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Robert H. Gundry: Smithereens!

[The Bible Made Impossible: Why Biblicism Is Not a Truly](#)

[Evangelical Reading of Scripture](#) is sure to sizzle before it fizzes; and fizzle it will, at least among the readers to whom it is primarily addressed: evangelical Christians. The author, Christian Smith, is a well-known sociologist who recently converted from evangelical Protestantism to Roman Catholicism but maintains the moniker "evangelical" and disclaims that the reasons for his conversion had very much to do with why he thinks biblicism isn't a truly evangelical reading of Scripture. But what does he mean by "biblicism," and by its making the Bible "impossible"? Biblicism makes the Bible impossible to put into practice, according to Smith; and as used by him, biblicism means an emphasis on the Bible's "exclusive authority, infallibility [or 'inerrancy'], perspicuity, self-sufficiency, internal consistency, self-evident meaning, and universal applicability," though not every version of biblicism contains all these ingredients, at least not all in equal measure.

How then does the foregoing constellation of emphases make the Bible impossible to put into practice? It does so by producing "pervasive interpretive pluralism," so that evangelical Christians differ widely on what they should believe and how they should behave; and their differences include important as well as

unimportant matters. Thus "practice" includes belief as well as behavior, and "impossible" has to do with *shared* practices. For example, biblicists differ over human free will and divine sovereignty; penal satisfaction and Christus Victor; creation and evolution; sprinkling and immersion; divorce and remarriage; complementarianism and egalitarianism; just war and pacifism; pretribulationism and posttribulationism; amillennialism, premillennialism, and postmillennialism; everlasting torment and annihilation; soteriological exclusivism, inclusivism, and universalism; and on and on. In other words, biblicism fails to produce the theological and behavioral unity that Smith thinks necessary to validate it. Furthermore, biblicism fosters using the Bible as a handbook for matters of diet, dating, gardening, good sex, alternative medicine, psychological counseling, business practices, and so on—all matters of little or no importance in the Bible, he avers.

Why then do biblicists go wrong? Because they mistakenly assume that the Bible contains no errors in whatever it says, always speaks clearly, and therefore can be understood correctly by any able- and fair-minded individual who reads it inductively. Giving rise to these assumptions have been the culture of American democratic individualism; the influence of Scottish commonsense realism and Baconian inductivism on and through Charles Hodge (1797-1878) and Benjamin War-field (1851-1921) at Princeton Theological Seminary (as though belief in the Bible's exclusive authority, infallibility, perspicuity, and other ingredients of biblicism don't date back at least to the Protestant Reformation!); the early 20th-century

battle against theological liberalism on the part of Christian fundamentalists, who fathered (or grandfathered) current evangelicals; and the failure of early evangelicals (then called neo-evangelicals) to appropriate Karl Barth's nonbiblicist but antiliberal way of reading Scripture.

Undermining the biblicists' assumptions, according to Smith, are biblical texts that almost no reader, biblicists included, actually lives by, such as "Greet one another with a holy kiss"; that need explaining away by arbitrary appeals to cultural relativism, such as Paul's prohibiting women from braiding their hair; that seem so strange as to merit neglect, such as the statement, "Cretans are always liars, bad beasts, lazy bellies"; and that disagree with other biblical texts, such as the disallowing of women's speech in church meetings over against an allowance if their heads are covered.

Why doesn't he ascribe egalitarianism along with biblicism to American democratic individualism instead, unless his own individualism leads him to ascribe only his dislikes to American democratic individualism?

How then does Smith propose to solve the problem of pervasive interpretive pluralism while maintaining a belief in the Bible's divine inspiration and avoiding a lapse into theological liberalism? His main answers: (1) by accepting the presence in the Bible of ambiguity, complexity, errors, contradictions, and thus the legitimacy of at least some different and even opposing interpretations of Scripture; (2) by importing extrabiblical theological

concepts, such as that of the Trinity with its ontological categories of person and nature; (3) by submitting to "a stronger ... ecclesial teaching office than biblicism has ever provided" (which answer, along with his book *How to Go from Being a Good Evangelical to a Committed Catholic ...*, calls in question Smith's aforementioned claim that his conversion to Roman Catholicism had little to do with his rejection of biblicism); and, most important, (4) by reading Scripture christologically, à la Barth, so that its problematic passages and the different interpretations thereof recede in importance before the main message of salvation in Christ, the incarnate second person of the Trinity.

But will these maneuvers work to solve the problem of pervasive interpretive pluralism? Smith himself admits that "various parts of scripture [such as the 'nasty things' said about Cretans in [Titus 1:12-13](#)] ... do not clearly fit its gospel message centered on Jesus Christ." So he backtracks from reading in Scripture "*every narrative, every prayer, every proverb, every law, every Epistle ... always and only* in light of Jesus Christ and God reconciling the world to himself through him" and says that the christological thread runs "more *or less* explicitly" through the Bible's "sometimes-*meandering* story" (emphasis added). To resist universalizing certain passages on the ground that they "do not clearly fit" the gospel doesn't solve the problem of pervasive interpretive pluralism, however, so long as opinions differ on what fits and what doesn't fit. Furthermore, though wanting to rein in pluralism by interpreting Scripture always and only in the light of the gospel concerning salvation through Jesus Christ, Smith lists this very salvation among the topics

plagued by pervasive interpretive pluralism because of what he sees as Scripture's multivocality. You also have to ask whether a christological reading doesn't produce its own such pluralism in attempts to relate somehow to Christ the Cretan passage, the "grab-the-hot-looking-woman" passage ([Deut. 21:10-14](#)), imprecatory passages (e.g., [Psalm 137:7-9](#)), and other passages also cited by Smith as problematic for biblicism. And will whatever relations to Christ might be drawn seem any less strained than biblicists' using Scripture for guidelines on dating (to cite one of the many examples that Smith describes as kitschy)?

By the way, why shouldn't Scripture be mined for Christian behavioral guidelines relevant to this and that? No less a personage than Carl F. H. Henry, hardly a kitschmonger, once asked me face-to-face how I thought Christian young people should and should not behave on dates; and though Smith declares that the commands to greet one another with a holy kiss are "much more overt" than scriptural teachings against premarital sex (but what about the multiple prohibitions of fornication, a general term for extramarital sex?), Smith himself gives ground: "That is not to say that evangelical Christians will never have theologically informed moral and practical views of dating and romance [exemplary of 'further insights and implications of what the gospel means for belief and life in the world' for 'every new generation of believers'] But the significance and content of all such views will be defined completely in terms of thinking about them in view of the larger facts of Jesus Christ and the gospel—not primarily by gathering and arranging pieces of scriptural texts that seem to be

relevant to such topics." Well and good, yet do the larger facts ever erase the pieces of scriptural texts ("pieces of" being pejorative, because Smith doesn't like proof texting except when the texts feature God's reconciliation of the world to himself through Christ)? If not, those pieces retain every ounce of applicability. But if so, we're back to the plurality of differing opinions on applicability, as when—despite admittedly specific biblical statements to the contrary—Smith declares that larger scriptural implications "clearly favor" egalitarianism over complementarianism. Why doesn't he ascribe egalitarianism along with biblicism to American democratic individualism instead, unless his own individualism leads him to ascribe only his dislikes to American democratic individualism?

Nor does this failure of a christological reading stop at "strange" texts in the Bible's margins. For early on, Smith emphasizes that "[o]n most matters of significance ['essentials'] concerning Christian doctrine, salvation, church life, practice, and morality, different Christians—including [but not limited to] different biblicist Christians—insist that the Bible teaches positions that are divergent and often incompatible with one another." In the early church, Christology itself fell prey to pervasive interpretive pluralism, and increasingly does so again among nonbiblicist Christians. When it comes to such pluralism, then, reliance on a christological reading of the Bible proves just as "self-defeating" as biblicism does according to Smith.

Nor does Smith's appeal to the late Barth's christological reading of Scripture cut ice, at least not with me. For in Basel during the fall of

1960 I regularly climbed out of the basement of biblical studies to attend the theological seminars held by Barth upstairs, only to hear him repeatedly engage in subjective judgments on what in the Bible carries authority and what therein does not. Dismissively, for example: "Oh, that's just a bit of Jewish apocalyptic that crept into Scripture." As I wrote shortly afterward to an acquaintance, "For all Barth's likeableness I must think that [Cornelius] Van Til's harsh judgment on his theology is more *grundlich* and closer to the truth than the sympathetic attitude which has appeared even in some American evangelical circles So far as I can see, Barth is the sole judge of what in the Bible is authoritative for him." Others disagree, I know; but that was my take.

Perhaps feeling some inadequacy in a christological reading of Scripture to solve sufficiently well the problem of pervasive interpretive pluralism, Smith reaches behind the New Testament to the early church's "rule of faith," which existed prior to the canonizing of New Testament books and allegedly helped regulate the process of canonization. This rule of faith consists, it is said, in the gospel of Jesus Christ, so that books containing it got canonized—hence, a canon *behind* the canon as well as *within* the canon. What then of Christian books that didn't make it into the New Testament even though they too present the gospel of Jesus Christ? And how is it that those books which did get canonized can be legitimately interpreted, according to Smith, as disagreeing on the essentials of Christ's gospel, i.e., on the rule of faith? And why are my suspicions aroused when Smith repeatedly cites the fate of the unevangelized as an open question and refers again and again

to the gospel of God's reconciling the world to himself through Christ but says nary a word about divine judgment and the lostness of unbelievers despite the apostle Paul's declaring that for their salvation people have to believe in Christ, that to believe in him they have to hear about him, that to hear about him preaching is necessary, and that the preaching requires a sending of preachers ([Rom. 10:9-17](#))? Paul also qualifies "the ministry of reconciliation" by describing himself as "an odor deriving from death, resulting in death" through the preaching of this very gospel to those who are perishing ([2 Cor. 2:15-16](#); [5:19](#)).

As to the ancient Christian creeds, they were forged in response to pervasive interpretive pluralism; and to date they haven't put a stop to pluralism outside biblicist circles any more than inside them. Nor has a strong teaching office. Not even pronouncements of the Roman Catholic Magisterium have stopped it among theologians, clergy, and lay people of that communion, not to detail disagreements among Roman Catholics on the Magisterium itself. If both Scripture and tradition are unalterably ambiguous, then, how can "a stronger hermeneutical guide" be judged "consistent with, if not directly derived from, Christian scripture and tradition"? "The larger, longer Christian tradition" with which Smith wants American evangelicals to interact is itself shot through with interpretive pluralism, as he himself says: "church history is replete with multiple credible understandings, interpretations, and conclusions about the Bible's teachings."

Toward the same end of wider interaction, Smith distinguishes

between dogmas (beliefs nonnegotiable for any Christian), doctrines (beliefs firmly held but not considered crucial to the faith), and opinions (less sure beliefs), and then urges evangelical Christians to decrease the number of their dogmas in favor of increasing the number of their doctrines and mere opinions: "For example, many evangelicals have the tendency to push the 'penal satisfaction doctrine of atonement' up to the level of dogma." To the contrary, Smith wants to make this doctrine negotiable because some Christians prefer, say, the Christus Victor theory of atonement. Never mind that the apostle Paul included Christ's having died "for our sins" among "the *foremost* things" in the gospel ([1 Cor. 15:3](#)). Sorry, but victory without the penal is pyrrhic.

Smith also wants evangelicals to expand the number of interpretations they regard as *adiaphora*, matters of indifference—like baptism by immersion versus baptism by sprinkling (as though *baptizein* in the Greek New Testament could mean merely "to sprinkle"). Expansion of *adiaphora* should be accompanied, he says, by "further insights and implications of what the gospel means for belief and life in the world," as in the matter of slavery, for instance. Despite explicitly negative biblical statements concerning homosexual intercourse, does his including it among christianly disputable issues tend to put it on a theological trajectory similar to the one traveled by slavery? (This is a question, not an accusation.) In any event, the charge that "biblicism lacks the imagination and categories to understand the dynamic nature of the gospel and the church's understanding of truth under the guidance of the Holy Spirit" masks with the happy-face of doctrinal advance a

lot of *non*biblicist interpretive pluralism in the questionable twists and turns of church dogma. The charge of interpretive unimaginativeness also rings somewhat hollow, given the echo of Smith's cannonades aimed against biblicists' imaginatively using the Bible as a handbook for "perfect and explicit instructions on every imaginable topic it seems to address, as well as indirectly to literally every possible topic."

How might further insights and implications come to light? Smith confesses the Bible to be "the primary testifying, mediating witness to Jesus Christ," but adds that "Jesus Christ is present to his people in the church in the bread and the wine," also "in baptism," "in the Holy Spirit," "in prayer," and "in the form of his or her [a Christian's] needy neighbor." But the question of sacramentalism aside, are these extrabiblical presences of Christ any less subject to pervasive interpretive pluralism than is biblicism? May not the reverse be true? For that matter, must we assume that the validity of interpretive principles, such as those in biblicism, requires uniformity of interpretive results?

So maybe someone should write a book arguing that pervasive pluralism in biblical interpretation is due to the lingering deleterious effects, even on biblicists, of *non*biblicism in the past. But what do I know? I'm neither a sociologist nor a theologian. Just a biblicist.

Smith argues that "scriptural multivocality is a fact that profoundly challenges evangelical biblicism." As already noted, however, multivocality characterizes also the rule of faith, the gospel

contained within Scripture, and the early and ongoing creeds and extrabiblical traditions on which he wants evangelicals to draw and to which may be added the title "Smithereens!" (Who is blowing what to smithereens? Biblicists, the Bible? Smith, biblicism? I, his book?) To the extent that *scriptural* multivocality entails seeming contradictions, it may be better to speak of diverse literary genres and the suiting of different messages to different situations, so that given a postbiblical *like* situation, the suited message carries full, unvarnished authority.

"Biblicists ... tend to assume the single, univocal meaning of biblical texts," says Smith. Not true, as he unconsciously admits when scoring biblicists for seeing no fewer than 17 meanings in the story of Jesus and a Samaritan woman at Jacob's well, to take but one example. Or take biblicists' affirming double fulfillments of prophecy and relishing typological, especially *christologically* typological, as well as historical meanings in the Old Testament, also salvific symbolism in Jesus' miraculous signs, particularly those recorded in John's Gospel.

I think Smith makes a mistake in lumping together theological issues such as Calvinism versus Arminianism and kitschy books such as *Cooking with the Bible: Recipes for Biblical Meals*. The latter arises out of the popular secular fad of writing cookbooks, not out of Scripture, whereas the issue of Calvinism versus Arminianism does arise out of Scripture—specifically, out of passages that highlight divine sovereignty and out of other passages that highlight human responsibility.

Smith outlines the combination of Scottish commonsense realism and Baconian inductivism that's used by biblicists as a gathering of biblical facts, which are considered self-evidently intelligible; an arranging of them in logical order; and an inferring from them general truths. This method is outdated, says Smith, because the impossibility of complete objectivity makes the meaning of facts at least somewhat less than self-evidently intelligible. Granted this impossibility, but how does *he* operate? He gathers a host of facts in the form of biblical passages, interpretations thereof, doctrinal confessions, book titles, slogans on bumper stickers and T-shirts, Internet pronouncements, and sociological surveys. He treats these facts as self-evidently intelligible. He arranges them in a logical order, from the popular to the institutional to the scholarly. He infers from them a general truth that interpretive pluralism pervades biblicism and concludes that this pluralism undermines biblicism. Welcome to Scottish commonsense realism and Baconian inductivism redux. Thanks to Smith they've made a comeback. To say so is neither to deny nor to affirm his thesis. It is only to say that he uses the very method he purportedly rejects, as did also John Calvin and others in their individualistic interpretations of Scripture long before the Scotsman Thomas Reid ever lived, even before Sir Francis Bacon lived, and long before the rise of American democratic individualism. Moreover, Bacon promoted inductive reasoning particularly in regard to the *material* sciences, which kind of reasoning seems at best only distantly pertinent to textual interpretation, as Smith himself seems to recognize in saying that "[l]anguage operates as a different dimension of reality than most *material* and mental objects" (emphasis added).

There's more: Not only does Smith ascribe biblicism in large part to Scottish commonsense realism and Baconian inductivism. He also ascribes biblicism in large part to a *presupposition* that Scripture speaks authoritatively on many more topics than salvation in Christ. Hence biblicism looks presuppositional as well as commonsensically inductive. As for his own presupposition, it's that Scripture speaks authoritatively only on salvation in Christ and topics related to that salvation. Under this presupposition, Smith appears to use just as much commonsensical inductivism as biblicists do under their presupposition.

I applaud Smith's opposition to forced harmonizations of differing scriptural passages, harmonizations that grow out of many biblicists' excessive fear of narrative that may be less than purely historical. He rightly derides, for instance, Harold Lindsell's argument that since the parallel biblical accounts of Peter's denials of Jesus differ in their circumstantial details, Peter must have denied him six times. During a telephone conversation long ago, I told Lindsell, "Harold, the Bible says that Peter denied Jesus three times, not six." He answered, "Well, if Peter denied Jesus six times, he must have denied him three times." Which answer harms rather than helps the view of Scripture held by biblicists.

Though Smith has justifiably brought to the fore a problem in pervasive interpretive pluralism, then, this problem plagues all literature, not just the Bible as perceived by biblicists. In regard to the latter, I find his arguments incoherent and his solutions inadequate. He cites Don Carson to the effect that solving the

problem requires "better scriptural exegesis." Indeed. So maybe someone should write a book arguing that pervasive pluralism in biblical interpretation is due to the lingering deleterious effects, even on biblicists, of *nonbiblicism* in the past. But what do I know? I'm neither a sociologist nor a theologian. Just a biblicist.

Corrigenda: "The author of 2 Timothy's specific teaching about eating meat sacrificed to pagan idols" (p. 70) should be corrected to 1 Corinthians' teaching on that topic. The statement, "All of scripture is not clear" (p. 132, emphasis original), which means that none of Scripture is clear, should read, "Not all Scripture is clear," which means that some Scripture is unclear (the same kind of correction being needed in the sentence that bridges pp. 115 and 116). Robert K. Johnston should have "t" restored to his last name (pp. xiv, 17, 18 [4x], 21 [2x], 22, 186 [2x], 190, 216); and "Greg Bashan" (pp. 87, 213) should be corrected to "Greg Bahnsen," as twice on p. 198, though when a college student of mine and others, Greg wrote a weekly column in our students' newspaper under the pen name "Balaam's Ass."

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