

On Wednesday I will be having a public debate with Mike Licona at Kennesaw State University on the topic: “Are the Gospels Historically Reliable.” This is something I’ve thought long and hard about for my entire adult life, and so has he. But we disagree, heartily. It should be a lively and interesting debate.

Just now I was looking through the ancient history of the blog, and I ran across this post where I discuss the issue from a different perspective (different from what I usually say) — one in which I claim that it is *helpful* for Christians to realize that the Gospels have discrepancies. Interesting thought, I think, and think I thought!

In my two previous posts I’ve been trying to explain that the historical-critical view of the Gospels, in which they are recognized not always to represent historically accurate information about Jesus, is not necessarily a view that “trashes” them. Instead, it is a view that tries to understand what they really are instead of insisting that they are something else. Accepting them for what they are is surely a good thing; making them into something they are not can’t be good.

In this post I want to do something highly unusual for me. I want to explain, for those of you who are Christians (or for anyone else who is interested), why this critical view of the Gospels is in fact *theologically* valuable, far more theologically value than a view that would insist that the Gospels have no discrepancies between them or errors of any kind, but are historically accurate accounts of what happened in the life of Jesus.

When I was a Christian, once I came to the conclusion that the Gospels in fact are full of contradictions and discrepancies and historical inaccuracies- after many years of research - I also came to realize that this understanding was remarkably fruitful from a theological point of view.

If Mark and Luke, for example, have different ways of telling the same story, then they each want to emphasize and teach something that is different (not the same). The discrepancies tell you what each one wants to teach. If you’re not a fundamentalist who cares only that the Gospels are historically accurate, and if you have any literary sensitivity at all, if you have any sense that “what really happened” is not the only or even the most important thing, if you have any grasp on the reality that great literature can teach important lessons (even if it contains material that didn’t happen) - then recognizing what each Gospel is trying to teach enables you to...

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