

Using Scholarship for Christian ends¹

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'Why do you say "No!" to historical-critical theology.' I have been confronted with this question, and I wish to state at the outset: My 'No!' to historical-critical theology stems from my 'Yes!' to my wonderful Lord and Savior Jesus Christ and to the glorious redemption he accomplished for me on Golgotha.

So Eta Linnemann begins her critique of historical criticism of the Bible² She then writes about the anti-Christian nature of the universities and goes on to say, 'An academic education that is Christian by design — not only in name but in authentic obedience to our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ — can be established only by conscious dissociation from the modern European university and its history.'³ The critique of a scholar like Linnemann should not be dismissed lightly by those who share an evangelical faith. That she might have a point can be supported by Robert Morgan's argument, although he is thinking from a different perspective,

Scholarship is bound to respect the rational norms of the day. If these do not speak of God, the result is a biblical scholarship which does not speak directly of God in a believing way either. This is bound to seem alien to those who use the Bible religiously. But the methods themselves are only a symptom of the conflict between religious assumptions and much modern thought.⁴

I want to explore the possibility of an alternative strategy, particularly for those of us working in Christian colleges, that is, to use scholarship for Christian ends. The ellipses diagramme⁵ illustrates our situation and the possibility of being caught in the dilemma of serving two masters. The outer ellipses are the various academic communities to which we belong to a greater or lesser extent. The central ellipse is our college and, presumably, our primary commitment, as far as our work is concerned. The goals of the college, then should be the determining parameters of our work and should shape the use we make of scholarship in this our primary responsibility. These goals are usually related to service in the churches. However, some of us are called to contribute to the world of scholarship too. I think it is helpful if we keep these two callings separate in our thinking, even if each undoubtedly influences the other in practice. We also have roles to fulfil in the churches.

But it is not only our use of scholarship which I have in mind. In teaching we are introducing students to the world of scholarship. I suggest this is principally to employ methods and results which serve their work in the churches. We may also hope to foster budding scholars who will make their own original contribution to scholarship, but this is a secondary and separate interest.

There are then three contexts in which we might use scholarship for Christian ends: the academic world, the college and the church. My central concern here is with the college which in some ways acts as a bridge between the other two but it is worth first considering the Christian contribution to the academic world.

Mark Noll has traced the history of evangelicals and biblical scholarship in the 19th and 20th centuries⁶ He shows the growing strength of evangelical scholarship towards the end of the 20th century but argues that evangelicals suffer from a lack of self-conscious perspective, by which I think he means, awareness of themselves as evangelicals, with evangelical beliefs. They are accepted in the academic world for their expertise on technical questions where point of view is not significant. He wants to encourage them to set their specialized studies in a broader framework of the bigger picture of theology and philosophy where different worldviews count⁷ A key question of course is whether evangelicals have a big enough picture of the Christian faith and a firm enough foundation from which to take up this challenge?

It is a call endorsed by George Marsden who has appealed to Christian scholars working across all the disciplines. He writes: 'Scholars who have religious faith should be reflecting on the intellectual implications of that faith and bringing those reflections into the mainstream of intellectual life.'⁸ He acknowledges that this is not easy. 'The fact is that, no matter what the subject, our dominant academic culture trains scholars to keep quiet about their faith as the price of full acceptance in that community.'⁹ And he asks, 'How does the religiously committed scholar accommodate to the demands of the mainstream academic profession without compromising her faith?'¹⁰ He asks specifically why those in church-related colleges do not address these issues. He himself goes on to explore the reasons for this state of affairs and then says that Christians should be able

to argue their case publicly, just as there is room for the views of Marxists, feminists, Jews, gays, etc.¹¹

The possibilities for Christian scholars to take a more publicly Christian role in the academy are enhanced by the reported breakdown of modernism and the emergence of a postmodern society¹² which, if true, qualifies Morgan's 'rational norms of the day'. One of the major features of what is sometimes called 'the collapse of the Enlightenment project' is the recognition that rationalism has severe limitations. The old idea of scientific humanism that there is one true story to be told and that it entails a closed universe of cause and effect which is understood by the objective application of human reason, is itself no longer credible. Today it is widely recognized that there is no human knowledge which does not involve the subjective factors of the beliefs, judgements and worldviews of the human beings who know.¹³ It is also widely argued that knowledge, like language, is a social construct. It may not be necessary to agree with more extreme statements, such as, there is no such thing as value-free knowledge — after all the NT was written in Greek — to appreciate that a person's knowledge is shaped by faith and the communities to which he/she belongs. Hence the possibility of openly acknowledged Christian scholarship in the academic market place.

But what Christian ends should Christian scholars seek and what strategies should they adopt? An influential chapter on bringing faith and academic discipline together was written by Ronald Nelson. He set out three stances which he termed: compatibilist, reconstructionalist, and transformationalist.¹⁴ The compatibilist sees his faith and his discipline as two different ways of looking at the world but he seeks to identify, elements in each which are compatible. The reconstructionalist sees no substantial common ground between them and works for the complete reconstruction of his/her discipline on Christian foundations. The transformationalist sees faith and discipline sharing some assumptions and concerns and works within the discipline as it is, but with insights derived from faith, for the transformation of the discipline, 'its ultimate subjection to the lordship of Christ'. What each of these might mean for any individual, and which of the three might be the preferred course, will be left to individual decisions.

What about Christian colleges?

One significant development in the post CNAA days has been the development of partnerships between Christian colleges and various validating bodies such as the universities. These partnerships are working for the interests of the colleges. The universities have adopted a policy of 'responsive evaluation' which means evaluation in terms of the needs and expectations of those

who have a stake in the institution whose courses are being validated, and in its programmes.¹⁵ This should encourage us to be free from setting our agendas as if our courses were courses in the university. Our questions do not have to mirror the current fashions in academic scholarship. They may, on occasion, but we need not ape the universities. Instead, our courses and questions can arise out of the Christian ends specified in our mission statements, publicity and *raison d'être*.

Taking Spurgeon College's mission statement as an example, it is characterized by broad phrases which might be interpreted in different ways but which still set some parameters. Here we are concerned with 'theological education and ministerial formation . . . for Christian service' in churches. This is expanded in terms of training for leadership as pastors, teachers and evangelists, and encouraging research 'relevant to the needs of the Christian Church'. The evangelical tradition of the College is indicated by a commitment to the study of 'the gospel of Jesus Christ as witnessed to by the Scriptures, with a view to facing up to the challenges of the contemporary world'. 'Academic and professional excellence' and 'the development of Christian character and spirituality' are cited as means to the achievement of these aims.

How then might we use scholarship to these ends? Evidently the disciplines of theology, pastoral training and leadership, biblical studies and the study of the contemporary world should figure on the curriculum but all deployed for service in the churches. One of the criteria to be applied to research proposals is how this will benefit the church, or anyone in it, rather than how this will advance my reputation in the scholarly world.

Fowl and Jones contrast the 'interpretive interests' of the academy and the church¹⁶ They argue that within the academy the Bible has the same status as a Shakespearean sonnet and it is simply another text to be studied. 'To be admitted to the guild of professional biblical scholars one need not (some would say should not) have any particular predisposition towards the Bible other than the conviction that it is a text about which one can say numerous interesting things.'¹⁷ But in a church, scripture has an authority which it does not have in the university, and the Bible is to be interpreted so that believers live faithfully before God. Where does that leave tutors in the colleges who are training people to lead and teach in churches?

It seems to me that it affects the presuppositions with which we work, the questions and issues which we select for study and the methods we teach our students to employ. In each case what we do will be governed by our Christian commitment and the specific purposes for which these students are taking our courses. The examples which follow are only illustrative of the kinds of difference involved.

At the level of presuppositions, the Christian world-

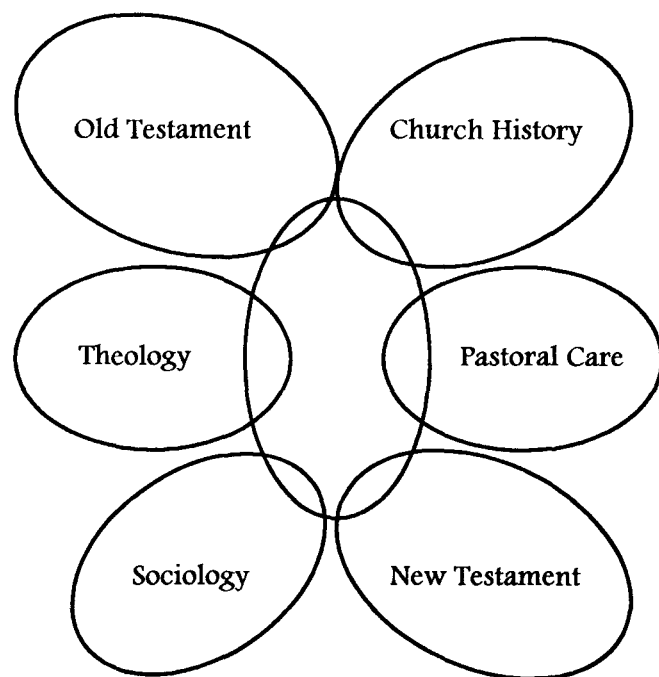
view is a way of life embracing our experience of God in his church and in the world but also including the acceptance of fundamental Christian beliefs such as: that God is the Creator and Sustainer of the universe, that his purposes are being realized in it, that the universe is open to his word and his coming in Jesus and through the Spirit. It entails acceptance of miracles as historical events — such as the exodus and the resurrection — even though the accounts are theological, expressing the faith of the witnesses. It means the Gospels are to be trusted as reliable sources for the life and teaching of Jesus and not just the faith of the evangelists if that is thought to imply something less. This does not rule out the idea that there are different layers within the Gospels: the ministry of Jesus, and how that ministry was understood after the resurrection, but it does rule out the idea that we cannot hear Jesus, even if his words are mediated by witnesses. As Noll argues in the ‘afterword’ of the second edition of his book, it is important to maintain the belief that the Bible tells the truth about God, the world and human history.¹⁸ It is also a Christian presupposition to respect the individual judgements of other people, including our students. We will encourage them therefore to come to their own academically informed convictions, rather than prescribe the outcomes of their studies, providing they can advance coherent arguments which pay attention to relevant evidence.

At the level of issues it may well be necessary for us to continue pursuing issues which are not currently fashionable in academic circles. Depending on one’s view of the nature of the book of Acts it is not today fashionable to suppose we have much evidence on the nature of the early church in Jerusalem. But some kind of imaginative reconstruction based on the evidence we have may continue to be useful to our students. On the other side some standard issues do not appear to be all that profitable for our purposes. I question whether issues such as: the place of Paul’s imprisonment when he wrote the prison epistles, whether Revelation should be dated in the reign of Nero or Domitian, who wrote some of the NT documents, warrant the time and energy which are sometimes given to them. To make a controversial point, is the examination of the evidence for and against Pauline authorship of the Pastorals as significant for our work as, say, the picture of church life which they contain and the advice the writer gives to deal with the problems at Ephesus and Crete? If Paul was not the author, that gets him off the hook of responsibility for 1 Tim. 2.11–15, as one of my students once said. But, as I replied to her, it doesn’t get us off the hook. We need to take seriously the Bible’s own explicit and implicit sense of its essential substance and shape when we decide on the content of our courses.

With reference to methods I regret encouraging one

of our average students to spend six weeks exploring the application of sociological models to the interpretation of the NT. Social history is a useful approach to understanding those who made up the membership of the first century churches and the first century world but the application of sociological models developed on the basis of 20th century societies to fill gaps in our historical knowledge may well be to use the wrong tool, however fashionable it was for a time.¹⁹ On a more positive note, as Christian teachers we have a responsibility to model Christian scholarship and discipleship for those we teach. One of Polanyi’s major themes is that the tacit dimension of learning requires the example of a teacher to be imitated by those who are learning. He holds too that faith is always involved in knowledge, that we have to indwell the details and lead from them to the significance of the bigger picture. For Polanyi faith is something like a conviction of the reality of the world, but for Christians it entails much more. Indwelling the details of the gospel accounts and learning from them of Jesus, may suggest that drawing distinctions between what the gospel writer received and the use he made of that tradition, is not the most helpful approach.²⁰ There will be wide agreement that we should use the canonical gospels as our primary sources for the study of Jesus, against Crossan and Mack.²¹

I expressed a concern in an earlier version of this paper that what is taught in our classrooms should be compatible with not only our mission statements but also what goes on in chapel. One colleague responded that maybe we should bring chapel into line with the classroom. Another distinguished the two activities. ‘In class the treatment is concise, analytical and epistemological in focus, concerned with say, the first century



horizon in NT studies; in chapel, the focus is on the contemporary impact of the Bible for the building up of the church and the activities are reflective, doxological and practical.' But this distinction of focus overlooks the community and worldview dimensions of what goes on in class. Biblical Studies can be inspirational and lead tutor and students to the threshold of worship, if not across it. In any event such studies should be pursued in the classroom in ways which help and not hinder the students' spiritual progress and training for their work in the churches. The use of scholarship in the churches is often in the background and that is probably its best place where it has a service role. For example, much detailed and painstaking work on the biblical text seeks to establish the final form of the text and guide in its translation. The scholarship of ministers should serve to help them in their teaching and preaching to the end that God's living word may be truly heard and his written word function according to 2 Tim. 3:16. Their theology and studies of leadership, apologetics, sociology, church history, ethics and mission, etc are all applied disciplines.

Today, then, is a day for bold unashamed Christian scholarship to serve Christ in the academy, the college and the church.

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Footnotes

1 I am grateful to Dr. Tony Cummins of Canadian Theological Seminary for his comments on and discussion of an earlier draft of this paper. He may recognize some of his phrases which I have plagiarized.

2 *Historical Criticism of the Bible: Methodology or Ideology? Reflections of a Bultmannian turned Evangelical*, transl. by Robert Yarbrough (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1990), p. 17.

3 op. cit. 49.

4 *Biblical Interpretation* (Oxford: OUP, 1988), p. 271.

5 attached to the back of this paper.

6 *Between Faith and Criticism* (Leicester: Apollos, 1991) [originally Harper Row, 1986].

7 p. 190.

8 *The Outrageous Idea of Christian Scholarship* (New York: OUP, 1997).

9 op. cit. p. 7 (cf. p. 52).

10 op. cit. p. 11.

11 op. cit. pp. 14–58.

12 e.g. [from a growing volume of literature] Stanley Grenz, *A Primer on Postmodernism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), J. Richard Middleton and Brian J. Walsh, *Truth is Stranger Than it Used To Be* (London: SPCK, 1995).

13 A seminal figure in the emergence of this recognition is Michael Polanyi whose magnum opus *Personal Knowledge* was first published by Routledge & Kegan Paul, London in 1958. However, Noll shows that years before Polanyi and Thomas Kuhn and the sociology of knowledge, evangelical scholars were aware of the significance of the presuppositions of those promoting the newer biblical criticisms [op. cit. p. 23].

14 'Faith — Discipline Integration: Compatibilist, Reconstructionist and Transformationalist Strategies' in *The Reality of Christian Learning*, eds. Harold Heie and David Wolfe (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), pp. 317–339.

15 cf. Robert Ferris, 'Accreditation and TEE,' *Excellence and Renewal*, ed Robert Youngblood (Exeter: Paternoster, 1969); pp. 64f.

16 *Reading in Communion Scripture and Ethics in Christian Life*. (London: SPCK, 1991). They argue that it is futile to seek 'the meaning' of a text. It is better to think in terms of different interpretive interests of different groups or communities, pp. 15–16.

17 op. cit. p. 37 They say that in the academy scholars can pursue any interest they fancy, constrained only by the need to get papers accepted for conferences and to have articles and books published, pp. 17f.

18 *Between Faith and Criticism*, p. 200.

19 C. Rodd, 'Sociology and Social Anthropology', *A Dictionary of Biblical Interpretation*, eds R.J. Coggins and J.L. Houlden (London: SCM, 1990), pp. 635–39.

20 see e.g. Drusilla Scott, *Michael Polanyi* (London: SPCK, 1996), [originally Guildford: The Book Guild Ltd., 1985]. R.T. Allen, 'The Philosophy of Michael Polanyi and its Significance for Education', *Journal of Philosophy of Education*, vol 12 (1978): pp. 167–177. See too from a different perspective, F. Watson, *Text and Truth: Redefining Biblical Theology* (Edinburgh: T.&T. Clark, 1997), pp. 41–63.

21 see the discussion in Gregory Boyd, *Cynic, Sage, or Son of God?: Recovering the Real Jesus in an Age of Revisionist Replies* (Bridge Point: Victor Books, 1995).