

ZANE HODGES: THE NEW TESTAMENT SCHOLAR WHO ACTUALLY STUDIED THE NEW TESTAMENT

BY BOB WILKIN

Editor

Editor's note: Zane Hodges went to be with the Lord on November 23rd, 2008, evidently due to several heart attacks. The following article is a slightly modified version of an article I wrote for a proposed festschrift for him, which hopefully will be released soon.

I. INTRODUCTION

Dr. Art Farstad, Zane Hodges, and I used to have lunch one or more times each month for years. Art called them our troika meetings. Troika is a Russian loan word. In Russian it refers to a vehicle drawn by three horses abreast. In English troika refers to any grouping of three.

I loved our troika meetings. Zane and Art would say the most amazing things, whether about theology, grammar, lexicography, or whatever. The puns were fast and fascinating.

Art once told a semi-joke that Zane knew, but which I didn't. In fact, even after he told the story, I didn't get it until he explained it.

Art told of a retiring NT scholar. This man had a Ph.D. in NT Greek and exegesis. He had taught the New Testament for 40 years. When asked at his retirement if he had any regrets, he said, "I only regret that I never really studied the New Testament."

"What? I don't get it," I said to Art. "If he was a New Testament scholar, surely he studied the New Testament."

Art told me that the point is that most NT scholars are experts in what others say about the NT and in extra biblical literature that might shed some light on the NT itself. However, most NT scholars rarely truly study the NT itself.

Here I was enjoying lunch with the two NT scholars who indeed actively studied the NT (and the OT) for themselves every day of their lives. I realized how blessed I was that I needed to have such a joke explained.

Zane Hodges was my mentor essentially since I met him in January of 1980 in his class on Hebrews until he went to be with the Lord on November 23, 2008. It is a delight to share some insights into my mentor and friend.

II. VIEWING TEACHING AT DTS AS TENTMAKING!

During my seven years at Dallas Theological Seminary (1978-85), I learned that Professor Hodges, as I called him then, viewed teaching at DTS as his tentmaking work. He taught to make enough money to live on so that he could minister free of charge in a small Hispanic mission church in Dallas (called Victor Street Bible Chapel today).

I was amazed by this conviction. Most of the faculty viewed their teaching at DTS as their ministry. Any church work they did was secondary at best. But not Zane.

The church in which Zane ministered for over 45 years was very small, under 75 people most Sundays. If he had desired, Zane easily could have pastored much larger churches. He could have had much more prestige and arguably influence and impact. But he never viewed it that way.

Zane never felt that the goal was to have a large congregation. He believed the goal was to minister faithfully where you are. Victor Street Bible Chapel saw hundreds, if not thousands, come to faith in Christ over the years of Zane's ministry there. Victor Street Bible Chapel produced many solid disciples of Christ, some of whom remain there and others who attend other churches around the country. These people, of whom I am one, are some of the fruit of Zane's ministry.

III. TURNING DOWN A DOCTORATE

When I was completing my master's program, I planned to go on for doctoral work. Professor Hodges discouraged me from this. It was his philosophy that doctorates were not only unnecessary, but they were dangerous. He didn't explain why. Later I learned some of his reasons.

He was influenced by his Plymouth Brethren (PB) background. In PB circles, people rarely get doctorates. In those circles no one is called

Reverend or Doctor. Often, as is the case at Victor Street, there is no “Pastor,” and no one is ordained for ministry. They simply recognize “approved workmen.”

Another reason for his reluctance, I believe, is because he felt that advanced degrees can feed the ego and hinder our ability to humbly minister.

At the time, my first thought was to go to Europe to get a doctorate. However, my wife, Sharon, absolutely did not want to go. (Today she says she’d love to go to Europe!) I later discovered that a very high percentage of those who go to Europe for doctorates come back with a dramatically changed view of the Scriptures. Many buy into the liberal methodologies they are forced to learn and use there. I realize now it is a great thing Sharon didn’t want to go overseas.

While I was in the doctoral program at DTS (I didn’t follow Zane’s advice, but I took it to heart), I learned that Zane had been approached by Dr. Jacob Van Bruggen about receiving a doctorate from his school in Holland. Dr. Van Bruggen indicated that his publication of *The Greek New Testament According to the Majority Text* was such a wonderful achievement that it warranted a doctorate. While Zane would have had to do more work on textual criticism to receive the doctorate, it would have been easy and fun for him.

Zane turned this down. He didn’t want a doctorate, even if it took very little time or extra effort. Indeed, I believe he would have turned one down if it required him no time and no extra effort. He just never felt it was a good thing. While I saw the situation somewhat differently, I greatly admired his stand. He was the best professor I had at DTS. And yet he was about the only one without a doctorate.

IV. A METHOD OF EXEGESIS THAT REALLY WORKS

During my years at DTS a rather mechanical method of exegesis was in vogue. We were taught to diagram, paying special attention to structural markers. We read all the major commentaries and grammars on our passage. We did word studies and text critical studies. Then we put it all together.

I spent 50 hours on my first exegetical paper. Later I was able to do an exegetical paper in half that time.

That method had much to commend it. It did result in a good grasp of a passage for the person who already was well grounded theologically. However, it was a cumbersome method that didn’t transfer well into the

real world. Few of us have 25 hours to exegete a passage and then spend 5 or 10 more hours to convert the exegesis into a sermon.

But Zane had a different method. His method didn't ignore the technical things we had been taught. But it included some other tools I had been overlooking. And it led to an ability to exegete much faster because the emphasis shifted from the commentaries and lexicons and grammars to the text itself. It is amazing how much light the Bible sheds on commentaries! One need not spend as much time in the commentaries if he spends sufficient time in prayer, meditation, and study of the actual text.

It wasn't simply that Zane's method was faster. It was also much more effective and much more enjoyable. I delight to this day in studying the Word of God because of the method Zane taught me.

Zane taught that we were to pray and ask God to open a passage to us. He pointed to many passages in Scripture that indicate we will only grasp God's Word if God opens it to our understanding (e.g., Ps 119:18; 26-27, 33-34, 66-68, 73, 124-125, 169; Luke 8:18; 19:26; 24:32, 45; John 2:24). This was so obvious. Yet I had not been praying and asking God to open His Word to me. I had thought it was a more or less mechanical process and if you just practiced the right techniques you'd grasp the meaning. Zane taught me that there is a spiritual component to exegesis.

As part of the spiritual component, he also taught us to meditate on the text. One of our assignments was to sit and look at the text and think about it. Ask questions of the text. Look for repeated words and phrases. We weren't to try to answer these questions or look things up in concordances or the like. We were just to look at and think about the text. This too was a novel approach. But, of course, it is a very Biblical one.

I remember one assignment in which we were required to stare at a passage (Acts 20:7-12) for, as I recall, 30 minutes. We were to think about the passage and not to write anything. That process brought the passage to life. I recently heard one of my friends, David Renfro, a fellow Dallas graduate, who team teaches a Bible study with me, say that those meditation assignments by Zane had a profound impact on him as well.

In Professor Hodges' classes I wrote shorter exegetical papers. They required less time. And yet I found I gained as much or more from these shorter papers. Later, when I went into the ministry, I was grateful for a method that allowed me to enjoy exegeting a passage and to do so in a

shorter amount of time. I found I rarely had 25 hours to exegete a passage I was preaching on Sunday or teaching during the week.

V. A LEADING NEW TESTAMENT TEXTUAL CRITIC

I was trained in the eclectic approach to textual criticism. But I took a doctoral course on textual criticism by Zane Hodges that changed my perspective. He made a convincing case for that the majority of manuscripts on any given book carry the correct readings for all passages.

Zane Hodges and Art Farstad came out with their *Greek New Testament According to the Majority Text* in 1982, the year I received my Th.M. This was a major publication requiring untold tens of thousands of hours of work from them and the legion of others they enlisted to help them in the task.

I know that most NT scholars are not persuaded by Zane's view of textual criticism. However, in NT circles there is great respect for him both as a NT scholar in general, and as a leading textual critic in particular.

Zane's view was not merely some academic concern. I have come to see that his interest in NT textual criticism stemmed from his high regard for the Lord and for His Word. If God gave mankind His Word, would He not also preserve it? Would He not oversee the copying process to the extent that His Word was not lost (as critical text scholars say happened to the ending of Mark's Gospel, for example)? Would He not make sure that future generations via study (cf. Heb 11:6) would be able to ascertain the original text? And wouldn't He preserve the correct reading in the majority of manuscripts rather than in just three manuscripts that contradict each other repeatedly (as the Critical Text theory essentially argues)?

Until I adopted Zane's majority text position, I always had nagging doubts in my mind about the validity of some of the canons of NT textual criticism. Why is a shorter reading to be preferred over a longer? Why is a harder reading to be preferred over a less difficult reading? Why should a few manuscripts from the third and fourth centuries (manuscripts which disagree with each other literally thousands of times) take precedence over hundreds of manuscripts (which were possibly copied from third century manuscripts) from later centuries? There seemed to be much more subjectivity in the eclectic method than in the majority text position of Zane Hodges.

VI. A LEADING SCHOLAR ON NEW TESTAMENT SOTERIOLOGY

When I took my first class from him, I had no idea that he was an expert in soteriology. He taught NT exegesis. My experience had been that such men knew theology, but that their heart was not afire with evangelism. I found in Professor Hodges an evangelist who happened to teach exegesis.

Before or during my seminary days Zane wrote several outstanding works that were either directly on soteriology (*The Gospel under Siege*) or which dealt with eternal rewards but had a lot of soteriological discussion (*The Hungry Inherit*, and *Grace in Eclipse*).

In 1990, while he was on the board of my ministry, Grace Evangelical Society, he came out with his book *Absolutely Free! A Biblical Reply to Lordship Salvation*. It was a response to the Lordship Salvation position and especially to John MacArthur's 1988 book, *The Gospel According to Jesus*. At our winter board meeting that year the other GES board members begged him to drop the chapter on repentance. In that chapter he argued that repentance is not a condition of eternal life. They said it would ruin his book. He insisted on keeping that chapter in the book. Today many think that the view he advocated is the Free Grace view on repentance. While it isn't yet the view, it is amazing how many people have come to adopt this position, myself included.

Around the turn of the century (2001), he came out with a book called *Harmony with God*. While ostensibly about repentance, it has a wonderful discussion of forgiveness. Here he breaks new ground of what forgiveness is. He sees repentance as a fellowship issue, not a relationship issue. While all Christians have eternal life, only some have experiential or fellowship forgiveness (cf. 1 John 1:9).

I came to seminary with a zeal for evangelism and the need for clarity between evangelism and discipleship. Zane Hodges stoked the flames of my passion.

VII. A PIONEER ON THE DOCTRINE OF REWARDS

The Hungry Inherit was his first book. Later came another book on rewards, *Grace in Eclipse*. His works on rewards have influenced a generation.

When I came into my first class with him, I had just come to believe in eternal rewards. But I still thought this theme appeared rarely in the

Bible. In his instruction on Hebrews, Zane seemed to see the doctrine of rewards as the controlling theme. I questioned this, asking if rewards were not largely restricted to two passages in 1 Corinthians. I smile now remembering his response. “Well, no, Bob. The doctrine of eternal rewards is on practically every page in the New Testament.”

I’ve come to see he’s right. Before taking my first class from him, the doctrine of rewards had little practical impact on my daily life. While I expected Christ’s imminent return, I was not focusing on that on the Judgment Seat of Christ. My aim in life was not to have Christ’s approval and to hear Him say, “Well done, good servant.” But that all changed after that course in the Spring of 1980. From then on I’ve lived for the Lord’s approval and His “Well done, good servant.” Zane’s teachings on rewards had a very positive impact on my service for Christ.

VIII. A NEW TESTAMENT SCHOLAR HEAVILY INFLUENCED BY THE OLD TESTAMENT

Dr. John Sailhammer is one of the leading OT scholars in the world today. Yet I remember talking with him in the late eighties when Zane and I spoke at a brown bag at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School where John was teaching. John said that Zane taught him more about OT exegesis, and particularly exegesis of narrative literature, than anyone else at DTS.

I’ve been a member at Victor Street Bible Chapel since the early nineties. It is not a stretch to say that I heard as much preaching and teaching from Zane on OT texts as NT ones. He taught through 1-2 Samuel and 1-2 Kings. I remember a fantastic message on Psalm 45. He taught from the OT as much or more than he did the NT.

He had an amazing grasp of the OT. I believe that gave him an even better grasp of the NT as well.

IX. ONE WHO USED COMMENTARIES AND OTHER EXTRABIBLICAL SOURCES VERY CAREFULLY

Zane Hodges did not suggest that we eliminate the studying of commentaries, grammars, and lexical sources. He was one who read just about everything! What he did suggest was that we must consult them

critically and that we must remember that prayer and meditation are more important steps in the process.

There is a great danger in exegesis of adopting widely held views. Admittedly, this allows us to feel safe since we have a lot of company in our view. It also tends to deflect criticism when we preach and teach. However, we are accountable to the Lord for what we believe and preach and teach. If what we are teaching is popular, but wrong, we will regret ever having taught it, regardless of how well received our messages were (Jas 3:1).

Zane Hodges and Dr. Allen Ross (Professor in OT exegesis when I was at DTS) both warned about this in their classes. When talking about the writing of theses and journal articles, Dr. Ross warned us to base our exegetical conclusions on what the textual evidence shows, not on our predetermined conclusions. He lamented the fact that in his opinion most evangelical scholars simply manipulated the data to make it conform to their expectations. He rightly called this dishonest. We are to let the textual evidence guide us to the conclusion the Lord intends, which may well not be the conclusion we expected and certainly not necessarily a popular conclusion.

When teaching on the saying in Jas 4:4 that “friendship with the Lord is enmity with God,” Zane suggested that as future teachers and preachers we should be very careful not to allow our exegesis to be determined by the views of the majority of well respected scholars. He said that if we wanted to be well regarded scholars in the world of biblical scholarship, then we would of necessity have to capitulate to unbiblical methodology and conclusions. The result would be enmity with God. He warned that friendship with the world of scholasticism was not a worthy exchange for loss of God’s friendship.

There is help to be found in the commentaries and other extrabiblical sources. However, much if not most of what we find there is wrong. We must realize that we are not in a jewelry store. We are instead in a field where we are searching for diamonds in the rough.

This reminded me, of course, of Art’s quip about the NT scholar who never really studied the NT. Zane and Art taught that we must be careful to relegate commentaries and other extrabiblical sources to secondary roles in our exegetical work. We must critically evaluate what we read and only keep that which is clearly borne out by the Word of God. And this process, too, must be bathed in prayer.

X. THINGS I LEARNED FROM HIM

Over the years I learned that Zane mentored many in the ministry, not just me. I would often be unable to reach him at his office because he was on the phone with a pastor needing help for his sermon or a theologian needing counsel about a theological puzzle.

Zane often went to Huntsville, Texas—a six hour drive round trip—to visit a prisoner on death row. Zane mentored this man via the mail and in person too.

While each one he mentored has a story to tell, I'll share with you some things I learned from him even after my seminary studies ended.

When I received my doctorate in NT, I thought I was well grounded theologically. While I knew I had a lot to learn, I thought the things I did know were solid and correct. Little by little God used Zane to show me that some of the things I was convinced were right were actually wrong. I think that by sharing just some of these, you will gain some insight into this man's influence. And keep in mind that he has an equal influence in the lives of hundreds of others who are in ministry today.

A. ISAIAH 7:14

I learned at DTS that this verse had dual fulfillment. A child was born in Isaiah's day as a sign for people in that day. Why a natural birth of a child would be a sign in that day was never clear to me. But the idea is that the virgin birth was probably not in Isaiah's mind. The Holy Spirit, however, knew this had another fulfillment in relation to Mary and Jesus.

I remember talking about this with Zane one day. He said, "Yes, that is possible. But why would we assume what is essentially a liberal position that undercuts the prophetic nature of Scripture? Why not see only one fulfillment? Is that not what a reading of Matthew 1 suggests? Does Matthew give even a hint of any earlier fulfillment of that verse?"

I don't remember whether my understanding changed that day or shortly thereafter. But I came to believe that Isaiah was writing specifically about the Messiah. Years after that I read a fuller explanation by Dr. Arnold Fructenbaum that completely cleared up the passage for me. But I gained the basic understanding from some questions Zane asked me casually while we were standing by our cars one day.

B. DOUBLE FULFILLMENT

This led me to wonder about the whole issue of double fulfillment. Current Bible scholars see double fulfillment everywhere. Zane suggested to me that we shouldn't see double fulfillment unless the Bible gives us strong indication that this is the case. That makes lots of sense. But I had bought into that position while rushing through seminary.

C. REPENTANCE

Zane was my first reader on my doctoral dissertation on repentance in the NT. I defended basically a modified form of the change-of-mind view of Chafer and Ryrie. I indicated that many texts on repentance concerned turning from sins, but never in salvific contexts. However, I did find a number of places in which I thought *metanoēō* and *metanoia* were used in salvific contexts. There I felt they referred to calls to change one's mind about Christ, that is, to believe in Him for eternal life.

Five years after my dissertation was accepted, Zane wrote Absolutely Free! and taught that repentance is always turning from sins and never is a condition of eternal life. It took about seven years, but I repented of my view of repentance! All the verses I thought were in salvific contexts (e.g., Acts 2:38; 2 Pet 3:9) I came to see were not.

D. ASSURANCE AND FAITH

In a series at Cypress Valley Bible Church (then Believer's Bible Church) in Marshall, Texas, Zane spoke on saving faith and assurance. I wasn't present to hear it. But I received the messages on tape. I found these messages fascinating. Typically I listen to messages once only. But I listened to these tapes over and over again.

After about five times of listening to the tapes, I had a good grasp of what he was saying. And the material convinced me thoroughly. Prior to listening the idea that assurance was of the essence of saving faith was something I was familiar with, but did not accept. After listening, I fully grasped and accepted it. In addition, I gave up the idea of faith as a decision and came to see it as a persuasion caused by the evidence.

E. GOD OPENING PEOPLE'S HEARTS (ACTS 16:14)

The Reformed understanding of Acts 16:14 always struck me as deterministic. Then Zane shared with a view that really made sense. No one comes to faith before God removes a veil from their eyes (2 Corinthians 3-4; Luke 8:12-13; Acts 16:14). But in some if not many cases, we have a part in influencing God to open our hearts/eyes. The one who responds

positively to the light he has will get more light (Acts 17:27; see also Acts 10 and Cornelius). Lydia is a perfect example of this as she was a God-fearer who was at the place of prayer when God brought Paul and Silas along and then opened her heart to their message.

F. NO ONE SEEKS GOD (ROMANS 3:11)

Zane also gave a cogent explanation of Rom 3:11, “No one seeks God.” He explained that this statement must be understood as from the perspective of humans left to our own initiative. We have other texts like Acts 17:27 or the conversion of Cornelius that show that the unregenerate sometimes do seek God. The simple yet profound solution is that no one seeks God except in response to the prior wooing of the Holy Spirit (John 16:9-11).

G. SUMMARY

I could give many other examples. The point is this. Zane continued to have a profound influence on my thinking and teaching and writing for decades after I completed my seminary studies under him.

And I am far from the only one. I know of four DTS graduates, Rene Lopez, Al Valdez, Bob Bryant, and Dan Hauge, who for years spent an hour a week or more talking with Zane on the phone. They asked him questions and got his feedback.

I know of many others who called Zane from time to time for theological help and personal counseling as well.

Not only did he teach thousands of young men during his 27 years at DTS, but since 1986 when he stopped teaching there, he continued to instruct myriads of people for the remaining 22 years of his life.

XI. CONCLUSION

No pastor, theologian, missionary, or layperson (for we are all to minister) should be in the position at the end of his life where he reflects, “I regret I never really studied the Bible.” We should want to please God and to do that we must be a men and women of God. To do that we must be students of His Word. If that means that some scoff at our supposed lack of scholarship, so be it. If that means we are never regarded as erudite theologians, fine. What we should really care about is not the opinions of men, but the opinion of the God-Man, the King of kings and Lord of Lords. What should matter most is what our Savior, the One who gave His life for us, thinks of our lives. Oh that we might hear the Lord Jesus say, “Well done, good servant.”

Zane Hodges more than anyone I know exemplified such a man. In the nearly 30 years I knew him, his focus was on the soon return of Christ and on gaining His approval. He was more than a mentor for me. He was a model of what an overcoming Christian is like. I thank God that He allowed me to be influenced by this great man of God. Should the Lord tarry, I hope to be able to be a faithful steward of what Zane taught me. I realize that he has not stopped laying up treasure in heaven. Those of us who have been influenced by him will cause more deposits in Zane's heavenly account if we continue on in what he taught us (cf. 2 John 8; Phil 1:6).

Finally, I'm glad he is my friend. I hope he will invite me over to his kingdom castle to enjoy some hidden manna and fruit from the tree of life.