

# Retrospective on the Spring Westar Meeting

Roy W. Hoover

Westar's 2006 Spring Meeting in Miami Lakes, Florida, featured the inaugural sessions of the new Seminar on Christian Origins. Fellows had enthusiastically endorsed the new Seminar, proposed by Brandon Scott at the 2005 Fall Meeting, and now took up the crucial questions of the best way to begin our inquiry and the most appropriate way to develop its trajectory. Papers by Arthur Dewey and Steve Patterson opened the discussion. Dewey's paper argued for integrating a variety of New Testament scholarship's disciplines and subject matters into our conversations. The question was, how? Someone suggested making "place" the organizing principle of our inquiry. What if we were to proceed place by place, using a variety of tools—archaeology, epigraphy, ancient history, cultural anthropology—to create a thick description of each place, inventory the texts and traditions that would likely have been heard there, plot them over time (tradition history) and then describe the "Christianity" we see developing there?

As more places were described, networks and connections could be tracked, conflicts explored, fault lines identified. A consensus emerged: proceed by place.

With what place should we begin? Galilee, Jerusalem, Antioch are all plausible candidates, but Thessalonica emerged as the choice. Our earliest piece of literature, Paul's first extant letter, was sent there. There is good material available for describing the city: archaeology, epigraphy, ancient descriptions. There is a possible tradition-history to explore between 1 and 2 Thessalonians. The question of how to use Acts will be broached early. These considerations made Thessalonica seem the most promising place to begin. We will then in due course look at Galilee, Jerusalem, Antioch, Edessa, Alexandria, Ephesus, Philippi, Corinth, and Rome. The interesting questions listed in Patterson's paper could also be incorporated: the role of women, Jews and Gentiles, Jewish Christianity, Gnosticism, Christianity and the Roman Empire, among others. By focusing the inquiry on place, these and other questions would have a concreteness anchored in historical particularity.

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The Fellows also agreed that before proceeding with this agenda it would be useful to air out some older ideas about Christian origins to see where we stand on them. Accordingly, we scheduled the first program on place—Thessalonica—for the Spring 2007 Meeting, and will devote the Fall 2006 Meeting to debate on four long-standing propositions:

- Christianity began with Jesus.
- Christianity began with the resurrection.
- Christianity began with Pentecost.
- Christianity began with Paul.

Another issue that was raised at the Meeting was the role of orality in early Christianity. This topic demands our attention because the printing press forms our mindset and dominates our methods. In the ancient world, on the other hand, only elites could read and write (about 10% of the population in large urban areas) and orality

dominated everyday usage. In her paper, Joanna Dewey called into question the assumptions of form criticism that the oral tradition circulated in isolated pieces of gospel tradition. She pointed to much research in oral culture that indicates that stories begin to coalesce and circulate rather quickly. Dewey sees Mark as representing such an early stage of oral story telling, that is, the story preceded Mark rather than being created by him out of separate pieces of lore. As we reconstruct Christian origins we need to take seriously the oral character of early Christianity and be aware that the textual nature of our evidence may skew our perceptions. Dewey's thesis will have to be revisited.

The question of orality also figured prominently in a paper by Aaron Milavec that was based on his extensive and recently published research on the Didache, (Greek for "Teaching," which is short for the "Teaching of the Twelve Apostles"). Since the discovery of the only extant complete manuscript of the Didache in 1873, most scholars have seen it as a manual of church order to be dated around the year 100 C.E., or perhaps a decade or so later. Milavec argues that, to the contrary, the Didache

reflects the oral tradition of a Jewish Christian community intended as instruction for initiates in discipleship and is the earliest representation of historical Jesus tradition that we have. He thinks it should be dated as early as 50 C.E. If Milavec's view should prove to be persuasive, that would call for a major alteration of the paradigm for understanding Christian origins. Stay tuned.

The continuing work of the Acts Seminar was represented in papers by Dennis Smith and Milton Moreland. Smith summarized the work of the Acts Seminar to date and raised the question of the relation of its work to that of the new Seminar on Christian Origins. He called attention in particular to forthcoming books by Seminar members Richard Pervo and Joseph Tyson that break new ground on the questions of the composition and date of Acts. The Fellows agreed that work of the Acts Seminar should continue and that the results produced will be very important for the work of the Seminar on Christian Origins.

Moreland's paper dealt with the question of archaeological and other evidence that might enable us to reconstruct the situation of the early "Christian" community in Jerusalem. He suggested that the challenge to scholars who seek to reconstruct the history of the Jesus group in Jerusalem is whether, after sorting through the available evidence, we will be able to write an historical narrative that can compete effectively with the imaginative construction created by Luke in Acts. Noting that Jerusalem was dominated by elites connected to the Temple cult and by military and political administrations typical of a city in the Roman Empire—neither of whom were inclined to be lenient toward critics—Moreland suggests that the Jesus group in Jerusalem was small (perhaps around 100 or so) and would likely have kept a low profile. That suggests a rather different picture of the history of the Jesus group in pre-70 C.E. Jerusalem than the heroic account one reads in Acts. "The story of the Acts of the Apostles is hard to compete with," Moreland acknowledges, "but as scholars we do ourselves a great disservice if we simply allow Luke's narrative to establish the questions and parameters of our research."

Friday and Saturday afternoons included session of the Westar Leaders Seminar. In response to a challenge posed by Robert Funk, the Seminar papers were focused on the theme of "A New Sunday Morning Experience." Roy Hoover's paper, "Where We Stand and What We Stand For" aimed at opening a conversation about "where people who take Westar's model of learning and open inquiry seriously should locate themselves in the flux of the competing claims and interests of our era." Hal Taussig's

paper proposed that ritual theory should play a role in creating new worship expressions. He suggested that "worship as ritual often helps participants not by making a moral issue clear, but by highlighting the ambivalences of such issues." Patricia Williams presented a case for modeling Sunday morning faith community experiences in the

style of the unprogrammed Quakers, who reject rituals and meet in silence. Williams suggested that such a style of worship maximizes the opportunity for worship for groups whose members hold a variety of religious beliefs. Jerry Stinson offered detailed examples of how he revises traditional language and forms of worship to create new ritual resources for worship for a church that looks to the historical Jesus rather than to the Christ of the Nicene Creed.

Stinson also especially aims to give voice to justice concerns in the ritual of worship.

Two invited lecturers enlarged our horizons with their presentations. On Thursday evening, Phyllis Tickle, the founding editor of the religion department of *Publishers Weekly*, the trade journal well known to every bookseller, and the author of more than two dozen books, sketched the contemporary religious situation in America. Every five hundred years or so, the church has a big rummage sale, she suggested, quoting Episcopal Bishop Mark Dwyer, and we are in the midst of such a sale now. In the rummage sale of the Protestant Reformation, the Roman Catholic Church lost hegemony. In the one going on now, Protestantism has lost hegemony. The current religious landscape exhibits a religious world made up of four quartiles: liturgical religion, social justice religion, Pentecostal/charismatic religion, and conservative/traditionalist religion. She closed by suggesting that by aggressively pursuing the unfinished business of Westar that Bob Funk often spoke about, Westar Fellows and Associates can play a critical role in shaping what happens in the emerging church.

On Friday evening, John Kloppenborg, Professor in the Department and Centre for the Study of Religion at the University of Toronto and the world's leading authority on the Sayings Gospel Q (see especially his *Excavating Q*, 2000) focused on a little noticed but important issue that influences our study of early Christian literature: how to isolate a text's ideology, its deepest set of assumptions. He used the parable of the wicked tenants in Mark 12:1–12, copied by Matthew and Luke, and also found in the Gospel of Thomas, as a test case. Kloppenborg cited a striking example of the use of the parable in the Book

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of Common Prayer where it is interpreted as a warning against regicide, recalling the murder of Charles I. The ideology of this reading is the same as that in Mark, where the parable is seen allegorically as picturing God's punishment of Israel for the rejection of his son, Jesus. But in Thomas, the parable pictures the reverse situation: the distant wealthy landowner, rather like the parable of the Rich Fool (Thomas 63//Luke 12) comes to disaster by his blind pursuit of yet more wealth. Most readers of the parable have been blinded to the ideology that shapes Mark's version because they share it, as does the Book of Common Prayer. Comparing the two versions enables us to uncover the different ideologies that shape a text's understanding of the parable.

The Spring Meeting was held in Miami Lakes at the invitation of Mary Tumpkin, Westar Board member and senior minister of the Universal Truth Center for Better Living in Miami Gardens. Dr. Tumpkin and her staff helped in making the arrangements for the meeting and also hosted the steering committee of the Westar Leaders Committee for an all day planning session at the Center on the Tuesday before the Spring Meeting. We wish to express our thanks to Dr. Tumpkin and her associates for their gracious hospitality and assistance. **4R**

Roy W. Hoover  
with reporting by Stephen J. Patterson,  
Bernard Brandon Scott, and Mike Short

## Voting at the Spring 2006 Meeting A Report by Roy W. Hoover

Ballots were voted on seven of the papers presented at the Spring 2006 Meeting. This is a "sampler" of some of the most interesting and significant voting results.

	WgtAve/Color*	%R	%P	%G	%B
<b>I. The Jesus Seminar on Christian Origins</b>					
<b>Arthur J. Dewey</b>					
<b>Prolegomena on the Traditions Seminar</b>					
There was no one point of origin for early Christianity.	.77 Red	65	13	9	13
Acts created the myth of succession from Jesus through the apostles to Paul.	.88 Red	70	26	4	0
<b>Aaron Milavec</b>					
<b>Didache Research at the Crossroads</b>					
The internal clues of the <i>Didache</i> show that it was created in a culture in which oral sources were given more weight than written sources.	.80 Red	45	50	5	0
The <i>Didache</i> expects the "God of David" (10:6), not Jesus, to be the one who will raise the just to life and "come upon the clouds of heaven."	.70 Pink	30	55	10	5
The <i>Didache</i> originated in the mid-first century in a milieu ignorant of (or opposed to) Pauline theology.	.53 Pink	25	36	15	25
<b>Joanna Dewey</b>					
<b>The First Century Oral-Written Media World; &amp; Mark—A Really Good Story</b>					
Mark was building on an oral tradition that had already created a continuous and coherent narrative.	.48 Gray	0	55	36	9
Mark survived because it was a good story and was easily transmitted orally.	.63 Pink	10	75	10	5

\*Red vote demonstrates strong agreement with the ballot item, Pink indicates agreement, Gray means disagreement and Black means strong disagreement.

	WgtAve/Color*	%R	%P	%G	%B
<b>Dennis E. Smith</b>					
<b>Acts and Christian Origins</b>					
Acts was written not later than 125 nor earlier than 100 CE.	.80 Red	55	32	14	0
The purpose of Acts is to provide an apologetic response to issues that arose in second-century Christianity.	.80 Red	55	32	14	0
<b>Milton Moreland</b>					
<b>Reconstructing Jerusalem “Christians”</b>					
A plausible account of pre-70 Christian groups can be reconstructed without using Acts as a principal source.	.52 Pink	0	61	35	4
In light of socio-economic and political evidence about Herodian Jerusalem, the Christian community there probably numbered less than 100 members.	.69 Pink	29	54	13	4
<b>II. Westar Leaders Seminar</b>					
<b>Patricia A. Williams</b>					
<b>Sunday Morning Among the Quakers</b>					
Christianity needs a new theology of God.	.83 Red	67	23	2	8
The <i>Tao Te Ching</i> provides a less anthropomorphic concept of the Ultimate than the Bible.	.83 Red	65	26	2	7
<b>Jerry Stinson</b>					
<b>The Encounter of Progressive Christianity with the Language of Prayer and Ritual on Sunday Morning</b>					
The language of ritual in a community that is tied to the historical Jesus should avoid references to the mythology of Christ.	.74 Pink	51	30	9	11
It is appropriate for a Christian community to use liturgical material from a wide variety of non-Christian religious traditions.	.91 Red	80	16	2	2