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True Scholarship

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According to the statement of purpose published in our seminary catalog and officially adopted by our Board of Trustees, Central Seminary will "emphasize scholarship of the highest order as a means to an end of 'rightly dividing the Word of Truth,' and it will disdain that type of scholarship that indulges in mind worshipping."

You will notice from this statement that our school believes that there is a worthy type of scholarship and an unworthy type of scholarship. The statement suggests that this is according to the means toward which scholarship is used. If it is a means to the end of correctly understanding the Word of God, it is pure scholarship. If it indulges in scholarship for its own sake and amounts to little more than mind worship, it hardly can be called true scholarship.

There are those in educational circles today who speak of scholarship in a sense which we are not ready to accept. They speak of the conclusions of scholarship as being diametrically opposed to the traditional views of the church. They are teaching that no scholar today holds to the traditional views of the church. They suggest that those of us who hold to the basic doctrines of Christianity are thereby unscholarly. They can easily dispose of our conclusions with the argument that we just do not accept the findings of modern so-called scholarship.

It is quite evident that we reject this distinction in regard to the word scholarship. There are scholars among fundamental believers in America. There are scholarly works being produced by those who believe in all the basic doctrines traditionally held by the church. In contrast to this position, we feel that those who reject the testimony

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of the revealed Word of God are themselves, because of that, unscholarly.

The distinction to be maintained is not that of scholarly as against traditional, but instead that of a critical as against the traditional viewpoint. These men are not scholars investigating the Word of God; instead they are critics cutting it apart and attacking it. There certainly is no reason why we should give up the word "scholarly" to men of this sort nor allow them to pervert it from its proper usage.

Strange as it may seem, there is a similar distinction used by some Bible believers who feel that anything scholarly has to be rejected. There are some who will reject a book because it is scholarly. There are some who will reject a teacher or a position because he or it is scholarly. They assume and sometimes they plainly say that if it is scholarly it cannot be Bible believing.

Again we must reject such a position, for certainly it is possible for us both to believe the Word of God and to be scholarly at the same time. We can and we must be scholarly in our treatment of Scripture. Sometimes I suspect that some books which are not scholarly, though taking a Bible believing position, actually show disrespect for the Word of God in not treating it seriously.

It is sometimes important for us to define terms we use. Ordinarily words are understood in their usual sense, but occasionally it is important to clarify what we mean when we use a certain term, particularly if we use it in a specific sense. Scholarship as a term may need some such clarification.

The expression of the faces of some of you when I have suggested that this one or that one was hardly to be classified as a scholar has indicated to me that you may not have the same concepts in mind as I do when I use the term. And so today I would like to enlarge upon some of the things I feel are involved in true scholarship. I recognize that the word scholarship is used in other phases than in Bible treatment, but what we are concerned about in this message is Bible scholarship.

A verse in the Old Testament seems to give us specific indications concerning true scholarship. Turn in Nehemiah, chapter 8, verse 8, where you will see: "So they read in the book of the law of God distinctly, and gave the sense, and caused them to understand the reading."

Jewish tradition tells us that Ezra and those who worked with him arranged the canon of the Old Testament. If so, they certainly exercised a great deal of scholarship in their work. Whether that be

true or not, there is suggested in this verse a scholarly attitude that each one of us who deal with God's Word should recognize and apply in our own considerations of the eternal truth.

Accept The Bible

First of all, it is evident that these men accepted the revelation of God. They knew that God had spoken. They had a record of it. They presented it to the people as being the Word of God. And it is just as basic for our ministry, too, that we accept the sixty-six books as the voice of the living God unto us.

True scholarship must accept the Bible first of all because it is fact. It is historical. Honesty demands that all deal with it as objective reality. These are facts of nature and history, and must be considered by anyone taking serious consideration of the world in which we live.

This includes accepting the Bible for what it claims to be, the accurate and infallible Word of the living God. This book is without error, without any admixture of error. This book has never given any evidence of mistake, and we can be assured that it never will be in error regarding anything. It is infallible because it is the Word of God. And it is our duty as scholars to accept it for what it is.

Acceptance of the Bible as the revelation of God should be the basis for any scholarly work in any field whatever. In our consideration now of true scholarship as that pertains to Bible study and Christian work, it is unquestionably essential. If we do not accept this revelation, we have nothing with which to work. If we do not acknowledge that God has spoken, we have no voice to present to people in this world. This is the only message Christianity can proclaim. Those who call themselves Christian scholars and deal only with the dreams and delusions arising from the mind of modern man are not actually scholars.

It is possible to accept this book in theory, and not in practice. Even though we claim that the Bible is the final rule for what we believe and the way we live, it is still possible for us in certain aspects to drift along with the world in which we live and follow the dictates of science, the demands of society, the desires of the flesh, or the dilemmas of philosophy. It will take constant vigilance on our part actually to accept the Bible as we ought.

Read The Bible

The next aspect I would like to point out is that they read in the Book. This just naturally follows. If we believe that this is the message of God for us, we will read this message.

There seem to be two different aspects of this. First, each one needs to read the Bible for himself. We need a personal acquaintance with this Book. We need an over-all acquaintance with all that God has set forth, even though we might be specializing in one field of study in regard to this Book.

We dare not fall into the rut of reading much about the Book and little in the Book. We have to maintain constant vigilance or we are satisfied merely with the frequent reading of the Word in connection with our ministry and do not engage in personal perusal of its pages.

The other aspect is that we use the reading of the Bible as the basis for our work. By this now I mean a public reading in contrast to a private reading of the Bible. The Scripture reading should be an important and sacred part of our worship services. And our messages surely should be a means of exposing the Word rather than simply using a portion as a springboard.

Actual reading of the Bible should also be part of our classroom study. It is too easy for us in our hurry to cover a greater amount of material in a class hour, or for you in your hurry to take notes of all the professor is setting forth, to be concerned just with the label of the passage and not take the time to turn and read the passage from the Book. This too is a tendency we should try to overcome. The words of this Book should play an important part in our work with and presentation of the truth.

Scholarly work must begin with the Bible. It must accept the Bible. It must use the Bible. But we have not yet reached the heart of this verse.

Understand The Bible

This verse declares that these who read from the Book gave the sense and caused them to understand the reading. They who could cause others to understand the Word must have understood it first themselves.

Consider that for Ezra and the others of his day who were reading the Book at this time this was an ancient language. The Hebrew had changed--ch, not so radically as English has changed--but the Hebrew

had changed through the centuries, and they must have been real scholars to have understood what the Word said.

We have some indication of what they must have struggled with in the titles of the Psalms in the Septuagint Version for instance. It is obvious that these indications of liturgical and musical usage from before the Exile presented difficulties for the scholars who translated the Hebrew Scriptures into the Greek language.

This is not to suggest that these scholars with Ezra understood everything they read, nor that they had no problems as they worked with the Word. After all, the Word of God is divine. It is above the comprehension, the full comprehension of the mind of man, though as the Reformation emphasized it is sufficient and clear enough in itself to lead even a child to a conversion experience in Christ Jesus. Yet it is so high and holy that men who spend their entire lives searching out its treasures do not exhaust the riches of meaning therein.

Our primary task today, if we are true scholars, is to discover exactly what the Bible says. This is a major part of your Seminary work. This is why you labor with the distinctions of Greek grammar. This is why you struggle with so strange a language as Hebrew. You believe that God has chosen and used these languages for a specific purpose, and has given a specific content to that which He has had recorded in these languages. You dare not rely solely upon the work, the findings, the conclusions of others. You recognize the importance of being certain yourselves of what the Bible really says.

You are aware that there is more to this process of discerning the exact meaning of Scripture than the linguistic phenomena involved. You are introduced during your years here in Seminary to problems of authorship, date, and text which have a bearing on interpretation. You receive a general acquaintance with the history and culture of the Bible period, and as you treat a certain passage you investigate the specific historical circumstances involved.

In a sense, each time you dig into a portion of Scripture seeking to discover its exact meaning you bring your entire experience in theology and church history and all to bear upon the problem. As you are discovering, the tools of a scholar are manifold.

In this connection I would like to suggest that if there are degrees in scholarship whereby we can classify one as a better scholar than another, this should not be done solely on the basis of methods used, as seems to be too prominent in our day, but rather on the basis of the depth to which a man delves into the Bible. The more thoroughly we know the exact meaning of the Word of God, the better scholars we

are. In this respect it should be our desire to be the best possible scholars that time and opportunity will permit.

Do not get the idea now that your scholarship is all yet future. You are capable right now of turning out work just as scholarly as any, though you can expect that under guidance here your ability will be improved. Just as a shop course in high school aims primarily at training in the use of tools, so here the products you produce as you learn the use of tools can be and should be of real value.

As we finished a class the other day, I pointed out to the men that what we had discussed in that hour would be sufficient for four different sermons if a man dug a bit deeper into the Word to understand more fully everything involved. One man in the class then suggested that we do not hear many sermons of this nature because they cannot be prepared in five minutes. No, I grant that. And I know that a preacher's life is so crowded that he cannot do a thorough job of exegesis and preparation for every message he presents. Yet we surely should not be satisfied just to present messages which come forth out of our training and experience with a minimum of real preparation from the Scripture itself. We ought to present at least once a month a message which is the result of the best scholarship of which we are capable.

Apply The Bible

And then there is a fourth aspect of true scholarship emphasized in this verse which is fully as important as this one I have just stressed. We must interpret and apply the Bible to everyday life.

Our work is not done when we understand what the Bible says; we must yet discern the application of these truths and principles in daily life, and sometimes this is the more difficult task. It can be fairly easy for us to discern abstract truth which to us is satisfying and sufficient and then be exceedingly difficult to see just how this truth fits everyday life and to recognize the full importance of it in life.

It can take as much time sometimes to comprehend the implications of a truth of Scripture as it did to be certain of just exactly what Scripture says. It may at times be sufficient to present the truth itself and rely on the Holy Spirit to make proper application. But men do not usually realize how these truths apply in real life situations. Nor do we.

It is easy to proclaim from the pulpit, "Thou shalt not steal," and we sometimes feel we have fulfilled our duty with a bare proclamation

of the truth. But how much more we cause the people to understand the Word when we also point out that stealing time from an employer is involved here, that keeping the wrong change is actually stealing, and so on.

This will take work I realize. It will happen when we engage in mental activity guided by the Spirit of God. Nevertheless it is an essential and important part of true scholarship as we seek to make known the message once for all delivered.

Notice in Nehemiah 8:8 that as they gave the sense, they gave it not in technical terminology comprehended only by the experts of their day, but instead "caused the people who heard them to understand" the Word of God.

Brethren, we have failed in our work if our people do not understand what we proclaim. The fact that we understand it is not sufficient. The fact that we set it forth in technically correct terminology is not sufficient. The fact that everything we present is true and right and just altogether is not sufficient. Our presentation must be such that people who hear us understand, comprehend, drink in the Word of Life which we present.

It should be a compliment to us when children understand what we are talking about. The truth which we present should be set forth in such a clear and logical fashion that all who hear us can understand. A vague presentation may be taken by some to indicate a deep thinker, but usually it only indicates poor preparation. The fact that a man is hard to understand certainly does not classify him as a scholar. One of the important indications of a trained mind is the ability to set forth clearly and logically the ideas necessary for others to understand the truth we seek to proclaim.

We have a strong practical department here in this Seminary, and rightly so. Emphasis upon the effective presentation of the truth is important in our day. You men will forever be grateful for this aspect of your training. Recognize the grave importance of it and take full advantage of it that your ministry of causing others to understand the way of salvation and eternal life may be fully used of the Spirit of God.

In these respects, gentlemen, we want you to become scholars, true scholars, good scholars. We want you to deal seriously with the sacred page and to set forth effectively that truth which is the power of God unto salvation.

You believe the Bible. Inasmuch as you do so, read it. Seek to know its full and exact message, and in the power of God proclaim it to a lost world.