

Wednesday, April 12, 2006

### George Guthrie on Faith Based Scholarship

George Guthrie, NT professor at Union University (Jackson, TN), chimes in on this topic. His work on the structure of Hebrews has significantly influenced me in the area of structural studies.



#### **How would you describe the role of personal faith as it relates to biblical scholarship?**

I assume that you primarily are asking about Christian faith, but we should be clear from the beginning that every scholar has a system of belief with which he or she approaches the biblical text, a view of reality that governs how data is addressed. Unfortunately, in contradistinction from the biblical literature, “faith” has been redefined somewhat in the modern era to mean “a leap against the evidence” (i.e. you must turn off your brain to have “faith”). Thus, at times in the history of biblical scholarship there have been those who have presented themselves as purely objective, over against those who approach the text with faith commitments. Bob Yarbrough’s monograph, *The Salvation Historical Fallacy*, demonstrates this tendency, for example, in the approach of F. C. Baur, who described New Testament theology as a purely historical science that sought “the pure and impartial investigation” of the biblical text (Yarbrough, 9). This posture simply will not do. Every scholar has a pre-understanding, and every pre-understanding affects interpretation in one way or another. At times we are not dealing with critical over against devotional approaches, but rather approaches that reflect different worldviews.

It is true that Jews or Christians approaching the biblical literature at times have skewed the meaning of the text in favor of their pre-understanding on how the world works, and how God works in the world, but the same certainly could be said, for instance, of naturalists, or those coming from a Kantian perspective. Conversely, some devoutly Christian scholars—I think of scholars such as J. A. Bengel or Adolf Schlatter in past generations—have taken careful, critical study of the biblical text to be the pursuit of truth (rather than the confirmation of an already held “truth”) and a matter of integrity. They cared about the text and the message it embodies so much that they demanded of themselves, from an integrity standpoint, the best and most honest approach to the text.

Now on one level good biblical studies scholarship is good biblical studies scholarship. Whether one is a Christian or not, evangelical, or some other stripe of Christian, or one who has no interest in or association with a particular religion, the way one uncovers and analyzes the data of history, archaeology, documents, etc. is going to be the same. That is why there can be quite a spectrum of worldview commitments in an organization like SBL; if you don't bring data to the table, you will not be given a place (unless of course you are there to add shock value!). The reason evangelicals have been much more visible at SBL in the last two decades is that they, at times, genuinely have something to offer in terms of the uncovering and analysis of data. At the same time, poor biblical studies work is poor biblical studies work, and no particular orientation has a corner on that market—I have read somewhat poor doctoral theses coming out of both evangelical and broader university contexts over the years.

So, everyone approaches the biblical text with a pre-understanding. My view of the way the world works affects how I approach the text in at least three ways: 1) My motivation to study the biblical text, both in relation to the academy and the church, certainly has to do with my understanding that Jesus really is Lord of the universe. I am motivated to do well, to analyze the text accurately, and to help others in understanding the text, by a sense of obligation to him; 2) since I believe there really is a God who is involved in the world, I, therefore, believe the supernatural is possible (this is not to say that it is inevitable or constant or rules out the normal, natural processes of the created order). Thus I do not approach the NT, for instance, assuming that things like resurrection from the dead must be ruled out from the start. 3) Application. I am compelled as a Christian to act on the truth I discern in the text. Rather than just interesting stuff, or just facts, I believe the materials of the NT call for response and often an adjustment of life thoughts or patterns.

**What are the advantages and pitfalls associated with a more “secular” brand of biblical scholarship? What does the church have to do with the academy and vice versa?**

I am with others who don't like the labels. I suppose by “secular” you mean “those who have no particular interest in or commitment to a religion,” but, as noted above, a “non-religion” posture still constitutes a “religious” posture in a sense. Some in institutions that are not aligned with a particular church or religious body probably have more freedom to shift positions pretty radically without repercussions (unless of course they become too evangelical!). As for pitfalls, I think they can be the same as for evangelicals—pressure from peers to maintain certain positions, a temptation to not be open to positions that call into question one's philosophical commitments, and given the commercialism of our contemporary context, the temptations to follow the money, or fame—i.e., “what can I put forward that will be sexy, or that will shock, or that will please, or that will sell books, or get me a better post, or get me on television?” These are very human temptations.

Since I teach at an institution that overtly works at the integration of faith and learning (and I realize that there are many who call that whole program into question), I believe in the synergy

between the church and our type of academic context. I would not be here if I did not. The church needs us, both in the sense of training those coming out of , and those going to, the church to think well. Most of the grand academic institutions of the Western world were founded with this intention. There would be no “Cambridge” or “Harvard” apart from such beginnings. Since we are a university, not a seminary, we do not focus on the practice of ministry skills as such, but rather the liberal arts and the classical disciplines—the languages, philosophy, theology, biblical studies, ethics, etc. At our best, we can help the church to deal well with all of these areas and to process its encounters with the broader cultures of the world in terms of information and worldview.

At the same time, I think we need the church. The church gives us a community context in which to do what we do. We get great students from a lot of churches. We are supported by the churches financially. I realize this could be seen as problematic to some, but the church also gives us a measure of accountability both morally and in terms of the grand Christian traditions.

**Who would you considered to be stellar examples of evangelical scholarship? Who are some of the best examples of mainstream critical scholars?**

Again, I am going to resist nice, neat categories. I have mentioned Bengel and Schlatter. Scholars I admire for a variety of reasons are people like Martin Hengel, F. F. Bruce, Richard Bauckham, Howard Marshall, Albert Vanhoye, L. T. Johnson, Richard Hays, Harold Attridge (especially his Hebrews vol.), Tom Wright, Earle Ellis, Murray Harris, Gordon Fee, Moises Silva, Douglas Moo, Anthony Thiselton, Kevin Vanhoozer, Darrel Bock, Scot McKnight, Grant Osborne, and Craig Keener. Don Carson and Craig Blomberg always impress with the breadth of the areas in which they are conversant. I think there is a great group of younger scholars coming up, such as Mark Goodacre and Simon Gathercole. There are many others from whom I benefit, including other friends, who I hope will pardon me for not mentioning them.

**Any additional thoughts on this subject?**

I probably have given you more than you wanted. Thanks for the invitation to participate.