

# Review Essay: Comparing Restoration/Stone-Campbell New Testament Introductions

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## *Introduction*

When Eugene Boring's *An Introduction to the New Testament: History, Literature, Theology* was published in 2012, there was a current New Testament Introduction from each major stream of the Stone-Campbell Movement. The other two New Testament Introductions are: Carl R. Holladay's *A Critical New Testament Introduction to the New Testament: The Message and Meaning of Jesus Christ* (Abingdon, 2005) and David Fiensy's *New Testament Introduction*, College Press NIV Commentary (College Press, 1997). Professor Boring suggested that it might be instructive to have some comparative conversations. To that end, the 2013 Christian Scholars Conference at Lipscomb University organized a panel discussion of the three. The following is my contribution to that session.

## *Similarities and Differences*

In reading these New Testament Introductions for the explicit purpose of bringing them into New Testament conversation, I was often struck by how often two were alike in comparison with the third. But the one that was different did not remain constant.<sup>1</sup> In other ways they are all three alike. Perhaps their most outstanding similarity is that they are all written from a faith perspective, or better from a confessional stance. Holladay (a member of the Church of Christ) is most explicit about this. He says he writes for ministers and Bible teachers and he identifies theology as something that can be done only by believers (xi, 12-13). Although less direct, Boring (a member of the Disciples of Christ) claims that the Bible is the vehicle of God's word (69) and he acknowledges that Scripture is the result of the working of the Spirit

(12-13). Fiensy (a member of the Independent Christian Churches) notes that his book had its origins in classes taught in a church (5).

In the midst of this similarity, however, a substantive difference appears in the idea of what constitutes an Introduction to the New Testament. For at least the last century and a half, New Testament Introductions have been focused on historical issues, nearly to the exclusion of discussions of theology. Most included a section on theological themes of each book that was rather short in comparison with the discussions of authorship, date, literary integrity, etc. This was characteristic of New Testament Introductions across the ideological spectrum. This is the pattern that Fiensy adopts. Boring and Holladay, however, represent a different kind of Introduction, one that emphasizes the theological nature of the New Testament writings. Holladay sees this as a significant innovation, and the Wabash Center seems to agree. Boring also explains that his Introduction synthesizes New Testament Introduction and New Testament theology texts (xxvi). All three authors agree, as Holladay puts it, that the goal of discussion of the critical issues is to get to the religious and theological aspects of the texts and to the “religious convictions shared by the author(s) and reader(s)” (Holladay, 2). But rather than leave the readers to complete this use of the critical tools on their own, Boring and Holladay make discussion of these matters a central concern of their work. Perhaps this is related to the explicit confessional stance they take. The earlier model that Fiensy follows projects the Enlightenment goal of objectivity that avoids being tainted by too much attention to non-empirical theology.

This is more than a matter of style. I suspect that a different understanding of the relationship between history and theology (or even history and truth) lies at the root of the difference. Holladay comments that “each New Testament writing is an exercise in meaning-making” (1). As I understand this, Holladay means that New Testament writers must assign (or discern) meaning to the events they record and to the situations they address. Boring would agree with this, while I expect Fiensy would not, but rather would see the meaning as inherent in the event. I will return to this matter below.

### *Definitions of Theology*

Further, there seems to be a difference in definitions of theology. Boring and Holladay see theology as an activity as much as it is a set of beliefs. They want to examine the ways that New Testament writers do theology, the way they theologize (Boring, xxvi; Holladay, 21). Particularly, Holladay asserts that readers need to attend to how New Testament writers appropriate and develop “earlier theological

formulations” (21). This is an especially interesting statement given Holladay’s earlier comment that the task of theology for the reader of these texts is “to employ what we find there to assist us in expressing *our own beliefs*” (19, emphasis added<sup>2</sup>). Fiensy does not address the question of the nature of theology, but the content of his sections that deal with the theology of each book suggests that he is most interested in the content of the theology of the writers. He sees their theology as what they believe rather than what they do. Some conversation among our authors about their understanding of theology, its place in a New Testament Introduction, and what a believer does with the theology or theologizing she finds in the text (e.g., how it is authoritative) would be interesting.

#### *The setting of the New Testament*

An immediate difference readers will see in these New Testament Introductions concerns their treatment of the historical and religious/philosophical setting of the New Testament. Put simply, Holladay does not describe this general setting,<sup>3</sup> while both Fiensy and Boring dedicate large sections to these matters. I am confident that Holladay thinks that knowledge of the historical setting is crucial to understanding the New Testament, yet he found no room—even on his extra information CD—for description of those worlds. While Holladay’s introductory chapter talks about the New Testament texts almost exclusively as theological documents, Boring stresses that they are both historical and theological (8-12). I would be interested to hear some conversation about whether or why descriptions of the cultural setting is among the most crucial things for an New Testament Introduction. What does it suggest about the nature of a New Testament Introduction or of the New Testament texts to include or omit these chapters?

#### *The Historical Jesus and Synoptic Problem*

The treatment each New Testament Introduction gives to the Gospels and the Historical Jesus likewise reveal some commonalities and some differences. I am happy to report that none of these writers has much use for the so-called “Third Quest” for the historical Jesus. Their reasons for its rejection, however, differ. Indeed, treatment of this issue is one of the biggest differences among these New Testament Introductions. Boring sets out the contrast between approaches to this question by describing two reactions to use of tools of historical and literary criticism. On the one hand, some find the methods liberating and a means of seeking the kernel within the husk. On the other hand,

some find them a threat and argue for traditional views of authorship, date, and such matters as central to retaining the truth of the Bible. Boring is clearly in the former category, as is Holladay I suspect—though he may want to phrase it differently. I wonder if Fiensy recognizes himself as a member of the second category. If not, how might he describe his explicit rejection of form criticism and strict limitations on the usefulness of redaction criticism (136-37)?

Fiensy describes the divide differently. For him, searches for the historical Jesus fail because of 2 methodological weaknesses. The most significant is the rejection of supernaturalism with the accompanying demand that everything happens according to the laws of nature (91). He contends that this presupposition includes the assumption that Jesus is not who the Gospels say he is. In contrast to this, Fiensy asserts that interpreters should assume the historical accuracy of the Gospels because some events are confirmed by external sources. He thus contends that “the Jesus of history and the Christ of faith are the same” (91). The second weakness in historical Jesus quests is the assumption that only material proven to be historical can be used to construct a life of Jesus. I wonder if Boring and Holladay recognize themselves in this description of those who uses these critical methods?

This difference manifests itself in these New Testament Introductions’ attributions of authorship of the Gospels and descriptions of the way Jesus material gets to the Gospels. Boring provides a taxonomy of views that has 3 basic alternatives: verbal inspiration, individual memory, and community tradition (467). While they describe it differently, both Boring and Holladay fall into the camp of those who think the Gospels are the result of the gathering and organizing of community tradition. I expect that both would want to say that the texts are still divinely, but not verbally, inspired. Fiensy belongs largely in the individual memory category. His conclusions about the authorship of the Gospels rely almost entirely on the traditions about them in Eusebius that trace each Gospel to an eyewitness source or to an apostle. It is not clear precisely how Fiensy would describe his view of inspiration in relation to this question.

Holladay provides a different taxonomy, identifying three other models: the Traditional Model in which the Gospels are traced to a particular person; the Form Critical Model in which communities shape traditions; and the Rabbinic Transmission Model in which a collegium of disciples emphasize fidelity in transmission of tradition. Fiensy fits the Traditional category, Boring the Form Critical, and Holladay accepts both the Form Critical and the Rabbinic models. The Rabbinic model perhaps permits interpreters to expect that more material remains

historical (perhaps especially the sayings of Jesus?) than what the Form Critical often allows. So it is something of a middle ground.

Before leaving the matter of the historical Jesus, it is interesting to note that Boring finds one of the things you can know about the historical Jesus is that he instituted the Lord's Supper, knowing that he would die before God's final eschatological act (131). A number of interpreters doubt that the institution of the Supper is historical. In a review that considers these New Testament Introductions in the context of the Stone-Campbell Movement, one wonders if the emphasis on Communion in the Movement, and particularly among Disciples of Christ, might have inadvertently influenced this judgment. Similarly, when Fiensy discusses "Early Church Practice" in connection with Acts, two of the three topics he takes up are baptism and the Lord's Supper. This selection of topics may well also be related to membership in this movement.

The methods these three New Testament Introductions use to consider the Historical Jesus and the conclusions they reach influence their discussions of the Synoptic Problem. Fiensy relies heavily on Eusebius (supplemented by Ignatius and the Didache) in his acceptance of the priority of Matthew. Boring and Holladay both adopt the Two Source Hypothesis. Most versions of this view presuppose the participation of the community or a part of it in the passing on and shaping of the traditions about Jesus that appear in the Gospels.

### *Pseudonymity*

Another topic that surfaces differences among our authors is that of whether there are pseudonymous writings in the New Testament. Boring is the most comfortable with this idea. He contends that elements of Paul's own practices, including co-authoring letters and establishing the office of teacher, led naturally to members of the Pauline school writing in Paul's name. In addition, he argues that it was culturally acceptable to write in the name of a revered teacher in order to apply the teacher's thought to a new time. Further, he cites a biblical precedent: the rewriting of Samuel and Kings by the authors of Chronicles (320-27). He contends that earlier Christians were not so concerned about pseudonymity, citing the example of the Wisdom of Solomon as a work accepted as canonical in the Muratorian canon and by Augustine, even as they recognized that it was not written by Solomon (326). Importantly, Boring asserts that when making judgments about authorship the interpreter must take a neutral view, assuming neither authenticity nor pseudonymity (325).<sup>4</sup>

Holladay seems less comfortable with pseudonymous literature. Still, he finds the evidence overwhelming that at least the Pastorals are post-Pauline (424). Despite this finding, they remain authoritative because the church turns to them for inspired teaching (424). In somewhat surprising language for a Stone-Campbell scholar, Holladay says, "Their authority has been established through usage over the centuries, but this authority is also acknowledged functionally every time a church, either a local congregation or a denomination, privileges the New Testament over other religious writing by reading it in worship, preaching and teaching from it, and trying to live by it." In yet a more surprising turn of phrase, he says of Ephesians that it "prepares the way for apostolic succession as a way of establishing both historical continuity and theological legitimacy" (414).

Fiensy finds the arguments against Pauline authorship of any of the letters attributed to Paul insufficient to demonstrate that they are pseudonymous. Indeed, he also finds all of the Catholic Epistles to be written by the people claimed as their authors. Part of the reason for this difference is again method. While Boring asserts that interpreters should begin with a neutral stance about authorship, Fiensy argues that the burden of proof lies with those who claim the texts are not authentic (283).

The difference between Fiensy's finding all the New Testament writings to be authentic and apostolic and Boring's and Holladay's seeing some texts as pseudonymous involves more than their evaluations of the evidence about particular letters. It also concerns their ideas about how the early church evaluated writings and perhaps even about inspiration. Fiensy seems to assume that a historical and fairly direct connection to an apostle is required for the text to be authoritative or canonical, perhaps for it to be inspired. He does not address this matter directly, but this seems to be his view. Boring sees the matter rather differently. He contends that patristic writers evaluated documents by whether they contained the apostolic faith and then decided questions of authorship on the basis of that theological evaluation, not on historical evidence that convinced them that the work came from the hand of an apostle (272-73). Holladay seems to lean in this direction as well. In discussion of the anonymous Letter to the Hebrews, he says, "The letter's authority ultimately derived not from the name of its author, but from its inspired message" (448). Thus, the decision to include it in the canon was a theological judgment rather than a historical one. This suggests that Boring and Holladay accept the authority of these books because the early Christian community judged that these writings contains the apostolic faith rather than because they can be historically connected to an apostle.

*The Authority of Tradition*

I was unexpectedly struck by a feature that is particularly prominent in Fiensy and Holladay, but is also present in Boring. In a movement that began by rejecting tradition and having little use for church history, these writers in their own ways are quite dependent upon tradition and history, granting it substantive authority. Fiensy consistently relies heavily on the testimony of writers up to the time of Eusebius as his evidence for matters concerning the authorship of various writings and for his view on the Synoptic Problem. Holladay looks not only to the authority of the community's judgments about apostolicity (understood as containing apostolic teaching) but even says that Ephesians (as noted earlier) prepares "the way for apostolic succession as a way of establishing both historical continuity and theological legitimacy" (414). Talk of historical apostolic succession from a Stone-Campbell author is surprising. Boring also relies on the theological judgments of the early community rather than on just the apostles. It might be interesting to hear these authors think about the place of tradition in the Stone-Campbell movement, historically and today.

*Reasons for Differences*

The issues of the historical Jesus and pseudonymity of New Testament writings manifest a significant divide between our three authors, it is a divide that has significantly influenced the history of the Stone-Campbell movement. It concerns the relationship between history and meaning or history and truth. In a bit older language, it is about whether to accept "higher criticism." It is the reason there is a Cincinnati Christian *and* a Lexington Theological Seminary. Fiensy's view seems to be that the stories of the Gospels must be historical to convey truth. Boring and Holladay see meaning conveyed in the interpretation of the events rather than in their facticity. This seems to be an epistemological issue. Conversation about the relationship between truth and history might be an important step for members of our movement to consider. Perhaps at that level we could have productive dialogue about the reasons for some of our differences.

It is interesting to note that the Disciples of Christ and Church of Christ authors are on the same side of this divide, given that the Independent Christian wing of the movement is often seen as the middle position between the two more different wings. This observation raises at least two other questions: who are these authors addressing? and how is each related to his church's theological outlook?

It is with good reason that the description on the back of Fiensy's work associates it with the J. W. McGarvey's *Evidences of Christianity*. It seems to carry on something of that tradition. Rejection of the conclusions of higher criticism while also working to disprove its individual assessments is in line with McGarvey's work. Boring and Holladay have accepted both the methods and some conclusions of higher criticism.

Finally, it may be interesting to hear each author identify his intended audience. From my reading, Holladay and Boring seem to address a "mainline" audience, while Fiensy seems focused on readers within the Independent Christian Church or perhaps a wider evangelical audience. He may well represent a wide segment of his branch of the movement more closely than the other two represent theirs. Boring represents well the "official" and urban Disciples of Christ acceptance of New Testament criticism. His positions might stir little controversy, though they would be news to most average Disciples of Christ members. Holladay represents Church of Christ members who have accepted New Testament criticism, however the average church member would be distressed at many of his conclusions. Perhaps the intended audience and relationship to thought within each author's branch of the movement is related to the academic positions these writers hold or perhaps it says something about the relationship each has with his branch of the movement. I would be interested to hear what each thinks about the reception of his work within his branch and in the wider audience of New Testament Introduction readers.

I want to thank all three for their contributions and for the ways they call readers to serious study and thought about the New Testament. While they differ about many issues of method and outlook, all three see Scripture as a means through which the church hears the word of God and they see its presentation of the meaning of Christ as crucial to their relationship with God and to living a meaningful life. Thanks is due to all three for working to help us understand and appropriate God's word for ourselves and the church.

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End Notes

<sup>1</sup> A few examples are: Fiensy and Holladay are alike in treating the New Testament writings in canonical order, while Boring treats epistolary materials first and then moves to Gospels. And Fiensy and Holladay treat the formation of the canon at the end of their work, while Boring discusses it at the beginning. Then Boring and Holladay have lengthy introductory discussions of the theological nature of the texts, while Fiensy does not. But Boring and Fiensy have chapters on “background” materials, while Holladay does not.

<sup>2</sup> I would be interested to hear what Holladay means by this and how it relates to his view of the authority of the text.

<sup>3</sup> Holladay does, however, discuss the form of ancient letters.

<sup>4</sup> Boring’s retort to those who contend that God would not let forgeries in the Bible is to note that the definitive revelation of God was “in the life, death, and resurrection of a crucified carpenter turned itinerant preacher.” Thus, it is hard to say what God might do (328).