

Preface to the Second Edition

THE PROTESTANT CHURCH culture in America, of which I am a part, often overlooks the immense contribution that the science of patristics makes to the way we understand the Scriptures. Now I certainly do not wish to replace a text-centered hermeneutic with an approach that is enslaved to the dogmata of councils and creeds. My claim in this book is not that the fathers of the church solve the synoptic problem. It is that any approach to a solution that rejects their testimony is, by definition, illegitimate. One reviewer of the first edition put the matter this way:

Black identifies the trend among scholars who approach the New Testament and especially the gospels with a dogmatic presupposition that any explanation other than what the Church Fathers, the early church, church tradition and faithful Christians have believed and passed down is to be preferred regardless of its unsubstantiated speculation, lack of logic and rejection of historical context.

This may not seem like a major issue to some, but at least in principle it gets to the heart of the present work. My positive appreciation for the writings of the church fathers does not mean that I take an uncritical view of early Christian interpretation of Scripture. Yet I fail to see how the watchword “ad fontes!” (or, in evangelical Christian circles, “sola scriptura!”) justifies a continued separation between Scripture and history.

I am indebted primarily to my professors in Basel for calling my attention to the need for studying the writings of such early Christian authors as Origen and Eusebius. After all, who could take a course from Martin Anton Schmidt and not be convinced of the need for the theological discipline called *Dogmengeschichte* (history of doctrine)? Then too, my Doktorvater, Bo Reicke, was already

well known in scholarly circles for his historical approach to the New Testament writings by virtue of his widely-used introductory textbook aptly entitled *Neutestamentliche Zeitgeschichte*. Professor Reicke's concern for a critical use of external evidence exactly characterizes my position.

Ironically, despite the lip service that is often paid to the patristic testimony by gospel scholars, the fathers are perhaps more neglected today than ever before. My friend Scot McKnight, for example, in his outstanding essay "Source Criticism" (in *Interpreting the New Testament*, eds. David Alan Black and David S. Dockery (Nashville: B & H Academic, 2001), observes, "The Oxford proponents cannot simply dismiss early Church traditions as pious and sentimental legends" (p. 82). An astute point! In fact, the rest of his essay deals exclusively with the internal evidence and ignores the patristic testimony. The same kind of neglect runs through the majority of New Testament introductions and guides to the synoptic problem. The late Bernard Orchard once quipped to me that, if I took the fathers' writings seriously, I – an evangelical Christian – would be accused of being a Roman Catholic in Protestant clothing! I sometimes put the matter this way to my students: If reading the church fathers critically makes me a catholic (please note the small "c"), then so be it. Professor N. T. Wright makes the incisive point in *The New Testament and the People of God* (Philadelphia: Augsburg/Fortress, 1992, p. 61) that "There are some strange bedfellows in the world of literary criticism." Surely New Testament scholars of all denominational stripes can learn from each other even if we do not share the same convictions about the *magisterium*. It is sad that so often this potential for cooperation is not exercised in fact. The kind of integrative research with which I am concerned is still in its infancy in some evangelical circles, despite our claim to "scientific objectivity."

It is fascinating to contrast the secular historian's approach to the early church fathers with the skepticism of biblical critics. I fear that the very contrast between "history" and "theology" only contributes to the atomization of an already fragmented discipline.

To suggest that evangelical Christians should pay attention to the fathers will strike many as absurd. Is not the very hallmark of Protestant Christianity the commitment to a text-centered hermeneutic? Though I am very happy to be classified as a text-based exegete of the New Testament, it will be clear that I think we have abandoned a rich source of knowledge. For me, this means that although I delight in studying and reading the New Testament in its original language, I think it is an advantage – rather than a detriment – to learn Scripture through the works of Tertullian, Luther, Calvin, Barth, and Yoder. Indeed, I believe that the fragmented and atomistic approach to the New Testament documents today is often merely an excuse for intellectual laziness. As another reviewer of the first edition of the book commented, “This is a book written for a lay audience but welcomes professional scholars and theologians who have not felt comfortable with the tenuous theories put forth among academics since the Enlightenment eschewed the supernatural and ignored church Fathers as being irrelevant.” This is a strong statement, but I believe it is completely accurate. Be that as it may, it will be obvious to everyone that I have taken tradition seriously, and with that tradition I have found my home and am at peace.

This edition differs from the original version of *Why Four Gospels?* in that I have rewritten and expanded the postscript and have significantly updated the bibliography. I have also gone through the book line-by-line and word-by-word to enhance its clarity and flow. Amid the continuing controversy over the synoptic problem, the original argument remains intact. It has been quite a challenge to shrink a complicated problem into a short volume. The book could easily have been expanded into a full-length tome. But that was not my goal. I write as a teacher who, after 33 years in the classroom, is beginning to realize that “less is more” and that the law of diminishing returns applies no less to the craft of writing than to the art of teaching. Along the way I have been aided and abetted by many friends and colleagues. I am especially pleased to acknowledge the help of my personal assistant, Mr. Andrew

Bowden, who prepared the expanded bibliography, and Mr. Henry Neufeld of Energion Publications, who enthusiastically answered “Yes” when I asked him, “Want my next book?” I am also grateful to the many readers who took time to send me their comments. Finally, I am truly blessed to know that there are some Bible schools and seminaries out there (Southern Evangelical Seminary in Charlotte, NC, for example) that actually require this volume as a textbook. I guess their professors felt there might be something worthwhile in it that could help their students. I hope the present edition continues to do the same. But whatever the outcome, *solī Deo gloria*.

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