

# **2013 AG Report**

## **for the Evangelical Christianity SIG**

by Larry D. Paarmann  
July 12, 2013

The 2013 AG met in Fort Worth, Texas, July 3 through 7, 2013. There were a number of meetings at the 2013 AG of interest to members of the Evangelical Christianity SIG. The following gives some details on those meetings. Those meetings with comments below, were attended by the SIG Coordinator. The order below is the order in which the meetings took place.

### **Debate Room: Separation of State & Church**

Was America founded as a Christian nation? Are atheists too aggressive? Should “In God We Trust” remain on US money? Should “Under God” remain in the Pledge? Should the US military keep its “Spiritual Fitness Test”? Should taxpayers pay for rebuilding churches after hurricane Sandy? Is opening government meetings with prayer OK (SCOTUS says yes)? Should blasphemy be illegal (Europe may say yes)? Do all beliefs deserve equal respect? Note: church taxation is a separate debate topic at another time.

### **Debate Room: Should we Believe the Entire Bible, Just Part, or None?**

The Christian Bible contains many valuable moral tales, as well as some perhaps more questionable ones. Either way, though, are the stories true? Is the Bible an historical document or a collection of fables? Did Jesus live? Did the Jews flee Egypt? What evidence has been uncovered in the modern age of archeology? Does it support or refute the reality of biblical accounts? Does the Bible’s historicity, or lack thereof, threaten the validity of the moral positions in the book?

### **Evangelical Christianity SIG Meet & Greet**

This is a time for current members of the SIG to get acquainted and prospective members to see what we are about.

Comments:

We had 20 to 25 people (about, I didn’t count) come to the Meet & Greet. A few were members of the SIG, but most were not. There was no formal presentation, but it started with a question and answer period. Then, one attendee suggested we go around the room and have everyone introduce themselves,

and say a few words if they wished. This proved to be an excellent idea, which led to stimulating discussion, and we got to know one another because of it. The last one to introduce himself was an atheist, and asked for ideas as to what he could say to Christians as to why they should be involved with Mensa. The response was excellent, and was continued by many in the group. After a few minutes the atheist asked for the rest of us to pause for a bit as he needed to start taking notes. I could not have been more pleased. A few non-SIG-members indicated their intention to join the SIG. I wasn't sure that more than just a few would come, and without any formal presentation prepared, perhaps we would leave early. Soon we ran out of time, and had to leave. Mensa, it appears to me, is far more open to discussion of Christianity, and a Christian witness, than secular academia, and perhaps even the culture in general.

## **The Real Jesus Behind the Grand Myth**

This penetrating look at Jesus (this is verbatim from the program notes) and his insights into life beyond devotional fantasy and scholarly reconstruction is based on Tom Nehrer's third book, "The Illusion of 'Truth'." Seen from Nehrer's perspective of "clear awareness," the discussion includes cultural/historical aspects of Jesus' world, Messianic notions/expectations, how Jesus' life and its meaning were altered by Paul and the early church, overview of scholarly research into historical Jesus, and pointed insights into perspectives found in his parables and aphorisms. A blunt, unfettered look at the real "Yeshua" and myths about him, it will expose cherished ideas as fallacy. Come prepared to think!

### **Comments:**

The above program notes greatly exaggerated what actually happened during the meeting. On a positive note, the large room was filled to near capacity, which indicates a good interest in the life and teachings of Jesus Christ. However, the fast-talking speaker left almost no room for questions or dialogue, which could indicate a significant insecurity on his part, or just poor speaking ability. Maybe some of what is promised is in his book, I don't know, but there wasn't any of it in his talk. It did not qualify as a "penetrating look at Jesus," it offered nothing of substance about "how Jesus' life and its meaning were altered by Paul and the early church," and it offered nothing, as best as I can recall, of "scholarly research into historical Jesus," and it made no attempt to "expose cherished ideas as fallacy," nor did he attempt to indicate just what any of those "cherished ideas" were.

## **Debate Room: Will Atheism Replace Religion?**

Each generation contains a smaller portion of believers. Urbanization, industrialization and education all breed atheism. Where will the trend stop? Will spiritualism always be a desired part of life?

Comments:

This was my first Mensa debate, and I was very pleased at how it was conducted. Everyone had an equal opportunity to participate. No personal attacks were permitted. All ideas and comments were equally accepted without any ridicule – how I wish we could do that in the larger society, and especially in academia! There were atheists, Protestants, Catholics, former Mormons, and no doubt others present. The more-or-less universal (I don't recall if everyone present agreed) conclusion was that atheism will not replace religion, but that religion will always be with us. I attempted to make the point that atheism is a religion, based on more faith than what Christianity is, but I don't think the point was well received, most desiring to define religion in a formal sense. I raised the question during the debate, whether or not it is true that "Each generation contains a smaller portion of believers." No one seemed to have a good answer. I also question, although I did not bring it up during the debate, whether it is true that education breeds atheism. Certainly that has not been true in my case. In my judgment, neither Christians nor atheists "won" the debate, but it was valuable, in my judgment, to dialogue about such things. I came away thinking that discussion about the existence of God is perhaps a necessary starting point with at least some.

## **The Vanishing Jesus**

Even the most skeptical tend to grant that Jesus of Nazareth, even if he wasn't a divine being, was the human lynchpin of a movement that has lasted for thousands of years and has dominated the Western world. But what if Jesus never existed at all? What if the assumption of Jesus' historicity is nothing more than that? And if the Jesus of history is lost to the mists of time, where did the Christ of faith originate? This talk will explore the minority scholarship that is currently exploring the question: "Did Jesus exist?"

Comments:

I'm happy that the speaker does clearly indicate that he was presenting the "minority scholarship". There was no attempt at balance, and certainly the majority scholarship, let alone conservative evangelical scholarship, was not presented at all that would challenge him on every point. His perspective was to date the Gospels of the New Testament very late, and not written by those that they are attributed to. Then he attempted to point out what he took to be errors and inconsistencies in the Gospels. He speculated that Christianity grew from the epistles of the New Testament, and that the Gospels were written much later. All of this, of course, ignores the majority scholarship, which keeps moving the writing of the Gospels earlier and earlier. Based on his assumptions and minority scholarship, he then wonders whether Jesus ever existed! I would sooner wonder whether or not Shakespeare existed, let alone Plato, etc. I came away from this meeting thinking that, at least for some, discussion of the reliability and accuracy of the Bible may be a necessary starting point.