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Sent: Friday, April 16, 2004 11:12 AM

To: graham@twelftree.com

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Subject: Grading is complete!

Dear Fellow Students,

Praise God! I have, at last, finished grading your rewritten papers on "Interpreting Scripture." The purpose of this letter is to offer some comments on the grading process and then list what I saw as the most important generally shared problems that need to be addressed if you are to improve your standard of work.

I do not think it is an exaggeration to say that all the papers showed evidence of considerable hard work, though one or two gave the appearance of being written hurriedly either through apparent lack of depth or attention to detail. (I recall the painful yet important statement made in class that "Life has to be organized so research can take place, not the reverse!") Also, whatever the weaknesses I list below, most papers showed evidence of thorough or sufficient knowledge of the particular field and, importantly, a broadening of theological reading.

Recognizing the time and attention that you (generally!) gave to writing and rewriting papers I spent at least one and sometimes two hours on each paper. I did not want to misunderstand what you were writing and also wanted to give adequate feedback so that, should you wish, you could take it into account in future assignments. Quite often I interacted with you more fully in the first few pages, but not towards the end of what you had written, for I could see that I had covered the issues that needed attention.

The down side of such close attention is that I saw significant errors that I did not see in the relatively cursory and distracted reading I was able to give during your presentation. Therefore, although I now think that most of the presented papers were graded too highly (!) , I do not think I have given anyone a lower grade for the rewritten paper than for the initial attempt. On the other hand, only rarely have I assigned a higher grade for your latest iteration.

My great desire is that you succeed in gaining a valuable PhD! Therefore, so far as I am able, I see my role is to help you reach a standard that will not only get you through the comprehensive examination but also, more importantly for the long term, to a level of critical skill and expression that will enable you to write an acceptable dissertation. In light of that, and at the risk of unduly discouraging you, rather than concentrate on the positive aspects of your papers I list here (from a general impression left on me) those shortcomings that stand out as needing attention. At times I use strong language for I am uncertain how I can be heard and understood, given that a number of these matters were raised in class - and at length! Of course, you may take comfort in knowing that what I say does not apply to every paper! (And my wife read and toned down a rough draft of this!!) So, I mean no personal offence. But I do want you to hear and understand so that you can improve!

- I am at a loss as to what to say in response to the widely evidenced inability to follow the *Society of Biblical Literature Handbook of Style*. Further, not only was that style not followed, there was a bewildering inconsistency in what was offered. (Sometimes a publisher will not

stipulate a particular house style but will demand consistency in what you submit.) Can it be that difficult to follow a style book that is so well set out and has countless examples available in the *Journal of Biblical Literature* to illustrate what is required?

- No scholarly piece of writing should (indeed can) be bereft of a reason for its existence! The absence of a thesis statement of some form is a required part of a report of scholarly research. Without a statement of purpose there is neither the reason to write nor the need for the piece to be read. Initially, the writing of a thesis statement will seem a self-conscious and mechanical exercise. With practice creativity will attend. (In a rough draft of your work, if you cannot underline the lines that set out why you are writing, you have nothing to guide your collection of evidence, nor anything against which to test your conclusion.)
- Given the existence of a thesis statement, it was too often vague and too generalized to do more than suggest the broad field of enquiry. A thesis statement requires clarity, precision and being well ordered if it is to perform its function.
- Along with the purpose statement, sometimes incorporated in it, there needs to come a plan or statement of method which will inform the reader as to how your purpose is going to be fulfilled and will also act as a preliminary guide to the form or structure of your paper.
- The body of the paper or essay needs to follow the scheme set out in the purpose and method statement. All other material is to be eliminated. (This leaves room for the proper development of ideas.) There needs to be connections or transitions between paragraphs and sections to guide the reader through your evidence and argument. Some of the papers read like spaghetti (scrambled and difficult to follow) rather than lasagne (ordered and manageable).
- Far too many statements were offered without evidence, either primary, secondary or in the way you argued. In a PhD course we are learning the skills required to work at the forefront of knowledge with the expectation of making breakthroughs. This can only be done in a way acceptable to the various scholarly fraternities through the careful and precise establishment of all that we say. No exceptions! (At every step be thinking, "How do I know this? How can I show this?" Or, "What is my precise Question? Is my Evidence appropriate? Are my Conclusions answering my question and are they reasonable in light of my evidence?")
- Platitudinous statements purporting to be conclusions too often bore only a scant relationship to the statement of purpose (if it existed) or could not be seen to arise out of the preceding evidence.
- The lack of critical skills was, at times, astounding! Even in offering an introduction to a field, thoughtful, ordered critical evaluation is part of what the intelligent reader requires. This is true of even journalism; it is more true of scholarly work. It is in offering critical evaluation that a piece becomes interesting and worth reading, and, perhaps, the point at which a contribution is being made.
- Too often there was wearisome foggy and pompous language along with poorly chosen vocabulary. Fancy words a good idea does not make! In fact, good ideas are often lost behind bloated diction. A good idea will shine best through clear language and a good idea will generate its own interesting language. For a sentence to sound nice or to be complex or to have too many ideas in it is not the measure of its success. Success in sentences comes in expressing as simply as possible a single idea that cannot be misunderstood by the clear language used. At the level at which we are working every (yes, every!!) sentence and statement within each sentence is to be weighed for its meaning - its one meaning! The same goes for each word! I do not exaggerate! (For example, the overused word "hermeneutics" took on and lost more meanings than I thought possible.)
- Write tightly and to convince your worst enemy. Put another way, write for the outsider who either does not know your field or needs convincing of some particular point or perspective.

Such an approach will help you decide what evidence is needed and what material is extraneous.

- A number of the papers read like first drafts. They were little more than scissors and paste exercises of pieces of information attached to various famous names. Knowing exactly what and why you are writing, and a frequent rereading, will facilitate a better flow in your writing, a tighter argument as well as a clearer authorial voice
- Similarly, too often I got the impression you were writing off the top of your head or preaching or thought you were writing something for a church magazine. Although we may be doing our research from within contexts that give particular drive, relevance and "edge" to our research, what we are producing is not, initially, for our context but for those who, soon to become our peers, help shape our contexts and the very subjects we are studying.
- There were, on occasions, laudable but often failed attempts to relate the topic to Renewal theology; a failure that stemmed generally from (1) superficiality, (2) a lack of clarity as to the nature of Renewal theology or (3) a lack of understanding as to the point(s) at which your topic might have interest for Renewal theology.
- None of the above is hard, it just requires discipline and repeated attention to the way we think, read and write!

Finally, see Regent's writing center as a valuable resource and not something to fear. Email the folk there and see if you can send one of your next papers to them for a critical reading.

I am sure I have upset someone in all this. However, to repeat, I do not wish to offend; I am trying to help you perform in a way and at a level that is going to bring you success in your comprehensive examination and, most of all, in your dissertation.

Those of you so able can pick up your paper from Megan, the faculty secretary at RH324, otherwise you should soon receive it by US post.

As of this evening I shall be away from the office for a fortnight (writing the first draft of a paper!). However, I will be able to communicate with you after May 3. (If you would like to chat in person, ask the secretary for a time *before knocking on my door!*)

Keep going!

God is good!

Graham

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