

Outreach: A Conversation with James E. Faulconer

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McClellan: Dr. Faulconer, you hold the Richard L. Evans Chair of Religious Understanding with Fred Woods. Can you tell me a little about the chair and what you are looking forward to during your assignment?

Faulconer: There is a certain sense in which the title of the chair tells you what you are supposed to do with it: foster understanding with people of other religions. Right now, I suppose, I have two foci. One of them is trying to talk to the people in the Orthodox traditions and in the Christian Near East. Those are people who, in fact, disappear from the understanding of Christianity of most people in the United States. If you ask, “What is a Christian?” they respond by talking about the Protestants, the Catholics—and perhaps the Orthodox, but probably not. When it comes to Syrian Christians or Egyptian Christians, most people have no idea that there is any such thing. So I would like to engage some of those people; and with the Center for Law and Religion, the Wheatley Institution, and the Kennedy Center, we are sponsoring a major conference next year that will bring in Orthodox and Near East Christians. We are going to bring in about twenty scholars and clergy from these traditions and have them talk about their relationships with each other, with the state, and their beliefs.

That is one focus. My other focus comes from the letter that Elder Ballard wrote in which he encourages members of the Church to use the Internet to participate in the wider discussion that it makes possible. It seems to me that one of the things I can do—I hope I can

do—is to try to make some good things available to people who might be looking for information that is more academic than usual. So, I am working with people, all of them Latter-day Saints (and most of them outside of BYU), to do some seminars on scripture where we will look at them closely in an academic way and write up pieces about various scriptures. We have done one on Abraham. We are finishing one up on Alma 32. We are looking to do one on the sections of the Doctrine and Covenants on economics. There is someone who wants to do one on the New Testament. We are going to try to form these groups so that people who are wondering what the Latter-day Saints think about X, Y, or Z can see that there are groups of Latter-day Saint academics thinking and talking about some of these scriptural issues. We want to make that available online.

McClellan: Truman Madsen was the first person to hold this chair, and he held it for over twenty years. Have you spoken with him and some of your other predecessors about the assignment?

Faulconer: Yes. He was one of my professors when I was a student. In fact, I was his assistant. I have a lot of admiration for him and for what he did. I have spoken with him about the assignment. I have spoken with David Paulsen. I have spoken with Fred Woods, who is the other holder of the chair right now. I have also spoken with Paul Hoskisson. That is partly what has me excited—to hear the things that they did and what kinds of things one can do with the chair.

McClellan: So you are looking forward to some good experiences.

Faulconer: Yes, very much so.

McClellan: And what kind of counsel did you receive from them?

Faulconer: Their counsel has come down to something along the lines of “Do what you really want to. Do what you think is good for the chair.”

McClellan: So everyone has the prerogative to take the assignment in the direction they think it needs to go.

Faulconer: That is my understanding.

McClellan: The name of the chair changed from the Richard L. Evans Chair of Christian Understanding to the Richard L. Evans Chair of Religious Understanding. This was to reach out to a wider audience than just Christianity, correct?

Faulconer: Right. I think that change was made to include Buddhists and Confucians and Muslims and a lot of other groups that we need to be able to talk to.

McClellan: You have spent much of your life interacting with other faiths.

Faulconer: In philosophy most of my work has been either with atheists or with Catholics. Those are the two bigger groups in philosophy. I was a visiting professor at the Catholic University of Leuven in Belgium, and I think most of my work has been with people who happen to be Catholic, although until recently most of my work has not been about religion—it has been about other things, such as the philosophy of psychology. In the last five or six years, however, I have made a move in my own career in the direction of the philosophy of religion, and it is a happy coincidence, I think, that these people I have worked with have been mostly Catholics.

McClellan: Do you feel like that has given you a bit of a head start?

Faulconer: Actually I feel inundated. It is a big job; there is a lot to do. For example, I am teaching a course in October at St. Joseph's University in Beirut. It is a Catholic University, and they have invited me to come and teach a five-day course on "prophetism." That is their word, not mine. They are doing a whole semester on prophets in various contemporary religions. So they asked me to come and talk about Latter-day Saints and our understanding of prophets. It is a philosophy course—it is not supposed to be a history course or a course in doctrine—so I am still trying to figure out what to say, because I do not want to offend them and turn it into a proselytizing tool on the one hand. On the other hand, I feel strongly that it is important that I convey the message and the beliefs of the Church accurately, and that I do so as a believer rather than just an observer. So I am struggling with that—not in terms of whether there is enough to say, but in terms of what do I say and how do I say it? I have never had this kind of experience.

McClellan: So when you were a visiting professor in Belgium, it was not as a Latter-day Saint scholar but as a philosopher.

Faulconer: I was just a philosopher. I was teaching a course on the nature of community. Although it was a very interesting experience in Leuven because they knew that I was a Latter-day Saint, and they found it odd. They had never met a Latter-day Saint before—at least they did not know it if they had. There was a branch in the town, so they probably had. They had seen the missionaries.

So I met with the administrators (who were mostly Catholic priests) on various occasions, and they were very curious about our theology. They could not believe that we do not have the kind of official theology that they have. In fact, at one point one of them said, "When you go back to Utah, you should go talk to the leader of the Church and tell them that they need it." I said, "I don't think it works

that way.” My own position is that we ought not to have an official theology. If you have continuing revelation and you believe that each person should have the Spirit, between the two of those I think the kind of theological messiness in the Church that some people complain about is exactly what we ought to have. There ought to be a few basic principles out of which other things grow, and the rest of it happens as we follow our leaders and live our lives. Though I’ve spent my adult life studying and teaching philosophy—how to talk about everything—we are supposed to be living Christian lives, not worrying about how to explain it.

McClellan: As the quote often attributed to Augustine says, “In essentials, unity. In non-essentials, liberty.”

Faulconer: Right, and that is the way it ought to be. I hope if I were to come back in a thousand years, assuming that the earth would still be here then in its current form, that Latter-day Saint theology would be just as messy.

McClellan: Do you think philosophy and the study of religion are interrelated as disciplines? Is this why so many in the ancient and modern world straddle that line?

Faulconer: Well, even in the ancient world there was some competition between philosophy and religion. When Paul warns about philosophy he is being serious. But philosophy was, in the ancient world, about how to live the best life. With Judaism or Christianity, or any religion, there is competition. Each says to the other, “No, that is not the best way to live the good life.” Today, philosophy is no longer about that. It is a much more abstract, theoretical discipline. And so today there is less competition between the two. I can say “I am a philosopher and a religious person” without there necessarily being a conflict between the two. Because philosophers are interested in the basic ideas of whatever it is they are studying, if they are religious they are also going to be interested in the basic ideas of their religion. Though there is no necessary connection between philosophy and theology today, it is not unusual for philosophers who are religious to also be interested in theology, since they are very similar disciplines. I also think there are probably more religious philosophers than in any other academic discipline.

McClellan: Do you think it is as common for a religious person to be drawn to philosophy as it is for a philosopher to be drawn to religion?

Faulconer: I think the former is more common. Most people who are religious are interested in some area of their theology, so that makes them also interested in philosophical ideas. But if you are an atheist

and you are interested in some area of philosophy, you may not be interested in religion at all.

McClellan: You are a professor of philosophy, but you have published in the field of biblical scholarship. You published a book on Romans and you say in your curriculum vitae that you are somewhat proficient in Greek. Can you comment on that?

Faulconer: Well, I studied Attic Greek in college as part of my philosophy requirements. I work with contemporary German and French philosophy, but since they refer to Greek philosophy a lot I had to learn some Greek. Then, for obvious reasons, I became interested in the New Testament and very interested in the book of Romans.

McClellan: You mentioned in the preface to your book Romans 1: Notes and Reflections that you cannot stop thinking about the book of Romans. What is it about Romans that is particularly compelling to you?

Faulconer: I think that the Apostle Paul has done as good a job of explaining the gospel as anyone. I think he does a great job. I think he gets a bad rap in Latter-day Saint Sunday School classes and other places. Part of that is because the translation is sometimes problematic. Part of that is because we have had missionary arguments with people of other religions about works and grace, which almost always result from misunderstandings on both sides about what Paul said. Part of my interest is also because there are places where Paul's work does contain difficult doctrine, but that doctrine is very important. It is an important thing for us to understand, and for me the best thing about Romans is that, as I read it and try to understand it, the one text that helps me more than any other is the Book of Mormon. When I have said that in Sunday School class, Latter-day Saints sometimes gasp. They seem to think that is not possible. And I want to say, "Well, maybe you should read the Book of Mormon more carefully" or "Maybe you should read Romans more carefully." I think they really do testify of each other. My experience is that the Book of Mormon and Romans fit together as well as any two other texts I can think of. Also, part of my interest is just biographical. I was born and raised Protestant. It was the text for us. It was the one we used and talked about a great deal. Some of my interest might be inexplicable too; I do not know.

McClellan: Do you think your training with Greek philosophy might have helped you understand the philosophical backdrop of Paul's day?

Faulconer: I do not think philosophy helps me that much with Romans. The way that philosophy can help me understand is that in philosophy, the way I was taught it, the point is to read very slowly and carefully, and, at least hypothetically, to ask, What if this does not

mean what I think it does? Maybe it says something else, and the point is to figure out what it really does say. So I think it is not so much the content of philosophy that helps as much as the tools and the methods. They help a lot.

McClellan: You also mention in the preface to Romans 1 that the book is basically from one layperson to another. Would you like to see more Latter-day Saint publications of that nature?

Faulconer: I would. One of the problems that we have in the Church is that we have the idea that unless you are with the Church Educational System or the BYU Religious Education faculty, on the one hand, or a General Authority, on the other, you really do not have what it takes to talk about the scriptures. There are, at least in our unspoken assumptions, two groups of authorities who have the qualifications, and no one else. The rest of us just sit around and wait for them to say something. I think that is appropriate for the General Authorities, but I think that we put too much trust in the scholars of our culture, and we do not realize that each of us has the ability to be a scholar of the scriptures. It is important to remember that the word scholar means “a person of leisure”—someone who has the time. Given today’s society, most of us have the time, if we want to, to spend reading the scriptures carefully. And I think that is all it really amounts to. So what I was hoping that book will do—and I am trying to follow it up with another book on Romans 5–8—is say to people, “Look, here is a guy who does not know Greek very well, and has little academic training in the New Testament, but it is not knowing Greek or having training that makes the difference.” I think the book says, “Just think about what is going on in this verse, or in this passage, and look at other scriptures and try to understand what Paul was saying.” This is something that any member of the Church can do. You do not have to have a PhD to do it; you just have to take the time. If you have that time you can be a scholar, but it does mean reading a lot and thinking carefully about what you read. It means studying, but you do not have to have formal training. Of course, that is not to say that I do not appreciate what those with formal training can do. We need more people in the Church with formal training in Hebrew and Greek and in biblical scholarship, Church history, and so on. I just don’t want to cede all thinking and discussion to them.

McClellan: What advice would you give to people who are committed to other fields professionally but want to participate in some way in biblical scholarship?

Faulconer: Read a lot. Read with some mild skepticism. Do not believe that just because someone wrote it, it must be true. On the other hand, do not read with extreme skepticism. Do not believe that everything you read must be false. Most writers are sincerely and honestly trying to argue that what they believe is true. Take a careful look at their evidence and use your own intelligence, and especially the Spirit, to make decisions about what you read. But in addition to reading secondary sources, which I believe we ought to do, read the scriptures a lot. Read them slowly and carefully, and read them over again. Do not assume that you already know what they mean. That, I would say, is our single best tool for reading the scriptures. It is also one of our biggest problems when we read the scriptures. We think that we already know, and so we are not really reading—we are just repeating to ourselves what we think we know. Pick any scripture and we already know what it means, so what we hear in our heads is what everyone says. We sometimes do not even really see the words on the page—we see something else. Being a scholar of scripture, lay or professional, requires getting over that. **RE**