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Bible Made Impossible: Why Biblicism is Not a Truly Evangelical Reading of Scripture (Book Review)

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Most of the time, I know pretty much exactly what he feels when questions—real questions—loom before him. Last night in church, we sang “Abide with Me,” a hymn we rarely sing anymore, a classic so evocative of cherished childhood moments that I wished I could have gone back, just for an hour maybe, to the old church. The Holden Caulfield in me wanted a return to childhood because, as I’ve grown older, my own doubt has grown; but then so has my understanding of the world we live in and my perception of just who I am. These days I think I know my sin more fully than I care to say, and that’s why I find also find grace vastly more amazing than I ever could have as a child. The sweet old hymn sounds much different today, beautiful but much different to my ears and in my heart. Sometimes I wish I could go back. Don’t we all?

A Laotian woman, a Christian, told me her story in great detail once upon a time, how she’d crossed the Mekong in what she described as a little homemade dug-out, her children inside. She was aware of soldiers ready to shoot her and her kids right out of the water, which they often did. It was night. The water was cold. But she wanted to get to the other side, to freedom. She described herself, chest-deep, in the waters of the Mekong. “I prayed and prayed and prayed,” she told me, almost crying as she remembered the danger.

That was years before she’d ever heard of Jesus—or if she had, it was by only the slightest mention. I remember wondering just then who exactly was she praying to? I asked her. She didn’t know—all she knew was that she prayed. Hard. Would God—who I believe had to hear that

prayer—shrug it off because it didn’t come in the name of Jesus? Would he turn away? Would he say, “Well, sorry, but you’re on your own.” Really?

John Suk’s *Not Sure* lays out the nature of the faith a lot of us struggle to hold securely at times—me too. When I came to the end of the book, however, what I really started to believe about Dr. Suk was that he was even doubtful about doubt. *Not Sure* does not end the kind of darkness one can’t deny in Psalm 88. It ends more like Psalm 13—with faith, at least what I’d call faith. It ends with honesty and aspiration and the kind of trembling trust that lots of believers have even though the Tebow’s get the headlines.

Would Suk’s views on gay marriage and human evolution and other hot-button items keep him out of the pulpit at my church? Yes, it would, I’m sure. And there lies the problem, maybe the most difficult problem the book creates.

His book offers an approach to solving that problem. He asks for a church that doesn’t judge, a church that only loves, a church without doctrinal walls. In the history of Christianity, those places generally do poorly, and that too is a problem.

But most of the time this believer found *Not Sure* to be thoughtful, earnest, and, finally, faithful. Even encouraging.

Some won’t, I’m sure.

But I think King David would, and so would Mother Teresa. They’ve been there themselves—not always perfectly sure, that is.

Smith, Christian. *The Bible Made Impossible: Why Biblicism Is Not a Truly Evangelical Reading of Scripture*. Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2011. 220pps. ISBN 978-1-58743-303-0. Reviewed by Laurence C. Sibley, Jr., former lecturer at Westminster Seminary, Philadelphia; visiting professor at Baltic Reformed Theological Seminary, Riga, Latvia; and author of *Spiritual Disciplines: The Tasks of a Joyful Life* and *Worship: Discovering What Scripture Says*, both published by Shaw Books.

Christian Smith, the William R. Kenan, Jr., Professor of Sociology and Director of the Center for the Study of Religion and Society at the University of Notre Dame, has written extensively on religion and sociology. He is best known for his ground-breaking studies of religion among young people in their teens and twenties: *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers* (2005) and *Souls in Transition: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of Emerging Adults* (2009). He is also the author of *What Is a Person?: Rethinking Humanity, Social Life and the Moral Good from the Person Up* (2010). While much of Smith’s writing is survey and interview-based, standard fare for sociologists, he has also produced philosophical anthropology, such as *What Is a Person?* and *Moral, Believing Animals: Human Personhood and Culture* (2003). He has twice focused on evangelical culture, producing *American Evangelicalism: Embattled and Thriving* (1998) and *Christian America: What Evangelicals Really Want* (2000).

In *The Bible Made Impossible*, Smith offers his observations on evangelical teaching about the Bible—some of which he views with alarm—and suggests a better hermeneutic. While he believes in the full authority of the Bible and greatly sympathizes with evangelicals’ belief in the Bible, he wishes that they would take the Bible as it is, not as what they would wish it to be.

Smith’s argument unfolds in two stages: “The Impossibility of Biblicism” and “Toward a Truly Evangelical Reading of Scripture.” In reading this book, we must keep in mind that his approach is to describe a social phenomenon (evangelical biblical theory and reading practices) and that his proposals are designed to work within the evangelical mindset: a sociological approach, not a theological one. As such, his work explains not only the social group but how it might be more true to its nature, more truly evangelical.

To explain *evangelical*, Smith has developed a self-identity mapping of identifiable religious traditions (see his “On Religious Identities,” in *American Evangelicalism* [233–47], and “Defining ‘Evangelical,’” in *Christian America?*[15–18]). His mapping includes four categories of Protestants: evangelical, fundamentalist, mainline Protestant, and theologically liberal Protestant. Evangelical is a broad category that includes conservative Reformed folks, for instance. In his description of evangelical biblicism, Smith includes some writers who, if asked to choose among these four, would probably say, “none of the above.” But for purposes of social analysis, the broad categories work. Other ways of mapping religious social groups are by denominational affiliation or by theological belief, but Smith has found that these are less useful for self-identity.

As for *biblicism*, Smith defines the term as being a constellation of ten “related assumptions and beliefs about the Bible’s nature, purpose, and function.” These include total representation (“all that God has to say to humans”), complete coverage (“all of the issues relevant to Christian belief and life”), democratic perspicuity (“any reasonably intelligent person...can correctly understand the plain meaning of the text”), commonsense hermeneutics (“explicit, plain, most obvious, literal sense, as the author intended them at face value”), internal harmony (“all related passages of the Bible...fit together...into single, unified, internally consistent bodies of instruction about right and wrong beliefs and behaviors), universal applicability (“what biblical authors taught at any point in history remains universally valid for all Christians at every other time”), and a handbook model (“a compendium of divine and therefore inerrant teaching on a full array of subjects—including science, economics, health, politics, and romance”), (4–5). Smith traces this biblicist mindset to an unwitting embrace of modern epistemology (149–51) and its preoccupation with clarity, certainty, and universally valid knowledge. With a sociologist’s keen insight for what is typical of a social phenomenon, he provides multiple examples of popular, institutional, and scholarly biblicism (6–16). Of course, not all evangelicals are biblicists. Smith references several whose approach to Scripture he finds more genuinely evangelical.

Smith says that a biblicist assumptions lead to a “flat reading” of the biblical text (125), one that runs head-on into the problem of pervasive interpretive pluralism. What was supposed to be a method for finding the right interpretation of the Bible results in multiple right interpretations (16–26), despite the expectations of what should follow from democratic perspicuity, internal harmony, and universal applicability. As support, Smith quotes evangelical D. A. Carson: “among those who believe that the canonical sixty-six books are nothing less than the Words of God written there is a disturbing array of mutually incompatible theological opinions” (*Exegetical Fallacies*, 2003, 18).

To flesh out his claim that “biblicism is impossible to practice in actual experience,” Smith cites several sociological and anthropological studies. These show that biblicist evangelicals, including popular book authors, often do not follow their biblicist theories in reaching conclusions, particularly about child-rearing and family relationships (75–78). The problem stems partly from the fallibility of human interpreters and partly from the character of Scripture as multivocal, polysemic, and multivalent (47–54), qualities obscured by biblicist readings of the text. Smith gives examples of polysemy: the meaning of *kephale* (head—is it authority or source?) and Matt 16:18 (Peter and the meaning of the rock). Such questions result in historic battlegrounds for those seeking a simple, flat meaning (47).

For historical background, Smith points to Princeton Seminary professors Charles Hodge (1797–1878) and Benjamin Warfield (1852–1921), influenced by Scottish common sense realism and Baconian inductive-empiricism. They were crucial in the development of democratic perspicuity and commonsense hermeneutics, characteristics of biblicism (55–60).

For what sustains the assumptions and convictions of biblicism, Smith also conjectures (his word) a homogenous social network, which functions as plausibility structure. The result of this plausibility structure is a tendency to minimize the real differences of interpretation; a need to establish difference as an aid to identity; and cognitive transitivity that equates overcoming interpretive pluralism with ecumenism and liberalism. Psychologically, he points to “a need to create order and security in an environment that would be otherwise chaotic and in error”; this need, he says, overrides concerns about interpretive pluralism (61–64). While this social network does not invalidate the sincerity of biblicists’ theological and biblical beliefs (64), it does offer an explanation for factors that sustain those beliefs. For Smith these conjectures provide the historical, social, and psychological sources of biblicism as a persistent religious subcultural identity.

By contrast to the biblicist approach, Smith proposes three steps toward what he calls “some promising ways forward beyond biblicism”: using Christocentric hermeneutics; accepting complexity and ambiguity; and rethinking human knowledge, authority, and understanding (97). This approach addresses the problem of pervasive interpretive pluralism described earlier in the book. It explains “how the Bible can function as an authority even if biblicism is impossible” (97).

Of the “Christocentric hermeneutical approach,” Smith writes, “Seeing Christ as central compels us to always try to make sense of everything we read in any part of Scripture in light of our larger knowledge of who God is in Jesus Christ” (98). For example, in Luke 24:44–48, Jesus taught the disciples to see him “behind, in, and through all of Scripture...[.] every narrative, every prayer, every proverb, every law, every Epistle needs likewise to

be read and understood always and only in light of Jesus Christ and God reconciling the world to himself through him” (98–9). Smith cites John Webster, Peter Enns, John Stott, and G.C. Berkouwer, among others, to flesh out his claim that we should start with the centrality of Jesus Christ instead of a theory about the Bible. Theories about the Bible must be located within the doctrine of the Triune God and the story of salvation: “Scripture’s internal unity or harmony...derives from...telling us about Jesus Christ... as the consistently present thread” through a “sometimes-meandering story” (102).

When this principle is grasped, argues Smith, applications for Christian living also flow from “thinking christologically about them” (113). This approach means that we “are active subjects seeking to understand the truth, with the Spirit’s help, and that our own minds and spirits necessarily play an active role in that process” (113). Smith observes that this also happens when biblicist principles are followed; the activity of the subject is inevitable.

On “accepting complexity and ambiguity,” Smith makes his plea that we let the Bible show us what it is, not what we theorize that it is. In so doing, Smith follows John Calvin (and several early church fathers) in writing that God accommodates his speech to our level, “lisps with us as nurses are wont to do with little children” (Calvin, *Institutes*, 1.13.1). God uses our languages and cultural forms to reveal himself and the saving work of Jesus Christ. To show how some evangelicals have embraced accommodation, Smith cites Gordon Fee: “[God] chose to speak his eternal word this way, in historically particular circumstances and in every kind of literary genre...[.] ambiguity is part of what God did in giving us the Word in this way” (“Hermeneutics and the Gender Debate,” *Discovering Biblical Equality*, 370).

A properly inductive approach to the Bible trusts that God knew what he was doing in so speaking to us. The Bible was not written to fit modern ideas of clarity, completeness, consistency, and harmony. The biblical message is both simpler—it’s about Jesus—and more complex—it’s about the incomprehensible God’s plan of salvation—than we sometimes suppose. Smith suggests that we live with the ambiguities and restrain our tendency to harmonize the tensions. Some harmonizations of different accounts will “best represent after the fact what actually happened,” but “many . . . are obviously forced and implausible” (134).

On “rethinking human knowledge, authority, and understanding,” Smith explains the effects of both modernism and postmodernism. He puts his finger on a modernist factor in biblicism: “Biblicism came to the point where it was (and often still is) driven not by gospel concerns and scriptural self-attestation but by modern

preoccupations with the certainty of knowledge” (151). He is also leery of postmodernism’s historical and cultural relativism and proposes critical realism as a third way.

Unpacked more extensively in his *What is a Person*, critical realism abandons modernist foundationalism and postmodernist relativism while accounting for the “hermeneutical, cultural-historical and interpretive character of all knowledge” and insisting on the objectivity of reality (152). To show that speech is more complex than simply making propositional statements, he enlists speech-act theory’s distinctions—locutionary, illocutionary, and perlocutionary acts—as three ways of doing something by saying something (156–63). He also explores several dimensions of biblical authority—how the different genres of Scripture convey this authority. Finally, he discusses the church’s historically growing grasp of the gospel’s meaning, for example on slavery (165–71).

Smith’s focus on the broad-category, self-identified evangelicals sets up this book nicely. As the problem and possible solutions are both found within this group, he is able to say, “listen to each other.” His 32 pages of endnotes (both brief citations of sources and extended side discussions) include a wide range of opinion and scholarship to help in this discussion.

As a sociologist, interested in the nature of groups and their behavior, Smith realizes that there is more to biblical interpretation than just theology or exegesis. We also need to be aware of what’s going on sociologically. To help readers, he asks how this social category—evangelical—functions, and how evangelical biblical study might be dysfunctional in terms of its stated hermeneutical agenda. Readers need to remember that his critique is quite specific: some evangelicals are biblicists, but their theory and practice don’t work. Other evangelicals are not biblicists, but they provide a way forward.

This book is important because we are in a decades-long transition from modernity to post-modernity, the latter being a critique and rejection of the former. This transition is happening at superficial levels (virtual living through screens) and deeper levels (the work of French philosophers Derida, Levinas, Marion, etc.). A transition like this helps us make comparisons and see more clearly how modernity has affected the church and biblical studies. Neither modernity nor postmodernity is either all good or all bad: they are the human cultures within and by which we live, worship, or otherwise make sense of the world. To be Christian and human is always to be encultured, but we must also be critically aware in order to make biblically sound choices. It is a time to evaluate how Christians, especially evangelicals according to Smith, have read and understood the Bible—and to learn how to do this better.