

ACADEMIC WRITING AND THEOLOGICAL INQUIRY

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Introduction

Academic writing and research in the seminary context or the undergraduate religion classroom can, at times, feel disconnected from both the spiritual formation of the writer and the task of ministry. A better understanding of theological inquiry as a spiritual discipline and the community of inquiry in which knowledge is communicated and formed could provide a context in which that disconnect may be addressed.

Two approaches to teaching academic writing and research in theological education have been discussed. First, Nancy Vyhmeister defines research as “the search for truth—for God is truth—whether it be historical, scientific, or theological—it is all God’s truth.”¹ For Vyhmeister, truth is objective, centered in God, and is something to be sought.

Barry Hamilton suggests an alternative approach to the teaching of research methods that focuses on the writer. He notes that

the research project as a theological enterprise does not stand as an isolated object, but rather integrates the researcher’s vocation into his/her spiritual and intellectual formation. The researcher must ask, “What is God calling me to do in this project? How does my work as a researcher relate to my life’s journey with God? How has God led me thus far? How will this project influence the course of this journey? How will this project shape my character? Will the outcome be congruent with the vocation to which God has called me?”²

Thus, for Hamilton, the value of research relates to the person.

A comparison of these two approaches demonstrates that, for Vyhmeister, truth is to be found outside and above us—it is a process of discovery, while Hamilton’s approach focuses on the spiritual formation of the writer and can be understood as reflecting a process of spiritual growth. A third approach, which I will develop in this article, views academic writing and theological inquiry as a ministry, in which the writer is served by and, in turn, serves the community of faith for the purpose of building a corporate knowledge of God. Research is service and the dissemination of the knowledge of God in the corporate experience of the community of faith. Research-method pedagogy will be enriched when all three research approaches are incorporated in the student’s understanding of the academic-writing task. Because I believe that the

¹Nancy Jean Vyhmeister, *Quality Research Papers: For Students of Religion and Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001), 2.

²Barry Hamilton, “A Model for Teaching Research Methods in Theological Education,” *Summary of Proceedings of the American Theological Library Association* 57 (2003): 158.

approaches of Vyhmeister and Hamilton are valid and should be included in the academic writing process, I will not attempt to critique their approaches here. Therefore, this article will focus on the third aspect of theological research—theological inquiry as a service to the community of faith.

I will use Albert Borgmann's definition of information to provide a thematic outline for this article. A functional definition of information, as articulated by Borgmann, states that "INTELLIGENCE provided, a PERSON is informed by a SIGN about some THING within a certain CONTEXT."³ When Borgmann's definition is applied to the question of theological inquiry in the context of academic writing three questions emerge: What is the THING that academic theological inquiry is about? What is the SIGN that academic theological inquiry points toward? and What is the CONTEXT of academic theological inquiry?

Theological Inquiry and the Community of Faith

What is the "THING" that academic writing along the lines of theological inquiry is about? To begin, theological inquiry, for the purposes of this article, refers to the systematic and intentional seeking of a knowledge of God through the Scriptures, including exegesis (the text itself), theology (the themes of Scripture), church history (the cumulative response of the community of faith to Scripture), and practical theology (the application of Scripture in the life of the community of faith). Jesus stated: "But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given you as well" (Matt 6:33).⁴ Each person, as an individual, is invited to "Come to me" (Matt 11:28). There is no substitute for this personal experience.

The process of gaining a knowledge of God has been termed "spiritual formation," an experience of special interest in theological education. This formation happens in a variety of settings, including the development and application of personal spiritual disciplines in the individual life and in community worship.⁵ Hamilton suggests that academic writing should also be

³Albert Borgmann, *Holding on to Reality: The Nature of Information at the Turn of the Millennium* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 22, emphasis original. The term "information" may be understood from a number of perspectives. For example, information literacy is the defining pedagogical mission for librarians. Studies on the history of the book examine the impact of technological advances on the dissemination of information from the earliest clay tablets to the internet. Philosophers debate the interaction of information and knowledge and the mind. Sociologists explore the social impact of information and the political aspects of information sharing. Composition teachers focus on disciplinary-discourse formation and rhetoric, preparing novices to enter the world of scholarly communication. In the midst of this published give and take, information theorists seek to define information and to explain how it functions.

⁴Unless otherwise noted, all biblical references are from the *NIV*.

⁵Keith Beasley-Topliffe notes that "Spiritual formation can include all the ways people seek either to grow toward greater consonance with a religious tradition or to form others within that tradition. Christian spiritual formation is the conscious effort

integrated into the process of spiritual formation so that the student views “theological research as a means for engaging the whole person and insuring the integration of spiritual formation and knowledge formation components of the seminary curriculum, as well as enhancing timely completion of projects. And instead of completing assignments that constitute an alien ‘other’, seminarians could pursue cognitively relevant research that would reflect their path to knowledge as a journey with God.”⁶ Thus, in the context of theological education, research writing becomes one way among many to “seek first his kingdom and his righteousness.” Theological inquiry is, then, based on the primary text that reveals God—the Scriptures.

Biblical Evidence for the Social Aspect of Theological Inquiry

Paul’s conversion in Acts 9 illustrates the social aspect of information-sharing in theological inquiry. Saul, who was on his way to Damascus with arrest warrants for the followers of Jesus, was suddenly confronted with “a light from heaven.” “He fell to the ground and heard a voice say to him, ‘Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?’ ‘Who are you, Lord?’ Saul asked. ‘I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting,’ he replied. ‘Now get up and go into the city, and you will be told what you must do’” (Acts 9:3-6).

That moment of divinely inspired insight altered Saul’s perception of what he was doing. His former zeal was based on his understanding of the law of God, as he had been educated as a Jew (Acts 22:3). Supernatural revelation, however, provided an additional important piece of information: the identity of Jesus. For everything else he needed to know as a Christian, Saul was sent to Damascus to be informed by Ananias and the church.⁷

The blindness Saul experienced as a result of his experience on the road to Damascus, while physically real, can be understood as a metaphor for his lack of understanding and his false beliefs about Jesus. While zealous in his persecution of the followers of Jesus, he fully believed he was doing the right

to mold oneself or others in the traditions of Christian spirituality. Thus Christian formation can begin with family spirituality and memorization of simple verbal prayers. Sunday school classes and worship services continue formation through reading and studying scripture; singing hymns; receiving the sacraments of baptism and Holy Communion; and joining or hearing prayers of adoration, confession, thanksgiving, petition, and intercession” (“Formation, Spiritual,” *The Upper Room Dictionary of Christian Spiritual Formation* [Nashville: Upper Room Books, 2003], 109-110).

⁶Hamilton, 157.

⁷Ellen G. White states: “The marvelous light that illumined the darkness of Saul was the work of the Lord; but there was also a work that was to be done for him by the disciples. Christ had performed the work of revelation and conviction; and now the penitent was in a condition to learn from those whom God had ordained to teach His truth” (*Acts of the Apostles in the Proclamation of the Gospel of Jesus Christ* [Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1911], 121).

thing and honoring God. Saul was spiritually blind. It took the ministry of the Christian community of faith to restore his sight.

Therefore, just as Saul was sent to the church in Damascus to be informed about the kingdom of God and God's righteousness, so too the theological researcher is sent to the community of faith to be instructed. In the context of academic writing, the community of faith includes the written documents of the historic church. Throughout history sincere Christians have struggled to apply the Scriptures in their personal lives and in their communities and to subsequently record their thoughts and experiences. As Chris Armstrong summarizes: "All of the 'saints' worth reading share this: they followed their Lord, offered up their gifts, and tried to discern their paths—right in the very midst of all that was good, bad, and ugly in their surrounding cultures."⁸ The information these writings provide can be useful in theological inquiry, either by enhancing the understanding or by clarifying understanding through the study of differing perspectives.

In addition, the Scriptures warn of error and heresy in the community of faith (2 Pet 2:1). Being able to differentiate between truth and error is critical for theological inquiry. This distinction can be worked out through dialogue with other thought leaders, whether from the past or present, using the medium of the written word. While individually the limitations of being human may lead to incomplete or incorrect conclusions, corporately the combined efforts of many can lead to a greater appreciation of truth.

The Seventh-day Adventist Perspective for the Social Aspect of Theological Inquiry

Theological inquiry from the Seventh-day Adventist perspective is informed by the "Great Controversy" theme⁹ and the belief in the imminent return of Jesus. These themes require an intentional emphasis on the Scriptures as the primary source of information about God. As Fernando Canale affirms: "In the church to think is to do theology. In Adventism, 'to do theology' is not to understand tradition and beliefs of the church or our own personal faith, but instead, to understand biblical revelation. This is the real basis for our identity as a people."¹⁰ Thus, while a researcher may narrowly analyze and evaluate any word of Scripture or any written text in the history of God's people, the "Great Controversy" theme and the second coming of Christ should permeate the

⁸Chris Armstrong, "Grateful to the Dead: The Diary of a Christian History Professor #2: 'All Things to All Men' or 'Be Ye Separate'?" *Christian History and Biography*, October, 2005, <www.christianitytoday.com/history/newsletter/2005/oct27.html>.

⁹The great controversy theme refers to the cosmic struggle between good and evil through all ages until Christ's Second Coming, at which time sin and evil will be destroyed.

¹⁰Fernando Canale, "Thinking Biblically and the Pastoral Ministry," *Reflections: A BRI Newsletter*, October 2005, 3.

entire process of theological inquiry.

Canale concludes that “Adventist pastors may choose to face the complexities of ministry not from the dictates of contemporary culture or evangelical tradition but from the dictates of eternal truth as revealed in Scripture. By realizing that the central responsibility of ministry is to help people to ‘think in the light of Scripture,’ Adventist pastors will become truly ministers of the power of God. This trend will not only increase biblical literacy and develop a healthy sense of identity, but also unify the church in its message and mission.”¹¹

Canale’s conclusion was arrived at in conversation within the Adventist community of faith, which is seeking first the kingdom of heaven and which is in dialogue with many in the larger community of faith. The ability to clarify this emphasis on Scripture and establish it as a marker of Seventh-day Adventist identity assumes knowledge of a broad spectrum of theological writings. Identity is achieved as much by contrasting characteristics as by comparing them.

From Information to Knowledge

One further distinction needs to be made concerning theological inquiry. Collecting information in and of itself is not enough. Information must be used to build knowledge. Often, the terms “information” and “knowledge” are used synonymously, but, for the purposes of this discussion, John Seely Brown and Paul Duguid’s distinctions between “information” and “knowledge” are useful:

First, knowledge usually entails a knower. That is, where people treat information as independent and more-or-less self-sufficient, they seem more inclined to associate knowledge with someone. . . . Second, given this personal attachment, knowledge appears harder to detach than information. People treat information as a self-contained substance. It is something people pick up, possess, pass around, put in a database, lose, find, write down, accumulate, count, compare, and so forth. Knowledge, by contrast, doesn’t take as kindly to ideas of shipping, receiving, and quantification. It is hard to pick up and hard to transfer. . . . Third, one reason knowledge may be so hard to give and receive is that knowledge seems more by way of assimilation. Knowledge is something we digest rather than merely hold. It entails the knower’s understanding and some degree of commitment. Thus while one often has conflicting information, he or she will not usually have conflicting knowledge.¹²

This pattern of assimilation and commitment is illustrated in the story of Saul’s conversion: “Placing his hands on Saul, he [Ananias] said, ‘Brother Saul, the Lord—Jesus, who appeared to you on the road as you were coming here—has sent me so that you may see again and be filled with the Holy Spirit.’ Immediately something like scales fell from Saul’s eyes, and he could see again.

¹¹Ibid., 4.

¹²John Seely Brown and Paul Duguid, *The Social Life of Information* (Boston: Harvard Business School Press, 2002), 119-120.

He got up and was baptized, and after taking some food, he regained his strength” (Acts 9:17-19). Ananias, as a representative of the community of faith, spoke and acted for God. Saul’s experience on the road—a schema—provided him with new information. Saul accepted that new information as truth and the scales fell from his eyes, thereby transitioning him from spiritual darkness to light. The geography of his mind was transformed. The first action Saul took following his conversion was to express his commitment to this new knowledge through baptism. He then regained his strength by eating, which can be understood as being metaphorically suggestive of the process of internalizing, digesting, and assimilating truth.

Scholarship and academic writing as a form of theological inquiry can thus be understood as a personal fulfillment of the command of Jesus to seek first the kingdom of heaven and, as such, the writer should “be transformed by the renewing of the mind” (Rom 12:2). Scholarship is an active engagement in the community of faith, past and present, for the purpose of contributing to the collective knowledge and community experience of God. Such community-oriented scholarship is less likely to generate error and heresy because it is open to criticism and correction. From this perspective, it is hoped that student writers can appreciate research assignments in theological education as opportunities for both spiritual growth and ministry.

The Signs and Symbols of the Community of Faith

What is the “SIGN” that academic theological inquiry points toward? In the broadest context, signs that inform are everywhere. Words, linguistic units, are one form of sign that represent meaning. The primary source for transmitting information about God is the Scriptures, which are a symbolic coding of truth consisting of letters formed into words and words combined to make sentences for the purpose of expressing ideas. The cumulative expression of words and their meaningful use is language. Information transmission is thus a function of language.

Biblical Evidence: The Tower of Babel

The power of language is illustrated in the biblical account of Babel (Gen 11:1-9). Rather than spreading out and inhabiting the earth as God had commanded, the people chose to stay together. To defy God, they decided to build a tower that would reach to heaven and there they would make a name for themselves (v. 4). “But the Lord came down to see the city and the tower that the men were building. The Lord said, ‘If as one people speaking the same language they have begun to do this, then nothing they plan to do will be impossible for them. Come, let us go down and confuse their language so they will not understand each other’” (vv. 6-7). It took the confusing of the language to disperse the people. United under one language, anything they planned would be possible. Their power lay in the ability to share information as a society.

Douglas S. Robertson illustrates this principle by describing levels of

civilization based on their ability to store and handle information: The first level of civilization relied only on spoken language. Information was stored in the mind of the individual and was shared once at a time in a nonfixed form to those who were close enough to hear. Second, the invention of writing, though limited due to the laborious process of copying, allowed for information to be stored on documents that others could consult. The copies could be altered either through human error or through intentional enhancements, thus no two copies were exactly the same. Third, with the invention of the printing press, a renaissance occurred, in which information could be stored in a fixed format and distributed broadly, with access made simultaneously available to a much larger audience. It is this broad access to information that has made possible the technological and intellectual advances of contemporary society. Fourth, the information explosion caused by the printing revolution is predictive of a new and much larger information explosion due to the computer's ability to store and disseminate information, which, in turn, will impact and change society in as yet unknown ways.¹³

The social crisis at Babel did not happen, however, because of technological breakdowns in the storage and retrieval of information. It can be inferred that attempts to communicate continued, just as before God intervened. The problem came because the people could not "understand each other" (v. 7).

Communication theorists have worked through the quantification and speed of information flow, including the formulation of mathematical formulas. But, as Fred I. Dreske points out, regardless of how much communication takes place, unless there is understanding and unless the equation includes meaning, it does not serve any purpose.¹⁴ Both the sender and the receiver must equally understand the "signs" or "symbols." This shared ability was no longer functional in Babel. The differentiation of languages made communication impossible.

Interpretation and Translation of Signs

Bible translations illustrate the challenge of interpreting and translating signs. Simply substituting words from one language to another is not adequate. Alister E. McGrath describes particular problems the translators of the King James Version faced with the Hebrew Bible because they lacked a knowledge of Hebrew idioms and unique words. As a result, in several passages the translators' efforts do not make sense.¹⁵

Recent efforts to translate the Bible into non-European languages face equally daunting challenges. David J. Clark uses the experience of the Bible

¹³Douglas S. Robertson, *The New Renaissance: Computers and the Next Level of Civilization* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 20-24.

¹⁴Fred I. Dreske, *Knowledge and the Flow of Information*, David Hume Series (Stanford: CSLI, 1999), 40-41.

¹⁵Alister E. McGrath, *In the Beginning: The Story of the King James Bible and How It Changed a Nation, a Language, and a Culture* (New York: Anchor Books, 2002), 230-234.

Society in translating the Bible into Kalmyk and Yakut, languages of Siberia: "Translation problems can be usefully considered in two general categories, linguistic and culture . . . [and in] an area where they intertwine, namely the translation of figurative language."¹⁶ After providing a number of examples, Clark concludes:

Enough has been said to demonstrate that translating the Bible is very much more than transferring the words of one language into another. Language and culture are intimately connected, and a culture is deeply influenced by the ecological environment and philosophical worldview of its members. The result is that far from being a mechanical task that could be taken over by a machine, the translation of the Bible requires a deep understanding of and empathy with both the source language and culture and the receptor language and culture. It will continue to demand the highest level of skill, creativity, discipline, and commitment on the part of its practitioners.¹⁷

Disciplinary Discourse

The storage and sharing of information within a specific discipline follows a similar pattern. Eric Sheppard and Trevor Barnes define "disciplinary discourse" as "a network of concepts, statements, and practices that produce a distinct body of knowledge. A disciplinary discourse, for example, would include specialized vocabularies, conceptual and theoretical frameworks, diagrams, variables, and even tables of figures."¹⁸ As an academic discipline, theological inquiry has these elements and can be described as having both a language and a culture. Academic writing in theology should follow the conventions and patterns, the "signs," of the discipline as a component of credibility. Just as the context and the audience should inform the shape of the sermon, so should these also inform academic written work.

Disciplinary discourse has a functional value. Careful participation minimizes the impact of extraneous cultural diversity or ambivalences in community knowledge building. Steve Fuller explains that while some scholars tend

to suppose that all scientists experience the same kinds of ambivalence, a finer-grained analysis of the concept might reveal that each discipline has a characteristic way of resolving its ambivalences, which, in turn, become the basis on which its cognitive status is evaluated by other disciplines and the public at large. This thesis of *Disciplinary Ambivalence* may be illustrated by considering the multiple *linguistic* functions performed by the discourses of disciplines. Our model, adapted from Popper, specifies four such functions, each associated with a virtue of disciplinary discourse.

¹⁶David J. Clark, "Minority Language Biblical Translation Work in Russia, Then and Now," in *Sowing the Word: The Cultural Impact of the British and Foreign Bible Society, 1804-2004*, ed. Stephen Bataldan, Kathleen Cann, and John Dean (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2004), 255.

¹⁷*Ibid.*, 233.

¹⁸Eric Sheppard and Trevor Barnes, *A Companion to Economic Geography* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), 13.

- (j) The virtue of *signaling* is efficiency. A discipline aims to convey the most (new) information per unit of discourse expended.
- (k) The virtue of *expressing* is surveyability. A discipline aims to make each step of its reasoning evident in its discourse.
- (l) The virtue of *describing* is accuracy. A discipline aims to maximize the total amount of truth conveyed in its discourse.
- (m) The virtue of *criticizing* is precision. A discipline aims to maximize the total amount of error eliminated from its discourse.¹⁹

These four functions of disciplinary discourse contribute to the community of faith's ability to build a knowledge of God. Through the careful adherence to the norms of the discourse, academic writers provide texts that readers can understand efficiently and effectively. Unlike the builders at Babel, it becomes possible to work together because the same language is spoken and the objective of increasing the community's knowledge of God is achieved.

Fuller's proposal brings us back to Jesus as the "Word." This symbol is a metaphor for the incarnation because it embeds Jesus in both language and culture; he is the "Sign" through whom humanity is informed about God. And just as words have been used to preserve information about God in a written, fixed form that has been shared by a community of faith, so also the "Word" is fixed, permanent, unchanging, and is known and shared by a community of faith unbounded by time or culture.

The Role of Scholarship in the Community of Faith

What is the "CONTEXT" of academic theological inquiry? A common perception about scholarship is that the scholar is devoted to writing books and articles on esoteric subjects. For the most part, he or she works alone, relying on written rather than verbal communication. For the uninitiated, much of what is produced seems almost impossible to understand. Thus it may appear that the scholar is an elitist who is set apart from society at large and, while interacting with other scholars, speaks what may seem like a different language.

Granted, the scholar engaged in theological inquiry may examine texts or topics in detail, framing his or her findings by efficiently using disciplinary discourse. But seeking the kingdom of heaven and accepting Jesus as the Word takes place in a context—the community of faith. Just as scholarship in general does not become recognized as such until the results or findings of the inquiries are published and scholarly peers recognize them as valid, so also in the community of faith. Scholarship in theological inquiry implies communication. As Patrick Granfield states: "Christianity is a religion of communication."²⁰

Granfield defines communication "as the transmission and interchange of information, as the way we share ideas, feelings, experiences, attitudes, and

¹⁹Steve Fuller, *Social Epistemology*, 2d ed. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2002), 201.

²⁰Patrick Granfield, "The Theology of Church and Communication," in *The Church and Communication*, ed. Patrick Granfield (Kansas City: Sheed & Ward, 1994), 1.

values with others.”²¹ This definition implies what he calls the “forum model,” which “holds that there is a dynamic relationship between sender and receiver. The receiver actively participates in this dialogic exchange on the basis of experience, understanding, and interpretations. Receiving involves active and creative dialogue by which the message is re-created and interpreted by the receiver.”²² Thus, for Granfield, “the Church is a group of communicating persons, a network of meaning and values, where continual and multiple interactions take place.”²³

Following Granfield’s model, the scholar listens to the message of God through the voices of the church in the past and present, is transformed both intellectually and spiritually by the message through the processes of interpretation and assimilation, and then shares the enriched message with others using appropriate methods and conventions of communication. The never-ending cycle continues as the receiver of the message from the scholar is also transformed by the message and, in turn, passes it on to new receivers. Thus the truth of God’s revelation in Jesus is handed down from generation to generation throughout time, with each new generation experiencing the transforming power of the gospel as they struggle to understand and apply the message in their new setting. The role of scholarship is that of a servant of the community of faith and scholars who emulate the Spirit of Jesus best serve truth.

Biblical Evidence: An Application of Communication Theory

The Gospels record an incident that relates to Granfield’s theory of communication. Human institutions, such as the university and the church, reward the most effective scholars with respect and recognition. Career opportunities are often governed by the objective evaluation of scholarly productivity. In Matt 20:20-28, when the sons of Zebedee asked a favor—to be granted the top positions in the kingdom—from Jesus through their mother, the other disciples became indignant. Jesus replied: “You know the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be your slave—just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many” (Matt 20:35-38).

Gerald Gerbrandt clarifies the role of scholar/servant: “Scholars in their scholarship serve the church as they fulfill their unique mandate of being the critical thinkers of the hermeneutical community. On the one side, the mandate of the scholars should be clear; on the other side, they do it not as those who

²¹Ibid., 3.

²²Ibid.

²³Ibid., 5.

have the final say or as individuals but as part of a community.”²⁴ This mandate to serve the church through critical thinking suggests that “all aspects of life—the assumptions and traditions of society, the faith and traditions of the church, as well as the customs and ‘givens’ of the university—must be put under the microscope. Faculty at our church institutions thus must ask difficult and uncomfortable questions, *not because they have a right or freedom to do so, but because it is their responsibility and assignment.*”²⁵ From this perspective, success as a scholar is not measured merely by productivity and recognition, but by faithfulness to a calling and to the furthering of the mission of the church. Following Jesus, the scholars in theological inquiry seek not to be served, but to serve and to give their lives for the church.

Purposes of Scholarship

One way to clarify the role of scholarship in the community of faith is to define its purposes. Calvin College has done this in their mission statement:

Conserving scholarship promotes understanding of the various Christian traditions in order to provide the Christian community with the integrity, vision, and wisdom needed both to frame and to energize its ongoing work. . . .

Transforming scholarship may establish Christian criteria for knowledge or for its application, or may implement those criteria in a particular field in such a way as to challenge the wisdom prevailing there or to show the critical, redemptive, or reconciling power of the Christian faith. . . .

Enriching scholarship brings the insights or methods of the arts and sciences to bear on Christian thought and the understanding of creation and culture. Such scholarship can enhance appreciation for God’s creation and human experience, expand the fund of human knowledge and wisdom, help Christians engage in proper self-criticism or self-understanding, and enrich the testimony of the Christian message.²⁶

Individual scholarly projects in theological inquiry can fulfill any of these purposes. The purpose and function are determined by the nature of the inquiry and the audience for which the findings are prepared. Academic writing presupposes certain expectations concerning subject matter, research methods, and audience (in this case, professional peers). However, permeating the research process is the awareness that the scholar is a servant of the community of faith and is seeking to contribute to the mission of the church. Thus the context of scholarship in theological inquiry is the community of faith.

Conclusion

While Borgmann’s definition of knowledge may be useful for discussion purposes, the elements are not discrete. Discussion of the message includes

²⁴Gerald Gerbrandt, “Scholars as Servants of the Church,” *Direction* 33/2 (2004): 139.

²⁵*Ibid.*, 136, emphasis original.

²⁶Expanded Statement of Mission: Part II: C. The Mission of Calvin College in Scholarship <www.calvin.edu/admin/provost/mission/part2c.htm>.

considering the sources that have been preserved, interpreted, and applied within a community of faith. Academic research seeks this knowledge through a better understanding of the Scriptures, the Word incarnate, and through the collective experience of the community of faith throughout time as preserved in written records. Thus the knowledge of the kingdom of heaven is made known through the Scriptures, as mediated through communication within the community of faith. It is in conversation with the historic community of faith that information about God is shared. The systematic and intentional research of scholars fulfills an important function within the church by thinking critically about the community's knowledge of God. This role is an essential ministry that will enable the community to build knowledge and to grow spiritually.

Discussions of scholarly discourse in composition studies and information and communication theory emphasize the role of the community in forming and understanding the signs used to share information. Epistemology reminds us that information must be transformed into knowledge. This applies both to individuals and communities. Finally, in theological inquiry, God is at the center of the process, from message to sign to community. The transformation within the scholar and the community from having information about God to knowing God requires the power of the Holy Spirit. Through the Holy Spirit, God is an active participant in all theological inquiry.

Academic scholarship, then, can be viewed as a calling to a ministry of transforming information that will edify the community of faith. Individual assignments and projects may not appear in and of themselves to contribute much to this vision; however, the cumulative effect of individual and corporate scholarship within the community of faith will lead to a better and richer knowledge of God and his purpose for his people. Research-methods pedagogy and academic-writing assignments, which lead the student to discover truth (what the student *knows*), are also meaningful for the student's spiritual formation (what the student *becomes*). Thus academic writing assignments prepare the student to *do*, thereby aiding him or her in a ministry of corporate knowledge building and communication that edifies the community of faith.