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BOOK REVIEW

Ben Witherington III. *Is There a Doctor in the House? An Insider's Story and Advice on Becoming a Bible Scholar*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011. 156 pp. Pbk. ISBN 0310493020.

Ben Witherington III is professor of New Testament at Asbury Theological Seminary and a well-known Bible scholar. He writes this slim volume mainly to undergraduates who are interested in pursuing a career in biblical studies, with asides to all who study and teach the Bible.

It is obvious from the beginning that Witherington is familiar with students and the postmodern love of narrative. He starts out with a humorous story about himself, and sprinkles other narratives from his life and career liberally throughout the book, ending each chapter with a poetic reflection of his own composition. This adds vividness to what could otherwise be rather dry lists of qualifications and skills needed for the life of a biblical scholar.

Chapter 1 lays a foundation in the need for a personal heart commitment to Jesus Christ and informed trust in the Bible. Chapter 2 discusses choosing a school, a program, and a mentor for advanced degree work. Witherington recounts his own decision to study in Britain, how that affected his scholarly relationships, his writing style, and his job prospects in the USA. He also provides helpful advice on relationships with the supervisor, avoiding distractions, critical thinking, the oral defense, and publishing.

Subsequent chapters deal with the specific skills needed for biblical scholarship. Chapter 3 is on the importance of knowing Greek, Hebrew, and Aramaic (the biblical languages). Chapter 4 is about study of the biblical world and its cultures, with tantalizing comments about slavery, social structure, and archaeology.

Chapter 5 describes how knowing enough about literature helps a scholar see the literary qualities of Scripture and avoid interpretive fallacies by recognizing a passage's literary techniques.

Chapter 6 extols the value of logical thinking and theological ability, and gives suggestions for essential reading in theology and ethics. Witherington emphasizes the need for interest and relationships that span all the theological disciplines (theology, ethics, biblical studies, ministry studies) and a commitment to make one's work useful to the church both at home and around the world. This can only happen if the scholar is both honest and godly.

Chapter 7 discusses research and writing skills. Writing gives an author's teaching much wider usefulness. But scholarly writers are often tempted to write primarily for the approval of other scholars (and career promotion) rather than for the glory of God and the good of the church. This chapter gives helpful advice for improving writing skill, finding bibliographic resources, and the importance of reading scholarly material in French and German. Witherington talks about various kinds of writing projects, keeping a balanced life, and not being overly enamored of the new versus the true.

Chapter 8 is about hermeneutics. Witherington starts with six basic rules for interpreting Scripture, discussing the role of Scripture versus pneumatic revelation, the relationship of the Old and New Testaments, typology, *sensus plenior*, prediction and fulfillment, and the place of reason, tradition, and experience. He then talks of how to move from interpretation to application (use principles rather than practices) with attention to the context both of the original Scripture and of the community to which it is to be applied.

The last chapter about skills, chapter 9, is about the ability to lecture and teach. This chapter gives helpful advice about how to learn to teach, available resources, enthusiasm and persuasion skills, and being prepared to teach a wide range of subjects.

Chapters 10 and 11 address the character and personal sacrifices of an effective Bible scholar. Witherington gives helpful advice on humility and confidence, expertise and integrity, being open to the Bible's message, and following the Spirit's gifting.

He points out that the spouse, children, parents, and others have serious sacrifices to make because of having a scholar in the family. The scholar too makes sacrificial choices, since biblical scholarship is seldom highly rewarding financially. But if it is the call of God, it must be followed.

An appendix gives advice on whether to do an MDiv or an MA in seminary and what to take if one wants to avoid significant remedial work at the doctoral level. A second appendix lists the books that John Wesley recommended as reading for his preachers.

This is a book that every aspiring young Bible scholar should read during undergraduate days or shortly thereafter. It should certainly help students discern whether or not the scholarly life is for them. It will also help young and aspiring scholars get off on the right foot with basic preparation, not just academically but also psychologically and spiritually.

Since this is a very personal book, full of Witherington's own stories, it is clear that not every scholar would write just this way to his or her students. For example, Witherington is a New Testament scholar, and gives a preliminary reading list pertinent to that discipline. However, the book could function as an example to other scholars of how to advise their students, and to students as to the kinds of advice they could seek from their teachers and mentors.

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