



University of the
Highlands and Islands
Highland Theological
College

Oilthigh na Gàidhealtachd
agus nan Eilean
Colaiste Dhiadhachd
na Gàidhealtachd

20th Anniversary Lecture, 28 August 2014

F.F. Bruce: Lay Christian in a Secular University

Dr Tim Grass (Associate Tutor, Spurgeon's College, London; tgrass.work@gmail.com)

It is my hope that you will not find this evening's lecture as dull as F.F. Bruce's audiences sometimes found his. In the words of one of my informants:

I remember him once saying that he was not a good public speaker, and preferred writing. He said he was to speak at Sydney Anglican Cathedral in Australia on one occasion, and as he was driven to the cathedral they found people lined up round the building waiting for entrance (such was his reputation). He said that he commented to his driver, 'My, these people will be disappointed', and then he paused, and added to me, 'And they were!'¹

I have been asked to focus on the way in which Bruce sought to integrate his personal Christian faith with his commitment to what he called 'unfettered biblical study' in the context of a secular university, something for which he is well known. And I am going to approach that question by taking the key words of the title in order: 'F.F. Bruce', 'Lay', 'Christian' and 'Secular University'.

'F.F. Bruce'

Let me begin with a brief outline of the life of Frederick Fyvie Bruce. Born in 1910 in Elgin, in north-east Scotland, he retained a lifelong sense of his identity as a Scot, and in particular a Scot from this region. The North-East was marked by a sense of intellectual independence and freedom from servile deference to metropolitan thought, and this was fully reflected in the ethos of the local communities of the Christian denomination to which his family belonged, an evangelical body known as the Brethren or Christian Brethren (in North America, Plymouth Brethren). Bruce's father Peter (1874-1955) was a full-time travelling evangelist among them. Keen Bible students, these Brethren nevertheless saw no reason to adopt a particular approach to an issue or passage just because someone highly regarded among them did so. Bruce himself often said that it was his father who taught him to think independently on the basis of the evidence, and never to accept any statement simply on the basis of someone else's say-so.

Young Fred early gave evidence of exceptional intellectual ability, which was encouraged to the full by his family and schools. He had a distinguished student career as a classicist at Aberdeen and Cambridge, and was continuing this as a postgraduate at Vienna when he cut short his studies to accept an appointment as Assistant in Greek at Edinburgh in 1935. Three years later he became Lecturer in Greek at Leeds.

However, his lay interest in academic biblical studies was to lead to a change of course. Before his appointment to the new department at Sheffield in 1947, he had taken a diploma in Hebrew at Leeds in 1943, and had lectured in NT Greek to theological students. In addition, he had been active in the formation and early development of an evangelical agency seeking to promote academic biblical study, Tyndale House at Cambridge and the associated Tyndale Fellowship for Biblical and Theological Research. The scarcity of Evangelical biblical scholars at that time was such that the

¹ Charles Price to the author, 27 January 2008.

Inter-Varsity Fellowship had turned to him to write for them on biblical topics, and he had offered to write a commentary on the Greek text of Acts for Tyndale Press, IVF's 'academic' imprint. It was remarkable that there was no evangelical New Testament scholar to whom the IVF could turn. And it was still more remarkable that in 1947 Sheffield should appoint as first head of its new Department of Biblical History and Literature someone who was not trained in biblical studies. We shall come back to this a little later. Equally remarkably, he was elected to membership of the Studiorum Novi Testamenti Societas (SNTS; Society for New Testament Studies) in 1948, which would have been granted on the basis of his published work, so that must have been deemed of suitable quality.

For the first year at Sheffield he carried the department's teaching load single-handed, but gradually he built it up, developed the course offerings, began postgraduate supervision, and was promoted to a professorship in 1955. Bruce was very happy at Sheffield, and it was a surprise to him to be approached regarding the Rylands Professorship of Biblical Criticism and Exegesis at Manchester in 1959. Nevertheless, he made the move, and would remain at Manchester until his retirement in 1978, after which his literary activity continued in full spate until his death in 1990.

Bruce achieved a range of academic distinctions. He was awarded several honorary doctorates; he was president of both the Society for Old Testament Studies (1965) and the SNTS (1975); in 1973 he was elected a Fellow of the British Academy. Furthermore, he was the recipient of no less than three *Festschriften*.² He was also a productive and versatile writer, with almost 50 books to his credit, of which about 25 remain in print, hundreds of articles, and over 2,000 book reviews. He also edited several journals,³ and co-edited major reference works such as the *New Bible Dictionary*, as well as serving as series editor for the New International Commentaries on the New Testament – not bad for someone with no degree in biblical studies!

Bruce has always been seen as noteworthy for his lifelong membership of the Brethren; one gets the feeling that sometimes people wondered either how he could stick them, or alternatively how they could stick him! But the fact is that he was fortunate enough to spend much of his life among open and outward-looking congregations which were at ease with things academic in general. For him, Brethren attracted by their catholicity of sympathy and their commitment to spiritual and intellectual freedom under Christ.⁴ He therefore found no difficulty in remaining not only a member of a Brethren congregation (or 'assembly'), but also in being active among them as a preacher and Bible teacher – and he saw no incompatibility between the approaches to biblical study adopted in the academy and the church.

Bruce was by no means the first member of the Brethren to write extensively in the field of biblical studies, but he was almost the first to do so as part of the academic world.⁵ However, whilst Scottish Brethren may not have participated in the world of academic discourse, they relished solid Bible study, and they had their own approach to biblical interpretation, supplied by a hermeneutic known

² *Apostolic History and the Gospel*, ed. W.W. Gasque and R.P. Martin (Exeter: Paternoster, 1970); *Studies in Honour of F.F. Bruce = Journal of Semitic Studies* 23/2, ed. C.E. Bosworth and S. Strelcyn (Autumn 1978); *Pauline Studies: Essays presented to Professor F. F. Bruce on his 70th Birthday*, ed. Donald A. Hagner and Murray J. Harris (Exeter: Paternoster/Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1980).

³ *Evangelical Quarterly* (1950-80), *Journal of the Transactions of the Victoria Institute* (1950-7), *Palestine Exploration Quarterly* (1957-71).

⁴ F.F. Bruce, 'Why I have Stayed with the Brethren', *Journal of the Christian Brethren Research Fellowship*, no. 10 (December 1965), 5-6.

⁵ A possible predecessor was S.H. Hooke (1874-1968), who had been brought up among the Exclusive Brethren, but he was probably no longer in fellowship with them during his academic career. Bruce edited Hooke's *Festschrift*, entitled *Promise and Fulfilment: Essays presented to Professor S.H. Hooke in Celebration of his Ninetieth Birthday ... by Members of the Society for Old Testament Study and others* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1963), and contributed 'Promise and Fulfilment in Paul's Presentation of Jesus', *ibid.* 36-50. He also wrote two obituaries of Hooke: 'Samuel Henry Hooke', *Palestine Exploration Quarterly* 100 (1968), 77-8, and 'Samuel Henry Hooke (1874-1968)', *Witness* 98 (1968), 101, 107.

as Dispensationalism. It was by no means uncommon for miners, joiners and other skilled manual workers to spend their leisure hours learning biblical languages and poring over commentaries. Conversational Bible readings formed a significant part of church life for them, and the highlight of an assembly's year was its Saturday conference, a gathering which combined sessions of solid biblical exposition with socialization and romance over a brown bag tea.

'lay'

I would argue that Bruce can be seen as a lay person from two angles: firstly he was not ordained, and secondly his academic formation had not been in the area of biblical studies.

Firstly, Bruce was not ordained. On occasion he found it useful to appeal to his lay status, as in his *Second Thoughts on the Dead Sea Scrolls* (1956).

In 1955, an American literary critic, Edmund Wilson, went into print with the claim that Jesus was not an original teacher but derived his ideas from the Essene community. Christian history, he asserted, would have to be rewritten. In addition, he made the sensational allegation that the Scrolls were slow to be published because clergy scholars were unwilling to face the implications of their discoveries.⁶

Bruce dismissed Wilson's claim by appealing to his own lay status: 'Whether the following pages are the work of a scholar is for others to judge. But it cannot be argued against them that they are the work of a clergy man.'⁷

Some years later, he corrected a misconception about his status by describing himself as a 'persistent layman', a phrase I rather like.⁸ And in 1965, he wrote to the evangelical magazine *Christianity Today*: 'I am "unordained" not merely because I belong to a fellowship in which the distinction between clergy and laity is not recognized. My vocation, as I am conscious of it, is to a lay ministry, and, so far as I can judge, I should have remained a layman no matter what my ecclesiastical attachment had been.'⁹ And in 1970, he wrote to a Brethren monthly, *The Harvester*: 'I rarely bestir myself to correct public statements which (as I think) misrepresent me, but I do repeatedly find it necessary to insist on my lay status.'¹⁰

This status very probably helped to secure him the opening at Sheffield. Hitherto the university had not acceded to calls for the establishment of a department of theology, but the status accorded to Religious Instruction or 'Scripture' in the 1944 Education Act resulted in unprecedented demand for qualified teachers of the subject. This was the first such department in Britain to be established within an arts rather than divinity faculty and without any corresponding department of theology, a development seen by the editors of the department's fortieth anniversary symposium as opening up the discipline to those not traditionally drawn towards it, a 'democratization of biblical studies'.¹¹ But it is recorded that, in the discussions regarding appointing a head for the new department, there was an 'unholy' row between various individuals involved.¹² The bishop of Sheffield, who was a

⁶ Stephen Neill and Tom Wright, *The Interpretation of the New Testament 1861–1986*, 2nd edn (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), 323–4.

⁷ F.F. Bruce, *Second Thoughts on the Dead Sea Scrolls* (London: Paternoster, 1956), 9.

⁸ F.F. Bruce, *In Retrospect: Remembrance of Things Past* (London: Marshall Pickering, 1993; first publ. 1980), 285.

⁹ F.F. Bruce, 'Matter of Call', *Christianity Today*, 26 March 1965, 38.

¹⁰ *Harvester* 49/6 (June 1970), 90.

¹¹ Preface to David J.A. Clines, Stephen E. Fowl and Stanley E. Porter, eds, *The Bible in Three Dimensions: Essays in Celebration of Forty Years of Biblical Studies in the University of Sheffield*, JSOT Supplement Series 87 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1987), 14.

¹² Helen Mathers, *Steel City Scholars: The Centenary History of the University of Sheffield* (London: James & James, 2005), 148.

council member of the university, wanted to see an ordained man given the job, while others, actuated either by a dismissive attitude towards theological studies or apprehension about giving the clergy too much influence in a secular university, required convincing that such a department was needed at all. Bruce 'was a Plymouth Brother and made no secret of the fact that he was a layman and intended to remain so', and he was appointed over two ordained candidates.¹³ To have Bruce as its head seems in retrospect to have been a very apt choice for a free-standing department of biblical studies lacking any corresponding department of theology or ministerial training college, although in commenting on the turbulent events leading up to its inauguration he played a characteristically straight bat!¹⁴

Secondly, Bruce may be described as a lay person because he had never received any formal academic training in biblical studies (though he had competed successfully for academic awards in that field). His academic formation was in the field of classics, and he sought to apply what he had learned in that discipline to that of biblical studies. Incidentally, I think this goes a long way to explain the 'feel' of some of his commentaries.

Neither did he have an earned doctorate, though he was awarded several honorary ones. Indeed, he expressed himself somewhat dismissively towards the Ph.D., speaking of the 'menace of the Ph.D. cult',¹⁵ and two Americans recalled him saying that 'the PhD was invented so that Americans could take an advanced degree home with them when they came to the UK for further study'.¹⁶ On the other side of the equation, however, it should be noted that during his career he is said to have supervised more postgraduate students in biblical studies than anyone else in Britain had done up to that point.¹⁷

'Christian'

Looking back on forty years of biblical studies at Sheffield and the academic publications which had resulted, Bruce described himself as 'tempted to make a response in words which would be strangely out of keeping with the self-consciously secular spirit in which the Department was conceived and launched'; he then went on to quote from Psalm 118, in Latin, the verse traditionally rendered as 'This is the Lord's doing, and it is marvellous in our eyes.'¹⁸ What underlay the marriage of faith and scholarship in his thinking? To answer that, let me comment – all too briefly – on the basis for his faith and on his understanding of what it meant to be a scholar.

Bruce's faith rested on the historical foundation which he saw as provided by the Scriptures, and in particular the gospel accounts of Jesus' birth, ministry, death and resurrection. But it was more than mere belief that certain events actually occurred in history. As a good Scots Calvinist, he was clear both that a personal faith-commitment in response to the message about these events was called for, and that such faith, while a genuinely human response, was at the same time the work of the Holy Spirit, who opened a person's eyes to understand the gospel and enabled them to believe it.

¹³ University of Sheffield, university archives, G.R. Potter, memorandum regarding the department's creation, 1980.

¹⁴ F.F. Bruce, 'Biblical Studies at Sheffield: The Early Days', in Clines, Fowl and Porter, eds, *The Bible in Three Dimensions*, 25–7, at 25. On the founding of the department, see further Bruce, *In Retrospect*, ch. 18; Grass, *A Life*, 52-3.

¹⁵ Bruce, *In Retrospect*, 97.

¹⁶ Laurel and Ward Gasque, 'Frederick Fyvie Bruce: An Appreciation', *Harvester* 69/11 (November 1990), 1-6, at 2.

¹⁷ At Sheffield, the department saw four Ph.D. graduates in its early years, all supervised by Bruce, and then no more until 1975: David J. A. Clines and Stephen Moore, eds, *Auguries: The Jubilee Volume of the Sheffield Department of Biblical Studies*, Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement Series 269 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998), 311-12.

¹⁸ Bruce, 'The Early Days', 27.

This much is clear: but his reserve means that he rarely cared to let slip many hints on the subject of his personal faith-journey.¹⁹ He speaks of having absorbed the Christian faith with his mother's milk, but coming to a point as a late teenager at which he made that faith his own.²⁰

What did it mean for FFB to be a scholar? In his own mind, it was about following the evidence wherever it might lead. He was deeply influenced by his father's insistence on doing so, and was therefore prepared, if the evidence warranted it, to adopt views which would not have been accepted by his fellow Evangelicals. For instance, he considered that there were three Isaiahs,²¹ and accepted a second-century date for the book of Daniel in its final form,²² although he was discreet about where and how he propounded his conclusions! One suspects that Brethren and other Evangelicals may have allowed more latitude in his opinions because of his eminence in the academic world and the fact that he already had a reputation for soundness.

One vehicle by which Bruce and others sought to facilitate the integration of Christian faith and critical scholarship was Tyndale House and the Tyndale Fellowship. In an important article for the *Evangelical Quarterly*, which appeared in 1947, Bruce argued that commitment to the fellowship's doctrinal basis in no way precluded what he called 'unfettered study' of Scripture, an assertion made in a context where the opposite was widely believed – on both sides.²³ In his view, acceptance of the Bible as God-breathed, and its study in a spirit of loyalty to the historic Christian creeds and confessions, predetermined neither the answers to questions of interpretation nor the methods of study to be used. In his view, if one's position is truly well grounded, then all light on it is to be welcomed, from whatever source or direction that may come.

It has to be said that evangelical theological students during the post-war decades were notorious for allegedly compartmentalizing academic and devotional study of the Bible. Bruce, however, saw no need to do so; the two were quite compatible, and in his work each interpenetrated the other. And this sense of integration is also evident in his emphasis on mediating the fruits of academic study to a wider audience. He did so not only in churches but also through what used to be called 'extra-mural' lectures and courses, intended for the general public. He saw no tension between his lecturing and his preaching; the audiences might have been different, and the language used might have been different, but the basic approach to the biblical text was not.

Nowadays eyebrows might be raised at the ease with which he felt able to switch between the academy and the church. But if we look at the historical context, this was the heyday of the 'Biblical Theology' movement, associated with such names as John Bright, Alan Richardson and Brevard Childs.²⁴ This sought to rediscover the essential message of Scripture without returning to older fundamentalist ways of treating it. Bruce found himself in considerable sympathy with the biblical theologians in their efforts to derive a unified theology afresh from Scripture: in 1955, for example, he saw one of the most important developments in biblical interpretation as being the increasing recognition of the unity of the biblical message and the looking to Scripture for a word from God in the present situation.²⁵ The 1950s were also a relatively conservative decade culturally; churches prospered, religious stories were big news, and Billy Graham hit the headlines; to some extent I think it fair to say that Bruce surfed these waves, as, perhaps, did his department at Sheffield.

¹⁹ Bruce, *In Retrospect*, 306-7.

²⁰ J.D. Douglas, 'A Man of Unchanging Faith', *Christianity Today*, 10 October 1980, 16-17. The preacher who made such an impact on Bruce was Kingsley Melling (1903-2004), a pharmacist and Brethren Bible teacher: *In Retrospect*, 16. Melling always considered his two years in Lossiemouth to have been a mistake: S. Kent, *Faithful to the End: Biography of Kingsley Melling 1903-2004* (Horwich: privately published, 2005), 24-5.

²¹ Personal recollection of one who worked with Bruce during the early 1950s.

²² *Christianity Today*, 10 October 1980, 17 [1115].

²³ F.F. Bruce, 'The Tyndale Fellowship for Biblical Research', *Evangelical Quarterly* 19 (1947), 52-61; repr. in T.A. Noble, *Tyndale House and Fellowship: The First Sixty Years* (Leicester: IVP, 2006), 314-25.

²⁴ Tim Grass, *F.F. Bruce A Life* (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2011 / Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2012), 85.

²⁵ F.F. Bruce, 'Trends in New Testament Interpretation', *JTVI* 87 (1955), 37-48, esp. 41-8.

At this point it is worth turning aside for a moment to ask what Bruce believed that the Christian brings to the task of reading and interpreting the Bible that the non-Christian does not. What he did not think the believer brings to Scripture was a particular concept of biblical inspiration. Rather, as we have just seen, he regarded this as something to be established on an inductive basis from careful study of the text.²⁶ Nor does the believer come to Scripture with a particular and predetermined set of conclusions about its interpretation.

Bible study involves the same disciplines as the study of other literature of the period: philology, archaeology, textual criticism, and so on. And in that study Bruce would insist on the pursuit of objectivity, based on his conviction that all truth came from God. Indeed, for him, the Christian has an added incentive and stimulus to engage in such critical study,²⁷ rather than a reason for not doing so, as many evangelicals would have asserted. 'The biblical message inculcates, among other things, a love of truth for its own sake and a willingness to follow the evidence wherever it may lead.'²⁸ Faith involves sharpening, not suspension, of the critical faculty, and it is the man of faith who is best able to pass judgement (1 Cor.2.15). Ultimately, then, he saw no tension between critical study and personal faith.²⁹ So his appreciation of 'believing critics' such as William Robertson Smith (1846-94) comes as no surprise.

However, according to John 5.39, Bruce argued, the primary purpose of the Scriptures is to bear witness to Christ; without faith we are in the same position as the Pharisees, who searched the Scriptures and missed the point of their message. As he commented on John 5.37-8, '[i]t was possible to have a minute knowledge of the letter of those writings which enshrined the former revelation and foreshadowed the final revelation, and yet not have the divine word which those writings recorded dwelling in their hearts.'³⁰ It is the work of the Holy Spirit to enable us to grasp this overall message of Scripture, this witness to Christ which it bears. As Bruce asked, 'who is so well qualified to interpret the sacred volume as the primary and perpetual Author?' But 'the wisdom which the Spirit imparts can be acquired only by diligent study, with humble and receptive minds'.³¹ The Spirit uses the aids to biblical interpretation to bring us to fuller knowledge of Christ.³²

So I would suggest that for Bruce, what the believer brings is not something *different* so much as something *additional* to the task of interpreting the Bible: an expectation of hearing God speak, which springs from acquaintance with the divine author and involves openness to the illumination of the mind by the Holy Spirit and willingness to be obedient. A non-Christian can understand the text, but it is the work of the Spirit to convince them that this is the Word of God and to enable them to submit to it; here we are not far from the teaching of the Westminster Confession.

So how did Bruce practice his scholarship? Here we turn to examine his methodology. This was inductive, based on careful study of ancient texts and shaped by his classical training. He paid careful attention to archaeology and philology, and drew on a comprehensive acquaintance with Greek and Latin literature. His written work is marked by extensive engagement with the primary sources, to the extent that when revising some of his commentaries he appeared to have taken little account of developments in scholarly debate since their first editions.³³

²⁶ Bruce, *In Retrospect*, 311.

²⁷ Bruce, *In Retrospect*, 144.

²⁸ F.F. Bruce, 'My View: Faith vs Scientific Study of the Bible', *Bible Review*, no. 3 (Summer 1987), 4-5, at 4.

²⁹ F.F. Bruce, 'Criticism and Faith', *Christianity Today*, 21 November 1960, 9-12 (= 5 (1960-1), 145-8)

³⁰ F.F. Bruce, *The Gospel of John* (Basingstoke: Pickering & Inglis, 1983), 136.

³¹ F.F. Bruce, *I & II Corinthians*, New Century Bible (London: Oliphants, 1971), 39-40 (on 1 Cor. 2.11-12).

³² F.F. Bruce, 'Divine Interpretation', *Harvester* 47/1 (January 1969), 2.

³³ Annotated copies of some of them in my possession show that he was aware of new work, but the lack of revision in the published versions may indicate that he saw no reason to alter what he had written in the light of it.

Looking back, he argued that there was ‘no better foundation than a classical education for the professional cultivation of biblical studies’.³⁴ In this he was reflecting a traditional Scottish approach in which ministerial students proceeded to study for the BD after first taking the degree of MA. In his SNTS presidential address in 1975 he argued that classicists were particularly well placed to study the NT because it was part of the same world.³⁵ The entry in the *ODNB* (by his friend and fellow evangelical Howard Marshall of Aberdeen) argues that Bruce’s classical background ‘tended to liberate him from the theological bias and even prejudice that can interfere with objective biblical study’.³⁶ And whilst Bruce usually came to conservative conclusions (as did several other contemporary classicists who engaged in New Testament study),³⁷ he did so on the basis of a methodology which was unexceptionable to his academic colleagues; thus some evangelicals joined with James Barr in regarding him as a conservative liberal.³⁸

This inductive approach shaped many of Bruce’s academic articles and books, which developed by means of a comprehensive collation of evidence, sometimes in narrative form, including comments on scholarly interpretation along the way, always undergirded by a belief that the centre of the Scriptures was their witness to Christ’s saving work. There is an emphasis on primary sources, and a sense that Bruce is working as a historian rather than as a systematizer, theological or otherwise. Often a conclusion is lacking, perhaps because he was not usually trying to build an argument but to present the evidence. And as he believed interpretation should be free from the constraints imposed by dogmatic syntheses, so he tended to avoid offering syntheses of his own conclusions. His major work on Paul, for example, was seen by some as offering a narrative approach of how Paul’s thought developed rather than a synthetic presentation of its major themes.³⁹ It was a case of ‘here’s the evidence; now you must make up your own mind’, an approach which he also adopted with his children.

There is another point we must make about this inductive approach. The decision by Sheffield to set up a department of biblical studies in isolation from any corresponding department of theology matched well the confidence of many Brethren in advocating study of the Bible apart (as they thought) from the constraints of human traditions. Several Brethren chose to study at Sheffield, during a period when parts of the movement were particularly aware of the value of academic study. Of course, for Bruce, as for other Brethren, a major reason for giving priority to inductive study of the Bible over adherence to particular doctrinal formulations was that it was the Bible through which, uniquely, the Holy Spirit spoke to the human heart. He also argued that it was not for theologians to interfere in the historians’ assessment of the value of the Gospels as historical material or to tell them that it was illegitimate to do so.⁴⁰ The historians were quite capable of reaching their conclusions independently of what the theologians might have to say!

By contrast with many other evangelicals, Bruce’s doctrine of Scripture was likewise induced from the evidence rather than representing an *a priori* commitment with which he came to the evidence.⁴¹ In the 1970s the word ‘inerrancy’ became for some evangelicals a defining mark of a sound doctrine of Scripture; Bruce insisted that he was happy simply with the word ‘truth’, resisting attempts to impose the new term. His apologetics, too, followed an inductive approach, and it is worth unpacking that a little in view of our theme. In arguing for acceptance of the truth-claims of

³⁴ Bruce, *In Retrospect*, 145; cf. Grass, *A Life*, 190.

³⁵ F.F. Bruce, ‘The New Testament and Classical Studies: Society for New Testament Studies Presidential Address, 1975’, *New Testament Studies* 22 (1975–6), 229–42; repr. in idem, *A Mind for what Matters*, 3–16.

³⁶ I. Howard Marshall, ‘Bruce, Frederick Fyvie (1910–1990)’, *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, <www.oxforddnb.com>, accessed 14 April 2008.

³⁷ e.g. G.B. Caird, C.H. Dodd, Bruce Metzger and E.V. Rieu.

³⁸ See Grass, *A Life*, 149, 219 and the references cited there.

³⁹ Cf. Grass, *A Life*, 162–3.

⁴⁰ e.g. F.F. Bruce, ‘History and the Gospel’, *Faith & Thought* 93/3 (1964), 121–45, at 121.

⁴¹ See further Bruce, *In Retrospect*, 311; Grass, *A Life*, 94–5.

Christianity as a religion founded in historical events, Bruce focused on the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Fundamentally, he believed that it was possible to examine the evidence for the resurrection according to the same canons as applied to 'secular' history, and that when one did so the New Testament writings stood up pretty well.⁴²

I do not believe that there is a cleavage between the Jesus of history and the Christ of faith, but if I had to choose between the two, I should plump for the Jesus of history. Why? Because the Jesus of history is a real live person, but unless the Christ of faith is securely based on historical fact, he is apt to be a figment of the believer's imagination.⁴³

To those who had difficulty in accepting that a bodily resurrection took place, his response was to allude to Acts 26.8 ('Why should any of you think it incredible that God raises the dead?').⁴⁴ Yet his Paulinism also made him remarkably sympathetic to Rudolf Bultmann, to take one example of a theologian whose approach was far different from his own. In an obituary for the Brethren monthly *The Witness*, he wrote that, given Bultmann's negative attitude to historical evidence, some sceptics could not see why 'he bore firm witness to Jesus as the Word became flesh. The reason was not far to seek: he knew whom he had believed.'⁴⁵

'secular university'

Bruce positively relished the opportunity to teach the Bible in such a context – and to get paid for so doing! Quoting from his inaugural lecture as professor: 'To teach this subject above all subjects in the academic freedom which we value so highly ... is the most rewarding and exhilarating work in the world.'⁴⁶ He had no problem with the stipulation that the teaching be marked by scholarly objectivity and be 'non-doctrinal'; indeed, 'It would not have occurred to me that Biblical History and Literature could be taught otherwise in an academic context'.⁴⁷

But how did he justify the study of the Bible in this context, apart from the faith-communities among whom its constituent documents had been produced and interpreted?

Firstly, as he argued in his inaugural lecture as professor at Sheffield, the Bible formed a significant element of the matrix which had give rise to Western civilization, and a good part of that was unintelligible apart from a sound grasp of the content of the Bible.⁴⁸ The Scottish education he had received stressed the value of a good general course of study which included the Bible. An early statement of this approach comes in an article he wrote in 1953 for the *Expository Times*.⁴⁹ He argued that the exclusion of Theology from the course offerings of the 'redbrick' English universities (on the grounds of confessional rivalry, which was at its height before the First World War), had resulted in the exclusion of a source which was just as important for an understanding of Western culture as the classical tradition of Greece and Rome. He therefore welcomed the establishment of departments of theology in more recent foundations, as part of faculties of Arts. All this may have been in part an *ad hominem* argument, but he genuinely believed it. It was, of course, his hope that the teachers he trained would function evangelistically.

⁴² Foreword to G.R. Beasley-Murray, *Christ is Alive!* (London and Redhill: Lutterworth, 1947), 7; Bruce, *In Retrospect*, 175; Grass, *A Life*, 51.

⁴³ A.R. Millard papers, ms article for *Release Nationwide*, 'Who was Jesus?', sent 26 September 1979.

⁴⁴ F.F. Bruce, *The Real Jesus: Who is he?*, The Jesus Library (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1985), 123.

⁴⁵ F.F. Bruce, 'Rudolf Bultmann (1884-1976)', *Witness* 107 (1977), 19, 21; cf. Grass, *A Life*, 153-4.

⁴⁶ F.F. Bruce, *New Horizons in Biblical Studies* (Sheffield: University of Sheffield, 1957), 1.

⁴⁷ Bruce, *In Retrospect*, 140.

⁴⁸ Bruce, *New Horizons*, 1; cf. one of his aims for the Tyndale Fellowship, which was 'to urge the claims of Biblical studies to a permanent and influential place in the national system of education': Noble, 318.

⁴⁹ F.F. Bruce, 'Religious Education: Bible Teaching in the Faculty of Arts', *ExT* 65 (1953-4), 306-7.

Secondly, and more importantly, he believed that all truth came from God, and that therefore all valid insights could be welcomed, from whatever quarter they came. For him, the message of Scripture included 'a love of truth for its own sake and a willingness to follow the evidence wherever it may lead'.⁵⁰ To understand the biblical documents, it was necessary to ask questions about their date, authorship, provenance and so on, the answers to which could only be found by a study of the evidence and could not be laid down by any external authority.

Since all truth was from God, so there was no need to restrict the student's freedom to study the Bible by any doctrinal, ecclesiastical or religious tests. Nor need the conclusions be prescribed. He explained his understanding of academic freedom as being that 'in the teaching and study of the Bible, as in the teaching and study of any other subject, one is not bound to follow any particular school of thought or promote any particular party line. It means that one's only commitment is to truth, that one is free to follow the evidence wherever it leads, in an atmosphere of free inquiry.'⁵¹ It is clear that he regarded this freedom as a particular delight, and one which resonated with his own approach to Christian spirituality, in which freedom was elevated to the status of a hermeneutical principle: he argued at one point that where faced with a choice of equally cogent interpretations, that which did more to promote Christian freedom was to be favoured.⁵² And at the end of his time at Manchester, he could write, 'In a secular university I have had greater liberty to say and write exactly what I think than ever I should have had in most theological colleges.'⁵³ One reason why Bruce felt so much at home in the university context was that he was free from the need to look over his shoulder for fear of upsetting someone. 'A person who always has to be looking over his shoulder, lest someone who is in a position to harm him may be breathing down his neck, has to mind his step in a way that, as a university teacher, I have been a stranger to.'⁵⁴ This was no idle fear; several of his acquaintances experienced problems as a result of expressing opinions deemed to be at variance with their position as faculty members in evangelical and Adventist institutions. The most notable was a fellow member of the Brethren, H.L. Ellison (1903-83), who in 1955 was forced to resign from London Bible College after writing an article on biblical inspiration which was condemned as 'Barthian'.⁵⁵ Bruce expressed himself unusually strongly in print regarding the way Ellison had been treated, and the incident remained at the back of his mind for the rest of his life.⁵⁶

Bruce's strong commitment to academic freedom was reinforced by a remarkable ability to listen to the views of scholars of all shades of opinion without feeling threatened. This was undoubtedly due in part to a sense of security in his own faith stance and a lack of defensiveness. In his words: 'The man who really knows what he has believed can ask questions about pretty well everything without having his faith disturbed and can listen to different opinions without a sense of disquiet.'⁵⁷ He had faced his own crises of faith as a young man; although he did not give full details, as a schoolboy he was helped in sorting out his attitude to certain Brethren interpretations of Scripture.⁵⁸ And as a student at Aberdeen, a work by the philosophical theologian W.R. Matthews was helpful to him: 'At a time when I was as skeptical as an undergraduate ought to be, a paper of his ... on "The Destiny of the Soul" showed me how I might understand and continue to accept *ex animo* the Christian doctrine of the resurrection of the body.'⁵⁹

⁵⁰ F.F. Bruce, 'My View: Faith vs. Scientific Study of the Bible', *Bible Review*, no. 3 (Summer 1987), 4-5, at 4.

⁵¹ Bruce, *In Retrospect*, 143.

⁵² Bruce, 'Problem Texts, 12: The Call to Freedom', *Harvester* 66/12 (December 1987), 21.

⁵³ F.F. Bruce, 'Accountability in University Life', *Spectrum* 12/1 (September 1979), 10-11, at 11.

⁵⁴ Ward & Laurel Gasque, 'F.F. Bruce: A Mind for What Matters', *Christianity Today*, 7 April 1989, 22-5, at 25.

⁵⁵ Cf. Anon., 'Towards Barthianism: Is "The Evangelical Quarterly" Softening the Ground?', *Monthly Record of the Free Church of Scotland*, February 1955, pp.29-31, at p.29.

⁵⁶ See further Grass, *A Life*, 88-91.

⁵⁷ F.F. Bruce, 'Thoughts from my Study', *Calling* 12/1 (Spring 1970), 10-12, at 10.

⁵⁸ Bruce, *In Retrospect*, 38-9.

⁵⁹ *Journal of the Transactions of the Victoria Institute* 84 (1952), 129: written response to a paper by W.R. Matthews, 'The Aims and Scope of the Philosophy of Religion'.

More generally, his confidence that the Christian faith can stand scrutiny in the secular academic environment, and his lack of defensiveness, was an encouragement to many who worked in other academic disciplines – everything from Chemistry to Nursing. ‘All truth is God’s truth’ is a principle which these folk have sought to apply. Time does not permit me to go into detail here, but Bruce had a seminal input at the start of what became Regent College, Vancouver; this was founded in 1965 by evangelicals who wanted to equip Christians to think Christianly in all areas of academic life. Its first principal was a geographer, James Houston, who had shared with Bruce in Brethren teaching conferences in England. Although Bruce did not accept Houston’s invitation to join the faculty, he did support the college, because I believe he shared its vision.

Conclusion

How successful was F.F. Bruce in integrating faith and critical scholarship? That’s a difficult question to answer, partly because it turns on how we define ‘success’.

There are areas where even those who approach biblical study as committed Christians would want to tackle things differently. Things have moved on somewhat since the 1950s, and we can no longer argue that the main challenges to accepting the NT documents as substantially accurate in historical terms come from the systematic theologians. And Bruce has been criticized as overly sanguine in his positive estimate of the historicity of those documents, failing to give due weight to the concerns of those who found the whole question less straightforward than he did.⁶⁰ His acceptance of a unified narrative within which the various parts of the Bible can be subsumed is also likely to come under fire from various directions in our postmodern climate. On the other side, the vogue for the type of ‘objective study’ in which personal commitment was seen as a hindrance has hopefully also passed.

Things have also moved on in the field of Classics; no longer can a widespread familiarity with the basics of Latin or Greek be assumed, for there has been a decline, whose earlier stages Bruce lived long enough to lament, as can be seen from his comments on the fate of the discipline as taught at Aberdeen.⁶¹

However, it remains true that, firstly, Bruce gave confidence to many Christians regarding the foundations of their faith; secondly, he blazed a trail for evangelicals to pursue a career in academic biblical scholarship; and, thirdly, he and others facilitated the taking seriously of evangelicals by others. The extent to which evangelicalism has itself been reshaped in that process is keenly debated. Yet his influence upon the evangelical world was epochal, in that his example, and his willingness to supervise them, drew numbers of evangelicals of all shades into the realm of academic biblical studies. If it is argued that he did not offer an extended rationale for the integration of faith and study in the secular context, he nevertheless encouraged many others to try the same integration. And for the exploration of that possibility, and the resultant strengthening of the faith of many, we give thanks to God.

[revised October 2014]

⁶⁰ Cf. Grass, *A Life*, 160-1.

⁶¹ Bruce, *A Mind for what Matters*, Preface.

Appendix: Key Works by F.F. Bruce

- 1943 *Are the New Testament Documents Reliable?*
1950 *The Books and the Parchments*
1951 *The Acts of the Apostles: The Greek Text with Introduction and Commentary*
1953 *The Spreading Flame*
1954 *Commentary on the Book of the Acts* (NICNT)
1956 *Second Thoughts on the Dead Sea Scrolls*
1959 *The Apostolic Defence of the Gospel*
1961 *The English Bible: A History of Translations*
1963 *The Epistle to the Romans* (TNTC)
1963 *Israel and the Nations*
1964 *The Epistle to the Hebrews* (NICNT)
1965 *Expanded Paraphrase of the Epistles of Paul*
1969 *New Testament History*
1970 *Tradition Old and New*
1970 *The Epistles of John*
1971 *1 and 2 Corinthians* (NCB)
1974 *Paul and Jesus*
1977 *Paul: Apostle of the Free Spirit*
1980 *In Retrospect: Remembrance of Things Past*
1982 *The Epistle of Paul to the Galatians* (NIGTC)
1982 *1 & 2 Thessalonians* (WBC)
1983 *The Gospel of John*
1984 *The Epistles to the Colossians, to Philemon and to the Ephesians* (NICNT; *Colossians* first publ. 1957)
1988 *The Canon of Scripture*
1990 *A Mind for what Matters*