

This thread has turned into an explanation of why most New Testament scholars – that is, professional researchers and teachers with a PhD in the field – are not well situated to write books for a general audience. My reflections on that question – once I get around to it – are probably not what one would expect. At least they seem ironic to me. But before going there (in a later post), I should stress that what is true of NT scholars is true of virtually all scholars in virtually all fields of intellectual inquiry. Most are not equipped (or inclined) to write books for their next door neighbor. They are trained and interested in producing scholarship for other scholars, sometimes just for a small coterie of scholars who are specialists in their own narrowly focused field of intense research. (I need to emphasize that I do not think this is a bad thing at *all*. I think it is a very good thing. Scholars are trained to advance scholarship. We only need a small percentage of those doing that tell the rest of the world what the scholars are saying.)

In my previous post I pointed out that in my graduate training – just to take the one example I am most intimately familiar with – almost all the formal training was in New Testament exegesis and New Testament theology. That was fairly typical of New Testament programs at the time. In large part that was because the graduates from a program such as that at Princeton Theological Seminary (where I did my work) could be expected to – and almost always wanted to – teach in divinity schools and seminaries, training future ministers of the church. And ministers need to be taught exegesis (roughly: how to establish the meaning of the biblical texts) and theology (very roughly: how to understand the religious significance of those texts).

In this way of understanding the tasks of New Testament studies, exegesis and theology are closely related but not coterminous. The way it was all taught back in the 70s and early 80s, when I was being trained, was that exegesis is principally concerned to establish the “original” meaning of the texts of the New Testament. That’s what I discussed in my last post. Exegesis involves establishing how a text would be understood by its original readers or, more problematic, but more common, what the text was supposed to mean in the judgment of the person who created it, the author.

This is a historical question. What did Paul mean when he wrote Galatians 2:12? What did the author of Fourth Gospel mean when he wrote John 3:3? What did the author of Revelation mean when he wrote Revelation 3:16? What did any author mean when he wrote whatever it is he wrote?

That’s a pretty basic issue, and is of course fundamental for historical understanding. The premise is that to interpret a text, we have to situate it in its original context and not simply assume that our modern ways of making sense of a text are necessarily what ancient authors themselves meant. To know what they meant requires historical linguistics, an understanding of philology, a knowledge of how the words in the original language (in this case, Greek) worked in other contexts in the ancient world, both before, during, and after the time when this particular author was writing, the other writings of the authors and the detailed views they present, and ... well, and lots of other things. Exegesis is not simply a matter of reading a passage and knowing then what it means. It requires rigorous study and analysis.

New Testament theology can be understood in a wide range of ways, but ...

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