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EDITORIAL

I still remember vividly a Canadian summer over a dozen years ago that put my scholarly career into a much-needed historical perspective. The reason I would like to share this with a wider audience is my conviction that such a bird's eye view is vital for anyone working in academia. Not that scholarship is the only, or even most important, kingdom ministry. Very likely, God's final verdict on what were the most valuable and vital contributions to his cause in this world will differ from ours, and there are many viable (and probably more important) ways to serve our Lord other than through scholarship or writing. Nevertheless, there are some of us whom he did in fact call to such ministry, and I believe that we would do well to reflect on our place in the larger scope of things from time to time. Perhaps this editorial can be of use at least for some of our younger scholars. In this regard I do share Millard Erickson's concern (expressed in his presidential address in the present volume) that we be of help if we can, and while I am not quite as "chronologically gifted" as he is, please indulge me as I share how I learned to see my scholarly calling in proper perspective.

I spent the summer of 1989 in Hamilton, Ontario. I would get married later that year, and so part of my time was taken up with gearing up for the wedding with my Canadian fiancée. During some of the remaining time I embarked on an independent study in the history of biblical interpretation. One of my professors at Columbia Biblical Seminary, Dr. Paul O. Wright, had, at my request, put together a program of reading that would acquaint me with some of the major contributions and contributors to Old and New Testament scholarship in the last two centuries or so. So I worked my way through Stephen Neill and Tom Wright's *Interpretation of the New Testament 1861–1986* and Werner Kümmel's *The New Testament: The History of the Investigation of Its Problems*, plus Ronald Clements's *One Hundred Years of Old Testament Interpretation*. As I plowed through these works in the backyard of Elsie Lavary, the elderly lady who had graciously opened her home to this soon-to-be-married scholar-in-the-making, I learned several lessons.

Feeling the weight of history on my shoulders, it dawned on me that the best I could realistically hope for (and probably not even that!) was to appear in a footnote when future histories of biblical scholarship would be written. Now some may say this is entirely the wrong focus—away with such morbid introspection and self-centered navel-gazing! And they would be right to a certain extent. On a grander scale, it has been said that American presidents, for example, are increasingly self-conscious about the way history will remember them, to the extent that they may build their presidency around what they would like future historians to write about them (if that were possible; I cannot see how it is), rather than making the decisions they are called upon to make by the particular unique circumstances with

which they find themselves confronted. What is more, in the case of American presidents at least, the seemingly omnipresent media require almost instantaneous responses in crisis situations, which allows little time for reflection or consultation. Biblical scholars, of course, do not operate under comparable types of pressure, though occasionally there are urgent requests to endorse a certain product or to sign one's name under a particular resolution or manifesto. Nevertheless, it is part of our narcissistic age to be given to excessive self-conscious preoccupation, and we must resist being drawn into this unhelpful tendency. Yet despite these objections there remains something to be said for perspective. How would I like to be remembered? What kind of legacy do I want to leave for my children, for those who look to me for guidance, and even as a scholar? These seem to be legitimate concerns, and ones that may well guide one's choices in the present.

For example, it may be helpful to identify one or a few key areas in which one hopes to make a contribution. The scope could be as broad as the field of hermeneutics or as narrow as the writings and theology of Adolf Schlatter. Not everyone will be a John Calvin who wrote commentaries on virtually every New Testament book plus a major systematic theology that (at least some would say) has stood the test of time. Modesty might suggest that one concentrate on contributing commentaries, monographs, or periodical articles on, say, John's Gospel or the Pastoral epistles. Apart from such efforts at concentrating one's scholarly energies, it is unlikely that one will be able to make a significant contribution to a particular field, and even a footnote in the history of scholarship will prove elusive. In the interim, we can gauge the extent to which we have entered into meaningful dialogue with other persons working in the area by reviews of our works or by others building their scholarly conclusions on our findings. The times are mostly gone (if they were ever here) where any one individual can single-handedly carry scholarship in a given field on their shoulder. We are part of a community of scholars who together seek to advance knowledge and grow in our understanding.

Beyond this there are, of course, causes which one may hold dear and to which one may devote part of one's time and energy. This may be the advocacy of egalitarianism or complementarianism; the promotion or defeat of open theism; the launching of a new Bible translation; or the championing of any number of other issues. Personally, I must confess that I have become increasingly leery of the way in which my scholarly energies may be diverted by involvement in these kinds of issues. To begin with, speaking as a scholar, what often goes hand in hand with defining an "issue" is both a high degree of polarization and a process of politicization. Both tendencies, I submit, are at odds with the ethos of true scholarship: a scholar will resist polarization, because issues rarely are as black and white as they may be made out to be; and politics is rarely the servant of truth (the stuff of politics is compromise), nor is political power or clout the best way to settle an issue. So, for my part I say, let us be careful not to be diverted from our genuine scholarly contribution by getting unduly embroiled in issues that may better be left to others to resolve (even though it is of course important for the Christian community at large to address these kinds of issues responsibly).

What else did I learn during that Canadian summer? If our life-long scholarly pursuit can be summarized, or even dismissed, in a brief footnote or cursory remark, it is even more vital to focus our energies on things that matter. Moreover, we must be careful not to fall into the trap of prideful dogmatism by coming to conclusions that go beyond what is warranted by the evidence. An example of this problem is cited in John Meier's recent third volume of his *A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus*. On page 29 of this work, he shows how commentators (including the highly respected Raymond Brown, one of the honorees of Meier's volume, as well as the reputed commentator Rudolf Schnackenburg) have regularly read rabbinic statements about "the people of the land" into the NT period (such as John 7:49), when this may not be borne out by the actual evidence. In volume 2 of his trilogy, Meier levels the same charge (that of going beyond the evidence) against Geza Vermes's effort to adduce Ḥanina ben Dosa as a first-century parallel to Jesus' healing and miracle-working powers. As Meier demonstrates, early evidence only credits Ḥanina with efficacious prayer on behalf of the sick; attribution of miracle-working power to this figure is not found until centuries later during the talmudic period, and Meier is reasonably skeptical that Vermes's claims regarding Ḥanina can be fully substantiated. If we do not want to be remembered primarily for exaggerated claims or bold—but long since discarded—hypotheses, we will want to be careful and allow our conclusions to be constrained by the available evidence to support them.

Let us therefore write with a sense of history and perspective. Let us select our topics of research deliberately and advisedly, and let us work with a clear and conscious purpose. We are engaged in a collaborative pursuit, and we ought to define our contribution in relation to the work of others, past as well as present. If there recently have been close to a half-dozen major works on Paul and the Law, is it advisable for a graduate student to choose this precise issue as a dissertation topic? Unless this student desires to chronicle the recent history of debate or has a gap to fill that has somehow been overlooked by everyone working on the subject, it may be wise to change one's direction and look for a less well-covered matter to investigate. Not that we know the end from the beginning (only God does), or that the ultimate judgment of the value of our lives belongs to those humans who write future scholarly histories—our final judge is of course none other than God himself (Rom 14:10; 1 Cor 4:3–5; 2 Cor 5:10). But just as in other areas, so also in our scholarly pursuits, we ought, by the mercies of God, to present our bodies wholly to God, not being conformed to the pattern of this world, but being transformed by the renewing of our minds. Then we "will be able to test and approve what God's will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will" (Rom 12:1–2).

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