

# THE BIBLE MADE IMPOSSIBLE

*Why Biblicism Is Not a Truly Evangelical  
Reading of Scripture*

WITH A NEW AFTERWORD

C H R I S T I A N   S M I T H



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## Introduction

This book addresses Christians, especially evangelicals, who believe that the Bible is a divine word of truth that should function as an authority for Christian faith and practice, and who want to espouse a coherent position that justifies and defends that belief. My contention here is that the American evangelical commitment to “biblicism,” which I will define and describe in detail below, is an untenable position that ought to be abandoned in favor of a better approach to Christian truth and authority.

What follows is not an attack on Christian authority or the Bible. It is rather a critical interrogation of certain aspects of *one specific account* of biblical authority that I think reason and evidence show is impossible to defend and employ with integrity. The kinds of reason and evidence I bring to bear here are not those of the irreligious, skeptical unbeliever; rather, they are the sort of considerations Christians need to engage. The goal of this book is not to detract from the plausibility, reliability, or authority of the Christian faith or from scripture. The goal is to persuade readers that one particular theory of Christian plausibility, reliability, and authority—what I call *biblicism*—is inadequate to the task.

I am aware that the term “biblicism” is often used pejoratively, as a disrespectful slight suggesting ignorance and lack of sophistication. I intend the use of the term here in a rather more neutral, descriptive sense, denoting a particular tradition of approach to scripture, as

described in greater detail below. I contend that the biblicism that characterizes the thinking and practice of much of American evangelicalism is not so much “wrong” as it is *impossible*, even taken on its own terms. It simply does not work as proposed and cannot function in a coherent way.

In order for evangelical biblicism to *appear* to work, therefore, those who believe in it have to engage in various forms of textual selectivity, denial, and contortion—which actually end up violating biblicist intentions. Most of these are practiced covertly, not in any sneaky way, but simply as the learned, taken-for-granted, and therefore largely unintentional habits of a particular subcultural style of thinking and behaving. Contemporary Christians who want to be theologically orthodox, biblical, and evangelical (in the best sense of the word) can and must do better. But before anyone is motivated to do better, we must confront the real problems with the current, inadequate biblicist account.

To be clear, I am not suggesting that all American evangelicals are biblicists. Some are not. And some others mix biblicism with other forms of authority, such as personal “leadings of the Spirit.” Many simply assume a kind of background biblicism without giving it much systematic thought. Many academic and more thoughtful evangelicals also tend to be more selective and careful in the way they articulate their biblicism. Furthermore, while I am focused here on evangelicals in particular, nearly all American Protestant fundamentalists are also biblicists, as are many if not most charismatic and pentecostal Christians.<sup>1</sup> I am suggesting, therefore, that biblicism of the kind I describe below represents the epistemological center of gravity of much of American evangelicalism (and conservative Protestantism more generally) and so warrants the kinds of questions raised in this book.

By “biblicism” I mean a theory about the Bible that emphasizes together its exclusive authority, infallibility, perspicuity, self-sufficiency, internal consistency, self-evident meaning, and universal applicability. Different communities within American evangelicalism emphasize various combinations of these points differently. But all together they form a constellation of assumptions and beliefs that define a particular theory and practice. My argument as follows does not question the doctrine of the divine inspiration of the Bible.<sup>2</sup> Nor am I here discounting the crucially important role that the Bible must

play in the life of the church and the lives of individual Christians. I am not suggesting that the Bible is just a set of historical writings set in particular cultures, or the record of human subjective experiences of the divine that has little to say to contemporary people without being translated into terms that modern people can accept. Instead, what I say here is simply that the biblicism that in much of American evangelicalism is presupposed to be the cornerstone to Christian truth and faithfulness is misguided and impossible. It does not and cannot live up to its own claims.

I must also insist that my motives, goals, and arguments have nothing to do with promoting or representing theological liberalism. I am not a theological liberal. While I believe that orthodox Christians need to engage intellectually and socially with theological liberals, I am and always have been a skeptic of theological liberalism as a project. I view the program of liberalism as an unworthy corrosion of historically orthodox, evangelical (again, in the best sense of that word) Christianity. I view theological liberalism—despite its good intentions—as naive intellectually, problematic in its typical ecclesial expression, and susceptible to unfortunate and sometimes reprehensible social and political expressions. It was no accident, for example, as Karl Barth explained at the time, that the prominent leaders of theological liberalism in the German church together publicly endorsed the causes of both Kaiser Wilhelm in World War I in 1914 and Hitler and the Nazis in 1933. When the church lacks a sovereign word of God that is not defined in terms of human subjectivity, experience, and culture, such ill-fated political moves become hard to resist. The theological liberal program lacks internal resources to help expose idolatry and so recurrently falls prey to the latest cultural movements and political fashions. I would go so far as to agree with J. Gresham Machen that theological liberalism is not one particular branch of Christianity; it is rather actually a very different religion from Christianity.<sup>3</sup>

However, *opposing theological liberalism does not necessitate biblicism as the only viable alternative*, as some seem to believe. This notion is an unfortunate legacy of the American modernist-fundamentalist battles of the early twentieth century. Slapping the “liberal!” label on others is still a knee-jerk reaction of many evangelicals against any argument that on first glance does not seem identical to or more conservative than their own position. This tendency has much more to do

with the sociological process of maintaining safe identity boundaries and avoiding truly challenging intellectual engagements than it does with sustaining Christian faith with appropriate confidence, integrity, and trust in God.<sup>4</sup> In any case, to be clear, I deny any attempts to label the argument of this book “liberal.”

My argument in what follows focuses not merely on theories about what the Bible is believed to be and how it ought to function as an authority. It also focuses on how in practice the Bible is often *actually* read and used as an authority and on the results that this produces. I will suggest that the problematic results are not mere accidents or worst practices within an otherwise sound approach, but they are rather the inevitable outcomes of bad biblicist theory. In this I do not assume that empirical facts about what actually happens are all that are ever worth knowing. A great deal of Christianity is of course about conforming problematic empirical experience to what is ultimately true in and about reality. However, actual empirical human practices and experiences of Bible reading, interpretation, and application—especially when they are widespread and endemic—tell us a great deal about the adequacy of our *theories* about the Bible.

In what follows I will not engage a number of issues that have long occupied certain kinds of critics and defenders of the Bible. One of those concerns “higher criticism” of the text, such as whether the purported author of a certain text really was that author or whether the events described in a text “really” happened in that way. Those may or may not be interesting and important issues, but they do not concern me here. Neither will I engage the exercise of finding long lists of scriptural texts that appear to contradict each other, to which some sophomoric skeptics devote themselves in order to try to undermine the Bible’s coherence and authority.<sup>5</sup> That merely mirrors the worst kind of fundamentalist literalism, to which few thoughtful evangelicals subscribe, and betrays pitiable misunderstandings of how human language works.

My line of reasoning in this book will run as follows. First, I will argue that most biblicist claims are rendered moot by a more fundamental problem (which few biblicists ever acknowledge) that undermines all the supposed achievements of biblicism: the problem of *pervasive interpretive pluralism*. Even among presumably well-intentioned readers—including many evangelical biblicists—the Bible, after their very best efforts to understand it, says and teaches very

different things about most significant topics. My suggestion is that it becomes beside the point to assert a text to be solely authoritative or inerrant, for instance, when, lo and behold, it gives rise to a host of many divergent teachings on important matters. Authority implies and requires definitive instruction, direction, or guidance. As the nineteenth-century Princeton Seminary theologian Charles Hodge stated, “If the Scriptures be a plain book, and the Spirit performs the functions of a teacher to all the children of God, it follows inevitably that they must agree in all essential matters in their interpretation of the Bible.”<sup>6</sup> But definitive instruction, direction, or guidance is precisely what pervasive interpretive pluralism precludes.

So, theorists about the Bible can assert theoretical claims of scriptural authority and infallibility as much as they want. But those ring hollow because of the ubiquitous variety and combinations of “biblical” teachings that sincere readers of the Bible think it teaches on nearly every subject. To be clear, the problem is not that theoretical claims to biblical sufficiency or authority are proved to be wrong or erroneous per se; rather, they are defeated *in relevance* by the undeniable lack of interpretive agreement and consistency among those who share the same biblicist background. That defeat in relevance then gives rise to questions about the truth of those theoretical claims. Biblicists might offer a variety of responses to this problem, to be sure, but none of them, I will suggest, are adequate to address the difficulty. So, pervasive interpretive pluralism remains a debilitating problem for the relevance of biblicist theory.

Having made that primary case, I will then turn more briefly to a subsidiary examination of the larger question of the defensibility of biblicism generally. My argument focuses on the fact that the Bible contains a variety of texts that are problematic in different ways and that biblicist (among other) readers rarely know how to handle. Some are texts that frankly almost no reader is going to live by, however committed in theory they may be to biblicism. Others are texts that need explaining away by appeals to cultural relativity (although no principled guidelines exist about when that explanation should and should not be applied). Some are passages that are simply strange. And some are texts that seem to be incompatible with other texts.

In order not to let these problematic texts endanger their formal theory of the Bible, biblicists tend to respond in three ways. The



first is simply to *ignore* the problematic texts, essentially pretending that they do not exist. The second is to “interpret” the problematic texts as if they say things that *they do not in fact say*. The third is to develop elaborate *contortions* of highly unlikely scenarios and explanations—of the sort to which nobody would ever resort in any other part of life—which seem to rescue the texts from the problems.<sup>7</sup> But, from the viewpoint of the biblicist perspective itself, these strategies should be illegitimate. Reliance on them to sustain a biblicist position is self-defeating. In addition, I will show, first, that biblicism itself is not a self-evident, much less necessary, teaching of the Bible about itself, and, second, that biblicism has some problematic, pernicious pastoral consequences for many thoughtful youth raised in biblicist traditions.

I conclude with three chapters advancing a number of proposals for overcoming American evangelical biblicism. My proposals assume that biblicism can be escaped not by turning away from an evangelical approach to the Bible but rather by becoming *even more truly evangelical* in the reading of scripture. Contrary to the fears of some biblicists, leaving biblicism behind need not mean losing the best of evangelicalism but, instead, can mean strengthening an evangelical hermeneutic of scripture.

How I came to write a book about biblical authority and scriptural interpretation is sometimes beyond me. (I have no doubt that some readers, by the time they get well into the book, will wish I had never written it.) I did not start off with that intention in mind, but it began simply with me (someone who tends to think better when writing) merely drafting out some thoughts and questions for myself and perhaps to bounce off a few friends for their reactions. Needless to say, it grew from there. I am not a biblical scholar or a theologian professionally—although I have studied at three Boston Theological Institute schools (Gordon Conwell, where I took a course on Christology from David Wells; Harvard Divinity School, where I studied historical theology with Margaret Miles and Ian Siggins, among others; and Andover Newton, where I took an excellent course on scripture with Gabriel Fackre) and have spent much of my life reading in theology.

Professionally, I am a sociologist. For purposes of writing this book, that is both an asset and a liability. It is an asset, I believe,

because it gives me a perspective that is different from many who deal with these topics for a living and so enables me to perhaps see things that some others may not. Being a sociologist—particularly one not employed at an evangelical institution with doctrinal standards statements determining the viability of my employment—also frees me to say things in print that I think are true without the accompanying worry that I will lose my job as a result. I know that there are at least some employees at evangelical institutions who share the concerns I lay out in this book but who cannot give voice to them because of the internal political problem this would create.<sup>8</sup> I am fortunate not to have to worry about such matters.

But being a sociologist is also in some ways a liability in writing this book, since I do not have the expertise in certain complex areas of scholarship upon which this book touches. I do not claim to bring such expertise to my argument; rather, the force of my case, such as it is, grows merely from the asking of some very simple questions and the refusal to settle for what I think are inadequate standard answers. Sometimes what needs to be asked or said—especially in contexts of well-established and taken-for-granted routines that at least some powerful people have a stake in maintaining—is not all that sophisticated but is instead quite elementary. Pervasive interpretive pluralism is the proverbial massive elephant in the room of evangelical biblicism that nobody talks about. I want to talk about it.

I should also say up front, for purposes of full disclosure, that, since completing the writing of this book, I have joined the Catholic Church. My reasons for becoming Catholic—an evangelical Catholic, I might add—were many, and only partly related to the issues raised here.<sup>9</sup> This fact of my autobiography, however, takes nothing away from the importance and legitimacy of this book's argument for American evangelicalism—a movement about which I still care, in certain ways admire, and want to see realizing its best potential. Toward that end, for evangelical Protestants who intend to remain evangelical, the argument of this book stands strong and deserves to be engaged and answered. The constructive suggestions with which I conclude this book hold true for evangelical Protestants, and, to be clear, no reader needs to become Catholic in order to embrace any or all of them.

Finally, it should go without saying that just because I cite a certain author or publication, that does not mean that I accept and endorse

everything he, she, or it says. Oftentimes one wants to connect with certain specific ideas or perspectives of another without implying a full-scale endorsement of the other's entire intellectual program. Most scholars know this. But, since among American evangelicals issues surrounding the nature of the Bible are so sensitive and politically charged, it is probably necessary for me to avoid guilt-by-association by saying it explicitly: merely because I cite a certain author or publication, that itself does not mean that I accept and endorse everything he, she, or it says.

I owe a debt of thanks to Mark Regnerus, Brian Brock, Mark Noll, Stanley Hauerwas, Richard Flory, Stan Gaede, Rich Mouw, Katie Spencer, Trish Snell, Peter Munday, Scot McKnight, Charles Cosgrove, Bill Webb, Roger Olson, Jeff McSwain, Douglas Campbell, Meredith Whitnah, Kevin Vanhoozer, Peter Enns, Craig Allert, Roger Lundin, Robert K. Johnston, Bob Brenneman, Kent Sparks, and David Sikkink for critical feedback on early versions of this manuscript. As is customary to say, and is true here also, this book was strengthened considerably by these people's helpful feedback; yet, none of them is to be held responsible—even by association—for any of its mistakes, inaccuracies, confusions, oversights, or oversimplifications, of which I am aware there may be more than a few.

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PART 1

# THE IMPOSSIBILITY OF BIBLICISM

# 1

## Biblicism and the Problem of Pervasive Interpretive Pluralism

The “biblicism” that pervades much of American evangelicalism is untenable and needs to be abandoned in favor of a better approach to Christian truth and authority. By untenable I do not simply mean that it is wrong, but rather that it is literally impossible, at least when attempted consistently on its own terms. It cannot actually be sustained, practiced, and defended. Biblicism is one kind of an attempt to explain and act on the authority of the Bible, but it is a misguided one. In the end it cannot and in fact does not work.

A better alternative to biblicism is needed that takes seriously scriptural authority but in a way that does so beyond the framework of biblicism. Before any biblicist or semibiblicist is going to be motivated to seek a postbiblicist alternative to biblicism, however, they must first become convinced of biblicism’s untenability. Seeing that biblicism really is a dead end may motivate a constructive search for something better. This chapter and the next three seek to persuade readers that biblicism is a dead end, best to be abandoned.

### What Is Biblicism?

Many functional biblicists in America have not heard of the term “biblicism” or do not know that it describes them. That does not

matter. What does matter are the real belief system and the practices it animates. Whether called by that name or not, biblicism is prevalent and powerful in American Protestantism, particularly among conservative Protestants. As John Frame, professor of theology at Reformed Theological Seminary (Orlando, Florida) concludes in a thoughtful paper titled, “In Defense of Something Close to Biblicism,” “although Protestant theology under the *sola Scriptura* principle is not biblicist, it is not always easy to distinguish it from biblicism.”<sup>1</sup> The word “biblicism” turns out to mean different things to different people. It is therefore important to be clear about the meaning I intend here.

All that I write below is intended to reference the following definition. By “biblicism” I mean a particular theory about and style of using the Bible that is defined by a constellation of related assumptions and beliefs about the Bible’s nature, purpose, and function. That constellation is represented by ten assumptions or beliefs:

1. Divine Writing: The Bible, down to the details of its words, consists of and is identical with God’s very own words written inerrantly in human language.
2. Total Representation: The Bible represents the totality of God’s communication to and will for humanity, both in containing all that God has to say to humans and in being the exclusive mode of God’s true communication.<sup>2</sup>
3. Complete Coverage: The divine will about all of the issues relevant to Christian belief and life are contained in the Bible.<sup>3</sup>
4. Democratic Perspicuity: Any reasonably intelligent person can read the Bible in his or her own language and correctly understand the plain meaning of the text.<sup>4</sup>
5. Commonsense Hermeneutics: The best way to understand biblical texts is by reading them in their explicit, plain, most obvious, literal sense, as the author intended them at face value, which may or may not involve taking into account their literary, cultural, and historical contexts.
6. Solo Scriptura:<sup>5</sup> The significance of any given biblical text can be understood without reliance on creeds, confessions, historical church traditions, or other forms of larger theological hermeneutical frameworks, such that theological formulations can be built up directly out of the Bible from scratch.

7. Internal Harmony: All related passages of the Bible on any given subject fit together almost like puzzle pieces into single, unified, internally consistent bodies of instruction about right and wrong beliefs and behaviors.
8. Universal Applicability: What the biblical authors taught God's people at any point in history remains universally valid for all Christians at every other time, unless explicitly revoked by subsequent scriptural teaching.
9. Inductive Method: All matters of Christian belief and practice can be learned by sitting down with the Bible and piecing together through careful study the clear "biblical" truths that it teaches.

The prior nine assumptions and beliefs generate a tenth viewpoint that—although often not stated in explications of biblicist principles and beliefs by its advocates—also commonly characterizes the general biblicist outlook, particularly as it is received and practiced in popular circles:

10. Handbook Model: The Bible teaches doctrine and morals with every affirmation that it makes, so that together those affirmations comprise something like a handbook or textbook for Christian belief and living, a compendium of divine and therefore inerrant teachings on a full array of subjects—including science, economics, health, politics, and romance.<sup>6</sup>

Biblicism is not a comprehensively formalized position always explicated in exactly these ten points and subscribed to identically by all adherents. Different people and groups emphasize and express a variety of these points somewhat differently. Some may even downplay or deny particular points here and there—there are, for example, highly biblicist denominations and seminaries that are unapologetically confessional. The point is not that biblicism is a unified doctrine that all of its adherents overtly and uniformly profess. The point, rather, is that this constellation of interrelated assumptions and beliefs informs and animates the outlooks and practices of major sectors of institutional and popular conservative American Protestantism, especially evangelicalism.

Evangelical biblicism has a long history in America—one revealing how much popular biblicism was driven not by fellowship with the historic church but by the particular sensibilities of life in a postrevolutionary, nineteenth-century, individualistic, republican democracy.<sup>7</sup> However intensely and with whatever variations it may be expressed by different groups, biblicism is the foundational belief and practice of many tens of millions of American Christians—perhaps as many as a hundred million (according to General Social Survey data, about one-third of all adult Americans say that they believe that “the Bible is the actual word of God and should be taken literally, word for word”).<sup>8</sup> Biblicism can readily be found in the belief statements of scores of denominations, seminaries, and parachurch ministries; seen in the words of myriad Christian authors and speakers; heard in the messages of innumerable pulpits and Bible studies; and observed in the practices of countless personal devotions.

### Popular, Institutional, and Scholarly Examples of Biblicism

To put a finer point of particularity on the “ism” about which I have generalized above, I next cite some examples of specific expressions of biblicism. I draw here from an almost limitless supply of possible examples, both academic and popular, using numbers in brackets (e.g., [5]) throughout—at the risk of oversimplifying and overlabeling—to indicate when any of the ten biblicist themes noted above are expressed or implied. I begin with popular or “folk” expressions of biblicism<sup>9</sup> and then move on to more scholarly and institutional examples.

Biblicism is everywhere in evangelical popular culture, including, for instance, on the Internet. One Bible website dedicated to helping readers in “selecting the best Bible translations,” for example, is entitled “God’s Handbook to Life” [10].<sup>10</sup> Another Christian music and lyrics website devotes a page to “The Bible, God’s Word—Our Manual for Life” [10], which says that the Bible “contains the solution for every problem you are facing today [3]. The Bible is an encyclopedia on all subjects you can think of under the sun” [10].<sup>11</sup> Likewise, *Faith and Fitness Magazine* on its website calls the Bible “His Instruction Manual—Our Guidebook for a Healthy Life” [10], explaining that



the Bible is designed by God to provide us a blueprint for living life. It's like an owner's manual for a piece of exercise equipment [9 implied]. We can make the best use of the equipment if we read the owner's manual so we are aware of how to use all the special capabilities and how all the "buttons and whistles" work. When it breaks down, we can look in the manual to know how to repair it [10].<sup>12</sup>

Similarly, the author of the "Bible Authors" webpage says that

the Bible was written through more than 40 men, but it fits together perfectly as if written by one man [7] because the author of all 66 books is the Holy Spirit [1]. The Bible was written over a time span of about 2,000 years, and it is totally accurate in matters of History, Prophecy, and every issue of life. There are no contradictions in the Bible [7]. . . . The Bible contains the mind of God [1]. . . . It is the traveler's map, the pilgrim's staff, the pilot's compass, the soldier's sword [4, 5 implied], and the Christian's charter . . . [that] condemns all who trifle with its holy contents. The Word of God is your absolute, infallible guide for life. Just like every major purchase is accompanied by an owner's manual which tells you how to operate it, if you do not go by the book, it won't work. The Bible is God's owner's manual for your life [10]. God would not save you and call you to service without clear, exact directions. You must go by the book.<sup>13</sup>

As another example, popular evangelical pastor and author John F. MacArthur Jr. writes that the Bible is "the only reliable and sufficient worship manual."<sup>14</sup> Folk biblicism is also expressed in products such as automobile bumper stickers and T-shirts, as with the following actual instances, all currently for sale:

- God said it, I believe it, that settles it!
- BIBLE—Basic Instruction Before Leaving Earth
- Vote Responsibly—Vote the Bible!
- Confused? Read the Directions! [picture of Bible]
- Have You Read My #1 Best Seller [picture of Bible]? There Is Going to Be a Test. —God
- Have Truth Decay? Brush Up on Your Bible
- Hey Bible Hater! You'd Fit Right in with Communist-Atheist Regimes, Dictatorships, and Islamic States!

- Got Scripture?
  - Certified Bible Thumper!
- [themes 1, 4–8, and 10 implied]

Biblicism also pervades the evangelical book-publishing market, which entails both popular evangelical markets and formal evangelical institutions (Thomas Nelson, Harvest House, NavPress, InterVarsity Press, etc.). The following are examples, drawn from among a longer list of similar books, almost all of which are currently still in print, all of whose titles listed here are, for present purposes, well worth reading word for word:

- *Bible Answers for Almost All Your Questions*
- *Biblical Principles for Starting and Operating a Business*
- *100 Biblical Tips to Help You Live a More Peaceful and Prosperous Life*
- *Cooking with the Bible: Recipes for Biblical Meals*
- *The Bible Cure for Cancer*
- *The World according to God: A Biblical View of Culture, Work, Science, Sex, and Everything Else*
- *The Biblical Guide to Alternative Medicine*
- *Bible Answers for Every Need*
- *Bible Prophecy 101: A Guide to End Times in Plain Language*
- *What Does the Bible Say about . . . The Ultimate A to Z Resource to Contemporary Topics One Would Not Expect to Find in the Bible, Fully Illustrated—Discover What the Bible Says about 500 Real-Life Topics* [pictures on the cover include golfing, pets, flower arrangements, and a whistle]
- *How to Make Choices You Won't Regret, 40 Minute Bible Studies*
- *Queen Esther's Secrets of Womanhood: A Biblical Rite of Passage for Your Daughter*
- *Handbook for Christian Living: Biblical Answers to Life's Tough Questions*
- *Scientific Facts in the Bible: 100 Reasons to Believe the Bible Is Supernatural in Origin*

- *Friendship Counseling: Biblical Foundations for Helping Others*
- *Principles for Life: Using Biblical Principles to Bring Dynamic Psychological Healing*
- *Business by the Book: The Complete Guide of Biblical Principles for the Workplace*
- *Bible Solutions to Problems of Daily Living*
- *The Biblical Connection to the Stars and Stripes: A Nation's Godly Principles Embodied in Its Flag*
- *God's Blueprint for Building Marital Intimacy*
- *Crime and Community in Biblical Perspective*
- *A Crown of Glory: A Biblical View of Aging*
- *Gardening with Biblical Plants*
- *Biblical Psychology*
- *One Blood: The Biblical Answer to Racism*
- *Leadership Communication: A Scriptural Perspective*
- *Diagrams for Living: The Bible Unveiled*
- *What the Bible Says about Parenting: God's Plan for Raising Your Child*
- *God Honoring Finances: What the Bible Tells You about Managing Your Money*
- *Success in School: Building on Biblical Principles*
- *Christian Dress and Adornment, Biblical Perspectives Series*
- *Feeling Good about Your Feelings: How to Express Your Emotions in Harmony with Biblical Principles*
- *Get the Skinny on Prosperity: Biblical Principles That Work for Everyone*
- *Off to Work We Go: Teaching Careers with Biblical Principles*
- *Incoming: Listening for God's Messages—A Handbook for Life*
- *Biblical Strategies to Financial Freedom*
- *Revelations That Will Set You Free: The Biblical Roadmap for Spiritual and Psychological Growth*
- *Scripture-Based Solutions to Handling Stress*
- *Bad Girls of the Bible and What We Can Learn from Them*

- *Success by Design: Ten Biblical Secrets to Help You Achieve Your God-Given Potential*
  - *The Awesome Book of Bible Facts*
  - *Learn the Bible in 24 Hours*
  - *Body by God: The Owner's Manual for Maximized Living*
  - *Biblical Foundations for Manhood and Womanhood*
  - *Beyond Positive Thinking: Success and Motivation in the Scriptures*
  - *Biblical Economics: A Commonsense Guide to Our Daily Bread*
  - *Holding Hands, Holding Hearts: Recovering a Biblical View of Christian Dating*
  - *Politics and the Christian: A Scriptural Treatise*
  - *Seven Secrets of Bible-Made Millionaires*
  - *Prophecy 20/20: Profiling the Future through the Lens of Scripture*
  - *Weather and the Bible: 100 Questions and Answers*<sup>15</sup>
- [Implied in these titles are biblicist themes 1–10.]

Clearly, masses of American Christians are biblicists who expect the Bible to be able to speak with authority on a nearly limitless range of topics, and they are willing to spend lots of money to purchase and read about those “biblical” teachings. Numerous Christian authors and publishing houses, both marginal and mainstream, are also clearly unabashedly biblicist, as evidenced in the kind of publications they write and put on the market.<sup>16</sup>

This fact helps to explain some of the more misguided public uses of biblicism. Take, for example, the recent case of disgraced governor of South Carolina (a highly conservative Protestant state) Mark Sanford's public appeal to the example of King David's remaining in monarchical power after his sin with Bathsheba and against Uriah. Sanford used the David and Bathsheba story as justification for his (Sanford's) remaining governor after he disappeared for some days in June 2009 in order to continue his illicit affair with a woman from Argentina. The exposure of the affair and Sanford's explanation proved highly embarrassing on many fronts. Sanford said in a televised cabinet meeting about his remaining in gubernatorial power: “I have been doing

a lot of soul searching on that front. What I find interesting is the story of David, and the way in which he fell mightily, he fell in very significant ways, but then picked up the pieces and built from there.” He followed up with this written statement: “I remain committed to rebuilding the trust that has been committed to me over the next 18 months, and it is my hope that I am able to follow the example set by David in the Bible—who after his fall from grace humbly refocused on the work at hand.” Sanford’s friend and Bible study teacher, Warren “Cubby” Culbertson, reportedly gave him these ideas.<sup>17</sup>

Evangelical biblicism is also used by some believers to justify the creation of conservative Christian subcultural alternatives to mainstream healthcare finance industries. Consider, for instance, the following ad published on the inside front cover by the “Christian Care Medical Sharing” company, Medi-Share, in the premiere issue of the evangelical parachurch ministry Focus on the Family’s magazine, *Thriving Family* (November/December 2009). This was published at the height of national healthcare reform debate in 2009. “With apologies to Washington,” the ad states, “the best plan for healthcare reform was written 2000 years ago.” Pictured is a white-haired man in a business suit with briefcase—most likely a member of Congress—sitting on the steps of the Capitol building and reading a Bible. The ad copy continues, “When it comes to your healthcare, the best answers won’t be found in the halls of Congress. They’re in the pages of God’s Word. And you can apply them to your life simply by joining Medi-Share.” That organization, the ad also says, promotes and supports “healthy biblical lifestyles, making member costs affordable.” Thus, the Bible not only proclaims the good news about salvation in Jesus Christ but it also provides the “best answers” blueprint for national healthcare reform and instructions for healthy lifestyles.

More generally, a defining feature of much of evangelicalism’s approach to scripture for ordinary believers is reflected in the “inductive Bible study,” a method presupposing that laypeople can sit down with the Bible and inductively draw from it the clear, relevant, and universal truths it teaches [4, 5, 8, 9]. If we could listen in to the private devotions and personal “quiet times” of millions of ordinary evangelical believers around the country, we would also hear biblicist assumptions and practices at work. And biblicism pervades a large amount of “expository preaching” from evangelical pulpits, which

generally proceeds on the assumption that a minister can select virtually any passage of scripture and adduce from the text an authoritative, relevant, “applicable” teaching to be believed and applied by the members of his or her congregation [4, 5, 6, 8, 9, 10].

All this popular biblicism has deep historical roots in America, reflected, for instance, in such popular tracts as Thomas Bingham’s 1817 *The Sufficiency of the Holy Scriptures, in the Memoir of William Churchman a Poor Cripple, Who Never Read Any Book but the Bible*, and Dwight L. Moody’s declaration, “I will read no book that will not help me understand The Book.”<sup>18</sup>

Popular, local, folk, and personal biblicism, however, are not free-floating and self-generating. They are contextualized and cultivated, if not sometimes outright justified and authorized, by more formal, institutional, and scholarly expressions of biblicism on which they ultimately depend. Take, for instance, the “2000 Baptist Faith and Message” of the massive Southern Baptist Convention, which professes the following:

The Holy Bible was written by men divinely inspired and is God’s revelation of Himself to man. It is a perfect treasure of divine instruction [10]. It has God for its author, salvation for its end, and truth, without any mixture of error, for its matter [1]. Therefore, all Scripture is totally true and trustworthy. It reveals the principles by which God judges us, and therefore is, and will remain to the end of the world, the true center of Christian union, and the supreme standard by which all human conduct, creeds, and religious opinions should be tried [8].<sup>19</sup>

The Evangelical Free Church in America’s statement of faith says, “As the verbally inspired Word of God, the Bible is without error in the original writings [1], the complete revelation of His will for salvation, and the ultimate authority by which every realm of human knowledge and endeavor should be judged” [2, 3, 10 implied].<sup>20</sup> Likewise, Trinity Evangelical Divinity School’s (Deerfield, Illinois) statement of faith avows, “We believe the Scriptures, both Old and New Testaments, to be the inspired Word of God, without error in the original writings [1], the complete revelation of His will [2] for the salvation of men and the Divine and final authority for all Christian faith and life.”<sup>21</sup>

Wheaton College’s statement of faith similarly says that, “the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments are verbally inspired

by God and inerrant in the original writing [1], so that they are fully trustworthy and of supreme and final authority in all they say” [9 implied].<sup>22</sup> Moody Bible Institute declares under “Our Beliefs” that “Everything at Moody falls under the authority of the Bible, which declares timeless truth that is relevant today” [8].<sup>23</sup> The faith statements of other evangelical seminaries and theology schools—including Gordon Conwell, Dallas Seminary, Covenant Seminary, Biola’s Talbot School of Theology, Concordia Seminary at St. Louis, and Asbury Seminary—are similar.<sup>24</sup> To take a more obscure and upstart example, consider the “Biblical Foundation Statement” of Gutenberg College—a small Christian “great books” school in Eugene, Oregon, which actually uses the label “biblicist” to describe itself:

We believe that no creed, no orthodoxy, no consensus, no tradition, nor any other extra-biblical source of teaching that attempts to claim what the Bible teaches should ever dictate how we understand and interpret the Bible [6]. We believe that our doctrines, beliefs, faith, practice, understanding, and knowledge should be brought into conformity to what the actual text of the Scriptures actually teach; but we do not believe that our doctrines, beliefs, faith, practice, understanding, and knowledge need be brought into conformity to any spiritual authority other than the Bible. . . . We grant absolute authority to the Bible and make it our working assumption that everything the Bible asserts—no matter how seemingly trivial or unimportant—should be assumed to be true [3]. We believe that the Bible is without error in anything whatsoever that it does, indeed, assert.<sup>25</sup>

By comparison, back to a more mainstream illustration, Westminster Theological Seminary (Philadelphia) frames its view of scripture confessionally. In a recent statement adopted and published by its board of trustees,<sup>26</sup> for example, Westminster Seminary asserted that the Westminster Standards<sup>27</sup> are “a summary and just exhibition of that system of doctrine and religious belief which is contained in Holy Scripture” [9]. The truths that are affirmed in those standards, the statement declares, “are true for all times, all places, all languages, and all cultures” [8], precisely because they are believed to be scriptural. (The statement does affirm that “the Westminster Standards are fallible, that is, that it is possible in principle that they

may err, and, further, that they are open to revision.” Yet, the larger content and tone of the statement, Westminster’s historical legacy, and the fact that, according to the statement, “the meaning of any particular teaching in the Standards is determined by the Board” [a Reformed quasi-papal Magisterium?], suggest that the likelihood that such a possibility of detecting or admitting error or revisions is effectively nil.)

The statement further declares that “the Holy Scripture is to be believed and obeyed, because it *is* the word of God” [1]; “what Scripture says, God says”; that “what Scripture affirms to its ancient addressees is always true” [8]; and the Bible is “without error in all it affirms.” According to the statement, God is the “primary author” who “in causing his word to be written down in the Bible . . . used human writers . . . [as] secondary authors” and “kept them from error.” Moreover, the statement declares, “the Holy Scripture contains a system of doctrine. We deny that the Holy Scripture lacks doctrinal unity on any point of doctrine, or that it does not always agree with itself. We affirm that the Holy Scripture is harmonious in all its teachings” [7]. Thus, “each individual passage of Scripture is consistent in its affirmation with every other passage. . . . We deny that passages may contradict one another” [7].

Finally, while the statement acknowledges that “some things in Scripture are difficult to understand, and . . . we may not always be able to easily explain apparent contradictions,” the implications of that have no evident effect in unsettling the confidence of the rest of the document.<sup>28</sup> Indeed, the statement claims that “Scripture makes known clearly those things necessary to be believed and observed for salvation, so that even the unlearned may come to sufficient understanding through due use of ordinary means” [4, 5]. More generally, the Westminster Confession of Faith, to which numerous Reformed evangelical denominations and seminaries explicitly subscribe,<sup>29</sup> says this of scripture: “The whole counsel of God concerning all things necessary for His own glory, man’s salvation, faith and life, is either expressly set down in Scripture, or by good and necessary consequence may be deduced from Scripture” [2, 3].

Another example of biblicism is the landmark 1978 “Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy”—signed by more than three hundred notable evangelical scholars and leaders—which states:



Holy Scripture, being God's own Word, written by men prepared and superintended by His Spirit, is of infallible divine authority in all matters upon which it touches [1]: it is to be believed, as God's instruction, in all that it affirms [and] obeyed, as God's command, in all that it requires. . . . Being wholly and verbally God-given, Scripture is without error or fault in all its teaching, no less in what it states about God's acts in creation, about the events of world history, and about its own literary origins under God, than in its witness to God's saving grace in individual lives [10 implied].

Therefore, the "statement" warns, "The authority of Scripture is inescapably impaired if this total divine inerrancy is in any way limited or disregarded, or made relative to a view of truth contrary to the Bible's own [6]; and such lapses bring serious loss to both the individual and the Church."<sup>30</sup> The signers of the Chicago Statement furthermore profess in Article XIV that "We affirm the unity and internal consistency of Scripture" [7].<sup>31</sup>

Evangelical parachurch organizations, which provide a major institutional component of American evangelicalism, also reflect some of the biblicism I have described here—despite the fact that in most ways they generally seek to build broad-based support with fairly generic statements of belief. The statement of faith of Campus Crusade for Christ, for instance, says, "The sole basis of our beliefs is the Bible, God's infallible written Word, the 66 books of the Old and New Testaments [6]. We believe that it was uniquely, verbally and fully inspired by the Holy Spirit and that it was written without error (inerrant) in the original manuscripts [1]. It is the supreme and final authority in all matters on which it speaks" [3].<sup>32</sup> The evangelical men's movement Promise Keepers similarly says that "God uniquely revealed and inspired the Bible, so that it alone is God's Word written [1], hence the Holy Scriptures are the only inerrant authority for what we believe [2, 6] about God's moral law, salvation from sin and how we should live" [8].<sup>33</sup>

Likewise, Back to the Bible ministries states, "We believe that the Bible . . . is the revelation of God to mankind, is verbally and fully inspired by Him, is sufficient for the knowledge of God and His will that is necessary for the eternal welfare of mankind [2], is infallible and inerrant in its original manuscripts, and is the supreme and final authority for all Christian faith and conduct" [6].<sup>34</sup> And the parachurch

organization Great Commission Churches says in its statement of faith: “The sole basis of our beliefs is the Bible [6] . . . uniquely, verbally, and fully inspired by the Holy Spirit and was written without error in the original manuscript [1]. It is the supreme and final authority in faith and life in every age” [8].<sup>35</sup> I could provide much more evidence of biblicism to be found in the formal statements of countless denominations, seminaries, and other organizations, as well as declarations of scholars, though hopefully these examples will suffice.

Formal statements of faith and theological declarations represent the more respectable face of evangelical biblicism. Popular Internet sites, books, T-shirts, and bumper stickers reflect the kitschier side. But they are both different parts of the same larger biblicist culture. Biblicist leaders and scholars<sup>36</sup> at reputable Christian denominations, seminaries, colleges, and parachurch ministries may dismiss or disdain the popular biblicism embodied in folk Christianity, but popular biblicist kitsch is the fruit of the larger biblicist culture that at least some of those leaders and scholars sustain. There are of course more and less sophisticated versions of biblicism. Yet in the end they are typically different versions and expressions of a broad, similar, shared historical and cultural epistemological tradition. What they generally fail to see is that “to say that the Bible is authoritative is [only] to begin a discussion, not to end it.”<sup>37</sup>

### The Problem of Pervasive Interpretive Pluralism

Consider the following four hypothetical scenarios. Imagine first an official state road map that four people all wanting to drive to the same destination consult for directions; each person decides on a different route as the best one to take to that destination. Picture next a pair of army-certified binoculars that five commanding officers who are meeting in war council use to assess their distant enemy’s position, strength, and movements; each officer reports quite different accounts of what they see of their enemy’s situation, and each one therefore recommends different battle strategies. Then imagine a manufacturer-authorized owner’s manual for a fancy new camera that all the shutterbug members of a family study carefully; each individual comes away insisting on very different methods for proper use of the camera. Finally, consider a well-known cookbook containing a recipe

that all the contestants in a particular cooking-skills competition must prepare; the contestants, though they vow that they cooked up the same recipe from the same cookbook, each produce a dish that is in some way distinct from all the others.

These four hypothetical scenarios depict something like the quandary in which biblicist believers find themselves. The very same Bible—which biblicists insist is perspicuous and harmonious—gives rise to divergent understandings among intelligent, sincere, committed readers about what it says about most topics of interest. Knowledge of “biblical” teachings, in short, is characterized by *pervasive interpretive pluralism*.

What that means in consequence is this: in a crucial sense it simply does not matter whether the Bible is everything that biblicists claim theoretically concerning its authority, infallibility, inner consistency, perspicuity, and so on, since in actual functioning the Bible produces a pluralism of interpretations. Analogously, the road map may indeed be officially published by the state department of transportation, the binoculars may actually be officially certified by the military, the camera’s owner’s manual may be manufacturer-authorized, and the cookbook may be well known and the recipe clearly specified—all of that may be so. But it simply does not matter. That is because those apparent facts did not actually accomplish the important things that make them relevant, which being official, certified, authorized, and specified are meant to achieve—namely, clear, consistent, and focused instruction, direction, information, and guidance for users.

Furthermore and very importantly, none of the differences among users that arose in these scenarios will ever get resolved simply by their focusing and insisting on the believed official, certified, or authorized qualities of the road map, binoculars, owner’s manual, and cookbook per se. Merely asserting those believed facts itself contributes nothing to solving the *functional* problems of multiple, diverse, and incompatible “readings” of or through them. Likewise, neither do increasingly insistent declarations of biblicist beliefs about the inerrancy, reliability, harmony, and perspicuity of the Bible actually address the fact and problem of pervasive interpretive pluralism concerning scripture, which is a major problem.

This is not a new critique. It is in fact a mere restatement of the same argument made by the evangelical biblical scholar Robert K. Johnston

in 1979, at the height of what was then evangelicalism's contentious "battle for the Bible." In his book *Evangelicals at an Impasse: Biblical Authority in Practice*, Johnston offered this astute observation:

That evangelicals, all claiming a common biblical norm, are reading contradictory theological formulations on many of the major issues they are addressing suggests the problematic nature of their . . . understanding of theological interpretation. To argue that the Bible is authoritative, but to be unable to come to anything like agreement on what it says (even with those who share an evangelical commitment) is self-defeating.<sup>38</sup>

Quoting Professor Geoffrey Bromiley, then of Fuller Theological Seminary—one of the “moderate” evangelical voices of the time—Johnston asked a simple question: “The Bible is infallible and authoritative. But if there are different possibilities of interpretation, where is one to find that which is infallible and absolute?” Johnston then opens his case-study analysis of the problem with this observation and query:

Evangelicals, all claiming a common biblical norm, are reading contradictory theological formulations on many of the major issues they address. . . . If evangelicals cannot discover a way to move more effectively toward theological consensus, can they still maintain in good conscience their claim to biblical authority as a hallmark?<sup>39</sup>

The evangelical historian Mark Noll in 1986 agreed with Johnston's point, calling “contemporary disagreements on what an infallible Bible means for daily living” a “formidable” difficulty facing evangelical views of the Bible.<sup>40</sup> Similarly, N. T. Wright observes, “It seems to be the case that the more you insist that you are based on the Bible, the more fissiparous you become; the church splits up into more and more little groups, each thinking that they have got biblical truth right.”<sup>41</sup> Likewise, Kevin Vanhoozer admits that “inerrancy—the belief that the Bible speaks truly in all that it affirms—does not necessarily generate interpretive agreement among those who hold to it. . . . It is one thing to posit the Bible's truthfulness in all that it affirms, quite another to say what the truth of the Bible *is*.”<sup>42</sup> Similarly, D. A. Carson notes that “I speak to those with a high view of Scripture: it is very distressing to contemplate how many differences there are among us as to what

Scripture actually says. . . . The fact remains that among those who believe the canonical sixty-six books are nothing less than the Word of God written there is a disturbing array of mutually incompatible theological opinions.”<sup>43</sup>

As far back as 1958, Geoffrey Bromiley had observed—anticipating the present book’s view—that “We have to recognize that the Bible is . . . a fruitful source of dissension and disunity in and among churches, so that *acceptance of its authority does not solve at once the problem of unity*. . . . The interpretation of the Bible gives rise to a whole series of more or less important and divisive differences. . . . These are obviously very real difficulties which cannot be ignored even if they cannot be fully embraced and answered. . . . Even in this sphere [of the Bible] there is the constant bias to disunity.”<sup>44</sup>

As a matter of fact, this precise line of questioning actually goes back to at least 1849, when Mercersburg Seminary professor John Nevin wrote in an article titled “The Sect System”:

It sounds well, to lay so much stress on the authority of the Bible, as the only text-book and guide of Christianity. But what are we to think of it, when we find such a motley mass of protesting systems, all laying claim so vigorously here to one and the same watchword? If the Bible be at once so clear and full as a formulary of Christian doctrine and practice, how does it come to pass that where men are left most free to use it in this way . . . they are flung asunder so perpetually in their religious faith, instead of being brought together?

Nevin continues:

However they may differ among themselves as regard to what it teaches, sects all agree in proclaiming the Bible the only guide of their faith; and the more sectarian they are . . . the more loud and strong do they show themselves in reiteration of this profession. . . . It will not do to reply . . . that the differences which divide the parties are small, while the things in which they are agreed are great, and such as to show a general unity after all in the main substance of the Christian life. Differences that lead to the breaking of church communion, and that bind man’s consciences to go into sects, can never be small for the actual life of Christianity, however insignificant they may be in their own nature. . . . However plausible it may be in theory, to magnify in such style the unbound use solely of the Bible for the adjustment of

Christian faith and practice, the simple truth is that the operation of it in fact is, not to unite the church into one, but to divide it always more and more into sects.<sup>45</sup>

Even before Nevin, various other observers of American Christianity's sectarian fragmentation expressed dismay about the many denominational divisions that biblicism produced. One, Joseph Smith, who later became the founder of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, wrote in retrospect:

In the midst of this war of words and tumult of opinion, I often said to myself, What is to be done? Who of all these parties are right? Or, are they all wrong together? If one of them is right, which is it, and how shall I know? The teachers of religion of the different sects destroy all confidence in settling the question by an appeal to the Bible. At length I came to the conclusion that I must . . . ask of God.<sup>46</sup>

The rest of Smith's story is, as we know, history. Likewise, sectarian division helped to drive one Pennsylvanian minister, Richard McNemar, to abandon his Presbyterian orthodoxy in favor of the "certainty" afforded by direct revelations among the Shakers. McNemar ridiculed the divisions among the many Christian denominations around him thus:

Ten thousand Reformers like so many moles  
Have plowed all the Bible and cut it [in] holes  
And each has his church at the end of his trace  
Built up as he thinks of the subject of grace.<sup>47</sup>

The British romantic poet William Blake put the problem even more succinctly:

Both read the Bible day and night,  
But thou read'st black where I read white.<sup>48</sup>

In some sense, recognition of this problem of pervasive interpretive pluralism even goes back to the Reformation and Martin Luther. When he was writing polemics against the Catholic Church, Luther was forceful about the perspicuity of scripture, since he assumed that the Bible clearly demonstrated the theological beliefs he championed.

However, in due time, as the Reformation began to spin out of control (from his point of view) with the spread of Anabaptist and other sectarian groups, Luther had to back away from the perspicuity of only one “correct” view and recognize the potential to prove a wide variety of doctrinal positions from scripture, admitting, “I learn now that it is enough to throw many passages together helter-skelter, whether they fit or not. If this be the way, then I can easily prove from Scripture that beer is better than wine.”<sup>49</sup>

In another, more general sense, this problem of pervasive interpretive pluralism goes all the way back to the recognition of the early church fathers Tertullian (AD 155–230) and Vincent of Lérins (early fifth century) about the impossibility of using scripture to persuade heretics of the error of their ways. Vincent wrote, “Owing to the depth of Holy Scripture, all do not accept it in one and the same sense, but one understands its words in one way, another in another, so that it seems capable of as many interpretations as there are interpreters.”<sup>50</sup> According to Tertullian, scriptural “ambiguity” and the possibility of reading the Bible in different ways means that “a controversy over the Scriptures can clearly produce no other effect than help to upset either the stomach or the brain.” Tertullian observed: “Though most skilled in the Scriptures, you will make no progress, when everything which you maintain is denied on the other side, and whatever you deny is (by them) maintained. As for yourself, indeed, you will lose nothing but your breath, and gain nothing but vexation from their blasphemy. . . . Our appeal, therefore, must not be made to the Scriptures.”<sup>51</sup>

Christians engaging other Christians with whom they disagree is of course different from arguing with heretics, so this is not to suggest that such engagements with other believers should not appeal to scripture. The relevant underlying parallel logic, however, is that scripture taken at face value itself often cannot resolve differences in interpretation, because of its multivocal, polysemous, and multivalent nature, which I discuss in detail below.

To my knowledge and that of Robert K. Johnston (personal correspondence), these observations and questions have been essentially ignored by biblicists in the debate. I know of no satisfactory reply to Johnston’s critique or Nevin’s question, and neither does Johnston. That is, I suspect, because there *is* no satisfactory answer that does not inevitably endanger the biblicist position. Thirty years ago, Johnston

identified a flaw in biblicism that seemed to be fatal but that was not taken seriously. So the issue must continue to be pressed, for the sake of intellectual honesty and theological integrity in Christian scholarship and practice.

Christians—including different biblicists—come away from their long, hard, well-intentioned studies of scripture convinced that the Bible teaches things that are very different and often incompatible from those that other readers of scripture believe. These differences concern matters both theological and moral, on issues that are considered both secondary and essential.

Biblicists are quick to minimize these differences. Most (“real”) Christians, they say, believe essentially the same things on most of the matters of real importance. Vern Poythress, for instance, writes in a book addressing the multiple perspectives evident in the Bible, “We must realize that our own understanding of the Bible’s teaching is not perfect or infallible. Because of error or deficiency in understanding, Christians may disagree *slightly* among themselves over *certain* aspects of their common world view.”<sup>52</sup> But that gross understatement, we must admit, is flat wrong, as I show below. On most matters of significance concerning Christian doctrine, salvation, church life, practice, and morality, different Christians—including different biblicist Christians—insist that the Bible teaches positions that are divergent and often incompatible with one another.<sup>53</sup>

One strategy for dealing constructively with this problem is to try to turn this unavoidable “necessity” of disagreement into a virtue. The inability of Bible-reading evangelicals to come to anything like a common mind about a host of topics is turned into published scholarly debates conducted under the guise of helpful theological orientation and education. Typical of the results of this strategy are the popular “Three Views,” “Four Views,” and “Five Views” book series. Thus, the Christian market today offers books with these titles:

- *The Nature of the Atonement: Four Views*
- *Understanding Four Views on Baptism*
- *Perspectives on the Doctrine of God: 4 Views*
- *Who Runs the Church? Four Views on Church Government*
- *Four Views on Hell*
- *Divorce and Remarriage: Four Christian Views*



- *Four Views on Salvation in a Pluralistic World*
- *Four Views of Christ*
- *Women in Ministry: Four Views*
- *Four Views on Eternal Security*
- *Revelation: Four Views*
- *Divine Foreknowledge: Four Views*
- *Understanding Four Views on the Lord's Supper*
- *Predestination and Free Will: Four Views of Divine Sovereignty and Human Freedom*
- *The Meaning of the Millennium: Four Views*
- *War: Four Christian Views*
- *Four Views of the End Times*
- *Are Miraculous Gifts for Today? Four Views*
- *God and Time: Four Views*
- *Show Them No Mercy: Four Views on God and Canaanite Genocide*
- *Four Views on Moving beyond the Bible to Theology*
- *Psychology and Christianity: Five Views*
- *Science and Christianity: Four Views*
- *What about Those Who Have Never Heard? Three Views on the Destiny of the Unevangelized*
- *Three Views on the Rapture*
- *Three Views on the Millennium and Beyond*
- *How Then Should We Choose: Three Views on God's Will and Decision Making*
- *Three Views on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament*
- *The Genesis Debate: Three Views on the Days of Creation*
- *The Lord's Supper: Five Views*
- *The Historical Jesus: Five Views*
- *Perspectives on Christian Worship: 5 Views*
- *Five Views on Apologetics*
- *Church, State, and Public Justice: Five Views*

Another popular evangelical book compares two, three, or four alternative, Bible-based, evangelical views on each of seventeen

theological concerns about which contemporary evangelicals disagree—in theory creating more than *five million* unique, potential theological belief positions that any given person might espouse, composed of possible combinations of the alternative views.<sup>54</sup> The disagreements, to be specific, are over inerrancy (inerrantism versus infallibalist), providence (Calvinist versus Arminian), divine foreknowledge (Arminian versus Calvinist versus Open views), Genesis (the young earth, day-age, restoration, and literal views), divine image in humanity (the substantial, functional, and relational views), Christology (classical versus kenotic), atonement (penal substitution, Christus Victor, and moral government views), salvation (TULIP versus Arminian), sanctification (Lutheran, Reformed, Keswick, and Wesleyan), eternal security (eternal versus conditional), the destiny of the unevangelized (the restrictive, universal opportunity, postmortem evangelism, and inclusive views), baptism (believer’s versus infant baptism), the Lord’s Supper (spiritual presence versus memorial), charismatic gifts (continuationism versus cessationism), women in ministry (complementarian versus egalitarian), the millennium (pre-millennialism, postmillennialism, amillennialism), and hell (the classical view versus annihilationism).

The differences that these books above chronicle concern some relatively minor topics, admittedly, in the eyes of many—although obviously not minor enough to have made the differences go away as beliefs of interest. But some also address major issues, including the doctrines of God, Christ, revelation, atonement, salvation, baptism, the Lord’s Supper, creation, hell, war, divorce, and remarriage. On all of these biblical and theological issues, we can identify three or four different views, not because those who hold them are trying to be contentious but because they read the Bible and come away convinced that their different views are correct.

It will not suffice to respond simply by reciting the mantra, “In essentials, unity; in nonessentials, liberty; in all things, charity,” because many of these matters that sustain multiple “biblical” views that cause division *are* essentials—particularly as viewed by many biblicists. There simply is not unity on many essentials. Furthermore, this response assumes more fundamentally that evangelicals at least agree on what the essentials *are*, which they do *not*. For certain kinds of Reformed believers, the sovereignty of God understood in a certain

way and double predestination are clearly essentials of the faith—while for others they are not. For Bible-centered Anabaptist Christians, biblical pacifism and nonviolence are central to the gospel—while other believers serve in the US military with clean consciences. For some biblicists, the penal satisfaction theory of the atonement expresses the pure essence of salvation—but for others it is an unbiblical and misguided doctrine. So, not only are Christians divided about essential matters of doctrine and faithful practice; they are also sometimes divided on what even *counts* as essential.

Such four-views and three-views books may provide theological inquirers helpful surveys of historical Christian disagreements about matters of significance—which does serve a good purpose and can be interesting. But in the end the books themselves may distract us from the larger, more serious problem they represent: *that on important matters the Bible apparently is not clear, consistent, and univocal enough to enable the best-intentioned, most highly skilled, believing readers to come to agreement as to what it teaches. That is an empirical, historical, undeniable, and ever-present reality. It is, in fact, the single reality that has most shaped the organizational and cultural life of the Christian church, which now, particularly in the United States, exists in a state of massive fragmentation.*

The fact that Christians have worked for centuries and sometimes millennia to try to sort through these differences has not mattered. The fact that the Bible *itself* implores Christian believers to come to unity with one another and be of the same mind as one another, in view of their one Lord, one faith, and one baptism (John 17:23; Rom. 15:5; Eph. 4:2–5, 13; Phil. 2:2; Col. 3:12–15), has not mattered. The differences have not been overcome. And we have little reason to believe that they will be overcome anytime soon—whether or not we have an inerrant, harmonious, and perspicuous Bible. Appealing to the same scriptural texts, Christians remain deeply divided on most issues, often with intense fervor and sometimes hostility toward one another.

Thus, Craig Branch, a Birmingham Theological Seminary faculty member and ruling elder in the Presbyterian Church of America, observes: “As evangelical Christians we claim that the inspired, infallible, and inerrant Bible reveals God’s truth. . . . Yet Bible scholars, Bible teachers, and students from many different denominations and traditions (sometimes even within the same denomination) differ on

. . . doctrines. The doctrines range from significant to peripheral. Yet they all claim to be based on the Bible.”<sup>55</sup>

Kenton Sparks observes:

Recall that among committed inerrantists we will find those who believe in “predestination” and “free will,” in “premillennial” and “postmillennial” eschatology, in “infant baptism” and “believer’s baptism,” in the “elder rule” and “congregational rule.” On almost every important interpretive question in every biblical book, we find a wide variety of “inerrantist” readings. So it is clear that inerrancy does not guarantee a correct reading of Scripture, nor does it prevent all sorts of exegetical tomfoolery. . . . Even though evangelicals deny the diversity of Scripture, the theological diversity within evangelicalism is a good and ready indicator of Scripture’s truer nature. . . . It is hardly conceivable that evangelicals could assent to so many differing and contradictory viewpoints if the Bible spoke as clearly and univocally as we are wont to suppose.<sup>56</sup>

So the question is this: if the Bible is given by a truthful and omnipotent God as an internally consistent and perspicuous text precisely for the purpose of revealing to humans correct beliefs, practices, and morals, then *why is it that the presumably sincere Christians to whom it has been given cannot read it and come to common agreement about what it teaches?* I know of no good, honest answer to that question. If the Bible is all that biblicism claims it to be, then Christians—especially those who share biblicist beliefs—ought to be able to come to a solid consensus about what it teaches, at least on most matters of importance. But they do not and apparently cannot.

Quite the contrary. Christians, perhaps especially biblicist Christians, are “all over the map” on what the Bible teaches about most issues, topics, and questions. In this way, the *actual functional outcome* of the biblicist view of scripture belies biblicism’s *theoretical claims* about the Bible.<sup>57</sup> Something is wrong in the biblicist picture that cannot be ignored.