

The Value of Good Commentary

Good, scholarly commentary on the New Testament often tends to highlight the very significant difference between early apostolic belief and practice and what was later handed down as tradition. While most churchgoers seem to accept the Bible as the source of their beliefs and practices, they remain unaware of the rather obvious discrepancy between what now prevails as Christianity and its pristine original.

The difference can be highlighted by giving a number of examples. While the public constantly refers to the Bible as the “word of God,” the Bible almost never does this. Now this is no small matter. The Bible generally calls itself “the Scriptures,” not the “word of God.” What is the point? The phrase “word of God,” especially in the gospels and Acts, is a technical designation for the Gospel of salvation, the proclaimed message about the Kingdom of God (Luke 4:43; 5:1, etc.). The “word of God” is a specific, focused idea; it is the shorthand for the essential message preached for salvation. Thus *The Interpreter’s One-Volume Commentary on the Bible* notes that in 1 Thessalonians chapter one when Paul reminded his converts that they had accepted “the word of the Lord,” they had understood and welcomed the Gospel, not a general lecture on the whole of Scripture.¹ The distinction is as important as the difference between the bull’s-eye and the dartboard. The “word,” the Gospel, is the heart of the Bible. It is possible to read the New Testament and miss this central, heavyweight element of its vocabulary. “Word” is the really “big” word containing the mystery of salvation. To confuse it with the broad expression “Scripture” is to miss the heart of revelation.

Often good commentary will come to the rescue at apparently perplexing passages. Jesus declares that “some of those who are standing” in front of him will, this side of their deaths, actually see the Son of Man coming in his Kingdom. A failed prophecy? Certainly not, because what Peter, James and John saw in the immediately following “vision” at the transfiguration (Matt. 17:9, but note the feeble translation of the NIV: “what you saw”) was indeed the Second Coming of Jesus, in vision, not as yet a historical reality. Luke

¹ Ed. Charles M. Laymon, Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1971, 867.

makes the connection clear: “And eight days after this saying [about the coming Kingdom] he took them up on to the mountain . . .” (Luke 9:28). Peter comments on that stupendous event, a fitting encouragement after the immediately preceding announcement that the Messiah had first to die (Matt. 16:21): “When we made known to you the power and coming [Parousia] of the Lord we did not follow fables: we were eyewitnesses of Jesus’ majesty . . . when we were with him on the holy mountain” (see 2 Pet. 1:16-18). That giant of commentators, H.A.W. Meyer, notes: “The Apostle Peter regards the transfiguration glory of Christ as the type — and therefore the proof of the glory of Christ at his second coming.”² The Kingdom was seen, just as Jesus predicted, but in a vision by which historically future times were experienced by the favored few as a mystery in the present.

Good commentary warns us against the major pitfall of reading our western Platonized idea of the immortality of the soul into the Bible. First Corinthians 15:53: “Paul’s use of the term translated immortality must not become a basis for confusing his hope with the immortality of the soul, the survival beyond death of man’s disembodied spirit.”³ The gap between this sound advice and its application to the pulpit and the pew remains as vast as ever. Thousands of churchgoers persist with their own “interpretation” and turn the rabbi Paul into a Platonist. But Paul sees the future resurrection of the dead, from death to life, as the only solution to man’s mortality. Churchgoers whose vision of the future is impaired prefer to speak of an immortal spirit or soul which survives in consciousness. But this muddles two conflicting worldviews: the Hebrew and the Greek. Commentary understands this vital distinction, but the information has not penetrated the pulpit.

There is a striking difference of practice in the fundamental issue of marriage and celibacy when we compare the New Testament period with what developed in post-biblical times. First Timothy 3:1-13; 4:1-5, again from *The Interpreter’s One-Volume Commentary*.

Vs. 4 makes clear that the author does not advocate celibacy for the clergy; instead it is taken for granted that the bishop has his own household. . . . In both cases, moreover, special mention is made of the temperate use of wine (vs. 8; cf. vs. 3). Nowhere, however, does the author advocate total abstinence. . . . [There is] a positive attitude toward marriage and the recognition of foods as good because they were created by God. The author consequently condemns those

² *Critical & Exegetical Handbook*, 2 Peter, T & T Clark, 1883, ad loc cit.

³ *The Interpreter’s One-Volume Commentary on the Bible*, 812.

who teach celibacy and abstinence. This is undoubtedly a reaction to Gnostic tendencies toward asceticism in the church.⁴

Rather strikingly those tendencies prevailed, and celibacy was enforced against the plain teachings of Paul. And from that celibate milieu came all the dogmatic decisions about the nature of Christ and the Trinity, in 325 (Nicea) and 451 (Chalcedon). Could this be a source of subsequent troubles? We need scholarly commentary to remind us of the real sources of church belief and practice when these are obviously in conflict with Scripture.

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⁴ 886.