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The Scholar and the Bible¹

David Lertis Matson

I still remember the day when I felt like I had finally “arrived.” It was the day I graduated from Baylor University with PhD in hand. After six long years of working full-time on classwork, preliminary examinations, a prospectus, and a dissertation, I had finally reached my goal. I was now a bona fide biblical scholar!

My wife and two young sons had willingly moved to Texas all the way from Southern California, away from everyone and everything they had known. While they flourished during their time in Texas, we struggled financially while I went to school full-time (with a part-time ministry) and my wife worked part-time at our church’s day-care. It was not easy doing a PhD and raising two young boys in the process. So imagine that day of graduation when all was complete, all was now finished. Our joy was soaring. That was when my father-in-law—a working-class, practical man with a great sense of humor—took me aside, put his arm around me, and brought me down to earth: “Son, you have a BA, an MA, and now a PhD. How about one more degree?” Delighted that he was so enamored with my higher academic pursuits, I asked, “What degree is that, Pop?” He replied—with a very slow and meticulous punctuation—“How about a J . . . O . . . B?”

I mention this event to warn you at the outset: if you’re thinking about becoming a scholar, you’re going to be looking for a j-o-b. The job market is tough and the competition, fierce. Only become a scholar if you can’t do anything else. Only become a scholar if there is a fire in your belly. Ask yourself: What if I never end up with an academic career? Will I still be glad that I earned a PhD? If your answer to both questions is yes, then I’m speaking to you today. Of course, we are all called to be scholars in the sense that we’re all called to be serious disciples. But, more specifically, I am speaking to any of you who are thinking about pursuing biblical scholarship as an academic career.

As I look back upon my own academic journey, three pivotal-moment events jump out at me. The first took place on my bunk at a church winter retreat during my freshman year of college. My fiancé (now wife of thirty-eight years) had given me a New English Bible for Christmas. It wasn’t that the NEB was somehow sacrosanct or better than any other translation; it was simply the fact that I grew up in a church where I was always given the King James Bible any time I won an award. I found the language difficult, if not downright incomprehensible at times. (I’m still not sure what an *emerod* is [1 Sam 5.12].)

So there I lay on my bunk reading the New Testament. And, boy, did I read! I even began to miss some of the group activities because I was so enthralled with what I was reading. When our youth minister would ask where I was, someone would invariably say, “Oh, he’s on his bunk reading his Bible.” Our youth minister kept saying, “That boy’s on fire!” “That boy’s on fire!” And I *was* on fire. For the first time in my Christian life, I began to understand what the two disciples on the road to Emmaus must have felt when their hearts burned within them as the scriptures were opened to them (Luke 24.32).

1. Delivered to the students and faculty of Nebraska Christian College on September 10, 2015, as part of the Dunning Lectures in Papillion, Nebraska. I am especially honored to dedicate its publication to Stuart Love, my mentor and former professor, whose influence in my life and scholarship will become apparent in the reading of this address.

The second event occurred in a Christian bookstore a couple of years later. I discovered a book on the discount shelf that would forever change the way I looked at the Bible. Now a Bible and preaching major at Pacific Christian College (Hope International University), I was beginning to encounter critical opinions in my research that I considered incompatible with an inspired, authoritative text: Did Paul not actually write all the letters attributed to him? Did Jesus not actually do or say everything attributed to him in the gospel records? Was the creation account (or accounts!) in Genesis mythical rather than historical? These were just some of the questions that gnawed at me as I probed ever deeper into my studies.

And then I discovered a book that changed everything. In it was an essay by the New Testament scholar J. Ramsey Michaels, who challenged the way I thought about the Bible.² Prior to reading his essay, I thought of the Bible this way:

REASON
FAITH

You see, I thought that it was necessary to establish the inspiration of the Bible first by appealing to evidence. Like so many of my evangelical contemporaries, I was weaned on Josh McDowell's best-selling book *Evidence that Demands a Verdict*.³ I was familiar with the *bibliographical test* and the *historiographical test* and the *archaeological test* that would certainly compel any reasonable person to accept the Bible as a divinely inspired text. But that meant, of course, that there couldn't be any contradictions in the Bible, that Paul was the author of all his letters, and that Genesis 1 was literal history. If I encountered evidence to the contrary, well, that meant that I should try to find some other explanation or just accept it on faith. Though I didn't realize it at the time, my presuppositions were to try to establish the Bible by reason and do my exegesis by faith.

But that sequencing got turned around by Professor Michaels. He introduced me to another way of thinking about the Bible's authority:

FAITH
REASON

In this model, I first accept the Bible on faith and then do my exegesis by reason. What a radical concept that was! I took this shift in paradigm to mean that I could accept the Bible presuppositionally as the revelation of God and then allow my critical study to determine the particular form that revelation took. What if reasonable evidence pointed to Paul not being the author of all the letters attributed to him? Then God must have inspired pseudonymous authors in a Pauline school. What if reasonable evidence suggested that Jesus did not do or say everything attributed to him in the Gospels? Then the resurrected, exalted Jesus must have continued to speak through what the gospel writers wrote. What if some things seemed to contradict? Then God must have wanted us to have those, too. *Whatever form the revelation of God took, that was the form of revelation God wanted me to have.*

This new insight would soon prove its worth in a third seminal event. I was now a graduate student at Pepperdine University, working on my master's thesis on the Gospel of John, under the tutelage of Stuart Love. At one point I was studying all the sayings about the Paraclete, the writer's special term for the Holy Spirit: "And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever. This is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him, because he abides with you, and he will be in you" (John 14.16–17 NRSV). "But the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything, and remind you of all that I have said to you" (John 14.26 NRSV). "When the Advocate comes, whom I will send to you from the Father, he will testify on my behalf" (John 15.26 NRSV). "Nevertheless I tell you the truth: it is to your advantage that I go

2. J. Ramsey Michaels, "Inerrancy or Verbal Inspiration? An Evangelical Dilemma," in *Inerrancy and Common Sense*, eds. Roger R. Nicole and J. Ramsey Michaels (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1980), 49–70.

3. Josh McDowell, *Evidence that Demands a Verdict: Historical Evidence for the Christian Faith*, rev. ed. (San Bernardino: Here's Life Publishers, 1979).

away, for if I do not go away, the Advocate will not come to you; but if I go, I will send him to you” (John 16.7 NRSV). “When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth; for he will not speak on his own, but will speak whatever he hears, and he will declare to you the things that are to come” (John 16.13 NRSV).

Among other things, I noticed that all the verbs used of the Paraclete’s activities were future tense—the Paraclete *will* teach, *will* remind, *will* testify, *will* come, *will* guide, *will* speak, and *will* declare. John obviously places a theological premium on the future role of the Paraclete. So the decisive question became for me as an exegete: When does the Paraclete, the Holy Spirit, come?

The answer that I was naturally tempted to give was the obvious one: on the Day of Pentecost as described by Luke in Acts 2. But Professor Love disciplined me not to jump out of the Johannine writings to get my answer. He pointed out that John wasn’t writing a second volume as was Luke, who could afford to delay the coming of the Holy Spirit until fifty days after the resurrection (Acts 2). No, I was going to have to find my answer *within the Gospel of John itself*. And that answer was to be found not on the Day of Pentecost, but on “that day,” the Day of Resurrection, when Jesus breathed the Holy Spirit onto his disciples.

When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you." When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit" (John 20.19–22 NRSV).

The realization began to dawn: if the Holy Spirit doesn’t come here, he doesn’t come at all for John’s readers, leaving all the majestic Paraclete promises left hanging in the air and tragically unfulfilled. But that stunning realization left me with a problem: How can John place the coming of the Spirit on the Day of Resurrection while Luke places it on the Day of Pentecost? Was this an instance of a contradiction? Could John and Luke be reconciled? Must they be reconciled? Sitting in my study, I pondered this problem. I read and I studied, hoping to find an answer that satisfied. But then I came across a simple observation of James Dunn, who suggested that perhaps John was being more theological while Luke was being more historical. That simple suggestion struck a chord. In other words, John moves Pentecost to the Day of the Resurrection so that the disciples receive the Holy Spirit as a fitting and climactic fulfillment of all the Paraclete promises. Of course!

Suddenly, I realized that I didn’t have to reconcile the two accounts. Both history and theology could be vehicles of truth if my presuppositions were right. Both accounts made perfect sense in their respective literary and theological contexts. Consistency, I realized, was something that *I* was imposing on the texts. If God had seen fit to provide me with two different accounts of the Spirit’s coming, why shouldn’t that be good enough for me? All this rethinking was the result of the bombshell that fell upon the playground of my biblical imagination.

These three events—lying on my bunk at winter camp, perusing the Christian bookstore, and sitting in my study—all lead up to my first important point: if you’re going to become a scholar of the Bible, you may need to **generate new presuppositions** expansive enough to account for all the complexities of the text. You will need to define biblical inspiration not by some bibliographical, historiographical, or archaeological test that Scripture must somehow meet, but by the nature and content of the biblical revelation itself. Whatever form God’s scriptural revelation takes is the form of scriptural revelation God wants you to have.

My second point is this: as a scholar you will need to **guard against pride**. In this day and age of the ubiquitous selfie, Christian celebrity, and endless self-promotion, when everyone seems to have a band, a blog, and a book, I remind you of what Paul said to the “wise” Corinthians: “Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up” (1 Cor 8.1 NRSV). You see, a curious thing may happen to you that has happened to so many others: you may find yourself frustrated and stifled by the church, to feel chained by your fundamentalist past. And you might even begin to look down upon the church, to think it beneath your time, effort, and career. The halls of universities and some seminaries are lined with professors who are more than happy to remind you of their

former Christian commitments. In one seminary of which I'm aware, it is an embarrassing admission to say that you are actually planning for a career in the church rather than in an academic institution.

Helmut Thielicke, the well-known German theologian and preacher of a generation ago, wrote a book every budding scholar should read. It's called *A Little Exercise for Young Theologians*.⁴ In it Thielicke warns against the very pride against which Paul speaks. In a chapter entitled, "Pathology of the Young Theologian's Conceit," Thielicke talks about a young theological student recently come home from his first year in seminary. Glorifying in his new-found insights and hermeneutical sophistication, he soon found himself engaged in a protracted theological conversation with a simple Christian pietist. The young seminarian took up the challenge of correcting the simplicity of this man's theology with what Thielicke describes as a "malicious joy." The learned student relished the thought of deconstructing all the naïve beliefs that he, too, had once entertained. "His purpose," writes Thielicke, "was to crush the man by the impression of an overpowering erudition to which he could never attain, and thus to reduce him to a feeling of helplessness."⁵ Thielicke further says: "The purpose of his action was not to impart to the other man some understanding of what we theologians are driving at, or to lead him gently beyond the stage of his previous knowledge, but to render him helpless . . . as a means to personal triumph and at the same time as a means to kill."⁶ Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up.

My third and final thought closely relates: you will need to **get straight your priorities**. Decide early on whether you will serve yourself or your Savior, your peers or a person, the guild or the gospel. Scholars are particularly prone to pride and self-promotion. You can see it a scholarly conference when someone delivers a ten-minute soliloquy intended to demonstrate his or her own erudition rather than ask a simple question. Scholars are not too different at times from the ancient Pharisees, who sought to justify themselves before others rather than to be justified before God (Luke 16.15). With refreshing candor, noted New Testament scholar Beverly Roberts Gaventa looked back on her career and reflected that "I haven't so much doubted God as I have doubted the significance and contribution of biblical scholarship." The reason, she says? An "ethos of self-promotion" and an "agonistic culture that undermines genuine learning."⁷

When it's about you rather than the gospel, scholarship becomes a selfish vehicle for advancing your career rather than serving the mission of God in the world. Scholars often travel in herds. They tend to jump on the bandwagon of the latest fads in the interest of writing a dissertation or carving out a niche for themselves on a scholarly Mount Rushmore. They pursue their ideas not always because they're *true* but because they're *new*. Advancing some esoteric theory is a way to get your name in scholarly lights, to publish a book, to get a better j-o-b. When scholarship is about you and your ego, then the desire for the approval of others becomes paramount. You want to be popular with your peers. You want to be cutting-edge. You certainly don't want to be perceived as quaint or out-of-date. Naming ("Are you conservative or fundamentalist?"), gaming ("Well, the majority of scholars think . . ."), and shaming ("No one thinks that way anymore.") are often rhetorical devices to label those poorly dressed practitioners who refuse to wear the latest scholarly fashions. Don't get me wrong: we *do* want to advance knowledge and we *do* want to push the envelope. But when scholarship is about you instead of truth, you will be blown around by every wind of doctrine.

A couple years ago I was invited to teach at a church near where I lived. The church was known for taking the Bible seriously, and so I appreciated its gracious invitation. There were, of course, all kinds of people present—from the ignorant to the intellectual to the person who simply liked to hear himself talk. But also present also was a middle-aged woman named Kathy with stage four cancer. She had been through numerous cancer treatments, and her prognosis at this point was uncertain. Much to my surprise, she told me after one of the class sessions that she was planning to pursue a master's degree in Biblical Theology. I remember thinking to myself (a bit heartlessly I must admit), "That seems a little unrealistic. Why would you pursue a

4. Helmut Thielicke, *A Little Exercise for Young Theologians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1962).

5. *Ibid.*, 18.

6. *Ibid.*, 19.

7. John Byron and Joel N. Lohr, eds., *I (Still) Believe: Leading Bible Scholars Share their Stories of Faith and Scholarship* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2015), 88–89.

master's degree when you're fighting for your life, when you don't even know if there's going to be a future?" But she answered before I could even speak: "I want to get my master's. If I die before I finish, at least I'll know more about where I'm going."

For Kathy, studying the Bible was a means to an end, quite literally. The prospect of death had put it all in perspective: she was open to revising her presuppositions, didn't care about her pride, and had her priorities in line. In the short amount of time she possibly had left, her desire was not to master the Bible, but to let the Bible master her.⁸ Kathy was ready to become a scholar for all the right reasons. "Where is the wise man? Where is the scholar? Where is the philosopher of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world?" (1 Cor 1.20 NIV 1984).

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8. Kathy was called home to be with her Lord this past January. She died in the confidence of knowing what she believed.