

**Are We Using the Same Bible?
Evangelical Doctrines of Scripture in the Economy of Salvation**

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Back to Scripture. A while ago my evangelical school, faced with a growing debate over whether our community life statement on homosexuality is up to snuff, held a series of faculty exchanges on the topic. When we realized we were appealing to the Bible in different ways, we held another series of faculty exchanges – this time on biblical hermeneutics. Once at a young nondenominational church I overheard a new parent talking to his pastor about the right thing to do regarding infant baptism. “What do we need to do?” he asked in complete innocence. “Just show me the Bible passages that give the answer.” After September 11, the 2004 tsunami, or any of the perennial moral issues of college students, the same question arises: “What does the Bible say about it?” Evangelical Christians constantly go back to Scripture for answers to the big questions life hands us, and sometimes the small ones too.

Back to Scripture?! In graduate school I could always count on my non-evangelical colleagues to cluck at such naïveté. After all, all observation is theory laden! The Bible must be read through tradition! Its meaning is not transparent as fundamentalists wish! Et cetera; you have probably heard enough of these responses yourself. And my colleagues had a point. Our simple talk covers a range of evangelical biblical practices that is complex to the point of contradiction. Evangelicalism’s various camps, forms of Christian life, and biblical practices do take the common evangelical respect for Scripture in different directions and produce a rich variety of evangelical “Bibles.” So should we give up on such deceptively simple phrases as “back to Scripture”?

This project seeks a satisfying account of evangelical hermeneutics through a survey of popular evangelical metaphors for Scripture – first one by one, then all together – to judge

whether their mass of contradictions may add up to anything coherent. Where my book *Living and Active* developed a systematic theological doctrine of Scripture, this postscript is an inductive study of the Bible's life and activity that *ought to* arrive at a similar or at least compatible account of Scripture. Time is short, and for a survey of the biblical practices characteristic of evangelicalism's different communities and traditions I will offer a typology of metaphors for the Bible. Each has characteristic uses, distinctive hermeneutics, representative historical figures, stereotypical arguments over the character and purpose of Scripture, contemporary champions within and without evangelicalism, and even paradigmatic Bible editions. Almost all of us use the Bible according to more than one type, of course. Yet many will find that a few dominate, or even perhaps only one.

The product line. Since at least Irenaeus and Athanasius the Bible has been an ***ultimate narrator*** locating us and all things in its story of creation, judgment, and redemption. Many evangelicals have drawn deeply from this ancient vision, from the Restorationist Alexander Campbell to today's credalists, postliberals, and "postconservatives." Among those who see ourselves in the Bible's world more than the converse, Scripture's narratives (especially Genesis, Exodus, the Gospels, and Luke-Acts) tend to be favorites. Many regard the ecumenical creeds as the Bible's most profound narrative summaries. [Families who see themselves within the Bible's cosmic family tree can inscribe their whole family genealogy in the *Keystone Family, Faith and Values Heritage Edition Bible* (Fireside), available from Christian Book Distributors for \$35.99.]

A similar but distinct type sees the Bible as a ***treasury of truth*** that teaches facts about God and the world. Evangelical apologists insist that its histories really happened, moralists mine its lessons for universal ethical principles, and fundamentalists read its creation stories as scientific accounts in accommodative premodern language. (Historical critics belong here too.)

They treat the Bible as different only in yielding its truth less adequately and more stubbornly. Thomas Jefferson is Charles Hodge with a pair of scissors.) [Zondervan's *NIV Study Bible* (\$31.99) supplies pages and pages of maps, charts, footnotes, artistic renderings, and cross-references that highlight and contextualize its archaeological, philosophical, and ethical material.]

An ever popular school understands the Bible to be a *past and future timeline*. Adventists and Dispensationalists search and synthesize Scripture's genealogies, chronologies, and apocalyptic passages to decode the past and especially the future in order to locate the present. Ellen G. White and John Nelson Darby followed in the traditions of Joachim of Fiore, and their disciples fill the shelves of general as well as evangelical bookstores. [The *Reese Chronological Bible* (Bethany, \$19.99) puts biblical text in a conservative chronological order (material chronicling the divided kingdoms is even printed side-by-side); the *Dake Annotated Reference Bible* (Dake, \$29.99) includes a timeline from a Dispensational-Pentecostal perspective.]

"Evangelical" was (and in Europe remains) synonymous for "Protestant." In Protestant hands the Bible is a *judge* – God's designated canonical authority, to be heard and obeyed. Scripture proclaims our relationship with God, particularly our forensic condemnation and justification. Its covenantal and kerygmatic passages are Lutheran and Reformed highlights. [People who want to read the whole Bible thus can have Zondervan's *Spirit of the Reformation Study Bible*, complete with texts of key Reformed catechisms and confessions, for \$31.99.]

Evangelicalism owes its name not just to the gospel but to practices that share it with new audiences. Translators like William Tyndale have rendered the Bible in the languages of the nations and missionaries like William Carey have taken the message to those who need to hear

its good news. Indigenous churches receive Scripture with the power of the Holy Spirit and inculturate it in their own ways. For all these the Bible is *a means of mission*, and its Great Commission, Acts' evangelistic passages, and Revelation's vision of the nations gathered around the throne are the canon within its canon. [The *Revolve* New Testament (Nelson) formats Scripture as a teen fashion magazine with question-and-answer columns, "Love Notes" from God, and even beauty tips for \$10.99, while at the quantity price of \$1.12 the *Here's Hope New Testament* is "*the economical choice for your evangelism and outreach programs.*"]

Witness evokes opposition. Those who bear Jesus' good news on the Church's frontiers personally encounter the world's defensiveness and enmity to its Savior. For these the Bible is also *a means of power*. Guided by Scripture's conflict narratives and armed with its ever-sharp Word, an army of spiritual warriors from Pentecostals to charismatics to therapists to liberation theologians wield the Bible to advance Christ's victorious kingdom and pray with Scripture to overcome adversaries, defeat addictions, heal relationships, and wage spiritual warfare. Charles Fox Parham and Martin Luther King, Jr. are two of their more famous commanding officers. [Two popular Bibles geared toward charismata and deliverance are the *New Spirit-filled Life Bible* (Nelson, \$29.99) and the *Life Recovery Bible* (Tyndale, \$19.99), respectively. The latter includes devotional readings for each of the Twelve Steps.]

To receive Scripture's judgments with faith is to become God's new creation. Those whom the Bible helps become 'convicted' and change discover the Bible to be a *means of conversion*. Wesleyans, revivalists, and sanctificationists privilege the Bible's conversion narratives, encouraging new audiences to envision themselves according to the paradigm of the Bible's saints and take on lives of grace, forgiveness, and holiness. [Tyndale's economical *New Believer's Bible* (\$14.99) strengthens the new believer and its *Life Application Bible* (\$26.99)

features more than 100 profiles of biblical figures and more than 10,000 study notes relating Scripture to life situations.]

From the patristic and Catholic traditions to what James Wm. McClendon, Jr. calls the “small-b baptist” Reformation churches, the Bible has mainly been *God’s word to the Church*. Biblical rituals order these communities, their liturgical calendars, and their life passages. St. Benedict developed a biblical ethic for his rule; Thomas Cranmer left the Bible at the heart of England’s reformed Sunday liturgy; Menno Simons centered his community’s ethics in the Sermon on the Mount and other passages most directly relevant to the life of disciples.

[Evangelicals in so-called “liturgical church” traditions can stand for the Gospel reading (perhaps following along with an NRSV Pew Bible, \$9.99 in bulk); Baptists can help themselves grow as followers of Jesus with Broadman & Holman’s *Disciple’s Study Bible* (21.99).]

Many find their own story in Scripture, making the Bible *a mirror of personal life experience*. Augustine was one pioneer in reading the Bible to gain self-understanding. Ignatius of Loyola followed one form of that trajectory, while the Reformation’s Spiritualists, Pietists, and later modern individualists followed others. Today evangelicals encourage each other to read the Bible as if autobiographically: “Do I see myself as Peter denying Jesus under pressure?” Besides consulting the Bible’s biographical narratives they favor introspective Psalms and the wisdom of Proverbs. All these texts reflect our lives back to us from the Kingdom’s perspective. [The *Extreme Teen Bible* (Nelson, \$17.99) features forty profiles of young Bible characters and 250 study notes for life guidance; the *Women of Color Study Bible* (Augsburg, \$28.99) offers a different range of figures to identify with.]

As our varieties of evangelicals, our different heritages, and our uses of the Bible drive different biblical practices and vice versa, these various forms of life produce different Bibles –

different visions of Scripture in the different evangelical communities in which the Bible governs Christian life. Evangelicalism is “a factory of Bibles”: our images of all things lead us to use our Bibles in certain ways.

The different Islams of different Bibles. Our distinctive metaphors for Scripture generate correlated images for everything. “Biblical” treatments of natural and political disasters, terrorism, and homosexuality are too-familiar territory for some of us, so consider the implications of the evangelical factory of Scripture by exploring something else: how Islam becomes different things to different groups of evangelical Christians in ways that reflect their different biblical practices.

Where the Bible is ***a treasury of truth***, apologetics establish the veracity of the Bible and document the flaws of its rivals. As doctrines and creeds loom large in evangelicalism (think of all our statements of faith), so truth and falsehood have long defined Islam as ***a false ideology***. R.C. Sproul’s and Abdul Saleeb’s *The Dark Side of Islam* centers on an extended contrast between Muslim and Christian teachings on Scripture, the Fatherhood of God, Trinity, sin, salvation, the crucifixion, and the deity of Christ. In order “to thwart the efforts of militant Muslims to destroy Christianity,” Norman Geisler’s and Abdul Saleeb’s *Answering Islam* moves from “the basic doctrines of orthodox Islam” to “a Christian response to basic Muslim beliefs,” then to a “positive defense of the Christian perspective” (8). The last section begins with “a defense of the Bible,” from which it moves to defend the deity of Christ, the Trinity, and salvation by the cross. These are only two of many examples.¹

¹ Timothy C. Tennant’s *Christianity at the Religious Roundtable* pits *Tawhid* (Allah’s work of unification) versus Trinity, prophecy versus incarnation, merit versus grace, prosperity versus crucifixion, and so on. George Braswell’s *What You Need to Know about Islam and Muslims* describes Muslim “denials” of Trinity, Jesus’ Sonship, incarnation, and crucifixion. In *More than a Prophet*, Emir and Ergun Caner appeal to Scripture to cast Jesus as *more than* – not just *other than* – what Islam claims him to be.

Where the Bible is *a means of mission*, there is a subtle but profound shift in focus and rhetoric toward the way Muslims appreciate their own tradition. Ron Rhodes' *Reasoning from the Scriptures with Muslims* confounds the stereotype of another futile attempt to convince Muslims of the doctrines of the Trinity or Christ's divinity. Instead Rhodes offers conversation seasoned with leading questions that enter the world of Islam in order to lead Muslims beyond it – and into Scripture, where they find their ultimate answers.² “Do not hesitate to quote from the Bible,” Rhodes advises. “Remember, ‘Faith comes from hearing, and hearing from the Word of Christ’” (280). Here Islam is not a false ideology but *a fallow mission field*.

These two approaches apparently contradict. Geisler demands that we acknowledge the nonsensical character of Muslim faith, while Rhodes asks us to affirm it as persuasive and powerful. Apologists tend to read the Bible defensively, intercultural missionaries promotionally. We disagree and talk past one another in part because we see and use Scripture differently.

Where the Bible is *a means of conversion*, Islam – with whose categories Muslims must first interpret it – becomes *a basis for conversion*. Much evangelical missionary literature commends giving Muslims the Bible. Scripture's voices are often closer to Muslim worlds than modern western voices. When translated appropriately they proclaim the faith apart from the distortions of Constantinianism, crusades, imperialism, Coca-Colonization, and Muslim insecurity. William McElwee Miller's *Ten Muslims Meet Christ* and Mark Hanna's *The True Path* testify to some of the results. An Indian Shi'i “had previously come to believe that Christ was the highest and best of all the prophets, but it was not until I finished studying the entire

² In Rhodes' queries one hears the echo of rabbi Jesus asking leading questions about the identity of David's lord in Psalm 110. To a Muslim who argues that Muhammad is the “one like Moses” of Deuteronomy 18:15, Rhodes asks, “Did you know that the Quran in Surah 29:27 says the prophetic line came through Isaac?” (60). To the Muslim accusation of corrupted Christian scripture, he replies, “If it was changed before the time of Muhammad, why does the Quran commend the Bible's reading” (Surahs 5:69, 10:94)? (196). He also asks a hypothetical Muslim, “Why would Caliph Uthman produce an authorized version of the Quran if the Quran had been perfectly preserved from the beginning?” (79).

New Testament that I came to believe in him as Savior and Lord” (Hanna, 21). The undeterred Jesus of Scripture bypasses readers’ objections and engages interlocutors on his own terms. Through the Bible’s patient and suffering witness the Jesus of Christian faith gets a hearing. Scripture’s lines of silent text “plant the Word of God in [Muslim] hearts” (Reza F. Safa, *Inside Islam*, 122). They absorb readers’ counterarguments without retaliating, allowing precious time for roots to grow and shoots to spring up.³

No one of these metaphors seems to include or govern all the others. There is not one evangelical Bible or hermeneutic. Nor is one desirable when the forms of evangelical Christian life are complex and do not reduce to some lowest common denominator. How can Geisler’s false ideology be a tutor for the gospel? Yet it is. How can biblical texts addressed to churches speak to untutored Muslims? Yet they do. While our Bibles reify and distinguish us, the Bible is a versatile *hermeneutical bridge between communities*. Speaking into every culture, Scripture manifests the universality of Christ’s reign and the catholicity of his body.⁴ (Its translatability reveals Islam to be *a language for faith*, a platform from which the gospel can be told and heard.) Our Bibles coexist with the Bibles of other Christian communities and even traditions beyond the Church.

Notable among these traditions is the academy. [My own standard Bibles are the Jewish Publication Society’s Hebrew-English Tanakh (softcover, \$29.99) and the Nestle-Aland Greek-English New Testament (27th edition, \$59.99), and to my New Testament students I recommend *The New Oxford Annotated Bible with the Apocrypha* (\$35.99).] In my circles the Bible is *an*

³ I recognize the same qualities from my own journey to Christian faith. At crucial times the Bible has quietly offered the perfect verse at just the right time. When a Muslim reports that a Bible passage confirmed and interpreted an earlier appearance of the white-robed Jesus who often comes to Muslims in dreams and visions to announce his lordship and call them to faith (Adeney 205-216, Safa 127-130, Rumph 228-230, 233-235), we evangelicals can relate.

⁴ Lesslie Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, Eerdmans 1989, 152.

object of fascination – a decidedly ambiguous image. (For that matter, so is Islam and most everything else.) Yet while the Bible funds the theological reflections that so occupy us scholars, more often it whispers answers to other concerns and shifts my thinking and even my scholarship into another key.⁵ Scripture in its rawness has the authority to bypass the centuries of poisoned discourse between Muslims and Christians – or academics and disciples – and speak according to its own apostolic agenda.

Apologetics can sound both triumphalistic and defensive about Islam, while missionary stories and conversion narratives can sound sanguine about its dialogical potential for nurturing Christian faith. The reality is less predictable and more dramatic. In the wilderness the Bible was Jesus’ means of power against the devil. Where the Bible is *a means of power and presence*, Islam is *a domain of principalities and powers* that dominate Muslims and harass Christians. Charismatic evangelicals subdue these forces and deliver the oppressed with Bible passages in intercessory prayers and power encounters.⁶

Is Islam itself one of those forces? Hal Lindsey’s book *The Everlasting Hatred: The Roots of Jihad* sees Islam as an eschatological enemy of God’s people. Franklin Graham provoked widespread ire and embarrassment for his comments that Islam is “a very evil and wicked religion,” but his judgment is echoed by just about every book on Islam in evangelical bookstores. “Islam denies the deity, death and resurrection of Jesus; therefore, it is an antichrist

⁵ This kind of transformation is the theme of a project of mine in ‘prayerful theology’, *Ain’t Too Proud to Beg: Living through the Lord’s Prayer* (Eerdmans, 2007).

⁶ Jane Rumph notes the role the Bible plays in a “power encounter” in an Albanian hospital in which an old and nearly blind man has his sight restored:

The gray-haired Muslim, scruffy and wrinkled, lay still, his eyes nearly closed in slits. When he glanced up, the team could see a white film over one of his eyes. Bill [Gray] and David [Russert] began to pray aloud, while Gus laid a hand on the man and Cathy stretched out hers. With authority they interceded for healing and salvation in the name of Jesus, asking God to reveal Himself. *David quoted from Scripture*. As they prayed, the man broke down in tears. Cathy reported later that she was watching as the man’s eyes started to enlarge. The white film cleared slowly from his eye until it disappeared. By the end of the prayer the Muslim’s eyes were completely open (226).

religion,” says Reza F. Safa, who goes on to say, “I believe Islam is Satan’s weapon to oppose God, His plan and His people” (17-18). What does this kind of talk say about evangelicalism? Is the Bible *a means of hate*, and Islam *one of its targets*? The “fundamentalist” Bible is often feared as such.

However, before jumping to conclusions consider the October 2002 release of *Jonah*, the first full-length film in the VeggieTales children’s series. God points Jonah, a comfortable moralist, to a map of the Middle East with Ninevah off in a forbidding corner that astute viewers would recognize as the northern no-fly-zone of Saddam Hussein’s Iraq. The film’s wisest character is not one of the story’s Jews, but a prophetic caterpillar named Khalil (yes, as in Gibran). While Muslims were killing and enslaving Christians in the Sudan and south Asia and as America was preparing for war in Iraq, these evangelical Christians *inserted an Arab prophet* to stress the irony of grace that pervades Jonah, and conservative audiences brought their children in droves to see it. Bicoastal elitists may scoff at fundamentalist Midwesterners, but one of 2002’s most introspective and culturally subversive films came from a small company of evangelical parents from Illinois.

After all, where *the Bible is a judge* it renders God’s dialectical verdict of *apocalyptic judgment and loving affirmation*, and Islam is *an object of both*. Graham’s organization pours relief supplies into Bosnia, Kosovo, Sudan, Afghanistan, Turkey, and Iraq. Graham says that “while as Christians we disagree with Islamic teachings, if we obey the teachings of Jesus we will love all Muslims.” Safa, a former Shi’i Muslim, introduces his book by forbidding readers to reach spiteful or resentful conclusions about Muslims, assuring that “Muslims in general are very loving and hospitable people” (9-10). Uncompromising negativity and unconditional love exist side by side in the great majority of evangelical analyses of Islam.

The Bible narrates the cosmos, the nations, Israel, and every human life from their beginnings through the cross of Jesus to their eternal ends. In that story, Brad Kallenberg says, we discover not only God but also ourselves⁷ – and everyone else, for where the Bible is *the ultimate narrator* of all histories, Islam is *a figure in its narratives*.

Which figure? Answering this question will lead us to the next topic I want to discuss: how to read our Bibles well. I am persuaded that Muslims are not adequately understood as the Ishmaelites of Genesis, the enemy empires of the prophets, the God-fearing *goyim* of Acts, the cultural conservatives of James' Jerusalem Church, the false prophet of Revelation, nor even the Pharisees or Samaritans of the Gospels. They are closer to us, right in the middle of the story. In my humble opinion, Islam is *Simon bar-Jonah*. The man is a walking contradiction: an adversary, a beneficiary, and a trustee of God's grace all in one. Simon's difficulty is not that he has the wrong God or the wrong Messiah, but that he construes the right God and Messiah in the wrong way (Matt. 16:13-28). Islam is not the blasphemous idolatry of a Pilate but the opposition of a follower who rebukes Jesus for promising suffering. [*Every spirit* that does not confess Jesus ... is the spirit of antichrist ... the spirit of error" (1 John 4:3-4, 6).] All our partial accounts of Islam fit Peter's character. And if Islam is satanic, it is no less satanic than the rest of us who trail our Lord while trying to leave our crosses behind.

Islam as Simon Peter is not something I encountered in some other source; I arrived at it myself. How is such a conclusion made? And by what criteria can it be judged? David Yeago argues that understanding the Bible involves making judgments that cannot be made through "Scripture alone," mere technique, or formal theological method. True understanding must

⁷ Brad J. Kallenberg, *Live to Tell*, Brazos 2002, 104-119.

appreciate “the *force and implications* of what the text says.”⁸ This requires resources “embedded in the form of ecclesial life, in the normative rituals and institutions and patterns of interaction that constitute the church as a singular people” (56). Using Scripture well *both requires and grows* healthy community, obedience, exposure, training, skill, and virtue. In just this way, like Peter’s joyful fellowship in Acts 2, Muslim background believers study the Bible together, practice devotions, and memorize and chant it in Muslim style. Miriam Adeney’s *Daughters of Islam* describes women who memorize forty-two verses from the Gospel of John, both because they are less responsive to European lecturing and American inductive study techniques, and because the words need to be available when these women find themselves alone, abandoned by their families and friends, and in need (160-162). At the same time, Muslim social solidarity gives these sisters a heart for their familial persecutors and a steadfast loyalty to their new brothers and sisters that puts individualistic westerners to shame. These communities are “Islamizing” the Bible as well as “biblicizing” Islam – not by vitiating Scripture’s message but by expressing that message according to a culture in which the Word can take root and a discipling community in which it can thrive under pressure. Where Scripture is *God’s Word to the Church*, Islam is *a social order both oppressive and supportive of Christ’s body*.

Philosophy and theology supply a wealth of theoretical frameworks for understanding our factory of Scripture and its remarkable product line. “Meaning is use” (Ludwig Wittgenstein): our uses of Scripture arise from and govern our complicated lives. Rationality is tradition (Alasdair MacIntyre): we do not so much fabricate or choose metaphors for Scripture as our communities of inquiry initiate us and form us with their biblical practices. Evangelical images

⁸ David Yeago, “The Bible,” in James J. Buckley and David S. Yeago, eds., *Knowing the Triune God*, Eerdmans 2001, 52.

of Scripture emerge as we use the Bible, as we become familiar with it, and as it shapes us. Our varieties of interpretation are our varieties of evangelicalism.

Then *is* the Bible whatever we make it after all? Does all this variety imply one coherent account of Islam or anything else, or just an unstable hodgepodge of reader responses? To press the issue, do evangelical biblical practices make sense?

Perhaps not. R.R. Reno blames the weaknesses of mainline Protestant churches not on techniques such as historical criticism but a deeper pattern of modern and postmodern distancing from forces of change. “The very core of Christian life and practice is alienated from the Bible,” he says, citing the life of his Episcopal Church USA as signal of an American Christianity where the plain sense of Scripture is simply no longer taken seriously as a norm for church discipline, family life, worship, or evangelism.⁹

The Scriptures have become the site of contest and conflict rather than the instrument of adjudication. ... In current debates Scripture is so deeply implicated in the perceived impediments to fuller life (patriarchy or homophobia or fear of difference or ethnocentrism – take your pick) that it is ruled out as the source of a possible solution.¹⁰

The situation is different among evangelicals than Episcopalians, but less and less different. Our debates shift from the content of Scripture to hermeneutics, history, or philosophy more and more quickly as we seek other and allegedly prior ground on which to justify our different interpretations of Scripture. Among us too the Bible has been a site of contest and conflict rather than our instrument of adjudication. (For instance, would you all like to chat about the Rapture?) These contests are not a function of the complexity of biblical hermeneutics; that complexity has been with us all along. They are a sign of another metaphor of Scripture we are reluctant to acknowledge: that of *an adversary*.

⁹ R.R. Reno, *In the Ruins of the Church*, Brazos, 2002, 90, 136.

¹⁰ Reno, 136-137.

Judge for yourselves: is the following a list of problems in Islam or evangelicalism?

Bluster hides insecurity. [Check.] Triumphalist eschatology and historical revision cover for past failures. [Check. ...] Imperialism lurks underneath otherworldliness. Love of beauty rationalizes ugliness. Legalism masquerades as grace. Awesome commitment wearies into apathetic loyalty. Those nearest in affection are persecuted. Rhetoric of human freedom collides with rhetoric of divine determinism and compulsion. Remarkable hospitality turns to fierce defensiveness. Shoddy apologetics prop up improbable claims. Self-assertion poses as submission. Honor trumps forgiveness. Idealism yields to utility under pressure. Trivialities crowd out weighty matters of the law.

Why? These things happen when we are using the Bible as reactionaries or revolutionaries rather than apostles – as an instrument of our own wills rather than as Holy Scripture.¹¹ [That is a topic for another day!] Many Muslim- as well as Hindu-background believers told Lesslie Newbigin that their transformations resembled Paul's. "At the point of crisis Jesus appeared to them as one who threatened all that was most sacred to them. In the light of their experience of life in Christ they now look back and see that he has safeguarded and fulfilled it."¹² Love of God, passion for holiness, profound respect for God's Word, pursuit of his mercy and compassion, zeal for total submission to divine law, close attention to the traditions of God's messengers, invitation for all the world to worship: when these Muslim (or evangelical) virtues are set alongside those vices we find only the familiar contradiction of grace. Where the Bible is *a mirror of life experience*, Islam is *the life of Saul of Tarsus*. To respond as Saul did to

¹¹ Telford Work,

¹² Lesslie Newbigin, *The Open Secret*, Eerdmans 1995, 177.

that grace is to undergo what Richard Hays calls “conversion of the imagination” with which Paul read the Scriptures in the new light of Jesus Christ.¹³

We need that conversion too. We evangelicals are a mess: concupiscent, divided, self-serving, institutionally dysfunctional, increasingly biblically illiterate, unskillful and shallow in our Scriptural reading, poor trainers and poorly trained, and prone to looking outside the tradition for quick fixes to our problems. Yeago’s advice for mainline Protestants is good advice also for us: Greater technical expertise or even simply knowing the texts better will not solve our problems (however much these two skills might serve us). “Renewal of the church requires ... renewed practices of being the church, and chief among these are practices of understanding and applying the scriptures” (93). Back to Scripture, we might say!

Yet Reno’s advice is just as important. He describes three kinds of distance separating the Bible and its readers. He notes that at least since Origen, biblical scholars have acknowledged historical distances between themselves and their ancient texts. For just as long, philosophers and theologians have acknowledged the metaphysical limits of human language. He diagnoses our most serious problem as *spiritual* distance: “The present age founders on the problems of history and representation because we are unwilling to enter into the spiritual discipline necessary to travel the distance between what we hear and what is said. ... [T]he moral and ascetical practices that the fathers thought essential to the Christian life are now divorced from intellectual training” (180). It is not enough to be more skillful scribes; we must become scribes *trained for the kingdom of heaven* (Matthew 13:52). We will understand when we obey Scripture as ***our spiritual disciplinarian***.

Our many Bibles should not be taken as signs of nothing but incoherence, indiscipline, division, and hypocrisy. They *are* signs of those confusions, of course; every evangelical use of

¹³ Richard Hays, *The Conversion of the Imagination*, Eerdmans 2005.

the Bible is not a holy one. Yet the evangelical multiplicity of metaphors and correlative images also springs from the heart of our movement. At one level it owes to evangelicalism's mixed Calvinist, Wesleyan, and Pietist heritages. However, it is rooted more deeply in the internal tensions of the gospel that raised these different movements in the first place. Our Bibles are what they are – the Bible is what it is – in the complex roles Scripture plays in the divine economy of salvation that seeks and finds us in mission, addresses us, shows us ourselves in its mirror, judges and forgives us, converts us, conquers our sin, renarrates us, introduces us to one another, and builds us up as we prepare for its promised future. The Bible seems to be involved in all these things because God's estranged creation *needs* all these things to become what the Father has intended it to be. The ultimate contradiction in our biblical practices is soteriological, eschatological, Christological, ecclesiological. It is the mystery at the heart of our faith: the love of enemies for whom the holy Father sent his missionary Son and his emissaries, by and for whom the holy Son suffered and was tempted, and upon whom the Father poured out the indwelling Spirit of holiness. Some may call that a contradiction if they prefer, but I prefer another term: resolution.