1. Introduction: Historical Competence in New Testament Commentaries

“The writing of biblical commentaries has always been, and will always be, an important datum of Christian experience, arising as it does from the interaction of heart and mind, of piety and inquiry.” Richard Longenecker goes on to describe how commentaries have historically been a tool of the Christian church to face times of change and growth—whether from prosperity and advancement or from difficulty and challenge. “At such times the writing of commentaries has been undertaken not only with the hope of achieving a better explication of what the biblical writers originally said and meant, but also of effecting within the contemporary Christian community something of a consensus regarding the import of their message and how that message should impact the thought and actions of Christians in our day.”

Ernest Best describes commentaries as...
“the backbone of all serious study of scripture.” So then, with a tendency to lean on commentaries, the Church should certainly demand competence of these important tools for understanding the Scriptures.

1.1 The Importance of Historical Competence in New Testament Commentaries

An important area for competence in commentaries is the area of historical background. To speak of historical competence in the writing of commentaries is to address the matter of how well a commentator investigates the historical setting of the document(s) being commented on, how well that commentator uses knowledge of the document’s historical context to understand the biblical text, and how well that commentator communicates these matters about the biblical text in the commentary. While certainly a concern for commentaries on any and all of the Bible, we address historical competence with particular attention to New Testament commentaries.

The Bible is the Scripture of the Christian faith—that is, its authoritative expression as well as its authoritative guide to faithful living. Understanding the Bible correctly is a historic Christian concern and the primary goal of commentaries. “The purpose of a commentary is to examine what was said/done in order to apprehend the author’s communicative intent.” And historical competence helps reach that goal. “Since Christianity is a historical religion, the interpreter must recognize that an understanding of the history and culture within which the passage was produced is an indispensable tool for uncovering the meaning of that passage.”

Richard Longenecker suggests that Ferdinand Christian Baur (1792–1860) made an important contribution to the scholarly discipline of commentary writing by pointing out the importance of historical competence. Writes Longenecker:

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3 Ernest Best, “The Reading and Writing of Commentaries,” *ExpTim* 107 (1996): 358. He continues dryly, “It is perhaps only to those who write them that commentaries seem exciting.”

4 Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *Is There Meaning in This Text? The Bible, the Reader, and the Morality of Literary Knowledge* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998), 285. Earlier Vanhoozer asks rhetorically, “What are commentaries doing if they are not trying to grasp the author’s intended message?” (89).