**The Vocation of a Christian Scholar: A Fichtean Analysis**

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Christian scholarship is a strong theme of the Bible. For instance, the Old Testament commends Ezra a skilled scribe in the Law of Moses (Ezra 7:6) and one who had prepared his heart to seek the Law of the Lord, to do it, and to teach statutes and ordinances in Israel (Ezra 7:10). The four qualities of a scholar are already present in that one statement: preparation of faculties, study, practice, and communication. Certainly, these disciplines were what defined the vocation of Ezra as a skilled scribe. The New Testament indicates to us that lack of a scholarly attitude, appetite, approach, and aptitude lead to schisms, sectarianisms, and suffering within the Body of Christ. Gullibility is not a virtue (2Tim.3:6); mere “learning” without assimilation is folly (2Tim.3:7); ability to criticize and oppose doesn’t promise wisdom (2Tim.3:8-9; 1Tim.6:4). The call is to diligent, determined, and directed scholarship. “Be diligent”, says Paul to Timothy, “to present yourself approved to God, a worker who does not need to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth.” And, then he adds the caveat, “But shun profane and idle babblings, for they will increase to more ungodliness.” (2Tim.2:15,16). True scholarship will help to rightly interpret God’s word and to increase godliness. True scholarship highlights truth and furthers the cause of moral excellence. Even the so considered “unlearned” Peter stressed the importance of proper erudition for the proper interpretation of God’s revelation and our relation to God and His world. In his words, there are certain things given through revelation that are hard to comprehend, and it is the unlearned and the unstable who twist the Scriptures for their own destruction (2Pet.3:16); which implies that learning, conservation of knowledge, and practical application of the same define the proper approach towards true Christian scholarship. A number of qualities make up and give identity to a Christian scholar.

Johann Gottlieb Fichte (1762-1814), in his lecture, “The Vocation of the Scholar”, [[1]](#footnote-1) presents few characteristics that define the identity and calling of a scholar in this world. Fichte was a German philosopher who shot to prominence after his authorship for the anonymously published treatise Attempt at a Critique of All Revelation (1792), published with the help of Immanuel Kant, was discovered by the public. Interestingly, his first interview with Kant had been rather disappointing after which he had determined to master the latter’s philosophy and write a treatise on a theme yet unaddressed by him: the treatise did impress Kant and he helped publish it. “The Vocation of the Scholar” was one of the lectures delivered at the University of Jena in the year 1794 to a group of young students and neatly outlines the place and position of the scholar in relation to the human race. Fichte lists at least four important qualities that the scholar certainly possesses.

1. **The Scholar is Learner.** To Fichte, learning is composed of the three branches of knowledge, viz., philosophical, philosophico-historical, and purely historical. A scholar is someone who devotes his life to the acquisition of this learning. To Fichte, it is pure reason (philosophical) that helps one to establish the ideal of human progress – to understand who we are and where we need to go. But, that isn’t enough. One needs experience directed by this ideal (philosophico-historical) to understand what means are available to us to achieve this goal. Then, comes the pure historical understanding of our condition today, of how far we have historically arrived, and how far we need to go and what steps we need to take now (purely historical).

For Fichte, education was not just about abstract ideals. The ideals had to be rationally captured and rooted in concrete history in order to shape history by means of tools that history makes available to us. Applying this to a theological situation, the Christian scholar cannot attempt learning in a mere a priori setup. Learning is a confluence of faith, reason, and historical experience. Learning is not just about the acquisition of knowledge, but about the blending of knowledge with purpose, direction, methodology, and praxis. A true Christian scholar cannot just be a gas balloon disconnected from the ground beneath; at the same time, he cannot also be a stone sitting on the ground. He must reach up high and touch the ground. Thus, any scholarship that means nothing to human progress is both insignificant and irrelevant. This means that since history is dynamic, the scholar also becomes dynamically attached to it. The scholar must be continuously open for learning.

Receptivity must already be developed in him if he has thoroughly mastered the requisite empirical sciences. He must be thoroughly conversant with the labours of those who have gone before him in his own department, and this knowledge he cannot have acquired otherwise than by instruction, either oral or literary; he cannot have arrived at it by mere reflection on the principles of Reason. But he should at all times maintain this receptivity by means of new acquirements, and endeavour to preserve himself from a growing insensibility to foreign opinions and modes of thought, which is so common even among the most independent thinkers; for no one is so well informed but he may still continue to learn, and may have something very necessary yet to learn; and it is seldom that any one is so ignorant that he cannot teach something to the most learned, which the latter did not know before.[[2]](#footnote-2)

1. **The Scholar is Teacher of the Human Race.** For Fichte, the scholar “exists only through society and for society”; therefore, communication of knowledge is demanded of him. The scholar is not just a receiver but also a communicator and he must be ready for both. It is usually enough if the communicator only speaks more of his findings than of all the process by which he arrived at the answers; not everybody is a scholar, but everyone wants to hear what an expert in his particular field is saying about something significant; and, usually, a sort of reasonable fideism (cognitive reliance/verbal testimony) and intuitive receptivity is what a scholar may often rely upon in his act of communication.In Fichte’s words:

Readiness of communication is always needed by the Scholar, for he possesses his knowledge not for himself, but for society. This he must practise from his youth, and keep in constant activity, through *what means*, we shall inquire at the proper time.

The knowledge which he has acquired for society he must now actually apply to the uses of society; he must rouse men to the feeling of their true wants, and make them acquainted with the means of satisfying these. Not that he should enter with them into the deep inquiries which he himself has been obliged to undertake, in order to find some certain and secure foundation of truth: that would be an attempt to make all men Scholars like himself, which is impossible, and of no advantage for the purposes of life; the other forms of human activity must also be prosecuted, and to that end there are other classes of men; if they devoted their time to learned inquiries, the Scholars themselves would soon cease to be Scholars. How then *can* he spread abroad his knowledge, and how *ought* he to do so? Society could not subsist without trust in the honesty and skill of others; this confidence is deeply impressed upon our hearts, and by a peculiar favour of Nature we never possess it in a higher degree than when we most need the honesty and skill of others. The Scholar may securely reckon upon this trust in his honesty and skill, as soon as he has earned it as he ought. Further, there is in all men a feeling of truth, which indeed is not sufficient in itself, but must be developed, proved, and purified; and to do this is the task of the Scholar. This feeling is not sufficient in itself to lead the unlearned to all the truth of which they stand in need; but when it has not become artificially falsified (which indeed is often the work of some who call themselves Scholars) it is always sufficient to enable them, even without deep argument, to recognise truth when another leads them to her presence. On this intuitive feeling of truth the Scholar too may rely. Thus, so far as we have yet unfolded the idea of his vocation, the Scholar is, by virtue of it, the *Teacher* of the human race.[[3]](#footnote-3)

1. **The Scholar is Guide of the Human Race.** The scholar is guide because “he sees not merely the present, he sees also the future: he sees not merely the point which humanity now occupies, but also that to which it must next advance if it remain true to its final end, and do not wander or turn back from its legitimate path.”[[4]](#footnote-4) The findings of scholarship are also directives of the future. The blind will lead the blind into the ditch. Only the one who has a proper vision can be a proper leader. Thus, a true scholar is a true leader. Scholarship is primary quality of leadership. A leader who is disconnected to the ideal and his historical position is no leader at all. A leader who fails to communicate is no leader at all. Thus, it is the scholar who becomes the guide of the human race.
2. **The Scholar is Morally the Best Man of His Age.** He possesses moral excellence. According to Fichte, erudition without ethics is pure emptiness. The educated man is an ethical man; the man of intelligence is the man of integrity. The scholar respects social freedom and detests deceptive schemes and manipulative techniques. He doesn’t attempt brainwashing, propaganda, fallacious advertising, and subtle suggestions. The scholar is confident about the freedom that is characteristic of both morality and truth.

The ultimate purpose of each individual man, as well as of all society, and consequently of all the labours of the Scholar in society, is the moral elevation of all men. It is the duty of the Scholar to have this final object constantly in view, never to lose sight of it in all that he does in society. But no one can successfully labour for the moral improvement of his species who is not himself a good man. We do not teach by words alone, we also teach much more impressively by example; and every one who lives in society owes it a good example, because the power of example has its origin in the social relation. How much more is this due from the Scholar, who ought to be before all others in every branch of human culture? If he be behind in the first and highest of them all, that to which all the others tend, how can he be the pattern which he ought to be, and how can he suppose that others will follow his teachings, which he himself contradicts before all men in every action of his life? The words which the founder of the Christian Religion addressed to his disciples apply with peculiar force to the Scholar,—“Ye are the salt of the earth: if the salt have lost its savour, wherewith shall it be salted?”—if the chosen among men be depraved, where shall we seek for moral good? Thus, in this last respect, the Scholar ought to be morally the best man of his age; he ought to exhibit in himself the highest grade of moral culture then possible.[[5]](#footnote-5)

**Contemporary Relevance of the Analysis**

In an age of growing commercialization of education, where money and education seem to be more often unethically linked, it is noteworthy that Fichte doesn’t relate scholarship to business in any way. Didn’t Fichte lecture and get paid for? Didn’t he know the importance of money for the publishing of his writings? But, Fichte certainly didn’t see the vocation of the scholar as egotistical, materially speaking. Of course, the Scholar had to be connected to concrete historical realities; however, he must not be overcome by the materialistic. Certainly, the present euphoria is more of an anti-idealistic nature. To a great extent even religion has been highly affected by materialism. Prosperity cults abound everywhere. Do we speak of ideals anymore? Well, ideals and absolutes have no place in a utilitarianistically driven post-modern world. Hasn’t this affected Christian education as well? One doesn’t need to quote sources to historically find oneself. A University degree doesn’t make one a scholar – titles such as Doctor and Professor matter nothing unless the scholar is both dynamically related to humanity in history as well as is an exemplary guide and teacher of the human race to which he owes his duty.

We have only startup differences with Fichte’s model. The Christian scholar begins with a priori absolutes, but they are provided by God in His revelation. However, this doesn’t ignore the role of reason, since reason is involved in the interpretation of the word. The Bible uncovers mankind’s ultimate need of eternal life and communion with God. The a priori truths of God answer the a priori realities of man. But, hermeneutics cannot ignore the question of history as well.[[6]](#footnote-6) Secondly, the Christian scholar’s primary obligation is towards God. Apart from these, the identification of the scholar as learner, teacher, guide, and example are valuable for an understanding of the Christian scholar’s vocation in the world.

Historical answers of history past cannot be the historical answer of history today. Context is dynamic. The scholar as leader must be ahead of the ones he leads; which also means that he is ahead of the scholarship of yesterday.

Also, the scholar cannot afford becoming chronologically archaic in the historical timeline of one relevant field of knowledge while he is up to date and advanced on some other field. It will only handicap his progress and leadership ability. Scholarship, therefore, becomes an arduous discipline. And so, the Christian scholar cannot ignore the findings of others. He must be receptive of discoveries in the field of knowledge, especially of that which pertains to his field of study; yet, not ignoring others

At the same time, the Christian scholar must know the need and the art of communication. The Christian scholar doesn’t withhold knowledge for the sake of money. In the modern age of electronic technology, perhaps this would mean that the Christian scholar must not withhold information from the public that can be made available publicly. This doesn’t imply that ebooks shouldn’t be sold; but, it certainly desires that they made available for online reading in some form of the other (with whatever restrictions with regard to copying and downloading are applicable). Fichte’s portrayal of the scholar as teacher of the human race does suggest that a scholar owes deliverance of knowledge to the entire world; he is obligated to teach.

Finally, the scholar is not so much concerned for reputation as he is committed to integrity and character. Reputation is what people think we are; character is who we are. The Christian scholar’s test of character is best seen in moments of adversity, stress, and dealings with other humans. A life that doesn’t exude Christian virtue is not Christian at all; a learning that is straying on the ethically wrong path of selfish ambition is empty of learning; a scholar who does not abide by what he proclaims gives evidence of his disbelief in his own teachings; thus, contradicting and nullifying his own “scholarship”. The Christian scholar is a learner, teacher, guide, and moral example to the entire human race because the Christian scholar is a discoverer of truths, discerner of times, director of progressive events, and demonstrator of character.

**References**

Fichte, Johann Gottleib. The Vocation of the Scholar, trans. Wiliam Smith, London: John Chapman, 1794.

1. Johann Gottleib Fichte, The Vocation of the Scholar (trans. Wiliam Smith, London: John Chapman, 1794). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Fichte, The Vocation of the Scholar, 56 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Fichte, The Vocation of the Scholar, 56-57 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Fichte, The Vocation of the Scholar, 57 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Fichte, The Vocation of the Scholar, 58-59 [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. See Anthony C. Thiselton, The Two Horizons (Grand Rapids: The Paternoster Press, 1980). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)