In this post I am going to take a bit of time out to do some self-reflection. An issue I’ve been puzzling over for some time is the fact that people keep referring to my work as “controversial.” I hear this all the time. And truth be told, I’ve always found it bit odd and a disconcerting. This past week I’ve had two people tell me that they know that I “like to be controversial.” That’s actually not the case at all. One person told me that she had seen a TV show where someone had said that they didn’t believe that Jesus existed, and she thought that was right up my alley. I didn’t bother to tell her that I had written an entire book arguing that Jesus certainly did exist. She simply assumed that this was the sort of view that I myself would have and delight in making public.

The reason I find that the idea I’m controversial is that my views about the historical Jesus, the authorship of the books of the New Testament, the Greek manuscript tradition of the New Testament, the relationship of orthodoxy and heresy in early Christianity, the rise of early Christology, and on and on – these are views that are not particularly strange in the academy. I *acquired* almost all of these views. With respect to every one of them, what I talk about in my writings is what I myself have learned. Very rarely in my popular writings do I put out a view that is unusual and untested in the academic world.

I have done so on occasion, and when I do the response I get from other scholars is very interesting and a bit amusing. If I advance a thesis in a popular book that is not widely shared among scholars (e.g., in my *How Jesus Became God* book, where I advanced the idea – which I did not invent myself, but came to agree with from the writings of two other scholars, but which is not a view widely held in the field – that the apostle Paul understood Christ to have originally been an angelic being who became human) some critics objected that I shouldn’t be saying something in a popular book that does not represent widely accepted scholarship. The reason this objection is amusing to me is that these very same critics are the same ones who object to my popular books because they “don’t say anything new.” So, well, how can they have it both ways exactly?

In any event, I may be on the relatively left side of scholarship, but this, that, or the other view I have is widely held in the guild among everyone who is not a religiously conservative Christian. So why am I, in particular, under attack for being controversial?

What some scholars criticize me for are not my statements but my “tone.” I’m not sure how one gauges tone. But when I say things that other scholars who are not controversial say, I’m charged with having a haughty and cynical tone. Just as one example, some critics have charged me with being excessive and over the top and sensationalistic when, in my book *Misquoting Jesus*, I wrote that “there are more variants in the manuscripts of the New Testament than there are words in the New Testament.” Apart from the fact that the statement is true, the line itself is one that I borrowed wholesale from my own teacher, Bruce Metzger! He was a conservative Christian scholar that almost precisely no one found excessive, over the top, and sensational – let alone controversial!

I have a good reason for thinking that people consider my views controversial when in fact they are not controversial (and when I don’t mean them to be controversial). That is this: When I first published my college-level textbook, *The New Testament: A Historical Introduction to the Early Christian Writings* in 1997, no one who reviewed it thought that it was the least bit controversial, off-putting, over the top, cynical, offensive, snarky, insensitive or anything else negative. It quickly became the bestselling book on the market. It still is today. But professors who use it have, over the past seven or eight years, *started* to complain about its “tone” as being over the top and insensitive, even though the
parts they complain about (in the current 6th edition) are the parts that I haven’t changed from when I published the first edition eighteen years ago! The words haven’t changed. But my public persona apparently has changed. So the words themselves, in my view, are not controversial. But because *I’m* controversial some scholars charge me with trying to be controversial with words that they used to think were not controversial even though they are the same words!!

It seems to come as a surprise to people that I don’t try to be controversial. It simply isn’t one of my goals. I actually don’t enjoy being controversial and would prefer it if I weren’t. I’d much rather that people read my work and say something like, “Hmmm. Good point! I hadn’t seen it that way before.”

I think the reasons I get *interpreted* as being controversial are (a) I say things publicly that other scholars just say to themselves and one another (these same scholars pull their punches when they are talking to a public audience); and even more important (b) I try to make the way I present things *interesting* to people. To make things interesting one has to highlight what is intriguing about them. But what is intriguing and interesting about scholarship almost always is, necessarily, information that people generally don’t know or haven’t thought about. And so if a compelling or (even just) strong case is made for a position that others have not generally heard (e.g.: there are more variants in the manuscripts than words in the NT), it is thought that you are going out of your way to shock people rather than to do the work of (otherwise dry) scholarship.

Scholarship, in all fields, can be incredibly dry. I believe in making scholarship interesting. I don’t do it to be controversial. I do it to get people interested. But as many people as get interested, there seem to be more who get upset. I’m very sorry to see that happen. But I’m not about to make my public scholarship dull, uninteresting, or inaccessible to public audiences so that no one will get offended!

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