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# A social epistemology of theological inquiry

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A SOCIAL EPISTEMOLOGY OF THEOLOGICAL INQUIRY

by  
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## INTRODUCTION

Traditional epistemology has struggled with the issues of how the individual knows something. A predominate understanding views the mind as like a library where knowledge is shelved and made accessible through complex organizational tools. But discussion has developed over the role society has in knowledge production. The study of how social factors influence the person's development of knowledge is broadly categorized as the sociology of knowledge. Social epistemology takes this question a step further.

Steve Fuller frames the issue of social epistemology as follows: "How should the pursuit of knowledge be organized, given that under normal circumstances knowledge is pursued by many human beings, each working on a more or less well-defined body of knowledge and each equipped with roughly the same imperfect cognitive capacities, albeit with varying degrees of access to one another's activities?"<sup>1</sup> Much of the discussion on these issues has taken place in the discipline of the history and philosophy of science, the area of Steve Fuller's work. There are also others who have applied these questions to other fields such as education and the social sciences. However, I have yet to find a study entitled "The Social Epistemology of Theological Inquiry."

For theological inquiry, then, the question noted above could be reframed, "How should the pursuit of a knowledge of God be organized, given that under normal circumstances

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<sup>1</sup> Steve Fuller, *Social Epistemology*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 2002), 3.

knowledge is pursued by many human beings, the church, each working on a more or less well-defined body of knowledge, the Scriptures, and each equipped with roughly the same imperfect cognitive capacities, albeit with varying degrees of access to one another's activities?"

There are two terms in this question of particular interest, "pursuit" and "access." The idea of pursuit implies for me a community of faith, the church, which is building knowledge, seeking first the kingdom of God and His righteousness (Matt 6:33). One church institution where this pursuit actively takes place on an academic level is in the Seminary. Faculty and students who are intentionally engaged in the pursuit of knowledge, "academic research," fulfill a special role in building the church's knowledge of God. The Seminary library is the institution of access, and the role of the library is to provide increased access "to one another's activities."

One issue implicit in Fuller's description is the equation of knowledge and truth. In the sciences, theories attempt to explain observed phenomenon. These theories are tested over time and are either accepted or rejected based on accumulating evidence. Fuller is interested in the question of the social institutions that control this process, for example, the university and industry. Thus he queries whether truth is defined by evidence or by the decision of the social institutions.<sup>1</sup> This tension can be traced throughout the history of science.

While there are some similarities between the histories of science and theological inquiry in terms of the pursuit of truth and institutional response, there are some significant differences. The paper will explore some of those differences and the implications for a social epistemology of theological inquiry. One difference that will be discussed is the doctrine of revelation and inspiration. This necessarily brief discussion will be followed by a case study using the NT as

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<sup>1</sup> Steve Fuller, *Kuhn vs. Popper: The Struggle for the Soul of Science*, Revolutions in Science (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), 121, 127.

the primary text. As an example of the positive adoption of new truth, Acts 15 will be discussed. In contrast, 2 Pet 2 will be discussed as a case in which the institution rejects “false” teachings.

It is hoped this discussion will contribute to the appreciation for academic research in theological inquiry as ministry and to the appreciation of the role of the library as an epistemic social institution that provides access to knowledge.

## CHAPTER I

### SOCIAL EPISTEMOLOGY AND THEOLOGICAL INQUIRY

Jesus commanded His followers to “seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness.” (Matt 6:33).<sup>1</sup> The most common application of this command has been to encourage individuals to seek God, to gain a personal knowledge of God. Paul defines this as a transforming knowledge. (Rom 12:2). The church is involved because it is the place where this knowledge is shared, passing the traditions on from generation to generation. Also throughout history the church has preserved the primary source of knowledge, the Scriptures. Even so, the epistemological emphasis has been on the individual accepting the truth. In contrast with that emphasis, this chapter will explore the concept that as an institution, the church plays a role in this seeking the kingdom of God and His righteousness. To better understand that role, the social epistemologies of the scientific community and the church will be compared and contrasted.

Thomas Kuhn wrote *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*.<sup>2</sup> In evaluating this book, Fuller describes Kuhn’s definition of a paradigm as “both an exemplary piece of research and the blueprint it provides for future research. In securing a paradigm, researchers agree to a common

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<sup>1</sup> Unless otherwise indicated all Bible references in this paper are to the *Holman Christian Standard Bible* (HCSB) (Nashville, Tenn.: Holman Bible Publishers, 2003).

<sup>2</sup> Thomas S. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963). A second edition was published in 1970, and a third in 1996.

pattern of work and common standards for adjudicating their knowledge claims.”<sup>1</sup> Kuhn suggested that a given world view predominated in a socially recognized and authoritative structure, for example, the university discipline, until overwhelming evidence to the contrary forced a revolution which changed the world view of these social structures. He called these revolutions a “paradigm shift.” This concept of a paradigm shift to explain change in perceived truth was adopted and given a life of its own in multiple disciplines, and came to mean simply looking at a problem or puzzle from a different perspective. As a result, over the years Kuhn’s book “has sold a million copies, has been translated into over twenty languages, and has remained for over 30 years one of the ten most cited academic works.”<sup>2</sup>

Such changes in church history are evident. A changing social environment caused a major upheaval when Constantine legalized the Christian religion; when the Roman Empire fell and the church took over leadership of Rome; when Martin Luther sparked the Reformation; and even when disappointed Millerites met, leading to the formation of the Seventh-day Adventist Church. Each transition could be labeled a “paradigm shift.” But there is a distinct difference when compared with scientific revolutions.

The historical developments given in Kuhn’s book as examples of a paradigm shift included the changes associated “with the names of Copernicus, Newton, Lavoisier, and Einstein.”<sup>3</sup> This contrasts with the shifts in church history in a significant way. When there is a paradigm shift in the scientific world, the old paradigm is rejected, and the new is accepted as truth. In church history, both the old and the new paradigms continue to coexist. The Roman

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<sup>1</sup> Steve Fuller, *Kuhn vs. Popper: The Struggle for the Soul of Science*, Revolutions in Science (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), 12.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 1.

<sup>3</sup> Kuhn, 6.



Catholic Church did not cease to exist because of the formation of Reformation churches. When the early Adventists accepted the truth of the Sabbath, the truth was not accepted as such by much of Christendom.

Another historical distinction between scientific and theological inquiry has been in the motivation for change. In science, a change occurs when accumulating evidence makes the prior worldview untenable. But in theological inquiry, the revolutions have been motivated by providence working through changing social situations. For example, reform movements initiated after the invention of the printing press have survived and have gained a legitimated identity, for example, the Lutherans. Most reform movements initiated before the invention of the printing press have not survived, for example, the Cathars and the Hussites. In SDA history, one of the earliest church institutions was the printing press. While both scientific and theological inquiry are motivated by a quest for truth, social factors seem to play a larger role in both sparking and sustaining paradigm shifts in church history.

There are also similarities in the social epistemology of scientific and theological inquiry. Both support institutions of higher education in which research is actively pursued. Both have accreditation bodies.<sup>1</sup> Students complete courses of study initiating them into specialized

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<sup>1</sup> “Up to the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century it would never have occurred to theological educators to form such a special body for purposes of accreditation, since they were still central to the educational culture. But, ... all this changed with the founding of the research university toward the end of that century. Education took on the mantle, not of passing on a tradition – which had been a value congenial to theological schools, but of discovering and creating knowledge – a practice that, in the minds of many, soon came to challenge received religious doctrines. So it was not until 1936 that the schools of theology banded together to form the first theological accrediting body of the US and Canada, the Association of Theological Schools of North America.” William Dyrness, “The Church, the University and Culture: Can Theology Find its Way? An American Perspective,” in *Theology Between Church, University and Society*, eds. Martien E. Brinkman, Nico F. M. Schreurs, Hendrick M. Vroom and Conrad J. Wethmar, eds. (Assen, The Netherlands: Royal Van Gorcum, 2003), 51-52. ATS currently has 251 members,

disciplines, for example, systematic theology, biblical studies, church history, practical theology, and missiology. Recognition as an expert is established through the publication of peer-reviewed works, whether books or journal articles.<sup>1</sup> How often other academic authors cite an academic author is a mark of credibility and authority and is a consideration in tenure. The sciences and social sciences have extensive citation indexes, and even though theology does not, probably due to the lack of financial support, citations still are seriously considered. In a number of ways, knowledge production and the validation of authorities are established comparably.

However, the epistemic institution of the library provides an example of another contrast. The new science library would emphasize the acquisition of the latest research, with minimal interest in older materials. On the other hand, a new theology library would emphasize acquisitions of classic works, such as the church fathers, reformation authors, and established authoritative reference works. The latest research is appreciated, but secondary. While science focuses almost exclusively on discovering new knowledge, theological inquiry also includes valuing the tradition.

Much of the difference between scientific and theological inquiry may arise out of the object of research. The scientist researches nature through observation and experimentation, and through the development of skills, the accumulation of knowledge, and appropriate collaboration with others, the scientist can achieve success and recognition. The theological inquirer however focuses on a text that claims to be the revelation of God. Through this text, the researcher hopes to gain a glimpse of the divine. The challenge is that success in the quest is beyond the grasp of

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including the Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary. [www.ats.edu/about/overview.asp](http://www.ats.edu/about/overview.asp) (accessed 20 April 2006).

<sup>1</sup> *Publishers Directory*, 25<sup>th</sup> ed. (Detroit: Thomson Gale, 2002) lists over 1100 publishers in the category of Religion. *Ulrich's Periodical Directory*, 40<sup>th</sup> ed. (New Providence, N.J.: Bowker, 2002) lists over 14,000 journals titles in the category of religion.

the researcher; regardless of the skills brought to the task, the researcher can only probe so far. Any success, any insight, any truth, however partially perceived, is achieved only through the gracious gift of God. “For the LORD gives wisdom; from His mouth come knowledge and understanding.” (Prov 2:6).

Peter introduces the divine partner in all theological inquiry: “First of all, you should know this: no prophecy of Scripture comes from one's own interpretation, because no prophecy ever came by the will of man; instead, moved by the Holy Spirit, men spoke from God.” (2 Pet 1:20-21). The Holy Spirit is the divine agent in the doctrine of the revelation/inspiration of Scripture. Because writing is a cognitive activity, we can assume that this partnership between the Holy Spirit and the human author took place in the mind of the writer, in spite of any inherent cognitive limitations. And so the act of writing appears to be a personal, individual activity, much like the writing of this paper. This reflection on the relationship of information and the individual mind falls under the general category of epistemology.<sup>1</sup>

Through the partnership of the Holy Spirit and the author, however conceived, a written message emerged, for example, the prophetic book of Jonah. When the first readers became involved, a transition took place. It is no longer a cognitive interaction between the Holy Spirit and the writer, but between the Holy Spirit and the readers.<sup>2</sup> At this point we shift from epistemology to social epistemology. Through established institutions the work was copied and

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<sup>1</sup> See Fernando Canale, *The Cognitive Principle of Christian Theology: A Hermeneutical Study of the Revelation and Inspiration of the Bible* (Berrien Springs, Mich.: Andrews University Lithotec, 2005), 70-85.

<sup>2</sup> For a discussion of the relationship of writers, readers, and text, see Sven Birkerts, *Gutenberg Elegies: The Fate of Reading in an Electronic Age* (Boston: Faber and Faber, 1994), 109-113; Doug Brent, *Reading as Rhetorical Invention: Knowledge, Persuasion, and the Teaching of Research-Based Writing* (Urbana, Ill.: National Council of Teachers of English, 1992), 75-101.

distributed to more readers. The new reader, socially conditioned in a different cultural context, still understood the message of Jonah, and accepted the message as authoritative and true. A point in history came when many readers agreed that the work was authoritative and true. In a formal, authoritative council, the book of Jonah was voted into the canon of Scripture. It is suggested that the Holy Spirit was a partner in the decision of the council. In other words, the Holy Spirit was active while the work was being written, continued to be active as the work was published and then read by many different readers in many different places, and still was active when the work was included in the canon by the consensus of the authoritative, formal organization of the people of God, the community of faith. While the categories of epistemology may help explain the doctrine of the inspiration of Scripture, social epistemology illumines the doctrine of the formation of the canon.

During the period of the early church, approximately fifty “gospels” were written on the life and teachings of Jesus.<sup>1</sup> One of the best known is the “Gospel of Thomas.” Recently, a translation of the “Gospel of Judas” was released with extensive coverage by the news media. As reported in an AP story, “Elaine Pagels, a professor of religion at Princeton University, said, ‘The people who loved, circulated and wrote down these gospels did not think they were heretics.’”<sup>2</sup> In spite of the authors’ good intentions and sincerity, these gospels did not make it into the canon that has come down to us. The social epistemic institutions within the church at large did not accept these works as authoritative, and they were relegated to obscurity at the margins.

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<sup>1</sup> E. M. Yaumachi, “Apocryphal Gospels,” *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1979), 1:182.

<sup>2</sup> See Randolph E. Schmid, “Ancient Manuscript on Relationship Between Jesus and Judas Revealed,” *South Bend Tribune*, 6 April 2006, available from [www.southbendtribune.com](http://www.southbendtribune.com), (accessed 6 April 2006).

In conclusion it is suggested that a social epistemological inquiry into the workings of knowledge discovery, preservation and distribution in theological inquiry may parallel the social institutions in the larger secular academic community. Understanding how this social construct works can inform the researcher on both the acquisition of knowledge, and the opportunities for communication and participation. While there are a number of key distinctions between scientific and theological inquiry, the most important is to recognize the role of the Holy Spirit in theological inquiry. It may be possible for the individual researcher to apply sound methodologies to biblical texts and theological themes, and to express the findings with effective and clear arguments. But any growth in a true knowledge of God can only take place with the partnership of the Holy Spirit. This is true of individual efforts; it is equally true for institutional efforts. The institution of the church serves the seeking of knowledge of God best by inviting and encouraging the conversation within all the disciplines of theological inquiry, and trusting the Holy Spirit to confirm the truth through His providential leading.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The early Adventists illustrate this process. Beginning with conferences of groups of Adventist believers in 1848, the doctrines that became the foundation of the Seventh-day Adventist church were “hammered out as the result of Bible study, discussion, and prayer.” Only when the group could not come to a consensus, would Ellen White be given a vision that clarified the issues. R. W. Schwarz, *Light Bearer to the Remnant* (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press, 1979), 68-69. See also Arthur L. White, *Ellen G. White: The Early Years* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald, 1985), 137-151. These truths were then published in church papers beginning with the *Present Truth*, and a lively discussion of many points was continued in this media.

## CHAPTER II

### ACCEPTANCE OF NEW KNOWLEDGE IN THE EARLY CHURCH

One “paradigm shift” that the early church experienced is described in Acts 15. New knowledge generated a conflict within the church. In response, the institutional church met, deliberated the issue, and then issued an authoritative response. This new position became the accepted truth, and the new practices were published and implemented by the church body.

The conflict that arose in the church at Antioch involved a social practice, circumcision. For the Jews this practice was a symbol of their right standing before God, a symbol of salvation. “Some men came down from Judea and began to teach the brothers: ‘Unless you are circumcised according to the custom prescribed by Moses, you cannot be saved!’” (Acts 1:15). Paul and Barnabus challenged this claim in spite of the apparent authority of the men from Judea. This is social epistemology in action. Neither side could persuade the other based on argument alone. We can infer that both sides were grounded in a social context that was foundationally threatened, and both sides sincerely acted in good faith to protect their perception of truth. But the positions were mutually exclusive, there was no room for compromise. To resolve the conflict, a delegation was sent to Jerusalem that included Paul, Barnabus, and others.

Admittedly, Luke as author of Acts was not reporting the event according to contemporary standards. He presents briefly and without comment the position of Paul’s opposition. “When they arrived at Jerusalem, they were welcomed by the church, the apostles, and the elders, and

they reported all that God had done with them. But some of the believers from the party of the Pharisees stood up and said, ‘It is necessary to circumcise them and to command them to keep the law of Moses!’” (Acts 15:4-5). It is interesting to note that Paul was “welcomed” but that the opposition were of the “party of the Pharisees.” Their opposition was based on the established authority, the Scriptures they had available to them, and they were being true to the principles of the faith as they understood them. To put it anachronistically, their position was *sola scriptura*.

But the evidence called for change, and it was perceived as overwhelming by the apostles. That evidence was based on the experiences of the apostles, and the authority for the change was not Scripture, but the Holy Spirit.

After there had been much debate, Peter stood up and said to them: "Brothers, you are aware that in the early days God made a choice among you, that by my mouth the Gentiles would hear the gospel message and believe. And God, who knows the heart, testified to them by giving the Holy Spirit, just as He also did to us. He made no distinction between us and them, cleansing their hearts by faith. Why, then, are you now testing God by putting on the disciples' necks a yoke that neither our forefathers nor we have been able to bear? On the contrary, we believe we are saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, in the same way they are." (Acts 15:7-11)

It would have been interesting to have a transcript of the debate. The issue at the time did not seem to have a clear solution. Finally, the words of Peter are described as convincing the participants. He alluded to his vision and experience with Cornelius (Acts 10). He presented the evidence of the apparent blessing of the Holy Spirit on non-Jews who believe. He closed the argument with the claim that salvation comes by grace, for both Jew and Gentile.

Following the case as presented by Peter, a recognized authority, the leader of the congress, James, made his pronouncement. He concurred with Peter, but then added another level of authority, he cited the Scriptures, Amos 9:11-12, that proclaimed the salvation of the Gentiles. Johnson observes, “The second component of decision-making as an articulation of

faith is the reinterpretation of the Scripture. ... It is the experience of God revealed through narrative which is given priority in this hermeneutical process: the text of Scripture does not dictate how God should act. Rather, God's action dictates how we should understand the text of Scripture."<sup>1</sup> Peter appealed to the authority of the Holy Spirit, and James interpreted the Scriptures as supporting that authority. "Therefore, in my judgment, we should not cause difficulties for those who turn to God from among the Gentiles, but instead we should write to them to abstain from things polluted by idols, from sexual immorality, from eating anything that has been strangled, and from blood. For since ancient times, Moses has had in every city those who proclaim him, and he is read aloud in the synagogues every Sabbath day." (Acts 15:19-20).

The final social epistemic action was to write a letter, and send representatives back to Antioch to deliver the letter. The paradigm shift was legitimized and the institution changed character, analogous to the acquisition of new knowledge in the sciences. That the matter was still a question of debate among individual Christians is alluded to in the epistles of Paul, particularly the Epistle to the Galatians. It probably continued to be an issue for some until after the first generation passed away.

This biblical record provides a socially established process for the acceptance of new truth. Throughout the history of the church, councils were called to discuss and decide on doctrinal issues. Most recently, the SDA church added a belief at a General Conference session that addresses issues faced by many in diverse cultures.<sup>2</sup>

While it is the role of the researcher in theological inquiry to explore, probe, challenge, and

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<sup>1</sup> Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Acts of the Apostles*, Sacra Pagina Series, vol. 5 (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 1992), 271.

<sup>2</sup> General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, "Growing in Christ," voted 4 July 2005 at the 58th General Conference Session, St. Louis, Missouri, USA. Available from <http://news.adventist.org/specials/2005/gcsession/>, (accessed 20 April 2006).



discuss the issues facing the church for the purpose of seeking God and His righteousness, the social epistemic model of Acts 15 reminds the scholar that all findings must be adjudicated by the church, and that the ultimate authority for all discovery of truth is the Holy Spirit who works through the human experience.

## CHAPTER III

### GUARDING AGAINST FALSE KNOWLEDGE

#### IN THE EARLY CHURCH

Acts 15 provides a case study from the early church for the acceptance of new knowledge. However, not all new ideas proposed by individuals warranted acceptance. This situation is addressed in 2 Pet 2. Peter is realistic. The Holy Spirit is not the source for all claims to truth. And so his argument flows as follows: “because no prophecy ever came by the will of man; instead, moved by the Holy Spirit, men spoke from God. But there were also false prophets among the people, just as there will be false teachers among you.” (2 Pet 1:21-2:1). Using standard rhetoric common when the book was written,<sup>1</sup> Peter characterizes the false teachers, provides analogies from Scripture, and describes their ultimate fate.

This passage is significant from a social epistemic perspective because it illustrates the authority structure of the church in dealing with new knowledge that is not deemed acceptable. The epistle itself is a public document from an established and unquestioned authority, Peter himself, an apostle of Jesus Christ. The simple observation that the epistle is included in the canon suggests that it must have received a wide readership, and that it had considerable and broad influence during the first years after its publication. Thus it may be viewed as an official

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<sup>1</sup> Jerome H. Neyrey, “The Form and Background of the Polemic in 2 Peter,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 99 (1980): 407-431. Neyrey draws on examples from Plutarch, the Epicurians, and Jewish writings.

statement of the church towards new .

The pertinent characteristics of the false teachers are described as follows:

1. “They will secretly bring in destructive heresies.” (2 Pet 2:1). The concept of secrecy suggests that they bypassed the official forums for the discussion of new ideas. In other words, their teachings contradicted the established teachings of the apostles, and were introduced in a way that did not allow for institutional review. Individual authority was claimed apart from the social institution of the church.

2. “In their greed they will exploit you with deceptive words.” (2 Pet 2:3). However conceived, their teachings were presented with a view to personal gain. This personal gain may have been financial in the sense that their message was popular, and so invited significant support; or it may have been greed for position, recognition, and perceived authority. The idea of deceptive words suggests that these false teachers also attempted to manipulate their audiences for whatever their personal goals might be.

3. “Those who follow the polluting desires of the flesh and despise authority.” (2 Pet 2:10). These false teachers diluted the ethical teachings of the church, thus making it more appealing to the culture. When challenged on their questionable morality, they did not accept but rejected the authority of the church.

While the fate of the false teachers in 2 Pet 2 is clear, utter destruction in the eschaton, the execution of the condemnation is reserved for God. It is not the role of the church or individuals within the church to play God and destroy heretics. Their destruction is assured, God will “keep the unrighteous under punishment until the day of judgment.” (2 Pet 2:9). Thus the readers of the epistle are reminded not accept as truth everything that is heard, but to think critically, and to trust the truth as it has been taught by the authoritative church.

## CONCLUSION

After comparing and contrasting social epistemic categories for scientific and theological inquiry, and after considering two case studies in the NT, what are the implications for theological inquiry?

1. For the institutional church: The quest for truth is a corporate mandate. Because of human limitations, both cognitive and temporal, there needs to be a forum where many minds can cooperate to discover and verify truth. This quest does not take place in a vacuum, but in a social and cultural environment, and it is constantly necessary to assess new and changing cultural assumptions against the truth of Scripture. To facilitate this process, the church needs to support scholarship systematically through developing competent scholars (education), through providing access to the scholarly discourse (library resources), and through facilitating scholarly communication (conferences, publishing venues, etc.).

2. For the individual: The individual scholar must take Acts 15 and 2 Pet 2 seriously. As humans, all scholars will have a different perspective based on differing experiences. Conversation among scholars, whether verbal at a conference, or in writing through published sources, must be encouraged. The individual scholar must engage in the ministry of scholarship passionately as a service to both God and church, committed to the well-being of the church, and not for self serving motives. (Matt 20:28).

Both the institution and the individual must welcome the role of the Holy Spirit in the quest for truth. (John 16:13). However, the Holy Spirit is like the wind. (John 3:8). It is

possible to study the formation of the canon of Scriptures, and in the historical context, the politics, personalities, and tensions can be traced. It may seem questionable whether there was a presence of the Holy Spirit in the process. But the “wind” was blowing, and the evidence is in the final result that has stood the test of time.

Likewise, it is the same in the social epistemic structures in the contemporary church. In the give and take of scholarly debate, it may appear that politics, social conventions, and personalities account for the acceptance or rejection of given theological queries. But the invisible wind continues to blow. To the degree that both the institution and the individual scholar are committed to finding the truth, to seeking the kingdom of God and his righteousness, the words of Jesus guarantee success. “Keep asking, and it will be given to you. Keep searching, and you will find. Keep knocking, and the door will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives, and the one who searches finds, and to the one who knocks, the door will be opened.” (Matt 7:7-8).

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