly. Part I, Context And Challenge," *Restoration Quarterly* 50.1 (2008), 9-13.

their faith and the faith of others.

Mark Hamilton has highlighted the current state of scholarship in Churches of Christ in various areas of biblical and related studies, the caliber of which has gained the respect of major American associations of biblical scholars.¹⁰ This level of work is an indispensable aid for ministers and teachers to develop a deeper self-understanding that includes their history, the bible, and theology, all of which is rooted in sound scholarship rather than anecdotal evidence. Like the various reformers whose work was dedicated to the discovery of and commitment to truth, scholarly work today can have the same dedication that is grounded in sound study of the scriptures and scholarly practice.

One of my favorite illustrations to highlight the value of good biblical scholarship comes from comparing it to other professions. For example, a patient wants his doctor to have credentials, which means the doctor is well educated, up-to-date, and proficient in his work. He wants a doctor that has an eye for detail and has the training and skill for accuracy. If this is what a patient expects of a doctor who ministers to the body, what about the minister who ministers to the soul? The doctor has his education, tools, medical journals, and workshops in order to remain sharp in his profession. I, a Christian minister, should expect no less of myself.

In order for my scholarship and ministry to be effective, I would need to avoid several pitfalls. These pitfalls have to do with underlying assumptions as to the purpose of scholarship and the manner in which I communicate the results.

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, but it was nothing more than "head"

¹⁰ Mark W. Hamilton, "Transition And Continuity: Biblical Scholarship In Today's Churches Of Christ," *Stone-Campbell Journal* 9.2 (2006), 191-201.

learning. In other words, it was knowledge with no heart. They did not appropriate it into their lives. Therefore, it was impotent and useless.

In communicating the results of good scholarship, I would need to be careful to speak in an understandable way. Douglas Brown points out that using scholarly, esoteric jargon in sermons, classes, and conversation can actually be an indicator that one is a novice instead of an expert.¹¹ The novice is eager to use his newfound vocabulary and show off what he knows. As a result, he may sound like he is talking in a condescending way without intending to. The motivation behind scholarship should never be to call attention to one self. This motivation quickly becomes self-evident and has a tendency to be repugnant, which may contribute to an anti-scholarship bias among some Christians. The Scribes and the Pharisees in Jesus' day were like this. 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). Does a patient appreciate the doctor that uses technical jargon to describe his illness? Probably not if only the doctor knows what he is talking about. The patient wants to know that the doctor has mastered his practice and knows the jargon along with everything else related to his practice. On the other hand, the patient wants the doctor to communicate to him in an understandable way. The biblical scholar should have the same consideration.

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. This will present challenges for any honest scholar. It may mean at times that he will have to re-evaluate traditional practices and beliefs. It may mean the church or the academic community may castigate him. The sound scholar must avoid

¹¹ Douglas Brown, "Theological Training in Ministry," *Restoration Quarterly* 28 (1985): 2

the temptation to keep peace by accepting positions that undermine sound scholarship, good theology, or the integrity of the biblical text.

Finally, another pitfall would be an exclusive, intramural orientation in scholarship. I strongly believe that the ministry of scholarship is not an intramural practice for the academy. This ministry is in service to the Kingdom of God. Good study habits form part of the foundation for good ministry. If my ministry becomes mediocre, it is likely because my study life is also mediocre.¹² I am much more effective when I take advantage of the tools of scholarship. This enables me to form a sound theology to lead the congregation in understanding what it means to be a Christian in a world that has a twisted view of God, life, and humanity. Like the second century apologists who helped to strengthen the faith of Christians who lived among people with a non-biblical worldview, I must engage in the same task so that I can help Christians to "grasp the world theologically."¹³

An ongoing challenge in my ministry is to promote holiness among Christians. This is not merely a moral holiness, but also an intellectual one. Christians are not merely to love God with all their hearts, but also all their minds. Christianity is as much a religion of mind as it is heart. In Colossians 2:8, the apostle Paul reminded his readers: " See to it that no one takes you captive through philosophy and empty deception, according to the tradition of men, according to the elementary principles of the world, rather than according to Christ." Paul does not contrast philosophy with non-philosophy in this passage. Instead, he contrasts the philosophies of men with the philosophy of Christ. The philosophy of Christ is theologically grounded yet engaged with the world. God's truth exists both in his word and in his world. They are not mutually exclusive. This means there is great value in the other disciplines if understood theologically.

¹² George Raymond Beasley-Murray, "Preparation Of The Gospel." *Review & Expositor* 73.2 (1976), 211.

¹³ Craig A. Loscalzo, *Apologetic Preaching: Proclaiming Christ to a Postmodern World* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2000), 26.

Holiness is not necessarily separation from other disciplines, but transformation of them. Good theology should serve as the basis for every discipline and profession; good theology is connected to good scholarship. With the tools of scholarship, I can more effectively help those under my care to understand how holiness and engagement with the world relate to each other.

Good scholarship also gives me the tools to evaluate claims made by those that secularists consider to be authorities on the Bible and religion. Whether it is a misrepresented inscription on an ossuary claiming to belong to Jesus, or claims that the Bible was the product of years of redaction, or some sort of historical revisionism, the tools of scholarship will help me to engage and evaluate these sorts of challenges.

One of the satisfying parts of my ministry has been witnessing the growing maturity of faith and intellectual understanding of the Christian faith among the people I minister to. One of the things my early training impressed on me was that we as ministers are never a finished product. We are life long students whose most important ministry is the ministry of study. Our good study habits provide a metaphorical deep well to draw from for those we minister to. Without the ministry of study, the well becomes dry. Learning to study in this way will help to keep water in the well in a way I would not have been able to do otherwise.

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