

A Response to *Christianity Today's* Article in Defense of Mike Licona

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In a letter to the editor of *Christianity Today* (CT), I gave a brief response to their November (2011) article on the Mike Licona inerrancy issue. It reads as follows: “Your article on the Mike Licona was biased, shallow, and uninformed. Your writer did not even know that he was dismissed from teaching at Southern Evangelical Seminary for his denial of inerrancy. Nor did he know that Licona’s view was condemned by the International Society of Christian Apologetics (ISCA) to which he once belonged. Nor did he mention that someone was asked to resign from the Evangelical Theological Society (ETS) in 1983 for holding the same kind of view. Nor was he aware that ETS adopted the ICBI view on inerrancy which condemns this kind of “dehistoricizing” of the Gospels. Better research could have given a more ‘fair and balanced’ view.”

Since, based on past experience, I was skeptical that CT would print even that short response, I offer a more extended one here. I will respond to each particular point they made in order to show how shallow and distorted their article really was.

First, the question is broader than “whether Matthew’s reference to many saints rising from their graves after Jesus’ resurrection might not be literal history,” as CT claims. As we showed in our web site article (www.normangeisler.net) titled “Mike Licona on Inerrancy: It’s Worse than We Originally Thought,” Licona’s unorthodox theological method led him to several unorthodox conclusions: (1) He denied the historicity of the resurrection of the saints in Matthew 27; (2) He doubts the historicity of the story of the “angels” at the tomb (Mk 15:5-7; Mt 28:2-7; Lk 24:4-7; Jn 20:11-13, *The Resurrection of Jesus[RJ]*, 185-186), thus involving event recorded in all four Gospels; (3) He doubts the historicity the mob falling backward when Jesus claimed “I am He” (Jn. 18:4-6, *RJ*, 306); (4) He undermines the general reliability of the historicity of the Gospels by claiming that “**there is somewhat of a consensus among contemporary scholars that the Gospels belong to the genre of Greco-Roman biography (*bios*).**” Then he goes on to say that “*Bioi* offered the ancient biographers great flexibility for rearranging material and **inventing speeches,...and they often included legend.** Because *bios* was a flexible genre, **it is often difficult to determine where history ends and legend begins**” (34, emphasis added). This makes the issue far broader and more serious than CT represents it, thus making the picture they paint a distorted one.

It should be clear why Licona has gotten himself into trouble. A bad methodology leads to a bad bibliography and to bad theology. At root, then, Licona's basic problem is methodological. Like Robert Gundry before him, who was asked to resign by The Evangelical Theology Society (in 1983), Licona's view is a form of methodological unorthodoxy (see "Tenth" point below and my article in JETS titled "Methodological Unorthodoxy" vol. 26, No. 1 March 1983).

Second, CT refers to the Licona debate as a "war of words," but as we have already shown, it is far deeper and more serious than this misleading phrase reveals. It is, in fact, one of the most fundamental issues of our day. What constitutes the total truthfulness of Scripture has been for centuries, and still remains, one of the most crucial theological issues of the Christian Church. The late Francis Schaeffer rightly called it a "watershed" issue. Since the Bible is the fundamental of the Faith from which the other fundamentals are derived, it could be called the fundamental of the fundamentals. And if the fundamental of the fundamentals is not fundamental, then what is fundamental? The answer is: fundamentally nothing.

Third, CT claims that "Licona voluntarily resigned from the [Southern Evangelical] seminary on October 4 after the print version of this article went to press." This too distorts the full facts of the matter. The truth is that SES was concerned about Licona's view, and after the faculty interrogated him they voted to not retain him on the faculty. In the words of an ETS faculty member, "SES formulated a statement formally dismissing him from any faculty appointment or position at SES, and that we believe he denies inerrancy as we understand it" (Letter, Oct 7, 2011). His position was then eliminated and his picture taken from the web catalog. Regardless of public statement to the contrary (which are often used to avoid litigation), normally, the term for what happened would be he was "fired."

Fourth, Licona's attempts to soften his position fail. For example, he claims that "At present I am just as inclined to understand the narrative ... as a report of a factual (i.e., literal) event as I am to view it as an apocalyptic symbol." However, first of all, this falls short of recanting the view that Matthew 27:52-53 and other texts are "poetical," a "legend," an "embellishment," and literary "special effects" (see *RJ*, 306, 548, 552, 553). Further, it does not address the other issues of considering the "angels" at the tomb, the mob falling backward after Jesus claimed, "I am he" which he also places in the poetical or legend category. What is more, it does not respond to Licona's claim that "**the Gospels belong to the genre of Greco-Roman biography (*bios*)" which "offered the ancient biographers great flexibility for rearranging material and inventing speeches,...and they often included legend."**

In the interest of full disclosure, we must point out that Licona said nothing of his request for a hearing with a top Southern Baptist leader whom he failed to convince of his orthodoxy. It was only after Licona realized that his view would not fly with Southern Baptist leaders, pastors, and church members

that he decided to garner support from a handful of scholars, many of whom were not Southern Baptist, and who sided with *Christianity Today* who happily accommodated him. When I learned the deck was being stacked by borderline inerrantist and others who were not full inerrantist, and that CT was publishing an article on it, I engaged unsuccessfully with a number of Emails with the CT editorial leaders who refused to print contrary views on the issue. This is just another example of their unfair, unbalanced, and biased journalism.

Fifth, CT painted our case against Licona as objecting to his “characterizing the passage as a ‘strange little text.’” However, this was not at the heart of our criticism at all, as was clearly indicated in our “First” point above. It was the denial of the historicity of part of the Gospel—one at that which was directly connected to the resurrection of Christ. And it was our objection to his upfront use of a genre decision and the use of extra-biblical stories as hermeneutically determinative of the meaning of a biblical text that were our chief concern. Here again CT gives both a shallow and distorted picture of the real situation.

Sixth, CT hides its view behind a hand-picked professor who is cited as saying, “I know a good number of professors who have privately expressed support for Mike Licona but cannot do so publicly for fear of punitive measures.” This completely distorts the picture by making it look like untold numbers of professors are afraid to speak up for Licona for fear of losing their jobs. This shifts the focus from an honest scholarly debate to one of positing alleged bad motives of people. In fact, it makes Licona’s critics look like theological bullies which is about as *ad hominem* as these kinds of allegations get.

Seventh, CT also employs another *ad hominem* comment of a professor (which it does not challenge) who calls an honest and reasoned challenge of the orthodoxy of a view (see our “Ten Reasons for the Historicity of Matthew 27” at www.normangeisler.net) a “witch hunt.” This adds only heat, not light, to the dialogue. It would have been much more profitable had CT printed the opposing view and spent time answering the many objections given against Licona’s position (which I sent to them but they refused to print). Instead, CT appears to agree with the view that honest, scholarly criticism of Licona’s views are “counterproductive to the important issues of the Kingdom.” We respectfully disagree, pointing out that the inerrancy of Scripture is not unimportant. On the contrary, if we cannot completely trust the full truthfulness of the Scriptures, then all of the essential doctrines of our Faith based on it are thereby undermined. Such is not “counterproductive to the important issues of the Kingdom.” It is in fact, basic to the work of the kingdom. For as the psalmist put it, “If the foundation be destroyed, what shall the righteous do” (Psa. 11:3).

Eighth, CT appears to support the view that we should give slack to a person who is otherwise known for his orthodoxy, saying, he “surely should not be tossed aside based on his interpretation of one

passage in a massive volume." Well, first of all, it is not just one passage, as we have shown above (in the "First" point).

Further, cutting slack on unorthodox views is a sure path to doctrinal disaster. It is akin to claiming that the early church should have cut slack on Arius, who was otherwise orthodox, when he claimed that Jesus was of a "similar" nature to the Father but not the "same" nature. After all, the difference is only one little iota difference in Greek between the two words. Regardless of orthodoxy on other issues, each doctrine must be judged on its own merits. There is no excess of orthodoxy on one doctrine that leaks over and helps keep another unorthodox doctrine afloat. Sure, one can agree that the deity of Christ is more important than inerrancy—at least as far as being saved is concerned. However, it is also true, as noted above, that inerrancy is a "watershed" issue that undergirds all other basic Christian doctrines. So, it is not an unimportant issue, nor one to which "slack" should be granted

Finally, Licona's underlying problem is the adoption of an interpretive method that undermines the historicity of the Gospel record and even that of the resurrection of Christ. As noted Southern Baptist leader Dr. Al Mohler aptly put it, "**Licona has handed the enemies of the resurrection of Jesus Christ a powerful weapon** — the concession that some of the material reported by Matthew in the very chapter in which he reports the resurrection of Christ simply did not happen and should be understood as merely 'poetic device' and 'special effects'.... He needs to rethink the question he asked himself in his book — 'If some or all of the phenomena reported at Jesus' death are poetic devices, we may rightly ask whether Jesus' resurrection is not more of the same?'.... He asked precisely the right question, but then he gave the wrong answer...." Mohler added, "**It is not enough to affirm biblical inerrancy in principle. The devil, as they say, is in the details.** That is what makes *The Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy* so indispensable and this controversy over Licona's book so urgent. It is not enough to affirm biblical inerrancy in general terms. **The integrity of this affirmation depends upon the affirmation of inerrancy in every detailed sense**" (www.AlbertMohler.com, emphasis added).

Ninth, CT lets stand without criticism the statement of a hand-picked scholar that claims "If we view our own interpretation to be just as inerrant as the Scriptures," he said, "this could ironically elevate tradition and erode biblical authority." However, this is a straw man criticism by Licona's critics since they never affirmed such a position. Just because someone disagrees with Licona's views and gives his biblical and rational reasons for doing so, it is no ground for unfairly charging him with the claim of infallibility for his position.

Furthermore, the charge has only been that Licona's view is contrary to the ICBI stand on inerrancy which the ETS had adopted for interpreting its statement on inerrancy, not on some private view of inerrancy one wishes to adopt to accommodate his forages into contemporary genre criticism.

Our contention is only that Licona's view is contrary to the historic doctrine of inerrancy adopted by the ETS and ICBI framers. We have expressed the many reasons for this in our article on "Ten Reasons..." article cited above. One would do well to give a biblical and rational response to these arguments rather than making ad hominem comments about the scholars holding them.

Tenth, the root issue with Licona's view is methodological. His view is in fact a form of methodological unorthodoxy. For it adopts a method of interpretation that undermined the complete truthfulness of Scripture. This comes out very clearly when Licona is asked whether one's methodology is totally separate from the doctrine of inerrancy, as the CT article implies. His answer is Yes. This means that even if more of the Gospel record, including the resurrection, turned out to be legend, it still would not affect the doctrine of inerrancy. Our response is: "Whose doctrine of inerrancy?" Certainly not the historic, ETS, ICBI doctrine of the full inerrancy of Scripture. Such a bifurcation of methodology from bibliology leaves one with an empty, vacuous, contentless claim that "The Bible is wholly true no matter whether what it affirms corresponds to reality or not." This was considered "unbelievable" at Southern Evangelical Seminary who dismissed him from their faculty.

Licona's vacuous methodological claim is self-defeating since they claim that their view corresponds to reality when they claim that truth is not what corresponds to reality. ICBI affirmed that "By biblical standards truth and error is meant the view used both in the Bible and in everyday life, viz., a correspondence view of truth. This part of the article is directed toward who would redefine truth to relate merely to redemptive intent, the purely personal, or the like, rather than to mean that which corresponds with reality" (Sproul, *Explaining Inerrancy*, 43-44).

Further, Licona's view is clearly contrary to what ICBI, adopted by ETS, affirms about "dehistoricizing" the Gospel record. For ICBI clearly declared that "We deny the legitimacy of any treatment of the text or quest for sources behind it that leads to relativizing, dehistoricizing, or discounting its teaching..." ("Chicago Statement on Inerrancy," Article XVIII), and "We deny that generic categories which negate historicity may rightfully be imposed on biblical narratives which present themselves as factual" ("Chicago Statement on Hermeneutics," Article XIII).

What is more, in an official commentary of ICBI on its famous "Chicago Statement on Inerrancy" (1978), it clearly defines truth as "what corresponds to reality," affirming that "When we say that the truthfulness of Scripture ought to be evaluated according to its own standards that means that ... all the claims of the Bible must correspond with reality, whether that reality is historical, factual or spiritual" (R. C. Sproul, *Explaining Inerrancy*, 41) So, to claim a biblical reference is true means that it corresponds to reality which is contrary to Licona's "dehistoricizing" of the Gospel record. For to claim

a narrative in a historic context is true, means it corresponds to a historical reality. As the ICBI *Explaining Hermeneutics* Article XIII put it, “We deny that generic categories which negate historicity may rightly be imposed on biblical narratives which present themselves as factual.” But this is precisely what Licona does. So, Licona’s view on inerrancy is clearly contrary to the ICBI framers meaning of the term.

Eleventh, CT’s distortions of the facts are not always in what it said, but sometimes are in what it did not say. As we pointed out in our letter to the CT editor, “Your writer did not even know he was dismissed from teaching at Southern Evangelical Seminary for his denial of inerrancy. Nor did he know that Licona’s view was condemned by the International Society of Christian Apologetics [ISCA] to which he once belonged. Nor did he mention that someone was asked to resign from the Evangelical Theological Society (ETS) in 1983 for holding the same kind of view. Nor was he aware that ETS adopted the ICBI view on inerrancy which condemns this kind of ‘dehistoricizing’ of the Gospels.”

Further, why were no scholars picked by CT who disagreed with Licona’s claim that his view did not deny inerrancy. Does this not indicate a journalistic bias? As noted earlier, Licona’s view is contrary to the historic view on the full inerrancy of Scripture. It is also contrary to the “grammatical-historical” method which the ICBI demands Article XVIII adds, “We affirm that the text of Scripture is to be interpreted by grammatical-historical exegesis” which it describes as “Scripture is to interpret Scripture,” not Scripture being interpreted by extra-biblical Jewish or Greco-Roman sources as Licona does (see the “First” point above) .

Conclusion

By failing to mention all of these important points, CT paints a distorted picture which, according to them, only a few “witch hunting” discontents oppose. However, just the opposite is the case. It was 70% of the Evangelical Theological Society (ETS) who asked a member to resign (in 1983) for holding a similar view that “dehistoricized” sections of the Gospels. It was 80% of ETS who voted to adopt the ICBI interpretation of inerrancy—which interpretation speaks directly against views like Licona’s. And the view of the full inerrancy of the Bible as held by the ETS and ICBI framers has been demonstrated to be the historic view of the Christian Church (see John Hannah, *Inerrancy and the Church*). In a well documented book, H. D. McDonald demonstrated that “Prior to the year 1860, the idea of an infallibly inerrant Scripture was the prevailing view” (*Theories of Revelation*, 196). So, the truth is that views like Licona’s that deny the full inerrancy of the Bible are: (a) contrary to the view held by orthodox Christians down through the centuries, (b) contrary to the affirmation of the decision of the

largest group of evangelical scholars in the world (ETS), and (c) contrary to the conclusions of the ICBI framers. Having been one of them, I can speak directly and authoritatively on the matter: **Licona's view, regardless of whoever may agree with it, is not in accord with the ICBI framer's understanding of inerrancy.**