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## A CATHOLIC LAMENTS THE EVANGELICAL SIN OF “BIBLICISM”

a book review of  
*The Bible Made Impossible: Why Biblicism Is Not  
a Truly Evangelical Reading of Scripture*  
by Christian Smith

(Brazos Press, 2011)

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Christian Smith—professor at the University of Notre Dame, recently converted Catholic, and author of *Soul Searching and Souls in Transition*—has written a number of insightful, helpful books. *The Bible Made Impossible* is not one of them. This book is Smith’s attempt to prove that the way evangelicals approach the Bible in this country is wrong, and dreadfully so.

By his estimation, American evangelicalism is beholden to a biblicist hermeneutic. By “biblicist” he means “a theory about the Bible that emphasizes together its exclusive authority, infallibility, perspicuity, self-sufficiency, internal consistency, self-evident meaning, and universal applicability” (p. viii). More thoroughly, Smith asserts that biblicism is the constellation of ten different assumptions or beliefs: (1) The words of the Bible are identical with God’s words written inerrantly in human language. (2) The Bible represents the totality of God’s will for humanity. (3) The divine will for all issues relevant to Christian life is contained in the Bible. (4) Any reasonable person can correctly understand the plain meaning of the text. (5) The way to understand the Bible is to look at the obvious, literal sense. (6) The Bible can be understood without reliance on creeds, confessions, or historic church traditions. (7) The Bible possesses internal harmony and consistency. (8) The Bible is universally applicable for all Christians. (9) All matters of Christian belief and practice can be learned through inductive Bible study. (10) The Bible is a kind of handbook or textbook for Christian faith and practice.

While some evangelicals may downplay or deny some of these points, Smith suggests as long as you hold to some of these points, you are still a biblicist (pp. 4–5).

At first you may be tempted to think Smith is targeting the silly extremes of evangelicalism. And he does do this often—criticizing the books that claim to give the

final biblical word on cooking or dating or handling stress. Evangelicals can make the mistake of thinking the Bible says everything about everything. They can also be guilty of majoring on the minors or forcing the Bible to address matters it never meant to address. Smith is right to deconstruct these tendencies.

But he's not just picking around the edges of the big tent. He's gutting the center. He sees biblicism in the official doctrinal statements from the Southern Baptist Convention and the Evangelical Free Church. He finds it in the statements of faith from Wheaton, Moody, Gordon-Conwell, Covenant, Westminster, Dallas, Talbot, Concordia, and Asbury. He cites what he deems to be biblicist instincts in respected scholars such as D. A. Carson, G. K. Beale, J. I. Packer, and David Wells. Even extremely nuanced documents like the 1978 Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy are routinely criticized, even lampooned, as unworkable, naïve, and biblicist. In short, pretty much every conservative evangelical preacher, institution, and scholar is hopelessly and shamelessly entrenched in biblicism.

**What Gives?** The main problem with biblicism (as Smith defines it), and the recurring theme of the book, is the presence of "pervasive interpretive pluralism" (PIP). Smith, who coined the term "moralistic therapeutic Deism," has a knack for labeling. In essence, what Smith means is that biblicist approaches to Scripture cannot work because intelligent, sincere, fair-minded evangelicals can't begin to agree on what the Bible actually says. If the Bible were really clear, internally harmonious, and univocal, we should be able to come to agreement on what the Bible teaches (25). But we can't and never will, Smith argues. Instead, we have countless books that give multiple views on everything from the atonement to baptism to hell to the rapture to the historical Jesus (22–23). We disagree on periphery, but also on "essential matters of doctrine and faithful practice" (25). By Smith's calculation, evangelical disagreement is so severe that we have created, in theory, more than five million unique, potential belief positions (24).

The solution to this intractable problem, Smith argues, is to ditch biblicism altogether in favor of a Christocentric hermeneutic. A truly evangelical approach to Scripture understands that the evangel is at the center of the Bible's message. So we should be less sure and less concerned with most of the theological convictions dear to us. Instead we should "only, always, and everywhere read scripture in view of its real subject matter: Jesus Christ" (98). When we understand this, we will not expect the Bible to speak to all our questions, and we will not expect internal consistency (except, presumably, on the matter of the gospel). This is where Smith finds Karl Barth tremendously helpful. With Barth's guidance, evangelicals can stop divinizing the Bible and realize the written word is meant only to point to the Word incarnate. We will hold tenaciously to Jesus Christ and loosely to everything else.

Of course, very few evangelicals I know would disagree with the notion of a Christocentric hermeneutic. In fact, nothing in recent years has been talked about more in evangelical circles than the gospel itself. We have *Together for the Gospel* and *The Gospel Coalition* and umpteen books with the word gospel in the title. We have conferences on preaching the gospel from the whole Bible and homiletical models that

emphasize seeing Christ as the hero in every story. So I'm not sure why Smith thinks a Christocentric reading of Scripture stands in opposition to what he dubs "biblicism," especially when he admits to seeing it in people such as John Stott and in the SBC "2000 Baptist Faith and Message" of all places (103, 108). A Barthian view may be missing from evangelical hermeneutics, but increasingly Christocentrism is not.

**What's Wrong?** But there are bigger problems with Smith's proposal than overlooking good examples of his best ideas. For starters, the book is littered with straw men. Smith frequently attacks ideas that none of the mainstream institutions, documents, or persons he criticizes holds. He opposes mechanical dictation theory, admitting that "most" thoughtful evangelicals do not hold to it (81). I can't help but wonder which thoughtful evangelicals do? Likewise, he mocks the logic of biblicism for being equally certain about the divinity of Jesus as it is about the ethics of biblical dating (137). But who actually espouses any of this? These are simply cheap shots.

At other times it seems that Smith is ignorant of mainstream evangelical theology. He frequently attacks the notion that the Bible is completely clear, but then in the end he says the Bible is perfectly clear when it comes to the important stuff of the gospel (132). This is not very different from classic notions of perspicuity, which always have pointed out that the Bible is not equally clear in every matter. Smith frequently gives the impression that no one has ever considered the problems he sees, as if no one has ever thoughtfully dealt with problems of harmonization, genre, or questions of culture and context. He goes on about how words have a semantic range and how certain passages have layered meanings. This is basic stuff taught in almost every "biblicist" seminary.

Some of Smith's most important arguments rest on false dichotomies. Consider this paragraph:

*The Bible is not about offering things like a biblical view of dating — but rather about how God the Father offered his Son, Jesus Christ, to death to redeem a rebellious world from the slavery and damnation of sin. The Bible is not about conveying divine principles and managing a Christian business — but is instead about Christ on the cross triumphing over all principalities and powers and so radically transforming everything we consider to be our business. Scripture, this view helps to see, is not about guiding Christian emotions management and conquering our anger problems — but is rather about Jesus Christ being guided by his unity with the Father to absorb the wrath of God against sin in his death and conquering the power of sin in his resurrection. Scripture then ceases to be about teaching about biblical manhood and womanhood or biblical motherhood and fatherhood — and becomes instead the story of how a covenant-making and promise-keeping God took on full human personhood in Jesus Christ in order to reconcile this alienated and wrecked world to the eternally gracious Father. (111)*

Amen to all that, but why all the "not this, but that" language? Of course the Bible is not *about* biblical manhood and womanhood if "about" means "this is the main point." But

doesn't the Bible have something to say about being a mom, or running a business, or going on a date? Or do only biblicists try to apply the Bible to all of life?

Strangely enough, Smith begins the next paragraph by admitting, "That is not to say that evangelical Christians will never have theologically informed moral and practical views of dating and romance, business dealings, emotions, gender identities and relations, and parenting" (111). So maybe the Bible is kinda sorta about handling our emotions after all, even if no one would say that's the main point.

Smith backtracks from his most provocative assertions. He bashes biblicism, only to come back to a proposal that sounds very much like what he calls biblicism. For example, he criticizes evangelicals for insisting on the Bible's internal consistency, but later says "we must believe in *some* kind of internal biblical coherence or unity" (102). Usually, for Smith, harmonization is what rationalist systematic theologians do, but he also acknowledges, "In some cases, to be sure, harmonizations of biblical accounts may actually be right." The problem is when they are forced or implausible (134). No "biblicist" scholar I know would disagree.

Likewise, early in the book, Smith rejects the slogan "in essentials unity; in non-essentials liberty; and in all things charity." He says it doesn't work because no one can agree on the essential doctrines or even on which doctrines are essential. But later (acknowledging apparent inconsistency on his part) he introduces the categories of dogma, doctrine, and opinion to help sort through which issues in the Bible are most important (134–38).

When it suits his rhetorical aim, Smith makes a big deal about the multiplicity of interpretations among evangelicals. But when he wants to make a point important to him, suddenly the Bible speaks clearly. For example, he asserts that Ron Sider's book *Rich Christians in an Age of Hunger* makes "a clear biblical case about poverty and hunger" (32). Similarly, the commandments that instruct Christians to give away their money generously are "pervasive, clear, straightforward, obvious, and simple" (144).

This gets to the Achilles heel of Smith's argument. His reliance on "pervasive interpretative pluralism" is not pervasive. The theory comes and goes. Look at these two quotes:

*If scripture is as authoritative and clear on essentials as biblicists say it is, then why can't the Christian church—or even only biblicist churches—get it together and stay together, theologically and ecclesiologically? (175)*

*It should be possible for all sorts of Christians, if they really grasp the difference and importance of these three distinctions [dogma, doctrine, opinion], to agree on a short list of beliefs that genuinely belong at the level of dogma. (136)*

On the one hand, biblicists naively think the Bible is clear and authoritative on essentials. On the other hand, all sorts of Christians should be able to agree on essential beliefs. So is it right or wrong to insist that the Bible speaks clearly and authoritatively on doctrinal essentials? Or perhaps the unstated assumption is that official church

tradition can define our essential beliefs. But given the divisions and serious disagreements within the Roman Catholic Church (despite external organizational unity), why shouldn't the problem of PIP also blow up a biblicist approach to church tradition?

**Biblical Authority.** According to Smith, Scripture is only a subsidiary revelation. Its function is simply to point to Christ and testify to him (117, 120). But this does not do justice to the biblical reality that God also manifests Himself through His word. The language of "the word" is used because it refers to God's self-disclosure. The Bible is the word of God inscripturated that continues to make Christ, the Word of God incarnate, available and knowable to us. In Matthew 10, Jesus equates rejection of the disciples' words with rejection of Him (vv. 14–15, 40). In John 15, Jesus equates His words abiding in us with Him abiding in us (vv. 4–5, 7–8). In Exodus 19, Israel's relationship to God is determined by their relationship to His words (v. 5). As Timothy Ward says, "God has invested himself in words, or we could say that God has so identified himself with his words that whatever someone does to God's words (whether it is to obey or disobey) they do directly to God himself."<sup>1</sup>

To say the Word of God is only a pointer to the Word Christ is saying far too little. God is near to His people in the nearness of His words (Deut. 4:7–8; 30:11–14); God's Spirit is present where his words are present (Ps. 33:6; Isa. 34:16; 59:21; John 6:63); the speech of God has divine attributes (Ps. 19; 119); and the Word of God does things only God can do (Heb. 4:12–13). As John Frame points out, "The psalmists view the words of God with religious reverence and awe, attitudes appropriate only to an encounter with God himself...This is extraordinary, since Scripture uniformly considers it idolatrous to worship anything other than God. But to praise or fear God's word is not idolatrous. To praise God's word is to praise God himself."<sup>2</sup>

**Biblicism Redux.** In the end, I wonder what pastors are left with after they lose their "biblicism." I am all for gaining a Christocentric hermeneutic and keeping the main thing the main thing. But Smith's radical ambiguity about most doctrinal matters doesn't work in the real world. It is, to borrow a phrase, "the Bible made impossible." At some point, even with "pervasive interpretative pluralism" on the issue of divorce and remarriage, as a pastor I need to tell people what I think about their impending breakup. I can't fall back on PIP when deciding whether I will baptize a baby or ordain a woman elder. If a college student asks me for guidance in his dating relationship, I'm going to try to show him what it means to go out with this girl as a follower of Christ. If he wants to date a guy, well, there are Bible verses about that, too—whether "good people" disagree on them or not. When our people read through the Bible in a year, I'll encourage them to plow through the strange or boring parts because every part of sacred Scripture is profitable for teaching, reproof, correction, and for training in righteousness (2 Tim. 3:16).

And later this fall, when my evening preaching series brings me to Titus 1:12–13 (where Paul says "all Cretans are liars"), I'm certainly not going to conclude that

“making such a proclamation violates many of Paul’s own moral teachings in other Epistles” and that his harsh words about the Cretans (through the words of one of their poets) means Paul “still needed sanctification from the sin of ethnic prejudice” (73). I will approach the text understanding the Bible is consistent with itself and has something to say to all people in all places at all times. I will see how the passage points to Christ and how it applies today. I will use the best tools available to ascertain the correct meaning of the text, believing that texts do have meanings and they can be understood. In short, I suppose I will approach those verses like a biblicist. And I’m OK with that. —Kevin DeYoung

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## NOTES

- 1 Timothy Ward, *Words of Life: Scripture as the Living and Active Word of God* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2009), 27.
- 2 John M. Frame, *The Doctrine of the Word of God* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R Publishing, 2010), 67.