

Preface

In March 2005, an interesting experiment began at New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary. The experiment was the Greer–Heard Point-Counterpoint Forum in Faith and Culture. The intention of the forum was to have a respected Evangelical scholar dialogue with a respected non-Evangelical or non-Christian scholar on an important subject in religion or culture. The forum was intended to be a dialogue, rather than a debate. The hope was that the participants would speak to each other and not simply about the other’s position. The goal was thus a respectful though uncompromising exchange of ideas. So often in our contemporary culture, the sorts of issues the forum was to address stoke the emotions, and consequently the rhetoric is of such a nature as to ensure that communication does *not* take place. There may be a place and time for such preaching to the choir, but minds are rarely changed as a result of such activity—nor are better arguments forthcoming. What frequently results, then, is that what passes for argument is really nothing more than a prolonged example of the straw-man fallacy. What made this experiment so interesting, however, was that it was taking place at a Southern Baptist seminary, a bastion of conservative Evangelical thought. Somewhat frequently, guests will comment to me that they are surprised that Southern Baptists are sponsoring such an “open-minded” sort of conversation. This just goes to show that one should not judge a book by its cover. The Greer–Heard experiment was made possible by a generous gift from Bill and Carolyn (née Greer) Heard. As such, the forum was originally a “five-year pilot program.”

The first forum featured a dialogue between N. T. Wright and John Dominic Crossan on the resurrection of Jesus. The following year was the only year (so far) that the forum took place in a location other than New Orleans. Due to the New Orleans campus being flooded in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, the forum was moved to Marietta, Georgia, where Johnson Ferry Baptist Church became its temporary home. There could have been no better site for the event. The subject of the dialogue for that year was “Intelligent Design.” Did I mention that Marietta, Georgia, is in Cobb County, Georgia, the site of a very important court case involving Intelligent Design? The large size of the audience was no doubt due in part to the interest in the subject in Cobb County. The dialogue partners were William A. Dembski and Michael Ruse. In 2007, the forum returned to New Orleans and featured a dialogue

between Daniel Dennett and Alister McGrath on the future of atheism. The next year featured a dialogue between Bart Ehrman and Dan Wallace on the textual reliability of the New Testament. The fifth year featured Paul Knitter and Harold Netland dialoguing on the subject of “Can Only One Religion Be True?”

The sixth year—yes, the experiment was deemed a success—featured the subject of this book: “The Message of Jesus.” The scholars headlining the event were John Dominic Crossan and Ben Witherington III. Jesus remains the most interesting person who has ever lived. That books about Jesus continue to pour forth from publishing houses at breakneck pace demonstrates this. Surely, by any measure, Jesus is a worthy topic for discussion.

The forum continues and shows no signs of slowing down or ceasing to address relevant concerns. Each year, the Greer-Heard Forum has been well attended, and the spirit has been good—collegial and irenic, yet without requiring any compromise of one’s convictions. As the chair of the forum, I must say that I am extremely honored to publish the fruit of the experiment with Fortress Press. All those at Fortress with whom I have worked have been creative and expert in every regard. What is more, Fortress is widely recognized as a publisher of excellence. The result is that readers with varying opinions and diverse backgrounds read the dialogues and accompanying papers from the forum. This has, indeed, been very satisfying to me.

The dialogue, “The Message of Jesus,” took place Friday, February 26, 2010, in the Leavell Chapel on the campus of New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary. The chapel was filled with an enthusiastic and appreciate crowd. Approximately 880 people heard the exchange. The discussion between Crossan and Witherington was spirited but civil, and very frequently witty and even humorous. Crossan and Witherington are passionately committed to their positions but also good friends with deep respect for the other’s scholarship. Such was obvious. One of the consistent fruits of the forum has been a demonstration that disagreement does not have to be shrill or heated in nature, and that one does not have to check one’s convictions at the door in order for respectful dialogue to take place. The following day, Saturday, February 27, 2010, papers were read by Craig A. Evans, Amy-Jill Levine, Darrell L. Bock, and Stephen J. Patterson on subjects related to Jesus and his message. After each paper, Dom and Ben briefly discussed the paper with each presenter.

Along with my introductory chapter, this book includes a transcript of the dialogue between Crossan and Witherington (including Q&A), as well as the papers presented the following day. In addition to the papers that were presented at the Greer-Heard Forum, other essays are included. Craig

Blomberg, David Wenham, and Robert Miller each contributes a chapter related to the message of Jesus.

While one could easily note issues that are still not addressed in this volume, or think of significant scholars who are not included, we believe these chapters make for a rich treatment of the issue. No doubt, readers will have to judge for themselves if this is in fact the case.

I am pleased to present to you the fruit of the 2010 Greer-Heard Forum. I trust that you will read it with an open mind and carefully consider what each author has to say. If you will, I have no doubt that you will be the richer for having done so.

Robert Stewart

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New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary