

Response to William F. Abraham, *Evangelicals and the Authority of Scripture*

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Billy is right: one of the common problems of evangelical doctrines of Scripture is that they are, as we would put it, unbiblical. They compromise the faith they seek to conserve.

Modernity has arisen out of the Christian way, challenged it, and begun to eclipse it so successfully that today it supplies the ‘plausibility structures’ even of evangelical Christians (Newbigin 1989, 8-9). Holy Scripture was the topic of the first paragraph of Westmont College’s original statement of faith:

The College believes it is essential for its faculty, administration, and trustees to be committed to the authority of Scripture and to the basics of the Christian faith. All faculty, trustees, and administrative staff of the College declare themselves annually to believe:

– The Bible, composed of the Old and New Testaments, is the Word of God, a divine, supernatural revelation. We believe in the plenary, verbal inspiration of the original writings of the Scriptures, and that as thus given they were wholly without error of any kind.

The rest of the statement is speckled with parenthetical biblical citations, but not this part. After all, we mustn’t engage in circular reasoning in front of the kids! Its logical structure is telling. It reveals the habits into which we evangelicals have fallen. They owe far too much to an unreconstructed culture of modernity.

I appreciate the way Billy points us insistently to other habits we evangelicals desperately need to cultivate before we produce yet another generation of recovering ex-evangelicals. I will not take issue with the fundamentals of his argument; I agree. Rather, I want to push his argument in several directions I hope will prove fruitful.

1. *Hans Frei redux.* Billy’s presentation reminds me of Hans Frei’s *Types of Christian Theology*, in which he arranges various schools of religious or theological discourse according to the ways they relate philosophy and theology. Type 1 dissolves the particulars of Christian theology into philosophical generalities so that the particulars become dispensable (“God”

becomes a form of “transcendence”; Immanuel Kant and Gordon Kaufman are typical here). Type 2 takes Christian specificity seriously but justifies it by a foundational philosophical scheme, so that theology philosophically correlates to general structures of meaning (Rudolf Bultmann, Wolfhart Pannenberg, David Tracy, Karl Rahner, *and Carl Henry*). Type 3 correlates Christian self-description with external philosophical descriptions, so that theology *practically* correlates to universal structures of meaning (Friedrich Schleiermacher and Paul Tillich). Type 4 insists on the uniqueness of distinctive Christian language; Christianity is not philosophically founded and plays by only its own rules (Jonathan Edwards, John Henry Newman, Karl Barth). General structures are present, and within the discipline formal rules and criteria are necessary (distinguishing meaning from truth, sense and reference, description and explanation, and so on), but these are used only *ad hoc* according to the theological issue at hand. Philosophy is governed by theology. Finally, Type 5 considers theology to be Christian grammatical self-description in which ‘outside’ philosophies allegedly have no place (D.Z. Phillips, though other Wittgensteinians dispute Frei’s interpretation).

Frei shows that as one travels away from Type 1 toward Type 5, interpretation of Scripture shifts from allegorical to literal; the Church’s relationship to its wider culture shifts from absorption to distinction; theology’s emphasis shifts from generality to specificity (see Bruce Marshall in Frei 88-89); intellectual respectability shifts from second-order reflection to first-order practice; and the preferred cognate discipline shifts from philosophy to anthropology.

So is Billy trying to move evangelicalism from Carl Henry’s Type 2 past Kevin Vanhoozer’s Type 3 and Tom Wright’s and Richard Bauckham’s Type 3½ (which is about as far as trained biblical scholars can go nowadays) to John Webster’s Type 4?

If he is, I have a further question: Is Billy’s goal a Barthian Type 4 or a Wittgensteinian Type 5? When he concludes that we evangelicals need to mine the Scriptures and Jesus for

epistemic insights that will lead to “a full epistemology of theology,” which would *still* be “strictly midrash in the church,” do I hear echoes of Karl Barth, or of the later Wittgenstein doing grammatical therapy on the Church’s first-order discourse? I cannot quite tell.

Actually, I have another: Is this the source of the surprising vitriol against Kevin Vanhoozer? Would Billy understand him as a postconservative Schleiermacher (along with anyone else who employs ‘narrative’, ‘drama’, or ‘story’ the way liberal Protestants used ‘experience’ – as a privileged general epistemological category to which the gospel story fits or correlates)?

2. *Philosophy as culture.* Jim McClendon considers philosophy the articulation of the convictions of a culture. The various movements of evangelicalism arise in modernity against rival forms of modernity. Now I am a critic of modernity. I think of it as a form of idolatry. And modernizing the faith of Jesus Christ is turning the Lord of all peoples into a partisan god of only our culture. *We* need to hear Vincent Donovan’s words to the Masai people. He told them,

Perhaps your God is not free. Do not try to hold him here or you will never know him. Free your god to become the High God. You have known this God and worshipped him, but he is greater than you have known. He is the God not only of the Masai, but also my God, and the God of the Kikuyu and Sonjo, and the God of every tribe and nation in the world (Donovan 2003, 34-35).

(Of course he goes on to tell them of “the man Jesus Christ,” in whom God freely came for all.)

However, if modernity articulates the shared sensibility of our peoples, don’t we owe moderns more than just condemnation? Might we need to be as critically affirming as, say, the apostles were to Greco-Roman idolaters? Think of Paul’s treatment of the *stoicheia* in Galatians. How can we acknowledge this culture’s convictions as something both powerful and potentially good? Scholars abandon fundamentalism for liberalism *and* the children of Unitarians usually become either atheists or fundamentalists not *merely* to abandon the weaknesses of their home tradition but also to embrace the other’s strengths. George Eliot and John Henry Newman gave

up on evangelicalism, but not on epistemology. Conversely, C.S. Lewis gave up atheism, but not epistemology; in fact, God used the epistemology of myth to bring Lewis around.

A missionary might put my issue this way: If Billy's prayers are answered and epistemology is indeed crucified and risen, what might be the continuity between the old epistemology and the new? In what sense is modern epistemology *redeemed* rather than just *annihilated*? And what might be the discontinuity? In what sense is truly evangelical epistemology a *transformation* rather than a mere *initiation*? How does our idolatrous culture of certainty versus uncertainty emerge from the Church's baptismal waters (I mean, walk back from the altar call) with its soul saved rather than just replaced?

It may be that we cannot answer until we try and find out. Yet watching the gospel meet idolatrous cultures and revive dead churches should train us to expect to see some commonality between the old and the new, and thus some kernel of affirmation in our calls to repent.

3. *The Bible as spirituality.* R.R. Reno's wonderful Augustinian analysis *In the Ruins of the Church* showed me that a lot of problems facing our churches that appear to be political, or philosophical, or cultural are in fact manifestations of a deeper *spiritual* problem. Our age uses both modernity and postmodernity to distance itself from any forces that threaten to change it. Hearing Billy's argument in this light leads me to ask, what is the spiritual condition that drives us on quests for ultimate epistemological priority? Granting that the political, philosophical, and cultural dimensions of evangelical crises of Scripture are real and deserve our careful attention, what pastoral dimensions might lurk within or underneath them?

My sense is that securing an epistemology for the faith is a spiritually ambivalent project. Sometimes it defers to powers and principles (*sic*) that tame and mute God's Word, but other times it aims to dethrone them. Some of my nervous students want certainty so that they don't have to do the hard work of trusting the Triune God, but others are rightly wary of learned

doubletalk and just want their leaders to affirm the Bible's truthfulness, integrity, and power in ways they can hold us to. Some evangelicals go crazy at arguments like Billy's (or my own) because they don't really trust God. Others do it because they don't really trust *us*. Those are two very different problems. The culture of modern epistemology has debilitated us in many different ways. Let everyone welcome those who are weak in faith (Rom. 14:1), and let the strong not cause their ruin (Rom. 14:15). There is more than one way to produce an ex-evangelical!

My more vulnerable students need a lot of strengthening before they can even recognize "a robust, industrial strength vision of divine revelation centering on the incarnation of the Son of God." Many don't understand incarnation, *or* inspiration, *or* indwelling in the first place! But the right theological diet – healthy shares of missiology, spiritual theology, liturgy, Christian history, pastoral pedagogy, and of course doses of the Bible in its raw power, delivered not combatively but confidently and affirmingly – produces exciting and promising results.

4. *Hear, hear!* Let me end on a note of gratitude. This is a powerful and much needed call for strengthening our will to live in the convictions proper to Christian faith. As our bulwark against overbearing claims of churchly authority, Protestants gradually shifted from Scripture's gospel to modernist convictions. Now that modernity is crumbling, we are often at a loss. We are hard pressed to distinguish our newly rediscovered talk of 'tradition,' 'community' and so on from Catholicism. Our so-called 'Bible churches' now tend to use the Bible much less on Sundays than even the daily liturgies of high churches. More and more of us are weary of our old debates and just want to get along. Our parents care more that youth groups keep their kids out of trouble in high school than foster faith for a lifetime. We fail in these ways because we fail to know the power of the Word as *creative* rather than just referential or expressive or even cultural. We have for so long leaned on modernist crutches that we can no longer imagine the gospel of Jesus calling us to stand upright and walk. Billy, thanks for the command to get up!