

Here on this New Year's Eve I would like to reflect for a minute on the last calendar year of the blog, our seventh year of operation. By nearly any metric, I would say it has been a very good year indeed.

For just about all the users of the blog, of course, the primary interest is to read what scholars say about the subject areas that we cover, which are narrow, in one sense, in that they deal almost exclusively with the area of early Christianity (with some discussion of cognate fields, such as Hebrew Bible, early Judaism, Greco-Roman world, Roman religion, and so on). But in another sense they are very broad, as the blog covers a range of subfields all of which entail scholarship produced by specialists who, in many instances, work in one small subfield or another. (My best friend in graduate school, upon graduation, used to say that her expertise was on Paul's letter to the Romans, chapters 9-11. And she meant it!)

And so the blog covers, among other things, such topics as the historical Jesus; the life and writings of Paul; the question of how we got the canon of the New Testament; the scribes and manuscripts of the New Testament texts; the early Christian apocrypha (books that didn't make it into the NT); the persecution of early Christians; the spread of the Christian church; the writings of Christians from the 2nd-4th centuries; the history of the church down to the end of the fourth century; and on and on!

As you know, you are welcome to ask me questions about anything connected to these or any other related field, and I'll try to answer. If I don't know the answer (or have an opinion, which isn't the same thing...) - as many have discovered, some to their chagrin - I'll simply say so!

Here in my seventh year I've fallen into a good rhythm on the blog. I post five times a week, on a typical week taking Thursday's and Saturday's off. I usually follow a thread, but sometimes- not sure if this is aggravating or not - I interrupt a thread when something else of relevance or immediate importance (like Christmas! Or a question I've received that I'm eager to answer comes up, sometimes to my surprise leading to a small thread of its own). But I (almost!) always get back to the original thread. (The only one I can remember not doing that for was some years ago. Got seriously side tracked....)

So, on that calculus I've posted over 250 times this past year. Since starting the blog in April 2012, I have altogether made 1945 posts. Almost all of them are between 1000-1200 words. That's a lot of words.

I have started doing a bit more what I used to do almost never at all, which is re-posting posts from years ago that strike me as important, relevant, and/or (most commonly) directly germane to a question I have received, on the assumption that the vast majority of people reading the blog never saw that original post (most people on the blog were not on it then; and lots of people - to my shock and eternal horror - don't read the blog every day), and those who did, like me, probably don't remember it much anyway. I hope that's not a problem for you (the idea of reposting old posts). If it is, let me know.

I continue to answer all questions I get, or at least I try to. I can never answer at length, since I get so many of them and despite all my requests for reform, there are still only 24 hours in the day. Because I deal with so many questions here, I very rarely can answer queries sent directly to me on email. Just can't. That aggravates some people, but I don't see any time-management ways around it. On a typical day on the blog I get 40-60 comments; most of them don't involve direct questions, so all I need do is read them, make

sure they are appropriate and not (particularly) offensive to anyone (sometimes some slip through, I know) and post them. I do read them all. And I try to answer the questions. I don't know the exact number of comments I've received this past years, but their numbers go up with growth in the membership. Since beginning the blog I have posted 76,375 comments altogether (and not posted a bunch that are irrelevant or snarlish).

The blog continues to grow in terms of numbers. We now have 6729 members, and are pushing to get it up to 7000, and to go from there. Knowledge of the blog is all word of mouth, as I'll reflect on further below.

The most important aspect of the blog for me - other than interacting with so many intelligent, interested, and intriguing people - is the revenues that it accumulates for charities. That, as you know, is ultimately its *raison d'être*: if it weren't for the charity aspects, I simply wouldn't be doing it. And we have seen a significant increase in funds we have raised over the years.

When I started the blog, I thought maybe we could raise \$20,000 a year; we exceeded that significantly the first year, and have grown and grown. This year, I'm very pleased to say, we have raised \$154,000. That's some serious pocket change. It marks a significant growth - 15% increase over 2017. The funds go to five charities: the Urban Ministries of Durham (my local charity dealing with hunger and homelessness, not just with a soup kitchen and emergency shelter but also with a staff that works diligently and impressively to *end* homelessness for people); the Food Bank of Eastern North Carolina; the Literacy Center of Durham; CARE; and Doctors without Borders. All of them are extremely worthy and deserving of our support, taking care of people in deep need in different ways and different places.

Most of the funds we raise come from membership fees - which have not changed a cent since we started in 2012. But a good bit comes from donations that come in from generous and able people who believe in the blog and what we're doing and want to support it. Even if the blog is a kind of middle-person between the giver and the charity, every penny of every membership fee goes straight to the charities; and every donation is tax-free, accomplishes great things, and supports the ideals of the blog. So, think about giving, as you are able! We all appreciate it very much.

My goal this coming year is to maintain the quality of the blog and increase its numbers - both membership and revenues. If we could sustain 15% growth, now *that* would be amazing. It depends not just on us, though, but also on all its faithful and devoted members; the growth of membership, as I pointed out, happens entirely by word of mouth, as more and more people learn about it. There are billions of people in the world interested in early Christianity; many, many millions are in the English-speaking world; many of these are interested in what scholars (not only preachers and evangelists) are saying about it. What better avenue for learning? If you know anyone - simply anyone (family member, friend, work partner, neighbor, church or synagogue member, simple acquaintance) with any interest in the area - tell them about us and encourage them to join!

I would like to end by thanking my assistant in technical support, Steven Ray, who urged me on at the beginning of this enterprise and has been along with me every step of the way. The blog simply could not happen without him. He is massively knowledgeable about all things computer and membership services, he is prompt, and he is diligent. You should hire him yourself. We all owe him a mountain of gratitude.

I feel grateful, as well, for all of you, without whom, of course, this blog would not exist. For many of us 2018 has been a hard year, in all sorts of ways. But a new day is dawning, the first day of a new year. May it be a very good one for all of us!



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