

Monday, March 13, 2006

Scot McKnight on Faith Based Scholarship

NT scholar and blogger extraordinaire, [Scot McKnight](#), shares his insights and thoughts concerning faith based scholarship. For clarification: what I mean by "secular biblical scholarship" is "mainstream critical scholarship" of the same genus as Crossley, Ehrman, Crossan, Borg, Pagels etc... Some might say "liberal" or "higher critical", but I find that most labels because they fail miserably when it comes to all the shades and nuances of various scholarly viewpoints.



(1) In what way does your faith enhance your scholarly investigation of the Bible? How does your research differ from that of secular biblical scholars? What are some of your guiding presuppositions? What are some of the potential strengths and weaknesses of a committed evangelical view of the Scriptures?

It is my daily prayer that all of my scholarly work be empowered by faith in Jesus Christ and be aimed at aiding that faith, both my own faith and the faith of others. I would not say it “enhances” my scholarship but drives it and shapes it. That notwithstanding, I believe all of scholarship, whether that of an evangelical or a non-evangelical, an atheist or an agnostic, is driven by that faith. All knowledge claims, as Lesslie Newbigin showed in his popular writings (like *Proper Confidence*), find their orientations in faith commitments or tacit assumptions. Scientists assume a scientific/empirical knowledge base and we Christians assume a Jesus Christ knowledge base. I do not look at the doctrine of Scripture as a presupposition but as the inevitable conclusion of faith in Jesus Christ, who sent the Holy Spirit, who empowers the Church to guide it into all truth, which finds its expression in Scripture.

(2) What are some of the potential strengths and weakness of secular biblical scholarship? What does the academy have to do with the church and vice versa? What is your advice to evangelical scholars regarding how one might interact with secular scholarship?

“Secular” scholarship means, I think I can assume from your questions, non-believing scholarship and by that you mean those who do not derive their scholarship from faith in Jesus Christ. That sort of scholarship, which is very common in the religious academy, is seeking to make sense of the world in which those scholars live. To the degree that such a world coheres with a believers’ world, that scholarship can be of tremendous use. This has led to the common description of “objective” scholarship as neutral and especially as it operates as a historical discipline. I don’t believe in objectivity or neutrality; and I am more and more persuaded, as I essayed in *Jesus and His Death*, that history is an attempt to find a narrative thread through a variety of facts, and I think that narrative thread is shaped by the questions one asks and one brings to the task – and those questions are shaped by one’s faith.

I think young scholars should find their scholarly orientation in the context of the Church and in the context, more particularly, of a local church. I do not think there is such a thing as “bracketing” off faith as one seeks to understand the Bible – to bracket off faith is to play a game that leads, actually, away from faith for it teaches the bracketing scholar how to think apart from faith – and one ends up where one starts: without faith. To interact with “secular” scholarship requires genuine listening, and that means allowing other questions to come to the fore and to the table – I know I have asked questions that have been “forced” upon me by scholars who come to the table from another faith orientation.

(3) Who would you consider to be stellar examples of faith based evangelical scholarship and why? Who are some secular scholars that you respect and why?

Stellar examples: Gregory of Nyssa, St. Augustine, Martin Luther, John Calvin, John Wesley – these have to come into play in every genuine Christian conversation with the Bible.

Contemporary scholars: the finest scholar I’ve ever been around is Murray Harris, now living in New Zealand. And I learned a lot from my teachers and I remain grateful for each of them: Joe Crawford, Ron Mayers, Walt Liefeld, Murray Harris, Grant Osborne, Doug Moo, Dale Allison and Jimmy Dunn. From the world of scholarship, I think I’ve enjoyed reading Tom Wright the most, but I have also learned from George Ladd, Don Hagner, Graham Stanton, Klyne Snodgrass, Mark Bockmuehl, Richard Bauckham, Howard Marshall, Joel Green, Ben Witherington, and I could go on and on.

And I think more of us need to read theologians, like Stanley Grenz, LeRon Shults, Bruce McCormack, Kevin Vanhoozer, and Miroslav Volf.

More biblical scholars need to read great writers – and apart from Tom Wright, who only fails in writing books that are too long, very few biblical writers today are really good writers. Few have achieved the clarity of C.H. Dodd or C.F.D. Moule. So, I recommend that young scholars read good writers – like Michel Montaigne, E.B. White, Joseph Epstein, Charles Lamb, Samuel Johnson, and especially C.S. Lewis.