
BINDING AND LOOSENING: SEEKING ANSWERS TO THREE THORNY QUESTIONS

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INTRODUCTION

In the beginning of her inaugural essay as editor of the *Journal of Biblical Integration in Business*, Yvonne Smith poses three thorny questions: What is Biblical integration? What is the position of *JBIB* among academic journals? What contributions should *JBIB* make to the CBFA? (Smith, 2010). At the end of her essay, she invites us to start talking about these things. I am writing because I think the invitation is as profound as the questions.

WHAT IS BIBLICAL INTEGRATION?

First, what is Biblical integration? The answer Yvonne gives us to react to is:

Biblical integration in business is a subset of Christian scholarship in which a scholar utilizes the Bible as one source of information and his or her business area as another and unites the two in a meaningful way. When this uniting is empowered by the Holy Spirit, it creates Life and Light by bringing the life of Jesus Christ into the mind and actions of the integrator and those observing or reading the integration (Smith, 2010).

Christian scholarship is defined as

any scholarship done by a Christian to the glory of God. Christian scholarship is not defined by subject or analysis but is scholarship done for the sake of

Christ and for the sake of uncovering his Truth (Smith, Martinez, VanderVeen, Swicegood, Haskin, and Babbs, 2005, as reported in Smith, 2010).

Let me begin the conversation by first commenting on the definition of Christian scholarship. How do we know if scholarship is done for the sake of Christ? In other words, what does Christ ask us to do? He asks us to love God with all of our heart, soul, strength (hands), and mind and our neighbors as ourselves (Mark 12:30 and Luke 10:27; see also Deuteronomy 6:5 and Matthew 22:37). What does it mean to love?

Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It is not rude, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres (I Corinthians 13:4-7 NIV).

Therefore, as Christian scholars, we could define Christian scholarship not by its subject or method of analysis, but in terms of how we as Christian scholars work together. God, as a Holy We, created humans to reflect him: “Let us make man in our image” (Genesis 1:26). Then, in order for humans to “fill the earth and subdue it,” he created for Adam a helpmate, which led to the creation of a people. Then, in the days of the early Church, the apostle Paul talked about believers working in love as a body (I Corinthians 12, 13). My point

is simply this: one of the distinguishing marks of Christian scholarship is how Christian scholars work together.

As Christian scholars, we should ask ourselves: are we patient (showing self-control); kind (giving appreciation, attention, and encouragement); content (not envious or jealous); humble (not boastful or proud; authentic without pretense or arrogance); polite (not rude; respectful; treating others with dignity); selfless (meeting the needs of others); self-controlled (not easily angered); forgiving (giving up resentment); truthful (not delighting in evil; seeking honesty, truth, and authentic relationships); protecting (guarding others from temptation); trusting (assuming others have integrity and character; giving others the benefit of the doubt); hopeful (optimistic; expecting the best); and persevering (committed; passionate about our work) (See also Hunter, 1998, p. 91-126)?

In contrast to Christ's command to love, our culture pushes us in the opposite direction. We live in a very individualized culture, a culture reflected in academe. While *JBIB* is unique in that it invites dialogue — for example, Yvonne writes something; maybe I respond; then maybe Richard Chewning responds — I'm suggesting something even more unique: collaboration. Could groups of Christian scholars get together and then write something we can all stand behind as a community? When we dialogue, we appear to be miles apart. When we choose to collaborate, we force ourselves into community.

Working collaboratively is very hard work; it goes against our culture, our fallen human nature, and sometimes even the strengths of our personalities. But I think the early Church gives us a good model. We, like the early Church, are confronted with thorny issues. How will those issues be resolved? But unlike the scholarship in other journals, the scholarship in *JBIB* is meant to be Christian scholarship. Our scholarship is meant to be unique because it reflects that we are the Church, followers of Christ.

That means we likely have different standards and processes from those who are not followers of Christ. How did the early Church resolve its thorny issues? One very thorny question was

whether Gentiles had to become Jewish to be Christian. In other words, the question had to do with what it means to be a Christian. How did the early Church make this decision? They had a council (Acts 15). Through debate, discussion, prayer, and wrestling as a collaborative community, they resolved their thorny issue.

Why is it necessary for the body of believers to conduct scholarship as a collaborative community? One reason is that no one is objective. Everyone has an interpretation. One reason people have different interpretations is that they have different gifts; for example, we each interact with God's world differently — some of us prefer abstract conceptualization; others concrete experience; some of us prefer reflective observation, others active experimentation (Kolb, 1984). God's Truth can be found through interaction with creation as well as with His Word, for God is the source of everything. But given our preferences and our finiteness — not to mention our moral imperfections, and the vastness of God's creation and the deepness of His Word — there is no way to read the Bible “agenda- and perspective-free” (Bell, 2005, p. 53). To be most successful at uncovering God's truth, we need to debate, discuss, pray, and wrestle together.

A second reason to conduct scholarship as a collaborative community is that “where two or three come together in my name, there I am with them” (Matthew 16:18 NIV). And when does Jesus say this? Immediately after he talks about “binding and loosening”—which, loosely interpreted, is about determining the rules for what it means to be a Christian.

To put it another way, Richard Chewning is correct to say God communicated to us in verbal, propositional form [but] it is only the Holy Spirit who can make the Word a governing reality in our lives... (Chewning 1997, p. 19). The rub is that as a body of believers, we don't know which of us has been more or less enlightened by the Holy Spirit. There is safety in numbers, for “where two or three come together....”

We also can never be sure beyond a shadow of a doubt that we have resolved the thorny issue properly. We are not the Holy Spirit. We have to take a leap of faith. And we have to keep questioning. We need not only believe the Holy Spirit is

present, but we must also remain humble. This is exactly what the early Church leaders did. When these first followers of Christ came out of their meeting with a decision about whether Gentiles had to become Jewish they responded by using the words “seemed.”

It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us not to burden you with anything beyond the following requirements: You are to abstain from food sacrificed to idols, from blood, from the meat of strangled animals and from sexual immorality. You will do well to avoid these things. Farewell. (Acts 15:28-29).

In other words, the early Church did not know beyond a shadow of a doubt whether they had properly resolved the issue. But they did know this: they had done it collaboratively as a body of believers. They had debated, discussed, prayed, and wrestled together as a collaborative community; they made a decision; and they moved forward — taking a leap of faith — in fear and trembling (Philippians 2:12). We, like them, still have thorny issues to resolve. May we do so in obedience — meaning, in love.

WHAT IS *JBIB*'S POSITION AMONG ACADEMIC JOURNALS?

Second, what is the position of *JBIB* among academic journals? The answer to respond to is

the JBIB takes its place among the referred cross-disciplined academic journals in the faith integration or spirituality streams of scholarship in the various disciplines (Smith, 2010, p. 7).

That is well and good. However, what is more important and potentially distinguishing about *JBIB* is in how the scholarship is created. Is it created in love and in collaboration?

I think *JBIB* ought to have the most collaborative and communal of paper writing and review processes. Therefore I applaud Yvonne for her emphasis on expanding the review board and increasing dialogue; however, I want to challenge her and us to consider organizing teams and sponsoring councils in an effort to make our

scholarship more collaboratively communal.

WHAT CONTRIBUTIONS SHOULD *JBIB* MAKE TO THE CBFA?

Third, what contributions should the *JBIB* make to the *CBFA*? The answer to respond to is that the editor will “seek to publish articles that extend knowledge” and will “seek to create opportunities for colleagues to practice Biblical integration in a variety of ways” (Smith, 2010, p. 8). That too, is a good answer. However, I believe *JBIB* can offer *CBFA* members greater opportunities to work as a collaborative community on the thorny questions related to Biblical integration in business. Instead of one person presenting a paper at a conference, or two or three people presenting papers individually, and getting feedback from individuals in the audience, we could create councils to dig deeper into issues. We could get well beyond doing scholarship to enhance our personal *vitas* or to advance in our own profession (Smith, 2010). We could move away from the competitive model among fellow believers. We could collaboratively explore the answers to the ontological, epistemological, and authority questions Yvonne proposes.

There are hundreds, if not thousands, of thorny questions we could seek to resolve as a collaborative community. Ironically, we are still trying to answer the same basic question the early Church leaders were trying to answer: What does it mean to be a Christian? Are we willing to move beyond dialogue and begin to answer these questions as a collaborative community? If so, how could we make such a process work? Maybe the place to begin is to try to collaboratively answer the three thorny questions Dr. Smith proposed.

CONCLUSION

As I stated in the introduction, Yvonne Smith's invitation to start talking about these things was as profound as the questions themselves. In summary, I believe it is how we work together that determines whether our scholarship is Christian, and that by writing and reviewing collaboratively as the body of Christ we will be more savory salt and a brighter light in academe and in the world.

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