

Scholars serving the congregation

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According to an old joke, the news circulated in a community that someone had moved into town and was planning to attend the local congregation. There was some uncertainty about the letters *PhD* attached to this person's name. When it was discovered that they stood for "Doctor of Philosophy," some were disappointed. At least a *Posthole Digger*, they considered, would have been good for something.

Such jokes mask values and perhaps fears. Scholars may be timid, socially awkward, arrogant, intimidating, or all of the above. Who do such people think they are to remove themselves from the realities of life, study esoteric books for several years, and then tell the rest of us what to believe? In my view, the populist

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and pragmatic attitudes that motivate such comments are not entirely off-target; in fact, they may be evidence of a congregation's spiritual health which brings people to engage with the Bible.

Yet if heard only disparagingly, such concerns can also be discouraging to those whose gifts motivate them toward academic

pursuits. I sometimes ponder whether I would have made it to the seminary and doctoral training I find so beneficial in my vocation if it had not been for the encouragement of a good friend from a different Christian tradition, one where such training is more highly respected than in my own.

If indeed graduate theological education has value, how might congregations benefit from the service of those who have such training?¹ First I will make some general comments about the scholar's role in the congregation's experience with the Bible and its process of interpretation—its *hermeneutics*. I will then suggest some specific ways that scholars might be "good for something."

The community's interpretive process

The process of appropriating scripture in the faith community may be summarized in three components: *community*, *canon*, and *commentary*.² The Bible (canon) has authority as the congregation (community) interprets and enacts it (commentary).³ For present purposes, we want to ask how scholars and scholar-pastors might best contribute to this process.

The more focused question is how a scholar's gifts and training might offer something *distinctive*. That role will differ according to the polity of various Christian traditions. In some traditions, special teaching offices require the gifts and training of a scholar, but in churches that encourage the contribution of each voice to the congregation's life and decision making, it is less clear how the scholar should be involved.

Some people suppose that where the importance of scholarship is promoted, scholars operate as a gateway to knowledge: all things of consequence must come filtered through them. It may be intimidating to cite a biblical text only to have a scholar respond that "in the original Hebrew (or Aramaic or Greek)," the verse clearly means something else. Or when a group is discussing a certain practice or doctrine, a scholar's comment that "Protestants in the believers church tradition have handled the present disagreement in such-and-such a way" may put the discussion on an uneven plane. It may intimidate some people into silence and can also engender resentment from those who disagree but don't know how to appropriately engage the discussion. The gateway concept seems inconsistent with their understanding of church.

Let us consider that among the three elements introduced above, it is at *canon* and *commentary* that scholars trained in biblical and theological studies bring something distinctive to the interpretive process. Scholars may be positioned to help the congregation better comprehend its canon, and those equipped to lead the community's commenting should be valued and respected (Ezra 7:6, 10, 12; Neh. 8:1–8, Matt. 5:21–48).⁴ The *community* element involves *all* members engaging and reflecting, in order to put the text into action. The scholar's input is important here as well, but not in a way that is different from that of others in the congregation.

Regarding the areas of distinctive contribution, the apostle

Paul's concept of assessment is especially germane. In the life of the church, the offerings of all participants should be "tested" to determine their faithfulness, and this testing presumably would include the input of the scholar (1 Cor. 14:26, 29, 32–33; Gal. 1:8; Phil. 3:16; 1 Thess. 5:21; 2 Thess. 2:15; compare Acts 17:10–11; 1 John 4:1).⁵

Rather than envisioning a gateway, we might visualize the hermeneutical community as a circle of conversation around the Bible. Such a circle entails interaction in which all participants are both teaching and learning from one another: experiences, insights, reflections, loving arguments, and the gift of scholarship interweave and allow iron to sharpen iron (Acts 15:1–31; Prov. 27:17). In this circle, the scholars' important contributions are

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acknowledged and honored as these are tested and found to have merit. At the same time, the scholar can humbly respect the bigger picture of the Holy Spirit's work in the community (John 16:12–15). As Richard Mouw has helpfully pointed out, scholars have much to learn from other believers.⁶

Ways scholars can serve

We turn now to three practical areas in which scholars and scholar-pastors can use their gifts and training to serve the congregation.

Understanding the Bible. Those who are trained in biblical scholarship can help people

in the congregation better understand the diversity of literature represented in the Bible. Good entry points for cultivating such understanding include helping people see the distinction between history and parable and the difference between prose and poetry. Within poetry, for example, there is the variety of psalm types in the book of Psalms and elsewhere. Students of the Bible usually pick up on this distinction quickly and recognize the value of distinguishing between a lament psalm and a praise psalm. The Psalms are an especially good illustration that literature does things, and that to avoid misreading we need to be alert to what a given text is trying to do.

Readers also need to recognize the complexity of the Bible as a

community document written by a variety of people who reflect different life realms of the community. The community's law, prophecy, wisdom, apocalyptic literature, and narrative play fundamentally different roles; interestingly, these intersect with the worship life of the community as evidenced in the Psalms. Added to this complexity is the character of the Bible as a transmitted document, shaped and adapted to new situations over a period of centuries.

The canon resists compression or abbreviation. The diversity of focus and differences of detail among the four Gospels, for example, once motivated an effort to merge the four into one document. The result, called the *Diatessaron*, was rejected by the church in favor of the four originals. On the other hand, many scholars believe that the Pentateuch resulted from a compilation of written or oral sources; yet even here not all tensions or varieties of perspective have been removed. The creation account of Genesis 1 complements a very different account in chapters 2 and 3. Scholars can help Bible readers navigate such diversity and appreciate what each element brings to the canon.

The Bible as canon is a tool by which the community evaluates various ideas and plans. Christians confess that their respect for scripture is justified because it is divine communication incarnated in human language. A major complexity with the Bible as canon is the fact that some parts qualitatively supersede other parts, yet without those previous parts being set aside. In these last days, says the writer of Hebrews, God has spoken to us through his Son (Heb. 1:1–2), just as Jesus demonstrated by his pronouncement “You have heard that it was said . . . But I say to you . . .” (Matt. 5:21–22, 27–28, 31–34, 38–39, 43–44). Working with this kind of tension in the Bible is particularly challenging, and as with many challenges it produces new insights into the reality of God’s work among us. As the early followers of Jesus struggled to comprehend, God continues to do new things, things that are in continuity with what came before but which also break through previous barriers (Acts 15:10).

Finally, the process by which the congregation reads and appropriates the Bible depends on its principles of interpretation. Those committed to full community involvement will naturally want the process to be as careful and productive as possible.

Challenges include the diversity (found in most congregations) in understandings about inspiration and revelation, and in approaches to language, literature, history, and the social sciences.

Training in Bible study. In our day, reading an ancient document such as the collection we call the Bible, with a view to transforming one's life, is a radical and countercultural act.⁷ One important way that scholars can assist others in the congregation is to help them make the transition from being *ordinary* readers to being *careful* readers. A careful reader, by my definition, is patient, disciplined, teachable, and courageous. The others are ordinary

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readers. In my experience the latter rush to the application "payoff" of Bible study and seek proof texts to support what they believe on other grounds. They may also be suspicious of scholars and fail to appreciate complex procedures, such as those required to translate the Bible into their native language.

Not that ordinary readers should be disqualified from participating in the hermeneutical community. One important contribution any alert person can make, for example, is to suggest biblical texts that may have some relevance to what the congregation

is engaging at the moment. But the participation of readers will be more constructive and satisfying to them and to others as they grow in their ability to read the Bible well.

The process of training in Bible study will typically introduce a method or methods, and will eventually involve Bible reference tools. Such introduction is often a good entry point for helping people grow in their ability to engage the Bible. Many tools used by scholars are available to other careful readers. At the most basic level, these tools, whether in print or (increasingly) in electronic format, can be used without difficulty by nonscholars. But to learn to use them skillfully and with appropriate perspective takes time. I personally observed one (intelligent and sincere) Bible study leader pick and choose among the possible meanings for a Greek word listed at the back of his Strong's concordance as he explained a biblical text; a guide is necessary to help people appreciate the nature of language and to use the best resources.

One tremendous asset is Bible commentaries, especially those that are not overly brief and those that are part of a respected series. The scholar in the congregation is often in a position to recommend such works and to point out their orientations, strengths, weaknesses, academic level, and idiosyncrasies. A Bible commentary, in fact, is a kind of portable scholar, one that is typically more direct, succinct, and compliant than its real-life counterparts. Alertness to the tradition within which the commentary was written is important, as is awareness of the benefits of consulting several resources for a diversity of perspectives. Ideally all such tools will help members participate more helpfully in the conversation of their local congregation.

Appreciating the big picture. In the history of the Christian church, discerning the “message” of the Bible, how it all fits together, has been addressed using various methods. These approaches include aligning scripture with a confession of faith, discerning a theological center within the canon, tracing a historical development of understanding, identifying polarities and tensions or patterns of promise and fulfillment, constructing a typology, and more. A scholar conversant with these efforts in biblical theology can offer some context, which may help Bible readers assess strengths and weaknesses of those proposals that to them seem obvious, essential, or the *only* viable Christian position. Big picture conversations can sharpen the focus of the pastor’s teaching ministry and the congregation’s Christian education plan. A key point in this exploration is recognition that the Bible asks us to adopt its way of looking at the world and its way of envisioning a new world, and we likely will have to adjust our own worldview glasses as a result.⁸

Beyond the transformation of our minds (Rom. 12:1–2), efforts to understand the “message” of the Bible can remind us of other important dimensions of faith, particularly active discipleship—developing faithful habits both individually and collectively—as well as growing in trusting love and worship of our Creator and Savior. Examining the big picture is important on a periodic basis, both formally and as reminders in sermons, Sunday school, and other venues. It can promote a healthy assessment of the congregation’s values, priorities, and practices, and may result in a greater appreciation for the wonder and richness of the biblical text.

Perhaps the greatest contribution a scholar can make is to embody delight in the scriptures and give evidence of their importance in his or her life (Deut. 6:6–7; John 15:7). Do we take the Bible *joyously-seriously*, whatever our particular articulation of its inspiration?⁹ Persons who incarnate the power of the Bible are its best promoters and give witness to its vital role in congregational life.¹⁰ And many of the best examples of such incarnation are not scholars by training.

The above reflections are an introduction to the potential for scholars to provide important service to the congregation. The better we understand this potential, the more satisfying we will find our participation in the hermeneutical community.

Notes

¹ It would also be instructive to consider the potential benefits with other scholars.

² Perry B. Yoder, “The Pastor as Teacher,” in *The Heart of the Matter: Pastoral Ministry in Anabaptist Perspective*, ed. Erick Sawatzky (Telford, PA: Cascadia, 2004), 74–84.

³ Yoder’s three components overlap what has been called the “hermeneutical spiral”: *scripture, tradition, experience, and reflection*. These elements are similar to the four sources (sometimes called the Wesleyan Quadrilateral) John Wesley employed for coming to theological conclusions (individually or corporately). The elements rotate as a cycle; considered over time, it is visualized as a coil or spiral stretching from the past into the future. Yoder’s community, canon, and commentary suggest a similar process but emphasize the corporate dimension and specify that the reflection and tradition elements adjudicate tensions and uncertainties in the canon.

⁴ Yoder, “The Pastor as Teacher,” 80–82.

⁵ Robert Banks, *Paul’s Idea of Community*, rev. ed. (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1994), 103.

⁶ Richard J. Mouw, *Consulting the Faithful: What Christian Intellectuals Can Learn from Popular Religion* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1994), 13. Mouw encourages a “hermeneutics of charity,” as scholars assess beliefs and practices of believers that might easily be rejected as valueless.

⁷ William H. Willimon, *Pastor: The Theology and Practice of Ordained Ministry* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2002), 111.

⁸ Ibid., 125.

⁹ Kathleen Kern, “What Does It Mean to Take the Bible Seriously?” *Gospel Herald*, January 31, 1995, 7–8.

¹⁰ Robin Maas, “The Pastor as Biblical Interpreter and Teacher,” in *The Pastor as Religious Educator*, ed. Robert L. Browning (Birmingham, AL: Religious Education Press, 1989), 83–86.

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