



As we begin this new term, we are hopeful and eager to see more scholars who will aspire to stand for the truths of historic Christianity.

At a time when evangelicals have just begun to engage in scholarship in Patristics and Early Christianity Literature, and not just the New Testament, we are mindful that the good fight for the gospel has been continuing for the last two millennia.

Here in this issue we decided to interview one scholar who needs no introduction . . . Prof. Gie Vleugels



Q. Why are you so committed and passionate about studying Early Christianity?

Evangelicals are often unaware of the earliest history of Christianity after the New Testament period; and what is worse, they don't perceive this as a problem. They apply the *sola scriptura* principle of the reformers quite absolutely: anything they find in the post-apostolic community that is not already clearly and unambiguously present in the New Testament is wrong or at best, suspicious; and for anything in post-apostolic times that is also expressed in the New Testament, they prefer to study the only canonical interpretation rather than their secondary and possibly distorted presentation in later generations. They have a particular version of the renaissance principle *ad fontes* too: they distrust the type of

Christianity that was handed down to them through tradition and read the New Testament with the expectation to find a radically different kind of Christianity in there.

However, most of what the Apostles and their generation of followers of Jesus communicated to the next generation was not put in writing. The apostles probably spent most of their time preaching, teaching, and preparing future leaders for the fast-growing church. Only a tiny portion of what they handed down ended up in the New Testament. Our giving up on all else they had to say is tragic. Let me formulate three theses which I hold. Each one of them is a motivation to study Early Christianity diligently:

1. The apostles were able communicators who succeeded in handing down the teaching of Jesus accurately to the next generation.
2. The apostles were able organizers and managers, who succeeded in installing trustworthy leaders and teachers to continue their mission to spread the message of Jesus in the world.
3. The same Christian community that read and passed on the New Testament writings cherished the (oral) apostolic tradition. For that reason, when the New Testament is ambiguous or unclear about certain elements of the Christian faith, positions regarding these elements in the post-apostolic church should be taken into account.

Q. The Early church is getting a lot of publicity these days with claims that diverse 'Christianities' were competing in the ancient world, that our Scriptures came to us because of the power politics of ecclesiastical leaders during the early centuries,

etc. What do you think is the overall impact of these claims on the evangelical church in our time, and why?

As evangelicals in general tend to leave the field of Early Christian writings to Roman Catholic or Eastern Orthodox Christians, or, even worse, to liberal scholarship, they are unable to challenge modern and postmodern reconstruction of Early Christianity. Consequently, they either deny the soundness of such reconstructions without due documentation and argumentation, or accept it in a form perhaps slightly watered down to safeguard the essence of their faith. Quite often this is a move away from the traditional (Nicene) doctrinal basis that becomes open for alternatives (like adoptionism, Jewish-Christianity, universalism, etc.).

Q. What would you say are some other benefits of studying early Christianity esp. for Christian leaders in our generation?

An Ecumenical dialogue. As the Christian literature of the first four centuries precedes the great conflicts within the church that resulted in divisions (4th century conflict on the natures of Christ, 11th century conflict on the bishop of Rome, 16th century conflict on salvation by grace), Christianity today has a common history of four centuries. Together with the Bible this common history forms the basis for an ecumenical dialogue about the essence and definition of Christianity.

Q. What do you hope to accomplish with the forthcoming book project on Early Christian literature?

The book aims to introduce all Christian literature (Christian in the broadest sense of the term) outside the New Testament from the first two centuries. While it attempts to be very complete, dealing with orthodox as well as heterodox literature, its unique contribution will be its discussion of the position of each piece of literature over against the mainstream Christianity. The thesis of the book is that the mainstream Christianity found an adequate expression in the creeds of the fourth century. This introduction is at the same time an apology for orthodox Christianity as well as an encouragement for Christians to pay much more attention to early Christian literature than is common in evangelical churches.

Q. While there is always need everywhere, what do you think are particularly urgent and needful areas of scholarship in behalf of Christian orthodoxy in the near future and why?

The general question will always be the one about unity and (or in) diversity within the Christian community of the first few centuries. Should we think, for instance, of a number of independent and very different communities within the Early Church, that could be named after a figurehead apostolic figure, and that could be reconstructed on the basis of canonical and extra-canonical literature that were created in their midst? (Cf. R. Brown's community of the beloved disciple.)

Other important questions:

- the definition of Christianity and ecumenism (cf. question 3)
- The priority of Nazarene Jewish Christianity or Ebionitism), and the relation of Church and Israel

RCEC discussion mtgs are open to all (✓ your calendar)

Sept 6 Oct 11 Nov 15
 Place: Staff Room in Peda
 Time: Thursdays 13:00-14:00
 Please join us with sac lunch

Reviews & Annotations

Bentley Layton, *Coptic in Twenty Lessons*. Leuven: Peeters, 2006. viii-204

The new introductory manual for learning Coptic by Bentley Layton is NOT worth the price Peeters is asking for it, but it will become the handiest short introduction to the language if you are starting from zero knowledge. As L indicates in his introduction, the workbook can be used for self-study or in a classroom setting. It consists of 20 lesson chapters, beginning with the Alphabet and reading exercises and ending with Conditional Sentence. At the end of the book L includes the first three chapters of the Gospel of Mark, used for some of the exercises. There is then a list of Coptic forms and subject list.

Each chapter is organized in two (or three) parts: Lesson (Vocabulary) and Exercises. The lessons vary in length according to the complexity of the subject, generally becoming longer as the student advances. A nice feature is the highlight boxes in each chapter, which focus on specific lesson points. Students are also expected to have access to the author's reference grammar and the standard reference dictionary by Crum. This is perhaps the only serious weakness of the book, given the price of those two resources. Add to that the fact that ETF has one but not the other. Otherwise the book is well printed, the choice of Coptic typeface and presentation are very clear and readable. The sequencing of lessons is reasonable. There is a good balance in the exercises between different linguistic skills between reading, writing and pronouncing (the later especially in early lessons).

Who should use this book? I would recommend it for anyone who wants to read early Christian texts (starting with the New Testament) in Coptic and to those who desire to study early Christian texts such as the Gospel of Thomas, or other texts from Nag Hammadi. It might also be useful for those working in textual criticism, but

only at a beginning stage. A helpful addition for those who don't have access to Crum is Richard Smith's *A Concise Coptic-English Lexicon* (SBL, 1999 second edition), available used via Internet book services and actually cheaper than Layton's lesson book!

-Martin Webber, Professor, New Testament, ETF

RCEC is designed to encourage research in any area in Early Christianity, and therefore inviting any ETF student who may be interested at whatever stage in this area. Publications, lecture presentations, discussion meetings, and other events will unfold as we are building a base for ongoing research among the ETF student body, alumni, and faculty.

We are extending invitation to write notes, annotations, and reviews either on some of the current books broadly on Early Christianity or on topics that you find helpful for your own specific study projects.



A 4th annual conference:
Pappas Patristic Institute
 October 4 – 6, 2007
 Brookline, Massachusetts
 "Sickness and Healing in the Patristic Period"

Proposals are still being accepted for presenting a short communication related to the theme of the conference (approx. 20 minutes in length); submit a one-to-two paragraph abstract of your paper at your earliest convenience (but no later than Sept. 10, 2007); Dr. Bruce Beck, Assoc Director, Pappas Patristic Institute (email: beck.bruce@comcast.net). All papers will be considered for publication in our series *Holy Cross Studies in Patristic Theology and History* published annually by Baker Academic. The registration fee is waived for all presenters. For more information, see <http://www.pappaspatristic.hchc.edu/conferences.html>
 Registration fee: \$75 / (student) \$25