

Why the Local Church Needs the Scholars

Since I have reached the age Bismarck set for retirement, please allow me to indulge in one remembrance of my youth. In order to show I am not weird, I wish to say that like most Australian youth I was very keen on sports. My ambition as a teenager was to play cricket for Australia. But I soon found out that those ambitions far exceeded my skills on the field; so I turned elsewhere. Being a child of the church, I also had another keen interest. I was curious to know what kind of grounds undergirded the claims that we made in church to support our story. How strong was that evidence? In other words, Christianity claimed to be a historical religion! Was that true?

Thus, when I journeyed down to Brisbane (the state capital) I would always visit the religious bookstores and carefully purchase commentaries, concordances and Bible Encyclopedias from my limited funds. I still have some of those works on my shelves; and almost fifty years later, I consult them from time to time. I think I must have been the first person in Australia to actually have a private subscription to our scholarly journal, *Restoration Quarterly*. It started to be published in the fifties and featured the work of the then younger scholars. Some of my most enjoyable moments of those years were winter mornings spent sitting in the sun on our veranda reading these materials. I especially remember the exciting story of how Fausto Salvoni, the Catholic Scholar trained in the Pontifical Institute in Rome, became part of the restorationist tradition and then used his skills to introduce us to new vistas in the Old Testament.

To a teenager in high school, who lived with the usual tensions between believing the Christian story and what one learned in the secular classroom, scholarly materials like these were deeply reassuring. It was good to know somewhere there were fellow-believers who had thought through these things and yet maintained both their intellectual integrity and faith. Recently in my trips to Eastern Europe, I have found similar sentiments among many of the young people over there. In cultures where, by definition, to be a high-school teacher or university professor is to be an atheist, the idea that one can be a believer and a professor at the same time is a liberating event. It means that not only can students be open to the emotional and experiential dimensions of Christianity – which to them are very attractive – but they also can feel free to unshackle their minds and let a whole set of other kinds of questions come tumbling out.

But I have been talking about the 50's of Australia and present day Central or Eastern Europe. At the same time, we must admit that thinking seriously about the faith in contemporary America or Western Europe has fallen on hard times. Of course, it is not for lack of information. Today we are awash in so-called scholarly materials about Christianity. Turn on to a program on the life of Jesus on TV or a DVD and you will hear about 10 different views on about any incident in his life. But although it is out there, it has little impact. Everything is marketing. And, quite frankly, often the only people who are heard on these matters are the most outrageous. Our post-modern age that presumes there is no such thing as absolute truth, but only centers of power, assists in underwriting this perspective. In this environment it is easy to dismiss traditional scholars as obscurantists. And since the scholars do not always agree, many assert they can ignore them. They assume they have a license to proclaim their own idiosyncratic readings of the texts or propose new interpretations of Christian doctrine. And they do!

But surely, this cannot be right. We do not build airplanes without asking the engineers to be proven practitioners of aeronautical engineering, or submit to surgery without determining the surgeon is credentialed and well accepted by his peers. Why should it not be the same with scholars of the Christian tradition? Indeed, it is a seldom-appreciated fact that those who confessed Christ as Lord were the founders of all of the great educational institutions both in Europe and North America. For centuries, through meticulous preserving and transmitting texts, they functioned as the depositories of information from the past. They were often the sole links in the chain between modernity and the ancient world. Without this scholarly tradition, which is passed on in the schools to this day, how can we make a claim to any serious person that Christianity is well founded? Nevertheless, many take Christianity, like death and taxes, as a given. They pay it little attention. Why in this busy world where so much is changing and there is so much information to process, should they care about scholars and their writings?

Very briefly, I propose to show why you should care. Procedurally, I will cover two subtopics. I trust they will be relevant. First, I will deal with some misapprehensions of what scholars do? Finally, I will note some very practical reasons in local church life why it may be helpful to have a scholar nearby.

What Do Scholars Do?

Several years ago, I received a very angry letter from a lady who was upset by several things I said in a public forum. She ended the letter with something like this:

I would have sent this letter to you by e-mail, but I know you and your type live in another world and do not even acknowledge the centrality of information technology for everything we do in life.

Upon receipt of that missile, I sat back in my chair. I wondered what kind of an image this lady had of the work taking place on the third floor at Austin Grad. I guess she visualized us sitting at desks peering at some old musty scrolls or ‘bean counting’ various interpretations of a text from a multitude of old commentaries. Yes, indeed, we consult ancient texts from time to time. But we also use the latest information technology. From our office this allows us to access digitally the actual manuscripts of ancient texts in libraries through the world. We even have a program at Austin Grad where we can look at all occurrences of a particular Greek word in ancient literature. In our interpretations of the Greek New Testament, this software, upon several touches on a keyboard, can help us do research which once took days or weeks. This is not to mention the lively correspondence that is taking place on the Internet between scholars and those who, across the globe, inquire about our work continuously.

Of course, even in this digital world, the basic process of research, writing and publishing goes on. Sometimes people say, “Well, hasn’t the Bible been translated? What else is there for scholars to do?” This philistinism is more widespread than one would think. It totally overlooks a basic fact. Each new generation can lose knowledge and skills just as easily as they can add to knowledge and skills. We regularly hear about our great advances in many fields of technology and science. Far too often we are exposed to so many of these mind-numbing calculations about the growth of knowledge that we forget that in some areas of knowledge we may be going backwards. Where is the present constituency that supported the teaching of great literature in

previous generations? The same thing with the great composers of music. And I can assure you that if there is not the constituency, there will not be the scholars to support them. Take a look at our public schools. Does anyone seriously think our students are better in the humanities and fine arts than they were a generation ago?

I am afraid the same is true in the church. The level of biblical literacy and theological acumen is in serious decline in the Churches of Christ. We all see it. Most of our time in teaching at Austin Grad is spent in instructing students on the basic facts about the Bible and Christian history and doctrine. We are doing catechism. Here is the danger. As in the overworked story of a country which banned the teaching of science for a generation, only to find later, when it was resumed, that the people had lost the connections that made sense of the discipline, so it is with respect to the Bible and Christian doctrine. We are rapidly finding ourselves, even in the heart of the Bible Belt, in a similar situation. Often we cannot make the proper connections in Bible study or in basic doctrines because we do not know enough. It is the task of schools to maintain this heritage that C.S. Lewis once called “basic Christianity.” The alternative of turning our faith over into a cafeteria religion – choosing ones own belief based on the small bits and pieces one encounters personally – is not a good prospect to see. The church needs this great edifice we call “basic Christianity.” But if it is not maintained by skilled craftsman, it will crumble.

Assisting the Church

Well, enough on what we do. How then can scholars be of genuine assistance to the local church? I think in two basic ways: (1) in practical matters, and (2) through technical assistance in helping the church engage in more theoretical issues.

Practical Matters

Essentially, there should be a strong bond between the local church and the theological schools it supports. The church has every right to expect that its schools supply them with a steady stream of ministers and servant-leaders, as well as the production of commentaries and other literature that will help the congregation in its work of nurturing the faithful and spreading the gospel. At Austin Graduate School of Theology we encourage our teachers to make their scholarship available through seminars, supply preaching, teaching and publication. It goes without saying that this is a two-way street. As one would expect, theological education is an expensive proposition. If we expect quality it will come at a cost. My experience is that the brotherhood is generous when it has confidence in a work. We would encourage the churches to set aside some funds regularly for theological education. In many denominational traditions, something like 5% of the budget of the local church is bracketed for theological education. For far too long many of our congregations have had a free ride in this area. The time has come to step up to the plate. Indeed, we need to strengthen the relationship between our schools and the church. The strengthening of these ties can only be for the benefit of the kingdom.

Theoretical Issues

Besides “hands-on” assistance, there is another critical area where the scholars play a crucial role in the life of the church. This is in the area of being a resource on the determination of doctrinal standards. Let me give you an example of what I mean. At present there is a very popular book

being read by the general public called *The DaVinci Code*. In fact, I heard yesterday it has sold over forty million copies. This means that in many homes it will be the only book on Jesus. Think about that for a minute. This book is a fictional work; but inserted in its pages are outlandish ideas presented as facts. Supposedly, Jesus married Mary Magdalene and established a paternal line. It claims that the four gospels were not accepted by the church until the fourth century. It argues that they replaced earlier more authoritative accounts of Jesus' life. Suppose some folk affirming these assertions were to have these ideas introduced and promulgated in the local church. How do you deal with this issue? This is a matter where only someone who is credible as an authority on the early church can speak knowledgeably. You call in the scholars. In many ways scholars are like the ancient scribes in the first century. They have at their hands the sources and basic information on the relevant subjects. Here they can be of great assistance. Otherwise, you are reduced merely to who can shout the loudest in an argument. In the current environment of rampant pluralism, situations like *The DaVinci Code* issue regularly occur. Today it is the *Gospel of Judas*. Tomorrow it will be something else. One of the areas that I cover is that of eschatology – matters of the end time. The *Left Behind* series constitute an amalgam of strange and “off the wall” distortions of the biblical picture of the last days. Here again “scribe-scholars” can be of assistance in helping congregations sort out what the position of historical Christian Faith is on these matters. Believe me, it will save us from a host of problems.

It is not only on these issues but also, in the not-to-distant future, the appropriate “scribe-scholar” can be of vital significance in addressing critical issues that face the Churches of Christ. It is not late-breaking news to note that in the last decade or so a number of tectonic shifts have taken place within our beloved Restoration heritage. Certain distinctives of our fellowship have been called into question and at present there is a widespread sorting out taking place between those who wish to maintain the key features of the heritage and those who are seeking connections with other theological traditions. Certainly this ferment is evident in both our schools and in churches in many cities throughout the country. We can only assume this ferment will continue to grow. How this will play out is an open question. But if it is to be addressed responsibly, then the “scribe-scholars” are storehouses of information on our history and points of doctrine. If we are wise, we will allow them to play significant roles in future discussions.

Conclusion

Years ago, in a somewhat pessimistic mood, I heard Tom Olbricht say that scholars delude themselves if they think that they can write or say things that will influence the future direction of the church. Olbricht went on to say that all the scholars can do is, in historical retrospect, explain what the issues were and then comment on the paths and directions that were taken by the church. Perhaps he is right. Far too often it is the exercise of sheer power and not intellectual argumentation that is the determining factor in how these matters turn out. Perhaps what we have been doing in this talk today is tilting at windmills. Maybe the scholars are deluded about their own worth and significance. Judging by the number of books we sell and the response of ordinary folk to our articles, Olbricht may have a point.

Yet, there is still something within me, my rationalist Scottish-Irish heritage, perhaps my ancestral connections to the Restoration Movement, or a stubborn conviction that it is important to have good reasons for what we do – even in religion – that I believe that sound scholarship

can make a difference. And so, after a career laboring in this vineyard I still believe that it is important that our scholars engage the best minds of the age and that together with our people we continue to seek God's truth. Of course, we should always be prepared to follow where the truth will take us. Sometimes that is difficult. If we are undergirded by these convictions, then clear thinking and good arguments will have a hearing. This remains my conviction. I trust it will be yours. And I trust that this constituency will continue to abide in the Churches of Christ.

Allan J. McNicol
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