

## **Book Review**

*A Beginner's Guide to New Testament Exegesis: Taking the Fear out of the Critical Method*

**Richard J. Erickson**

(Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2005) 239 pages

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Many present-day pastors and theologians still view modern critical methods with some suspicion, and rightly so. Most of these methods arose from a generation of scholars who sought to “free the Bible from the church” and “treat it like any other book.” This perspective led to ignoring the message of the text, or at least of ignoring any orthodox interpretation of it which could be applied to modern life.

However, evangelical scholars have come to grips with using these tools despite their questionable parentage. When one maintains a belief that the Bible is the Word of God, the tools can then be employed to help discover the fullest and clearest understanding of the meaning of the text.

Richard Erickson does a valuable service by showing how different critical tools can profitably be applied to the text by Evangelicals. In his hands, then, redaction criticism is not a tool for showing how the evangelist changed the early Jesus message to create someone who would speak to later concerns, but rather a tool for showing how one evangelist's slight differences in his telling of a story adds new depth to the understanding of what Jesus taught and did. In this, he is to be commended.

Erickson, a professor at Fuller Theological Seminary Northwest in Seattle, Washington, draws on over twenty years of teaching New Testament exegesis. Consequently, this book would serve well as a textbook, either in a classroom setting or by the pastor who would systematically study the book to learn more about interpreting Scripture for his or her congregation.

In the first chapter, Erickson lists his assumptions in approaching the New Testament: (1) the Bible is the inspired Word of God; (2) the Bible is the “Word of Life;” (3) the Church needs pastors to teach the Bible; (4) the Holy Spirit is the interpreter. While he believes that exegesis is best done from the original languages, his book is written in such a way that those without Greek or Hebrew knowledge can still use it. A pastor can use this resource without getting into trouble.

My one quibble is his treatment of textual criticism. I also believe in the value of an eclectic text in establishing the closest to an original text; however, his emphasis on external evidence is somewhat out of date. While this has been the main focus of textual criticism for 150 years (and still has many advocates), a significant number of textual critics have moved to a more thoroughgoing eclecticism that gives greater

credence to internal evidence. Less discussion of text families and more on evaluating internal evidence would be beneficial.

This work differs from the popular-level book (also used in many classrooms), *How to Read the Bible for All It's Worth*, by Fee and Stuart. The focus of the latter is primarily on interpretation approaches to the different genres of the Bible. *A Beginner's Guide* touches on genre, but highlights the way that critical tools are applied to the differing literature types.

This book would serve as a fine textbook for a beginning class in New Testament exegesis. I would also recommend it to pastors who sense some inadequacy in their interpretive skills. Taking a few months to slowly work through this book would also improve the content of one's preaching. With the current focus on expository preaching (see the articles by George Wood and Richard Dresselhaus in the Summer 2006 issue of *Encounter*), it is vitally important for any preacher to begin with solid biblical exegesis. Erickson's book provides a great place to start.