

November 12, 2012

To Whom It May Concern:

I am writing this letter to support Dr. Christopher A. Rollston, the Toyozo Nakarai Professor of Old Testament and Semitics at Emmanuel School of Religion in Johnson City, Tennessee. I first met Chris in 1997, when I entered the Ph.D. program in the Department of Near Eastern Studies at Johns Hopkins University. Chris was several years ahead of me in the program and much more than that ahead of me in terms of his skill and expertise. The department had him teach the year-long seminar on textual criticism, in which I was a student. And he taught the second semester of Ugaritic that I took. He and I also had extensive conversations about religion, the Bible, the academy, and society in general.

During my years at Hopkins, Chris was a genuine friend who gave in unbelievably generous ways of his time, his resources, and his knowledge. He was never one to keep ideas or insights or “inside information” (e.g., about some university process) that he had learned to himself for the sake of his own advantage. Because of his readiness to help and his personable style of relating, I often turned to him for advice.

I can vouch for the fact that Chris is an outstanding scholar with an outstanding reputation in the field of Hebrew Bible studies and, more specifically, in the subfield of epigraphy. He worked harder than just about any student I knew at Hopkins, and he served a small church as its pastor during most of his time in Baltimore. I envied his breadth of knowledge in the field and his skills with ancient languages, but he was not the kind of person that I could be envious of. His kindness to me was such that I could hardly wish for anything but success and happiness for him and his family.

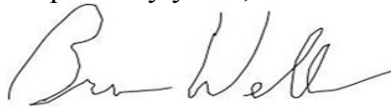
I do not know a great deal about the current controversy at Emmanuel. I understand that an article (or blog post) of his in the *Huffington Post* about the marginalization of women in the Bible is playing a significant role. For the most part, I agree with what Rollston had to say in the article. On the other hand, I can understand how it could have rankled some members of the Emmanuel community. I come from a very conservative evangelical background, although not linked with the Stone-Campbell movement, and I know of many people who would have been upset by an article like this. While I basically agree with Rollston’s position in the article, it is not terribly surprising, at least to me, that a controversy has resulted.

What I would like to stress, though, is that I do not see why the controversy can be resolved only by means of removing or threatening to remove Chris from his position at Emmanuel. If the article is the only reason or even the main reason for seeking to terminate Chris, I find that very problematic. I identify myself as Christian, and, as I look back over the history of my tradition, it is not hard to find all manner of issues that Christian thinkers and writers (and many others) disagreed about. It seems to me that a way forward could be found that allows Chris to remain in his position. Issues such as this deserve to be discussed and argued over, but Protestants (again, my tradition) have probably been too hasty over the years (and centuries) to part ways with other Protestants because of similar disagreements. This situation presents an opportunity, I would think, for a Christian institution to demonstrate to itself and to other observers how controversy

can be handled with kindness, grace, and even, in the end perhaps, with the parties involved agreeing to disagree. Therefore, I earnestly hope that Chris can stay on in an endowed chair that, as far as I can tell, he has done more than enough to deserve. From an academic perspective, having Chris on its faculty is a genuine feather in the cap of the Emmanuel School of Religion.

I admit that there may be a host of issues of which I am not aware. But, if this is the case, I think that it would behoove Emmanuel to explain what those issues are publicly. Doing so may not convince its critics that it has made or will make the right decision. Probably not. At the very least, though, it will be able to claim that it was not hiding anything relevant to the controversy from the public.

Respectfully yours,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Bruce Wells". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name "Bruce" and last name "Wells" clearly legible.

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