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# Can a Christian Be a Biblical Scholar? Searching for the Coherence of Believing and Learning in Biblical Studies

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## **Can a Christian be a Biblical Scholar?**

### **Searching for the Coherence of Believing and Learning in Biblical Studies**

It is the same way every semester. Northwestern College's course evaluation forms ask students to respond to this question: "To what extent did the professor relate the Christian faith to this course and help you to do the same?" Without claiming to offer a scientific survey, easily half of the students in my courses respond with something to this effect, "Well, it *is* biblical studies." Some, with greater brevity but less eloquence, simply write, "Duh." Putting aside for the moment the troubling implication that my class has inspired such *heights* of reflection, one has to wonder what is going on in their minds. They seem to presuppose that: (a) biblical studies classes, by their very nature, provide such integration; (b) biblical studies professors necessarily, easily, and clearly do this; and (c) biblical studies as a discipline assumes faith on the part of teachers and students, whereas matters of faith are somehow outside of, or at best tangential to, other disciplines, whether they study nature, history, or human thought.

There is surely enough blame to go around, for no doubt I have contributed to their confusion. In my effort to "get through the material," I have probably not spent sufficient time dispelling their false assumptions about critical thinking in general or the discipline of biblical studies in particular. Neither is it obvious that Northwestern College has so clarified these matters as to produce unanimity among its faculty members on the matter of faith and learning. But the fact of the matter is that there may yet be greater and more tragic blame, because it is not

altogether clear that the guild of biblical studies has clarified these matters for itself.

It is my goal, therefore, to explore this quandary and offer some assessment of and proposal for integrating faith and learning within biblical studies. My perspective on this subject is largely conditioned by a vocational journey that has placed me in the center of the faith-learning matrix. I worked within *the faith community* as a Presbyterian pastor of three different churches over a twelve year period. I then spent four years in a doctoral program which, while not hostile to matters of faith, was conducted almost entirely from the modern and critical perspective of *the academic guild* of biblical studies. Since that time I have been employed at Northwestern College, an institution that aims to be a community of *both faith and learning*. Although the effort to integrate the distinct subject matter, methods, and perspectives possible within these two spheres is a condition of employment at the college, my own experience of the task of integration has been fraught with challenges.

To be a *Christian minister* in most denominations requires a deep sense of calling and commitment to the essential tenets of that tradition's theological beliefs and ministerial practices. To be a *biblical scholar* at most educational institutions is to commit oneself to the highest standards of research and publication, based on an outlook that strives for objectivity as well as openness to truth wherever it is found. But herein lies the difficulty: can an ordained minister like me – who has already affirmed ordination vows about the Bible's inspiration and authority – achieve the level and quality of objectivity and openness required of critical, scholarly study of the Bible? Or to ask the question another way: have my faith commitments about the Bible already limited what I am able or willing to discover within its pages? By admitting my subjectivity, what form or level of objectivity can I now claim? To put the matter broadly and bluntly: can *any*

Christian be a biblical scholar?

In what follows I hope to provide a reasonable and faithful presentation of the following thesis: **Christian biblical scholars are not only *able* to experience the coherence of believing and learning in their work; they are *especially equipped* to do so by the dynamic relationship of their faith commitments and academic standards.** In order to support this thesis, I will first define key terms for the purpose of discussing biblical studies in the context of faith and learning. Second, I will illustrate the problem in biblical studies, drawing on the modern debate over the historical Jesus, since this scholarly issue raises the very questions inherent in the faith-learning dilemma. Third, in light of the above I will address the possibilities and problems for the coherence of believing and learning in Christian biblical scholarship. Since this paper is “expected to focus on the philosophical and theoretical underpinnings of [my] discipline” for “the faculty at large,”<sup>1</sup> my aim is not to be overly technical, but neither do I assume that my colleagues cannot or do not engage in the same kinds of issues in their fields.

### **I. Biblical Studies in the Context of Believing and Learning**

In addition to the primary theoretical goal just stated, this tenure paper is expected to demonstrate my “familiarity with the academic literature on [my] discipline’s relation to the Christian faith.”<sup>2</sup> Biblical studies is not, of course, the only field concerned with such relationships. There has been a wealth of quite recent studies on the so-called “faith and learning”

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<sup>1</sup>Faculty Handbook, Northwestern College, Orange City, Iowa, 2005-06, 3.42.41.8.a

<sup>2</sup>Ibid.

challenge for Christian colleges in general.<sup>3</sup> It would seem that the jury is still out on the prospects for Christian institutions of higher education. After reviewing the literature of this subject, Stephen Haynes observes that the 1990's have provided "a hospitable environment for conversations about faith and learning."<sup>4</sup> There seems to be no small amount of optimism among writers who see opportunities for church-related institutions in the postmodern environment, but there are also, according to Haynes, several obstacles for determining the precise nature and status of the conversations. Before I address some of these challenges, however, it is important that I define the discipline of biblical studies, at least as it is practiced and taught at Northwestern College.

### The Discipline of Biblical Studies

While there is no canonized definition of biblical studies, Richard N. Soulen defines "biblical criticism" as that field "which consciously searches for and applies the canons of reason to its investigation of the text."<sup>5</sup> This emphasis on reason and the seemingly scientific nature of textual investigation is not antithetical to the approach taken by Northwestern College. Our Faculty Handbook outlines four objectives for the general education requirements in biblical and

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<sup>3</sup>Among them are Stephen R. Haynes, ed., *Professing in the Postmodern Academy: Faculty and the Future of Church-Related Colleges* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2002); Harry Lee Poe, *Christianity in the Academy: Teaching at the Intersection of Faith and Learning*. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004); and Naomi Schaefer Riley, *God on the Quad: How religious Colleges and the Missionary Generation are Changing America* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2005).

<sup>4</sup>Stephen R. Haynes, "A Review of Research on Church-Related Higher Education," in *Professing in the Postmodern Academy*, 30.

<sup>5</sup>2<sup>nd</sup> edition (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1976), 29. Obviously, not all biblical study uses the gains of higher criticism, but I am aiming at the understanding within the academic guild.

theological studies (4.25.21):

1. To provide a disciplined, scholarly study of the Bible itself as the Word of God and as the record of God's gracious dealings with humankind.
2. To understand the historical-cultural context in which revelation occurred, the issues that dominate the mainstream of contemporary biblical scholarship, and the normative role that Scripture plays as a standard for thought and action in the church.
3. To understand the biblical concepts (foundational truths, principles, themes) that go into a biblical theology or Christian world-view.
4. To provide students with a biblical basis for making a faith response to God in Christ, for continued maturation as Christ's disciplined servants in the world.

Each one of these objectives, in their own way, presumes some prescriptive or normative position from which biblical and theological studies are undertaken. While the approach to the Bible is to be "disciplined and scholarly," the object of study is assumed to be "the Word of God" and "a record of God's gracious dealings with humankind." An understanding of the "historical-cultural context" and "the issues that dominate the mainstream of contemporary biblical scholarship" are called for, but these goals are joined by an affirmation of Scripture's "normative role . . . in the church." Biblical concepts are explored, but the purpose is their relation to a Christian world-view. And the fourth goal is the most explicitly normative of all, seeking to provide a basis for faith and discipleship in Christ.

Alongside of this perspective, however, one might lay various descriptions of biblical studies from textbooks or other scholarly resources. One generally finds language like the following, in which Stephen L. Harris describes the method of his book, *Understanding the Bible*, as setting every biblical book "in their historical and literary context." The study of these texts emphasizes "the role of modern scholarship in illuminating the individual books" and each edition

of his text is “revised to incorporate important new scholarly research.”<sup>6</sup> Much like the Northwestern handbook, there is mention of scholarship, but noticeably absent in Harris’s description are references to the “Word of God,” faith and discipleship, or Christian world views. Harris himself may be a Christian, but nowhere does he air his own faith or suggest that matters of personal faith might influence his presentation.

Closer to home is the example of Christian Hauer and William Young’s *An Introduction to the Bible: A Journey into Three Worlds*,<sup>7</sup> currently used by all of the biblical studies classes at Northwestern. Hauer and Young seem to be more forthcoming about matters of perspective and the numerous contemporary issues facing biblical interpretation – as the third (i.e., contemporary) world of their subtitle implies – but their program does not assume the need for faith. In fact, they express discomfort with relating theological categories to the Bible, insofar as biblical literature avoids the “abstract, systematic, and rationalistic” qualities which they believe the discipline of theology inherited from classic Greek philosophy.<sup>8</sup> They conclude with this claim: “The Bible is not, therefore, a theological book, but a book used as a source by theology.”<sup>9</sup> Problems with their assumptions about theology notwithstanding, their book serves as another

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<sup>6</sup>Stephen L. Harris, *Understanding the Bible*, 5<sup>th</sup> ed. (Mountain View, CA: Mayfield Publishing Company, 2000), iii.

<sup>7</sup>6<sup>th</sup> ed. (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 2006).

<sup>8</sup>Ibid., 30.

<sup>9</sup>Ibid., 31. It seems to me that while Christian theology since the medieval period owes much to the categories of Greek philosophy (so, Aquinas), contemporary theology is not therefore inherently “Greek” in its philosophical underpinnings. That is, while sharing many thought forms and vocabulary, the Christian theological outlook is influenced as much by the ancient Near Eastern world and the faith of Judaism as it is by anything Greco-Roman.

example of scholarly treatments of the Bible which apparently operate with different concerns and expectations from those presupposed at Northwestern College.

Nothing in these definitions by Harris or Hauer and Young necessarily preclude the sorts of faith interests supplemented by the Northwestern faculty handbook. Even if these authors excluded faith, it is highly doubtful they would sell many Biblical Studies textbooks were they to denounce faith altogether. But this still raises the question whether faith interests *should be* precluded.<sup>10</sup> Can genuine learning of the Bible's meaning occur when a person approaches it with faith commitments about the Bible's nature and authority? To answer such a question it is appropriate to say something about what is constituted by the concept of "faith and learning"

#### The Activities of Believing and Learning

*Rationale for the notion of believing and learning.*

While not essential to my thesis, I think that this subtle change of language from "faith and learning" to "believing and learning" is advantageous for several reasons. For one thing, it seems *linguistically* appropriate to compare nouns with nouns or verbs with verbs. The word "faith" – when it stands on its own – tends to imply not the verbal concept of having faith but the nominal concept of the object of faith, namely, *what* is believed. To take it a step further, "faith" may often signify an entire system of beliefs or set of specific doctrines, such as those in "the Reformed faith." When taken as a noun, it is therefore easy to see why scholars might wonder if they are

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<sup>10</sup>While he does not explicitly criticize matters of faith, Bart D. Ehrman suggests that his perspective on biblical studies is thoroughly historical, employing "a rigorously comparative approach to all of these [New Testament] texts." With respect to the theological or literary orientation of other introductory textbooks, he states, "I have no trouble with these vantage points per se; they do not, however, happen to be mine." At every turn, he stresses that his task is *historical*, thus subtly setting history over against theology (*The New Testament: A Historical Introduction to the Early Christian Writings* [New York: Oxford University Press, 1997] xix.



being asked to assent to particular beliefs in order to teach at an institution that integrates faith and learning. Second, it seems *epistemically* appropriate to compare verbs, insofar as a comparison of the nouns “faith and knowledge” is unsatisfactory. I will soon address this point at greater length, but here I simply wish to assert that there are clearly noetic dimensions to faith and faith dimensions to knowledge. To be sure, there will also be elements of learning in believing and vice versa, but what is avoided, I think, is the verb/noun equivocation that occurs when the term “faith” is used. Third, it seems *pedagogically* appropriate because it is tempting for college students at a place like Northwestern to assume that their faith should never be challenged by what they are learning. In order to avoid poor attempts at integrating faith and learning, perhaps one should first grapple with the notion of segregating faith and learning.<sup>11</sup> Faith is a loaded term, connected in students’ minds with what they might call “my personal faith,” something solid and static which they do not wish to lose. The more generic verbal, “believing”, points to a dynamic activity that many can share without having to hold the same belief content. Learning and believing might then be seen as parallel, and even integrable, pursuits that do not threaten each other.

*The element of trust in all learning.*

Faith has sometimes been caricatured as an unreasonable leap into the unknown or (as I heard one person say) “believing what you know isn’t true.” But such understandings are overly simplistic. In all statements of faith, there is intellectual content to be grasped, and it is the mind which processes evidence and searches for coherence between the experience of believing and all

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<sup>11</sup>I owe this insight to Dr. Randy Jensen, “From Theistic Ethics to Christian Ethics (and Beyond?),” Tenure Paper for Northwestern College, Orange City, Iowa. March 16, 2004, 26.

other experiences. Likewise, there are faith dimensions to all knowledge gained by observation: we trust that our senses are accurately observing reality, that our minds are rational and not delusional in their processing of experience, and that there is logical coherence in reality rather than complete randomness. This analysis may lack some philosophical sophistication, since my thinking on this matter has been informed by the missiological analysis of modernity by the late Bishop Lesslie Newbigin. In books like *Foolishness to the Greeks* (1986) and *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* (1989), Newbigin draws on the work of Michael Polanyi and others to assert that the great advances of modern science in the western world are owing in large measure to “the biblical vision of the world as both rational and contingent. For to put it briefly, if the world is not rational, science is not possible; if the world is not contingent, science is not necessary.”<sup>12</sup>

Newbigin contends that scientific method (and therefore modern learning) assumes that the world is a rational place. Indeed, scientists express such a “passionate faith in the ultimate rationality of the world” that they never accept apparent irrationality as final but rather press on discover a reasonable explanation for events.<sup>13</sup> In a helpful chapter entitled “Knowing and Believing,” Newbigin points out that advances in quantum physics have shown first, that “paradoxically, the ultimate elements of what we call matter are not material,” and second, that we can no longer think of ourselves as detached observers of our world. We are part of the system we are observing.<sup>14</sup> What I garner from his analysis is that the distinct activities we call believing and

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<sup>12</sup>Lesslie Newbigin, *Foolishness to the Greeks: The Gospel and Western Culture* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1986), 70.

<sup>13</sup>Ibid.

<sup>14</sup>Lesslie Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1989), 37.

learning are not finally separable. If believing describes that act of trust or confidence that something is true, and if learning describes the means by which we come to know that “something”, then – on Newbigin’s analysis – there is no inherent contradiction.<sup>15</sup>

*The current, postmodern context of believing and learning.*

In spite of the fact that defining postmodernism is fraught with difficulties, it is at least generally argued that the prefix “post” implies not only a chronological shift (= after) but also a conceptual one (= over against).<sup>16</sup> Following the work of Cornel West, A. K. M. Adam states that postmodernism is marked by three tendencies: antifoundational, antitotalizing, and demystifying. In other words, postmodern thinkers tend to be suspicious of modernity’s claims to provide absolutely certain starting points for knowledge (antifoundational), to offer universal rules that explain or apply to every specific event (antitotalizing), and to appeal to the unquestionable nature of reason itself (demystifying).<sup>17</sup> Adam does not deny the usefulness or applicability of many modern *methods* of biblical criticism; rather he challenges the modern *mind set* that presupposes the absolute correctness of historical, rational, and scientific analysis as a means to obtaining the truth about the Bible’s origins, contexts, and meaning. It is this challenging of modernism’s hegemony in biblical studies that has brought about a rebirth of interest in so-called pre-critical modes of theological interpretation. But in light of Adam’s acceptance of the

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<sup>15</sup>I am drawing on definitions proposed by the *Merriam-Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary*, 10<sup>th</sup> ed. (Springfield, MA: Merriam-Webster, Incorporated, 1997) for “believe” (p. 104) and “learn” (p. 663).

<sup>16</sup>A. K. M. Adam, *What is Postmodern Biblical Criticism?* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995), 1. Adam calls postmodernism “a movement of resistance.”

<sup>17</sup>*Ibid.*, 5-16.

important insights and methods of critical research, it seems to me that one need not describe the status quo in terms of an *either-or dichotomy*, as if modern methods of learning the Bible ruled out any believing on the part of the learner. At the same time, and with equal seriousness, postmodernism's critique of modern presuppositions does not necessarily place all the emphasis on believing and undermine everything about modern learning.

More recently I have been helped by Paul Lakeland's analysis of the habit of empathy which now seems welcome in light of postmodernism.<sup>18</sup> Lakeland suggests that in this modern-postmodern moment, higher education can only achieve excellence by cultivating the virtues of both "critique and empathy." While critique has been the generally accepted, modern mode of learning, "requiring as it does the disciplined analysis of the particular object of inquiry," the habit of empathy is also well-suited to church-related colleges. Empathy requires a "suspension of judgment" and precludes "premature analysis or critique and does battle against the strong urge of the academician to place the object of inquiry in some preapproved taxonomy, system, or metanarrative."<sup>19</sup> To be sure, Lakeland decries letting empathy turn into "sentimentality", which in biblical studies might constitute an unwillingness to analyze the Bible for fear of losing its beloved, authoritative status. Nevertheless, in some ways, the scholar must "*love* the object of inquiry," a stance that will allow him or her to "reach the object of inquiry" rather than letting it

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<sup>18</sup>He describes three primary types of postmodernity: a *nostalgic* postmodernism that emphasizes the negative aspects of enlightenment thinking and modern scholarly methods, longing for a return to the pre-modern or pre-critical ideals; a *critical* postmodernism that is grateful for the achievements of the modern era while readily acknowledging its failures; and a *radical* postmodernism that gladly accepts the fall of modernity with the new freedoms brought on by subjective approaches to thought and life. See his "The Habit of Empathy: Postmodernity and the Future of the Church-Related College," *Professing in the Postmodern Academy*, 36-39.

<sup>19</sup>Ibid. 40.

“remain within the labyrinth of the inquirer’s mental pathways.”<sup>20</sup> Given the way that many peoples and cultures in history have both intensely examined and passionately revered the Bible, it seems that Lakeland’s proposal could be put to good use in the field of biblical studies.

### The Concept of Integration as Coherence

If Lakeland’s perspective offers a workable way to explore the integration of believing and learning, what precisely would it mean for biblical studies to integrate these two activities? In the subtitle of this paper, I have deliberately used the term *coherence* instead of integration because I think the former maintains some of the denotation of latter while offering a different connotation. As with the above discussion of believing and learning, I am not resting the success or failure of my thesis upon a specific word, but it does seem to me that coherence is a helpful way to describe what Northwestern is seeking when it asks its faculty members to relate the Christian faith to their research and teaching. If the term integrate means “to form, coordinate, or blend into a functioning or unified whole,”<sup>21</sup> then the implication is that the combination of elements is so blended that we create a *tertium quid*, some new entity whose name, nature, and function remain vaguely illusive. Moreover, like the blending of two primary colors to create a completely different color, the integration of believing and learning runs the risk of losing the distinct contributions each makes to the whole. To cohere, on the other hand, is “to hold together firmly as parts of the same mass” or “to become united in principles, relationships, or interests,” and “be

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<sup>20</sup>Ibid. Emphasis his.

<sup>21</sup>“Integrate”, in *Merriam-Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary*, 608.

logically and aesthetically consistent.”<sup>22</sup> Thus, the coherence of believing and learning maintains the notion of unity found in integration while avoiding the connotation of blending and therefore losing the unique features that believing and learning contribute to biblical studies. For these elements to cohere they must be compatible and harmonious with each other rather than constantly vying for prominence in a win-lose venture. Of course, such rhetoric is all well and good, but the sticking point is whether these definitions hold true in practice. If believing and learning are as compatible as I say, can they cohere in the “real world” of biblical scholarship? In order to examine the usefulness of my definitions I need a unified subject within the larger flow of the discipline’s history, one which might illustrate the tensions that arise when believing and learning are assumed to be antithetical to each other. The recently renewed fervor over the quest for the historical Jesus provides us with a test case for this question.

## **II. The Search for Certainty in Biblical History: the Quest for the Historical Jesus<sup>23</sup>**

The details of the long and storied history of biblical scholarship are well beyond the purview of this paper. Even broaching the subject can tempt one to gloss over the numerous cultural, intellectual, political, and religious currents that contributed to the rise of and reaction against higher criticism of the Bible. The motivations of churchmen and scholars alike are

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<sup>22</sup>“Cohere”, in *Ibid.*, 223.

<sup>23</sup>This area has a huge bibliography, and it is practically impossible for anyone to master all of the issues other than the scholars who specialize in these matters. A helpful overview of the origins of Jesus research is by N. T. Wright, “Quest for the Historical Jesus,” in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, ed. D. N. Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1992) III:796-802. There is a similar, though less focused, debate raging in Old Testament studies over the historical Israel between so-called maximalists and minimalists. See William G. Dever, *What Did the Biblical Writers Know and When Did They Know It?: What Archaeology Can Tell Us about the Reality of Ancient Israel* (Grand Rapids: Wm B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2001).

complex, and many of the reasons people had for the stands they took are lost in the mists of time. The unhappy history between the church and those scholars who embraced higher criticism in the wake of the Enlightenment reveals assumptions on both sides of the divide: orthodoxy's claim that faith disallowed critical investigation of the Bible and higher criticism's claim that the faith was an impediment to objective investigation.

The Enlightenment brought a shift away from what Hans Frei called a *realistic approach* to the biblical story (i.e., assuming its historicity and relationship to the flow of world history) to a *critical approach* that understood and used the Bible as merely one source among many for trying to get at the actual past.<sup>24</sup> The onslaught of the new, more scientific methods of biblical interpretation in the 18<sup>th</sup> century created mixed reactions. Those scholars who were disillusioned with the Post-Reformation scholasticism but did not embrace either pietism or romanticism welcomed the new methods as a way to free the Bible from the fetters of the ecclesiastical establishment. There were also a great many scholars who stood firmly within the church establishment but nevertheless felt that a more scientific approach to the Bible could only serve to establish its teachings more firmly in the history of the ancient world, thus bringing to fruition the very goal of reformers like Luther and Calvin, who sought the plain, historical sense of scripture as the ultimate foundation of Christian belief. Still others in the church were fearful of treating the Bible as one would any other book, examining it in ways that might not appreciate its status as sacred scripture of the believing community. These basic positions and many variations of them

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<sup>24</sup>See Frei's now classic study, *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative: A Study in Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century Hermeneutics* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1974).

would mark the world of biblical scholarship in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>25</sup>

The quest for the historical Jesus can be studied against the background of this divide. In spite of its breadth, the question of the historical Jesus offers a good place to start for at least three reasons. First, it provides some focus and control over the larger subject at hand. Second, it is a significant question because beliefs about Jesus Christ are particularly central to Christianity. Third, because it is a question involving history, matters of fact and objectivity are especially in view. After describing this area of biblical scholarship I will highlight a few of the ways that it impinges on my thesis.

#### The Jesus Quest within Biblical Studies

The specific language of a “historical quest” in biblical studies goes back exactly one century to the 1906 landmark study by New Testament scholar and (later) world-famous medical missionary Albert Schweitzer: *The Quest of the Historical Jesus*.<sup>26</sup> In the most basic terms, Schweitzer debunked the attempt of 19<sup>th</sup> century scholars to reconstruct the life of Jesus in the intellectual categories of their own day. They wrote their “biographies” to recover the person of Jesus Christ in a way that affirmed his timeless relevance while purporting to be the result of historical research. The outcome of these endeavors was what Schweitzer called the “liberal lives of Jesus,” since they tended to present the Jesus of history in theological terms that were suspiciously modern, a Jesus who reflected the liberal presuppositions of their authors. Whether

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<sup>25</sup>For an excellent treatment of the many personalities and movements, see William Baird’s two-volume work, *History of New Testament Research* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992, 2003).

<sup>26</sup>Albert Scheitzer, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus: A Critical Study of Its Progress from Reimarus to Wrede*, trans. W. Montgomery (New York: MacMillan, 1957); original German edition published in 1906.



one was speaking about the Ernst Renan's "universal brotherhood" Jesus or David Strauss's "absolute consciousness" Jesus, what these authors got was a *non*-historical Jesus, quite unlike the apocalyptic and eschatological teacher of the Synoptic Gospels.<sup>27</sup>

So devastating was Schweitzer's critique that it would be decades before New Testament scholars began cautiously to wade into what is now referred to as the "New Quest for the Historical Jesus."<sup>28</sup> This endeavor was driven along two basic lines of research, the more philosophical approach of Rudolf Bultmann (d. 1976) and the more historical approach of scholars like Joachim Jeremias. Ironically, Bultmann tended to downplay the "Jesus of history" in order to apprehend the "Christ of faith."<sup>29</sup> It was not that Jesus never existed or that the gospels gave us no access to information about him; rather it was that the gospels were primarily proclamation by the early Christian community pointing more to the glory of the risen Lord than to the earthly life and ministry of Jesus. Drawing on a combination of historical-critical exegesis, neo-orthodox theology, and an existentialist hermeneutic strongly influenced by Martin Heidegger, Bultmann argued that the best way to get back to the reality of Jesus was to "demythologize" the gospels' first century presentation of Jesus and access the essence of his teachings: that through Christ one can come to an authentic self-understanding of God's claim

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<sup>27</sup>Ibid., 234.

<sup>28</sup>This term seems to have been popularized in the work of James M. Robinson, *A New Quest of the Historical Jesus* (London: SCM Press, 1959).

<sup>29</sup>Rudolf Bultmann, "The Primitive Christian Kerygma and the Historical Jesus," in *The Historical Jesus and the Kerygmatic Christ: Essays on the New Quest of the Historical Jesus*, trans. and ed. by Carl Braaten and Roy Harrisville (New York: Abingdon Press, 1964), 15-42.

upon human being in both condemnation and forgiveness.<sup>30</sup> The other line of research in the “New Quest” was spurred on by an increased understanding of Jesus’ first century milieu, particularly his use of the Aramaic language, and important discoveries of early Christian writings, such as the Nag Hammadi codices.<sup>31</sup> Joachim Jeremias believed that we could access some of Jesus’ actual teachings (*ipsissima verba*) by comparing the language, style and content of Jesus’ teachings with first century norms.<sup>32</sup> But this New Quest, too, came under intense scrutiny especially on the matter of Bultmann’s hermeneutic and the separation of the Jesus of history from the Christ of faith. Bultmann’s own student, Ernst Käsemann, argued that there was so much more to the gospels’ proclamation than a sole witness to resurrection faith. Not all of their traditions about Jesus could be easily subsumed under the message of the resurrection. Moreover, the New Testament as a whole assumes a vital historical connection between the exalted Lord and the earthly Jesus.<sup>33</sup>

What we are now witnessing in New Testament Studies is being called a Third Quest, with new lines of research, using social science methods or linguistic and theological analysis of the Dead Sea Scrolls, accompanied by historical criteria to determine how each gospel’s own

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<sup>30</sup>See his *Jesus Christ and Mythology* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1958), and *Theology of the New Testament*, trans. Kendrick Grobel, 2 vols. (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1951, 1955), especially the nice summary in the “Epilogue” (II: 237-241).

<sup>31</sup>See Birger A. Pearson, “Nag Hammadi Codices,” in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, ed. D. N. Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1992) IV:984-993.

<sup>32</sup>See Joachim Jeremias, *New Testament Theology: The Proclamation of Jesus*, trans. J. Bowden (New York: Scribner’s, 1971)

<sup>33</sup>Ernst Käsemann, “The Problem of the Historical Jesus,” in *Essays on New Testament Themes* (Naperville, IL: Alec Allenson, 1964), 15-47.

perspective may have colored its presentation of Jesus. A significant number of studies have arisen in the 1980's and 1990's that try to locate Jesus within his first century, Jewish (especially Galilean) context, by portraying him with a variety of images: an itinerant philosopher, an eschatological prophet, a wisdom teacher/sage, a prophet of social change, and so on.<sup>34</sup> Some of the problems with the new approaches have to do with the danger of confusing what we know of the general social background with what might have been true of a specific individual. In fact, some scholars have charged that what we really have is "the quest for the historical Galilee" rather than of Jesus himself.<sup>35</sup> Be that as it may, there is nothing inherently wrong with exploring as much as can possibly be known about the background of Jesus' life in order to identify both similarities and dissimilarities between him and his culture. What remains to be seen, of course, is how any eventual portrait is received by a community of believers who already have faith commitments about this Jesus. And with that we return to the questions that have been driving this paper.

#### The Jesus quest and coherence of believing and learning in biblical studies

This survey of the last one hundred years of research has described the key scholarly movements related to the Jesus quest, without offering much analysis or assessment. What I would like to do now is bring my discussion of definitions in part one to bear upon the movements of the Jesus Quest, showing how various understandings of biblical studies and the coherence of believing and learning are present at every stage of the debate.

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<sup>34</sup>These descriptions basically make up the chapters headings of Ben Witherington III's helpful review of recent scholarship, *The Jesus Quest: the Third Quest for the Jew of Nazareth*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1997).

<sup>35</sup>*Ibid.*, 14.

*The challenge of defining Biblical Studies as an objective, historical discipline.*

In discussing Northwestern's definition of biblical studies, I wondered about its compatibility with contemporary scholarship's continued emphasis on the scientific nature of its methods and the historical approach to the discipline. I saw nothing inherently contradictory between the focused definition of scholars and the broader definition at the college, so long as the normative aspects (Word of God, faith and discipleship, and Christian world-view) be understood as they were intended to be: as forming and informing the context within which we study the Bible rather than as dictating the conclusions we reach based on such study. What I find ironic is that the history of the Jesus Quest seems to have run aground on that very issue, namely letting the context for the search play too great a role in determining the results. Both the biographers of the First Quest and the existentialists of the New Quest tended to reach conclusions about Jesus that were influenced by their philosophical presuppositions. This is not to say that scholars like Strauss and Bultmann were completely inconsistent in their application of scientific and exegetical method to the gospels or that all of their conclusions were wrong. But it is to say that the challenge of contextual interpretation applies not only to biblical studies in faith communities but also to the most critical of scholars.

In the current Third Quest, the goals of objectivity and accurate historical knowledge have been reasserted, albeit with more openness about methodology and presuppositions. Thus we have the example of John Meier, who readily acknowledges his Roman Catholic beliefs, since everyone's presuppositions affect their work. After all, as he puts it, "There is no neutral

Switzerland of the mind in the world of Jesus research.”<sup>36</sup> Nevertheless, he is unwilling to give up on the goal of objectivity and believes that any portrait of Jesus should “be open to verification by any and all persons using the means of modern historical research.”<sup>37</sup> So how do we balance our contextual subjectivity with the goal of methodological objectivity? His proposal is for a provisional objectivity that involves “knowing one’s sources, having clear criteria for making historical judgments about them, learning from other questers past and present, and inviting criticism of one’s peers.”<sup>38</sup> We can at least “try to exclude [our standpoint’s] influence in making scholarly judgments.”<sup>39</sup>

Is Meier’s concept of provisional objectivity a defensible one? It would seem that even the most rigorous historians of Israelite religion are speaking in these terms, to judge from Rainer Albertz observation that, “from the side of the history of religion it must be noted that there is no such thing as presuppositionless historiography.”<sup>40</sup> He regards as “deeply questionable” Otto Eissfeldt’s view in the 1920’s of a historian as one “who regardless of his personal faith and the confession of his church can pursue and assess the development of his religion in enlightened

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<sup>36</sup>John P. Meier, *A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus* (New York: Doubleday, Inc., 1991), 5.

<sup>37</sup>*Ibid.*, 2.

<sup>38</sup>*Ibid.*, 4-5.

<sup>39</sup>*Ibid.*, 6.

<sup>40</sup>Rainer Albertz, *A History of Religion in the Old Testament Period: Volume I: From the Beginnings to the End of the Monarchy*, trans. John Bowden (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1994), 13.

objectivity.”<sup>41</sup> Thus, much like Meier in New Testament scholarship, so Albertz still believes that the historical-critical method offers “a number of controls” so that the result, while being “neither objective nor relativistic, is not subjective either, nor does it pursue any immediate normative interests.”<sup>42</sup>

The balance between a subjectivity we cannot completely escape and an objectivity we cannot fully achieve seems difficult to find, insofar as the details of studying the Bible in the midst of the tension remain elusive.<sup>43</sup> The now accepted methods of higher critical research are still helpful, minus the overly optimistic historicism of the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. But one caution should still be mentioned about historical research of the Bible, be it of Jesus of Nazareth or the people of Israel. More than one biblical scholar is calling for a reassessment of the application of certain understandings of history. With respect to the so called maximalist-minimalist debate about the biblical portrait of Israel, Robert Miller has argued that key difference between these camps is in the angle they take on *what can be proved*: “the ‘minimalists’ maintain that one cannot present an item from the biblical account as history unless that historicity is proven; the ‘maximalists’ maintain that one can present an item from the biblical account as history unless that historicity is disproved.”<sup>44</sup> Both sides are appealing to the historical method,

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<sup>41</sup>Ibid., 13.

<sup>42</sup>Ibid., 14.

<sup>43</sup>An example would be Daniel Flemings careful use of ancient Near Eastern sources in “History in Genesis,” *Westminster Theological Journal* 65 (2003):251-262.

<sup>44</sup>Robert D. Miller II, “How Post-Modernism (and W. F. Albright) Can Save Us from Malarkey,” *Bible and Interpretation* (Dec 2003) <[http://www.bibleinterp.com/articles/Miller\\_Malarkey.htm](http://www.bibleinterp.com/articles/Miller_Malarkey.htm)> Accessed 16 June 2005.

but Miller claims that the impasse arises because both sides operate with a Rankean notion (Leopold von Ranke, 1795-1886) of historicity as what can be proved as fact and what actually happened. Since the definition of history as a reconstruction of “what actually happened” is no longer tenable, historians must shift their focus from proving past events to developing “well-argued plausibilities.”<sup>45</sup> On the New Testament side, Gregory Dawes does much the same thing when he questions the application of socio-historical “covering laws” to the past, in such a way as to eliminate the improbable (e.g. miracles) as impossible.<sup>46</sup> Not only must the historian grapple with the dearth and ambiguity of documentary evidence, he or she must be careful not “to rule out the *possibility* of an event because it is improbable.”<sup>47</sup>

*The challenge for biblical scholars who relate their believing to their learning.*

If the above discussion of the historical nature of biblical studies leaves us with some degree of provisionality for all who conduct research, the issue now is whether there is something particularly troubling or obstructive about *Christian* presuppositions. In part one of the paper I suggested that our postmodern context has helped to encourage what Lakeland calls the habit of empathy, opening the way to a coherence of believing and learning. Coherence provides a rubric within which there should be no final or logical contradiction between believing certain things as a Christian and continually learning new things about the basis of one’s beliefs. Like all biblical

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<sup>45</sup>Ibid.

<sup>46</sup>Gregory Dawes, “A Degree of Objectivity: Christian Faith and the Limits of History,” *Stimulus* 6 (1998): 32-37. See also his helpful reader, *The Historical Jesus Quest: Landmarks in the Search for the Historical Jesus* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1999).

<sup>47</sup>Ibid., 34. Emphasis his.

scholars, Christians cannot completely disavow their biases, but are some of those biases so strong that the Christian biblical scholar is not able to achieve even a *provisional* objectivity? After all, in personal devotion, public worship or both, they believe certain things about Jesus: that he was born to a Galilean virgin named Mary; that he suffered an ignominious and cruel death in Jerusalem under the Roman governorship of Pilate; that within a few days of his burial he was raised from the dead by an act of God. All three of these tenets of the Apostles Creed make claims about what actually happened in human history and interpret these happenings in theological ways. Is it therefore even possible for such scholars to approach their rational and historical study of Jesus with an openness to any and all evidence about him?

While the Jesus Quest has not always stated the issue from the believing side of things, scholars who questioned the biblical basis of Christian doctrine were – at least early on – hounded out of the church and the guild. Within two months of publishing his *Life of Jesus Critically Examined*, Strauss lost his position at Tübingen because a professor of philosophy at the university was able to convince school authorities – and later the regional Lutheran synod – that Strauss's work was the "Ischariotism" of their day.<sup>48</sup> One reviewer colorfully described *Life of Jesus* as "the most pestilential book ever vomited out of the jaws of hell."<sup>49</sup> But Strauss was not intentionally antagonistic to Christianity, and even though his research undercut the historicity of biblical miracles, he still believed that they taught eternal truths. The same could be said of Bultmann's program of demythologizing, which incurred the wrath of many an evangelical scholar

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<sup>48</sup>Bruce N. Kaye, "D. F. Strauss and the European Theological Tradition: 'Der Ischaritismus unsere Tag?'" *The Journal of Religious History* 17 (1992): 171-172.

<sup>49</sup>Quoted in Marcus Borg, "Profiles in Scholarly Courage: Early Days of New Testament Criticism," *Bible Review* 10 (October, 1994), 44.



in the 1960's and 70's. Bultmann may have created a problematic dichotomy between the historical Jesus and the Christ of faith when he questioned the historicity of the resurrection, but the meaning he drew from the New Testament teachings about the resurrection were theologically profound.

There are some, perhaps many, in the academic guild of biblical studies who are suspicious of believing-scholars who address issues of historicity. Ronald Hendel of Berkley takes Kenneth Kitchen to task for the latter's book, *On the Reliability of the Old Testament*.<sup>50</sup> Hendel accuses him of wanting his results to verify his faith, stating that Kitchen's analysis "is an odd combination of preconceived notions, broad knowledge of ancient Near Eastern history and curmudgeonly putdowns" and that "he desperately wants to establish these prior convictions on historical grounds."<sup>51</sup> It should be said that Hendel has no problem with scholars holding personal beliefs but that he sees danger in the way the historical and the theological get confused in works like that by Kitchen.

One of the traditional responses to this suspicion has been to turn the argument back on the critic by claiming that any treatment of the Bible that disregards its theological claims misreads it from the start. About the same time that Schweitzer was attacking the Old Quest, a debate raged between William Wrede and Adolf Schlatter over the nature of the New Testament. Wrede had argued that the discipline of New Testament theology was strictly historical and descriptive, making its documents merely resources among other first and second century writings

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<sup>50</sup>Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2003.

<sup>51</sup>Ronald Hendel, "The Kitchen Debate: Erudition and Bluster," *Biblical Archaeological Review* (July/August 2005): 49.

to uncover what the early church believed about Jesus.<sup>52</sup> But Schlatter argued that the New Testament “confronts us with the claim that we should be affected by it in all our behaviour and without reservation.”<sup>53</sup> Recognizing that there is no neutral interpretation of the Bible, Schlatter insisted that the New Testament “intends to be believed” and that “as soon as the historian sets aside or brackets the question of faith, he is making his concern with the New Testament and his presentation of it into a radical and total polemic against it.”<sup>54</sup>

This approach to the Bible is similar to Lakeland’s call for empathy toward and love of our object of study, but it goes further by saying that the object in this case makes a claim on the kind of learning we seek from it. In an insightful study of Exodus 34, R. W. Moberly points out that the magnificent revelation of God’s character in Exodus 34:6-7 does not occur in Israel’s story until Moses involves himself by interceding for the people.<sup>55</sup> “The implication is that self-involvement makes possible an encounter with, and fuller knowledge of, God that a self-distancing would impede; in other words, certain kinds of ‘objectivity’, in which the knower tries to keep distance and distinctness from what is known, rule out the kind of knowing of God which

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<sup>52</sup>William Wrede, “The Task and Methods of ‘New Testament Theology,’” in Robert Morgan, *The Nature of New Testament Theology* (Napierville, IL: Allenson, 1974), 68-116.

<sup>53</sup>Adolf Schlatter, “The Theology of the New Testament and Dogmatics,” in Robert Morgan, *The Nature of New Testament Theology* (Napierville: Allenson, 1974) 122.

<sup>54</sup>Ibid.

<sup>55</sup>The LORD passed before him, and proclaimed: “The LORD, the LORD, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for the thousandth generation, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, yet by no means clearing the guilty, but visiting the iniquity of the parents upon the children and the children’s children, to the third and fourth generation. (New Revised Standard Version, Division of Christian Education of the National Council of Churches of Christ in the U.S.A., 1989).

is the foundation of biblical and Christian faith.”<sup>56</sup> Therefore, if Schlatter and Moberly are correct that the Bible can be truly and accurately understood in its theological message only when one takes into account its normative claims, then believing scholars are, by virtue of their faith, enabled more fully to grasp the meaning and message of the Bible. Far from being caught in an insurmountable subjectivity, the biblical scholar who experiences the coherence of believing and learning may confidently approach the interpretive task. This position does not thereby denigrate all scholarship done from a secular point of view, any more than it implies that all Christian scholarship is immune to the pitfalls of its own presuppositions. But it does have the effect of “leveling the playing field” in the hermeneutical debate if not also placing the supposedly neutral, objective scholar on the defensive.

### **III. The Christian Biblical Scholar within the Coherence of Believing and Learning**

My analysis in parts one and two of this paper have sought to explain and support my thesis that Christian scholars are especially equipped to undertake critical and historical study of the Bible. In this concluding portion, I would like to propose three statements that articulate what the coherence of believing and learning might look like for the Christian biblical scholar.

#### The Christian Biblical Scholar’s Contexts: and Ethos of Honesty

If the intellectual gains of the modern era mean that there is no facile return to a completely pre-critical study of the Bible, the contextual awareness of the postmodern era means that there is no return to the complete positivism and methodological naivete of modern historical criticism. Biblical scholars now enjoy the freedom to listen again to the insights of the great

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<sup>56</sup>R. W. Moberly, “How May We Speak of God? A Reconsideration of the Nature of Biblical Theology,” *Tyndale Bulletin* 53.2 (2002): 198.

Jewish and Christian interpreters from the patristic, classical, medieval, and renaissance eras. This rebirth of interest in theological interpretation appreciates the insights of the past as belonging at the same table as the modern critics.

Christian biblical scholars must acknowledge their own subjectivity – in all of its depth and breadth – without thereby relinquishing the quest for provisional objectivity. This honesty about our context has the potential to transform scholarly discourse in healthy ways that avoid both a purely defensive, apologetic posture and a critical, win-lose perspective toward those with whom we disagree. To be sure, there remain pitfalls in this new day of contextual interpretation, not the least of which is that the attention to ideology is usually focused on everyone else but ourselves. Premodern scholarship may be faulted for the ecclesiastical limits of interpretation, while modern scholarship may be faulted for its ideology of power, vested primarily in the hands of a white, male academic guild. But, as Leander Keck so eloquently suggested, “It is time to apply ideology criticism to the ideology critics themselves, and to ask about the power quotient in their own scholarship and career patterns.”<sup>57</sup> An ethos of honesty can only serve to advance the discipline of biblical studies.

#### The Christian Biblical Scholar’s Communities: an Ethos of Responsibility

The Christian biblical scholar lives within and among a variety of communities that are marked by sometimes complex patterns of similarity and difference. There is no simple Venn diagram for describing the particular tensions that Christian biblical scholars experience in light of the competing claims of their communities of faith and scholarship, not to mention the claims of

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<sup>57</sup>Leander E. Keck, “The Premodern Bible in the Postmodern World,” *Interpretation* 50 (1996): 136.

the book they hold dear. That being said, we can at least distinguish between them in the following ways. The *faith community* asks that scholars be responsible to believers as they undertake their research, being sensitive to the vast range in levels of knowledge of Scripture and experiences of Christian faith. Teachers at Christian colleges especially should seek creative ways to assist students in both the construction of biblical knowledge and the deconstruction of interpretations based solely on individual preference or experience. The *academic community* asks that scholars be responsible to uphold the highest ideals in the search for truth. Whether or not our colleagues in the guild are believers, we should respect their right to interpret the biblical text with methods that are open to public discussion, approval, or critique. Finally, the *biblical text itself*, as the Word of God, asks that believing scholars listen to it with faith as much as with reason. There is room for appreciating the rhetorical function of each and every passage of the Bible,<sup>58</sup> but it is also true that when we “live with the Bible” and are challenged by its claim on us, we often tend to understand its limits and problems more than one who merely objectifies it.<sup>59</sup>

#### The Christian Biblical Scholar’s Faith: an Ethos of Humility

I am often stunned by how small a place my colleagues and I in the biblical studies guild make for humility in our own scholarship. But speaking mainly for myself, as a Christian biblical scholar my faith that Jesus of Nazareth’s life, death, and resurrection frees me from myself and my sin to live joyfully ought to invoke a deep sense of humility. My own faith journey has been through the Reformed theological tradition, which in the 20<sup>th</sup> century owed so much to the

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<sup>58</sup>See Elizabeth Schüssler-Fiorenza, *Rhetoric and Ethic: The Politics of Biblical Studies* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999), 129-148.

<sup>59</sup>Keck, “The Premodern Bible in the Postmodern World,” 138.

thought of Karl Barth. In commenting on Barth's impact on biblical studies, Gregory Dawes states, "The historical criticism of the Bible has a valuable role to play in helping us understand the biblical proclamation of the action of God, but it loses all theological significance when it attempts to reach behind that witness in an attempt to discern the hand of God at work in human history."<sup>60</sup> Although his words are open to interpretation, there is something in them that resonates with my emphasis on the ethos of humility, that calls me to stand in awe of God's word in the Bible.

Although I have been for the most part appreciative of the postmodern moment in scholarship, as a person of faith I am disturbed by the current popularity of reading "against the grain of the text." I am not saying that such readings have no place at the interpretive table, nor am I questioning all of the ways in which contemporary methodologies assist me in seeing things in scripture I had not noticed. Rather, what I am saying is that a method which claims to be reading *against* the grain is at least presupposing that there is a "grain" in or of the text, such that Jewish and Christian communities felt captivated by its claim upon them. Thus, I wonder just how helpful an exclusive "hermeneutics of suspicion" finally is when it carries little or no empathy for the text. To employ a "hermeneutic of consent" in its place does not thereby eliminate any and all critical reading of the Bible but rather asks simply that the Bible be read in light of the claims it appears to be making upon humankind. Peter Stuhlmacher describes this ethos in terms of an openness to transcendence, methodological verifiability, and effective-historical

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<sup>60</sup>Greg Dawes, *The Historical Jesus Quest*, 270. For Barth's complete comments, see his *Church Dogmatics*, trans. G. T. Thomson and H. Knight (Edinburgh: T & T. Clark, 1956), I/2/19).

consciousness.<sup>61</sup> In a similar vein, John Goldingay writes that theological insight is far more likely to result from our interpretation if we subject our framework of thought to the Bible's rather than the other way around.<sup>62</sup>

I can practice such a hermeneutic only with the help of the communities of which I am a part. The Reformed tradition in which Northwestern College stands has long recognized the need for community-shaped readings. I am blessed with this community of believing learners from many academic disciplines, who sharpen my own sense of the Bible's message. As a biblical scholar at a Christian college I have the wonderful opportunity to experience how interpretation is formed by the Spirit's work in community. I am in a place where I have to apologize neither for my faith in Christ nor for my embrace of careful scholarship, as I seek to come to terms with the Bible's witness to the mighty acts of God in Jesus Christ our Lord.

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<sup>61</sup>Peter Stuhlmacher, *Historical Criticism and Theological Interpretation of Scripture: Toward a Hermeneutics of Consent*, trans. Roy A. Harrisville (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1977), 83-91.

<sup>62</sup>John Goldingay, *Old Testament Theology, Vol. One: Israel's Gospel* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 19. As Dawes states, the ideal of objectivity means grappling with how different my own assumptions are from those of the Bible ("A Degree of Objectivity," 36).