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THE BIBLE MADE IMPOSSIBLE: Why Biblicism Is Not a Truly Evangelical Reading of Scrip By Christian Smith

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THE BIBLE MADE IMPOSSIBLE: Why Biblicism Is Not a Truly Evangelical Reading of Scripture. By Christian Smith. Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2011. 220 pages. Hardcover. \$22.99.

If the truth hurts, then *The Bible Made Impossible* is going to leave an ugly bruise. Christian Smith, noted sociologist and author of influential studies in American spirituality, lobbs a grenade on the Protestant playground with his exposé on evangelical biblicism. Smith identifies American biblicism as the principal encumbrance for missional efforts in our milieu, as well as the reason for pop culture's perception of evangelical Christianity as absurd, anti-intellectual, and indefensible. The bruising truth is that, on the whole, he is right.

"Biblicism," as Smith understands it, is a theory about the Bible "that emphasizes together its exclusive authority, infallibility, perspicuity, self-sufficiency, internal consistency, self-evident meaning, and universal applicability" (viii). Absent from this description is the doctrine of the divine inspiration of the Bible. That is because Smith has no argument here: the Bible is the Holy Spirit-inspired-word of God. Instead, the focus of this work exposes the impracticality and unsustainability of the biblicist theory of Scripture due to the problem of "pervasive interpretive pluralism" (x), which renders biblicism an impossible theory of interpretation. Biblicists are defeated *in relevance*, according to Smith, "by the undeniable lack of interpretive agreement and consistency among those who share the same biblicist background" (xi). The result is more than 33,000 Christian

denominations and associations in the United States alone. All claim the authority to speak with authority from what biblicists deem to be the sole authority for Christians in matters of faith and life—the Bible. Outside evangelicalism, nobody is really listening except those who want to hear their own voices in Scripture.

Biblicism as a particular theory about and style of using the Bible is defined, says Smith, "by a constellation of related assumptions and beliefs about the Bible's nature, purpose, and function" (4). Chapter 1 delineates ten such beliefs and assumptions including such admittedly untenable characteristics as "Total Representation"—where the Bible represents the totality of God's communication to and will for humanity, "Complete Coverage"—the Bible as God's total will about all of the issues bearing on Christian belief and life, "Democratic Perspicuity"—where any reasonable person can read it and correctly understand the "plain meaning of the text," "Commonsense Hermeneutics," "Universal Applicability," and the "Inductive [Bible study] Method."

Pervasive interpretive pluralism works against any notion of evangelical agreement in essentials by setting forth sometimes innumerable biblicist interpretations of the same texts that result in fragmentation, disunity, and departures from the gospel *in the name of an all-authoritative, inerrant, infallible, perspicuous Bible*. The empirical reality is that biblicism yields the opposite of what it claims: hence the dozens of "Three/Four/Five Perspectives" books that debate everything from salvation to eschatology all resourcing *from the evangelical position* the same all-authoritative Bible.

Smith's deconstruction of biblicism continues exploring some philosophical assumptions of American biblicism, along with certain historical and psychological factors that have contributed to its rise and prevalence. Throughout these chapters, Scottish commonsense realism, Charles Hodge, B. B. Warfield, the 1978 Chicago Statement, and the Westminster Confession of Faith undergo scrutiny for their contributions or adherence to prevailing biblicist holdings and thus make for uncomfortable but necessary self-critical reading within the Reformation tradition, not only for seminarians but pastors.

A biblicist reading of Scripture, the author argues, is *not* a truly evangelical reading of the Bible, and can never be so. A truly evangelical reading of Scripture would be a gospel-oriented reading of Scripture, where the Bible's in-built hermeneutic of christocentrism would override special interest interpretations; that self-presenting biblical hermeneutic already stands codified in at least two other extra-biblical sources of authority—"the canon of Truth," and the classic, consensual interpretation of Scripture. These three things, together, preserve the Bible's authoritative witness, nature, and content from fraudulent biblicist manipulations and misappropriations. The *sola scriptura* tradition, especially among Lutherans, must not be permitted to degenerate into *solo scriptura*.

Notwithstanding, Smith says there is a way forward. It requires the abandonment of biblicism as the evangelical's epistemic foundation and embracing a critical realist approach to the Bible as divine witness to Jesus, who is himself the ultimate revelation of God. Biblicists, however, are locked into an Enlightenment epistemol-

ogy that has steered the former genius of the Reformation down a path that is directed by cultural issues and ideologies and battles them on their terms with their weapons.

Epistemological foundationalism, explains Smith, "is a conviction that rational humans can and must identify a common foundation of knowledge directly up from and upon which every reasonable thinker can and ought to build a body of completely reliable knowledge and understanding" (150). This foundation for the certainty of knowledge must withstand all challenges to every topic to which it speaks. In the case of the Bible, the scope of topics includes astronomy, cultural anthropology, geology, zoology, prehistoric eras, medicine, politics, and economics, to name but a few. Biblicists responded to Cartesian, Humean, and Darwinian foundationalism by asserting that the Bible is the proper foundation for indubitable, secure, universal, knowledge and that this position was defended by theories of its plenary inspiration, infallibility, and inerrancy. And when this happened, biblicism committed to a failed epistemological endeavor that it props up with circular reasoning about biblical authority and sentiment.

Biblicism is preoccupied with epistemic certainty rather than by Scripture's advent-oriented witness and a long Christian tradition of christocentric interpretation. Consequently, Smith warns with prophetic voice that just as Enlightenment epistemological foundationalism was exposed and abandoned, the day of reckoning for biblicism has arrived: evangelical biblicism will not stand because it has built itself upon the sand and not the Rock. To the degree

that the Confessional Reformation tradition adheres to or associates with subcultural evangelical biblicism is the degree to which they too will suffer declension and missional irrelevance. In this respect, Smith's work is a call to all Lutheran enterprises to be circumspect about melding our gospel mission with evangelicalism's biblicist methodology.

The Bible Made Impossible will make for uncomfortable but necessary reading for all stripes of evangelicals, but especially Confessional Christians from the Lutheran, Anglican, Presbyterian, Reformed, and Baptist camps. Have

our positions on Scripture been lassoed into categorical epistemological foundationalism? Are subscribers to Augsburg, Westminster, Savoy, and Heidelberg fighting modernity and postmodernity with the failed and abandoned tools of modernity itself, namely philosophical foundationalism? Why are we fighting biblicist battles over "creationism," "young earth" dictums, and anti-evolution platforms with biblicist hermeneutics that have little or no christocentric referent, let alone christocentric hermeneutic?

Smith's learned but never pedantic, passionate but not pugnacious work will press upon its readers the multi-generational legacy of biblicism, namely the fact that the plausibility structures of the biblicist faith community crumble when their over-realized epistemology is applied to disciplines that eclipse the authorial intention of Scripture as divine witness to Jesus. Emil Brunner said it best last century (*Revelation and Reason*, 1946) and Smith has said it best this century in this eminently accessible and well-documented study. By making a compelling argument that christocentrism, not

is the truly evangelical response to theological liberalism and cultural caricaturing, *The Bible Made Impossible* warrants mandatory reading by all thoughtful Christians and thorough discussion by Lutheran pastors, professors, and seminarians.

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