

Interview with Professor Grant Macaskill of Aberdeen University

with Ray Van Neste
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Professor Grant Macaskill recently came to Aberdeen University to fill the Kirby Laing Chair of New Testament Exegesis, the chair which was first held by Howard Marshall. I had the privilege of meeting Grant at the service of thanksgiving for the life of Howard Marshall and was greatly encouraged. So, I jumped at the opportunity to interview him and introduce him to our readers.

So, tell us about your academic journey. What led to your interest in pursuing academic biblical studies as a vocation? When did you know this was what you wanted to do? Where did you receive your degrees?

I never really intended to become an academic. I think my story is really one of God's providence working to place me where he wanted me to be, both through and in spite of my own bad decisions. When I first started university, it was with a view to becoming a veterinarian; I came from a rural background (specifically, a crofting one) and was more interested in working with animals than with people. So, when I was 17, I began my studies at the School of Veterinary Medicine at Glasgow University. But I knew pretty soon that it wasn't for me and by my second year I was spending more time reading theology than studying histology. I decided (with all the arrogance of a 19 year old) that I was called to the ministry, shifted over to complete a degree in General Science, in order to finish more quickly, and began the process of applying to become a candidate for the ministry in my church. I was accepted for this and started my training at the Free Church College in Edinburgh (the institution now known as Edinburgh Theological Seminary) in 1995. With hindsight, I realize that I was probably attracted to the ministry for the wrong reasons and that what I told myself was "God's leading" was actually just my own interests and desires. But God was undoubtedly at work in and through it all, for that process led me into a course where I was rigorously schooled in the biblical languages and robustly trained in the classical doctrines of systematic theology, especially as these were developed in the Reformed tradition.

Towards the end of the course, I began to recognize that I was not a good fit for the ministry. Various things prompted the conclusion, but probably the key was a period of time when I realized that my walk with God was not what it should be and that my moral life was quite unhealthy. In the first instance, it prompted me to re-evaluate myself with a new measure of honesty, including my sense of call to the ministry, but it also kick-started a longer

period of reflection on how my theology shaped (or failed to shape) my identity. At the core of those reflections was the question of whether my personal identity as a Christian was really and properly shaped by my union with Christ, or whether I was substituting something else, perhaps just conforming to a set of cultural expectations. Those questions have followed me ever since.

Thankfully, I was given the opportunity at that time to work with a church in Dundee, the church that had once been pastored by Robert Murray M'Cheyne, doing a combination of youth work and teaching, while I tried to work out what I was going to do (and, as importantly, who I was). It was a pleasantly eclectic congregation, in one of Scotland's quirkiest cities, and the folks there were good to me. So, for about 4 years, I worked there, largely involved in the teaching side of things but also doing some outreach youth work with some of the kids who hung around on the streets. (I also had a sideline as a singer-songwriter, which has left some embarrassing traces online). The side of the job I enjoyed the most, though, was the teaching side and it often pushed my knowledge of biblical studies, in particular, to the limits. Not quite sure why, I began to entertain the idea of pursuing a PhD on apocalyptic literature, which many of the conversations concerned. I originally approached Dr Alistair Wilson at the Highland Theological College, but he (very graciously) thought I would be better to look at St Andrews, and to talk to Richard Bauckham about whether he would be willing to supervise me. I really didn't think Richard would be interested in supervising someone whose training in biblical studies was at the seminary level, and not university level, and didn't expect the conversation would go anywhere, but he turned out to be quite enthusiastic about my proposal and encouraged me to apply. A few months later, I was a newbie doctoral student at the University of St Andrews.

Most of my fellow students were very clearly set on pursuing academic careers, but I still wasn't sure what I wanted to do. I was enjoying the studies and was happy to leave it at that. Every year, they would go back to the States for the SBL Annual Meeting, partly to ensure that they were visible when the time came for hires, and I would stay in St Andrews. When I entered my final year, I was quite open to the possibility of going back into farming, but Richard encouraged me to apply for the British Academy Postdoctoral Fellowship scheme. I put together a proposal to develop a critical edition of the *Slavonic Texts of 2 Enoch*, but didn't really expect to be successful, since the award rate is so low; only about 6 percent of applicants are awarded the fellowship. Again, though, things worked out and I was given the fellowship, which allowed me to continue in St Andrews, but now as a staff member. A year and a half into the fellowship, the University advertised a lectureship (the equivalent of an "assistant professor" role in the States), which I applied for. I wasn't actually on the original shortlist, as my first book hadn't been released yet, but it came out about 10 days before the interviews were due to take place and, as a result, the University added me to the shortlist. I got the job

and at that point the penny dropped that perhaps this was what I was meant to be doing. I taught at St Andrews until September 2015, when I moved to Aberdeen.

What is your church background?

My family is from the Isle of Lewis, one of the Gaelic-speaking islands off the north-west coast of Scotland, and the strongest denomination there is the Free Church of Scotland. It's a Presbyterian denomination with a rich history of Reformed theology and one of its strengths has been the place of serious theological reflection in the day to day life of the church, especially in the Gaelic-speaking communities. In particular, there is a real importance attached to reflection on Christology: after-church fellowships would often involve long conversations about the two natures of Christ and how they bear on our salvation. Sermons, which were often lengthy, were seldom pristine exercises in oratory, and they would probably not win many prizes for homiletics, but often evinced a richly theological engagement with the text. I feel that I learned as much about theological interpretation from some of those sermons and fellowships as I ever learned from a textbook. John Webster actually told me recently that a sermon he once heard from a Free Church pulpit in the islands was one of the best works of theology he had ever encountered. It wasn't confined to ministers, either; it was simply part of the culture that we talked about and read theology, particularly that of the Reformers and the Puritans. In fact, when I was searching online recently for John Owen's *Christologia*, the first things I found was a scan of a Gaelic translation of Owen that I had seen on the bookshelves of a few of the old worthies on the island. The Free Church traditionally practiced exclusive psalmody, too, which fostered a particular way of thinking about canon and Christian life: to sing psalms exclusively as Christian praise requires a certain communal sense of what it means to read the Old Testament "Christianly" and a certain core competency in reading the Old Testament theologically.

Over the years, I've really come to appreciate that theological depth, particularly when I compare it to the general state of evangelical theology today. It worries me that the range and depth of the theological tradition that I come from is increasingly narrowed and emptied of its depths, as evangelicals focus (often rightly) on certain issues, usually those that mark boundaries, but consequently neglect others that are actually more central or fundamental. The result can be something that is disturbingly Christless. My wife and I were so troubled by one example of this in the congregation that we attended (and had helped to plant) in St Andrews that we felt we had to leave, along with a number of others. That was something we never thought we would ever do. I don't like to discuss it, but I mention it here because it was an example to me of how a theologically deficient ministry can be pastorally toxic. We can probably all think of examples of this that we have encountered, just as we can probably all think of examples to the contrary, of ministries that were

vibrant, mature and effective. That is something that I feel burdened over in my current position.

So, for our last year in St Andrews we worshipped with a wonderful independent evangelical congregation (Cornerstone: www.cornerstonestandrews.org) that is very serious about theology. It was a nourishing and challenging home for us and we were quite sad to move on. We have only just moved home to be nearer Aberdeen and haven't yet worked out where we should settle.

What are some of the key academic influences on you?

As my doctoral supervisor, Richard Bauckham was, and continues to be, a big influence. Richard has never particularly compartmentalized areas of research: he writes on theology and Christian ethics as easily as he does on biblical studies, and for a pastoral as well as an academic readership. It's been really important to me to have an academic mentor who demonstrated such a natural integration. He has also been wonderfully kind to me over the years, and that has also left its mark: it is easy to be sucked into the self-importance of the academic world, and having a supervisor who was humble and kind—who acted like a servant—really helped to keep me grounded.

There have been others who have shown a similar level of kindness to me over the years and who have likewise embodied a particular kind of academic humility. They may come from different traditions, but I've found them to be incredibly supportive of me and always willing to talk, and sometimes argue, about the interpretation of Scripture. People like Loren Stuckenbruck, Philip Esler, John Barclay, John Collins and Philip Alexander all fall into that category. I had the opportunity to get to know Howard Marshall a little before he passed away, too, which really meant a lot to me. As a student, I had a number of Howard's books on my shelf: he was a real hero for evangelical academics. It's hard to put into words what it means to be in what was Howard's chair: it's very special.

Over the years, I have also been quite significantly influenced by those involved in the "theological interpretation" movement. When I was a doctoral student in St Andrews, Christopher Seitz was still there. He ran a weekly seminar on Scripture and Theology, to which a number of us were drawn. It was my first exposure to the contemporary academic discussion of theological interpretation, including its criticisms of historical criticism and the underlying modernism of much "conservative" exegesis and biblical theology, and it proved to be quite significant for my development. What I found fascinating was how much of the theological material we were looking at resembled the interpretation of Scripture that I remember from sermons in the Free Church, which was so different from the way that we are typically trained to read Scripture in the academy. It's not that I want to jettison the latter, or to minimize its importance, but that seminar really helped me to see something of the tendency to "naturalize" our interaction with Scripture and to reduce theology to historical criticism.

As a result, I've also benefitted richly from some great conversation partners who work on the systematic theology side of things, and these have been really pivotal to my own development. Probably the most important of these is Ivor Davidson, with whom I worked in St Andrews and who was endlessly willing to talk about systematic and historical issues when I was working on my study of Union with Christ. Although I had a good classical theological formation in my church background, my training in modern theology wasn't as thorough and my knowledge of patristic literature was patchy. Ivor is always a great conversation partner, with a remarkable knowledge of the scholarship. Towards the end of my time in St Andrews, John Webster arrived and also became part of those conversations; to have a leading theologian who was willing to talk positively about the Puritans was a real gift. Now that I am in Aberdeen, I am deeply grateful to have colleagues like Tom Greggs, Paul Nimmo, Phil Ziegler, John Swinton and Brian Brock: what I love about them is that they want to do theology in a way that takes Scripture seriously, and they want to do theology for the church. They model something really special on that level and have really encouraged me to do academic work that is true to the gospel.

At the end of the day, though, I would say that the biggest academic influence on me was my minister for over 10 years, Rev. Alasdair I. Macleod. Alasdair was my minister for a year or two when I was a student in Edinburgh and then again for the best part of a decade in St Andrews. Every week, he would wrestle with the text of Scripture and would bring that into the pulpit. He read widely, stayed abreast of developments in biblical studies and academic theology, and grappled with what these might bring to the reading of the text; his sermons were enriched by that erudition, but remained as accessible (and powerful!) to the old man who wandered into the church one week, and then came every Sunday until he passed away, as they did to the doctoral students in the congregation. Alasdair is one of the reasons that I really believe in the idea of the pastor as public theologian.

Describe your approach to biblical studies.

In some ways my approach is quite variegated: I do a lot of work on Jewish backgrounds/contexts, I do work on the interface with systematic/historical theology and I do work on theological ethics. On the surface, these can look quite different, but they are all integrated by what, for me, is basic: the proper identification of my object of study. To identify it as "New Testament," rather than *just* as something in or behind the text (e.g., Paul), is not just about breadth of focus, but about the recognition that the New Testament matters as an object of study because it is *Scripture*. That demands a very different mode of engagement, one that necessarily articulates with the theological disciplines and with the life of the church. None of that takes away from the historical particularity of the New Testament and its constituent parts, and I think it is a mistake for those who want to engage in theological

interpretation to neglect proper historical-critical engagement, but it fundamentally resists any idea that such historical analysis fulfills the requirements of New Testament study. Historical criticism is only ever one element in a more complex engagement. That's not to disparage any historical-critical work, even when practiced by those who see it as an end in itself, but to recognize that the proper study of the New Testament *qua* New Testament demands further levels of engagement and submission.

One of the particular dangers facing evangelicals involved in biblical studies is that we see ourselves as having a strong commitment to Scripture, but we don't necessarily engage with it *as* Scripture. We see our task as one of practicing some kind of faithful equivalent of historical criticism, rather than one that necessarily moves beyond it. So, we generate what we see to be faithful accounts of Paul or of John, but to engage with New Testament as Scripture requires us to read our authors canonically, as part of the living word of God to the church. Again, I think we often reduce that vitally theological issue to something naturalistic: we see a canonical reading of Paul, John, etc., as simply a matter of locating their writings in the bigger narrative that runs from creation to eschaton. That's part of it, sure, but it's still a long way short of what we encounter in the great exegetes like Calvin, who take seriously the fact that they are dealing with a living voice and that its reception by the church has been subject to divine providence. So, even when applying the principle of *semper reformanda*, the history of theological reception of the text is never simply jettisoned, since that would be potentially contemptuous of providence and the working of the Spirit, but is instead *sifted*.

That has been a big part of my more recent work, whether on *Union with Christ* or *Intellectual Humility*. In both cases, I feel that I have been very dependent on the legacy of the great interpreters of Scripture that have gone before, particularly Calvin, but through him some of the medieval and patristic interpreters.

What are some of your current and recent research projects?

My last monograph was a study of *Union with Christ in the New Testament* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013). I wanted to trace the ways in which the union between God and those he has redeemed is represented across the New Testament, not just in individual books, and to trace the distinctive representation of Jesus as the one by whom this union is mediated. I was quite heavily influenced by both patristic and Reformed accounts of union, with chapters devoted to each, and consequently quite attentive to the place that finely grained Christological discussions have in understanding the nature of our union with God, through our union with the mediator. At some stage soon, I want to develop a more popular version of the study, as I think there are some really important pastoral issues at stake.

My current research project is on *The New Testament and Intellectual Humility*. I was given a grant in 2014 by Saint Louis University and the John Templeton Foundation to develop the study, as part of a bigger international

project looking at the *Philosophy and Theology of Intellectual Humility*. It is very much at the theological and ethical end of New Testament studies, and oriented towards the life of the church. To a large extent, my interest in the life of the mind came out of my work on union with Christ, since the epistemic and noetic dimensions of the union (basically, the way in which being united to Christ changes the way we see and think about the world) were a big part of that study. It was nice to be funded specifically to do something theological on the New Testament, and the conferences hosted by the project were pretty fascinating exercises in interdisciplinary research.

I have two further projects on the horizon. One is a joint study with my former colleague David Moffitt, on the place of the ascension of Jesus in New Testament soteriology. The other is a long standing interest in autistic spectrum disorders and the church. There is a lot of research on autism here in Aberdeen and I think we can develop a really important study. It's something I have felt burdened about for a long time, but couldn't really explore meaningfully until I came here.

What is your vision for the work of biblical and theological studies at Aberdeen University?

I obviously want Aberdeen to maintain its reputation as home to critically rigorous biblical and theological work. All of my predecessors in the New Testament chair have been known for such work, as have our colleagues in Old Testament and in the theology disciplines. But Aberdeen also has a reputation for being a place where the sub-disciplines are well-integrated, where theologians and biblical scholars converse and have some shared identification of what their task is. While they were in Aberdeen, Howard Marshall and Francis Watson both exemplified this, though in quite different ways; on the theology side of things, so did John Webster. Among many of the current staff, such an attitude towards the natural integration of the disciplines is just part of the atmosphere, reflected in the joint seminars that are a regular feature of the life of the school. I had a sense when I was interviewed for the job that my own instinct to integrate was one of the reasons I was considered a good fit for the department. So, in some ways, my vision for biblical and theological studies at Aberdeen is simply that they continue to do what they have done for a long time. At the same time, that sense of fellowship between the sub-disciplines (like all fellowship) can easily be allowed to grow cold, if it is not deliberately maintained. My vision, then, would be one of a school that *continues* to see such integration of Bible and theology and to recognize it as a core part of our identity.

Within this, Aberdeen's reputation for robust practical theology, especially through the work of John Swinton and Brian Brock, has a particular significance and it's an important one to highlight. Their work is centrally concerned with the life of the church, and I think one of the keys to Aberdeen's identity is a widely shared sense that what we are doing matters—has academic significance—because of the church. We're not just a sub-discipline of history, or of philosophy, or of religious studies, even though all of those

things are parts of our activity. For many of us, our academic work is something we see as “calling,” as service. That may not be true of us all, but it’s certainly true of many of us, and it really shapes the identity of the department. I don’t think it needs to be seen as being at odds with the robustly critical character of what we do, either.

I have heard you express an interest in training pastor-theologians. Tell us what you have in mind and why this is important. What makes Aberdeen a good place for this sort of training?

The fact is that through the centuries, most of the truly great scholarship on the Bible and theology has been done in the church, by those serve in some capacity as pastors. That’s true of the celebrated figures of biblical and theological scholarship, but its also true of the humble ministries that have “rightly divided the word of truth” for Christian communities week after week. Through the modern period, though, church and academy have had a messier relationship, often driven by the principled exclusion of confessional concerns from “scientific” study of the bible, which in turn has fostered a suspicion of academic theology. One of the legacies of this has been that the genre of doctoral research in biblical studies has become characterized by certain kinds of research, done in certain kinds of ways.

Part of my vision, then, is simply that those who see their vocation as pastoral, rather than academic, recognize that they may have the gifts to allow them to develop a significant piece of research based on the New Testament, that may be a gift for the church when it is eventually published. This may well involve a different kind of project from the one that the career academic would develop, perhaps one more obviously aligned with the disciplines of practical theology, but it will be no less critical or robust.

On the other side of that equation, though, the process of developing a research based doctorate is one that fosters a different kind of learning from taught programs. Students will acquire a range of skills and knowledge through their own work of identifying relevant needs and will typically do so under their own steam. That means that a particular kind of self-knowledge is acquired, often by exposure to radically different viewpoints to the ones we hold to ourselves. I think the pastor-scholars who emerge from such processes of formation have distinctive gifts to offer the church.

I saw this with one particular candidate in St Andrews, who became the senior pastor at the church that we attended towards the end of our time there. His doctoral thesis involved a study of Union with Christ in Ephesians (specifically, on Christ as the messianic builder of the temple) and it has continued to be deeply influential on his pastoral work. While the thesis itself has continued to be a gift to the church, he would probably say that what he learned from the process was as important. He found the doctoral process to be grueling (probably because of my supervision . . .), but the challenge left him with an incredible depth of resources.

So, while doctoral work is not for everyone, I think it is important for some pastors to consider it, as part of their calling to be pastor-theologians. I think they should recognize that they have real scholarship to offer both church and academy.

There are a couple of factors that make Aberdeen a good option for those interested. The most important is probably that of ethos, as I mentioned earlier. Aberdeen is a place where the connectedness of the disciplines is recognized and where the place of the church is taken seriously, not just in practical theology, but in all the theology and biblical disciplines. For a leading research university, that is an unusual set of characteristics.

The other factor is more mundane, though perhaps very significant for many who are interested. Aberdeen can accommodate both part-time and full-time, distance-taught doctoral research. We have a number of students who are based overseas, particularly in the States, working on both a part-time and a full-time basis. For many pastors, this can be a really big factor: it means they don't have to leave their ministries entirely, and it makes the possibility a more affordable one. We've been working hard to make sure that those who are not residential in Aberdeen still feel part of the community, and still have access to resources: we record all our seminars and post them to a secure website, and we try to have as many of our library resources as possible available electronically.

Thank you, Grant, for taking the time to do this interview with us. I greatly appreciate your personal story and your vision for academic work and ministry. May your tribe increase!