

Bible Made Impossible Book Review

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The Bible Made Impossible: Why Biblicism Is Not a Truly Evangelical Reading of Scripture
By: Christian Smith
Published 2012
197 pages (240 pages including footnotes and indices)

I hereby attest that I have read this book in its entirety, have not skimmed any part and have applied my best effort in understanding it.

I. Introduction

In *The Bible Made Impossible*, Christian Smith argues, from an American Evangelical perspective that Biblicism, the approach to scripture most prevalent in American Evangelicalism, is neither biblical nor as the scripture is intended to be read. In fact, Smith repeats the simple description that it is “impossible.” The most prevalent explanation he offers is that this impossibility derives from “pervasive interpretive pluralism,” the idea that Scripture is often asserted to say directly contradictory things by different groups, both asserting absolute truth in their interpretation. The second half of the book is devoted to suggesting some alternate approaches to Scripture that, in Smith’s estimation, offer a starting point to a “Truly evangelical reading.” While, as previously stated, Smith was writing this from a solidly American Evangelical standpoint, some of the lessons are useful to a Catholic discussion of Scripture, also. A similar Biblicism can be seen in some Catholic circles, and it is helpful to properly situate what it means for the bible to be without error without having to deny the progress of modern scientific inquiry. Smith’s biggest suggestion, a Christocentric hermeneutic in the reading of Scripture, is strikingly close to a Catholic reading; he lacks only the concept of the living Magisterium of the Church to guide that reading and keep it on track.

II. Three Lessons to Be Learned From *The Bible Made Impossible*

The Catholic Church in America, despite decades of broad ecumenism, remains not infrequently in conflict with several of the Evangelical communities. In order to understand this conflict and draw Christ's Church into the true unity for which he prayed, it is important to understand the actual approach to Scripture and theology that is used by these groups. Too frequently, Catholics instead either have such a weak understanding of their own faith that they cannot identify the differences between the Biblicism prevalent in American Evangelism and a Catholic reading of Scripture or they have an understanding of the origins of the American Evangelical beliefs that amount to little more than a caricature such that no meaningful dialog can take place. A close reading of *The Bible Made Impossible* can serve to alleviate the latter of these two challenges by offering an explanation, albeit critical, from within the milieu. As a summary of the understanding of Biblicism as Smith sees it, he provides ten assumptions that apply the idea. These are as follows: "Divine Writing," "Total Representation," "Complete Coverage," "Democratic Perspicuity," "Commonsense Hermeneutics," "Sola Scriptura," "Internal Harmony," "Universal Applicability," "Inductive Method," and the "Handbook Model" of reading Scripture.¹ It is true that, from a Catholic perspective, several of these seem perfectly reasonable based only on the name, it must be noted that, as they are applied, they frequently lack the nuance called for in Catholic Scripture scholarship.

A second lesson of value in this book is Smith's extended discussion of "pervasive interpretive pluralism," which is the subject of the second chapter, but a recurring theme throughout the text. According to Smith, this term refers to the problem prevalent in American Evangelism whereby Scripture is used to justify or prove varying points, often directly

¹ Christian Smith, *Bible Made Impossible, The: Why Biblicism Is Not a Truly Evangelical Reading of Scripture*, Reprint ed. (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2012), 4-5.

contradicting one another. At times, the same texts are even used to prove such points. Smith notes that the common reply to this challenge against Biblicism is that the differences are not central matters, but secondary matters. Therefore, the problem is not of a nature that should lead one to reject Biblicism as an interpretive hermeneutic for Scripture. Smith rightly points out that, despite claims to the contrary, these interpretive differences can be found in matters that, while they frequently are not the most central tenet of the faith, that is, the death and resurrection of Christ as a saving act for men, they are certainly found in areas that are not entirely tangential. For example, Smith lists important interpretive differences, all biblically based and held by mainstream groups, in “Church polity” and management,² questions of “Free will and predestination,”³ ways of interpreting the commandment to keep holy the Sabbath,⁴ “The morality of slavery,”⁵ “Gender difference and equality.”⁶ Smith’s list goes on for several pages further, but, suffice it to say, he shows that these questions are certainly not simply window dressing of the faith but important tenets of different ecclesial communities. As was noted previously, this is useful to understand the context from which various evangelical groups in America come. Smith then goes on to note several responses that are common when this concern is raised. Smith discusses six possible replies to the problem of this pervasive interpretive pluralism, three common and three hypothetical that he wants to answer before they are raised. Smith notes that the source of the problem seems, in fact, to be the fact that many texts in scripture are multivocal, an idea well represented in Catholic Scriptural scholarship by discussion of the four senses of Scripture. Furthermore, Smith notes that even a single word can have different meanings in Scripture.

² Smith, 28.

³ Smith, 29.

⁴ Smith, 29.

⁵ Smith, 30.

⁶ Smith, 30.

A third worthwhile lesson can be found in Smith's third chapter. To offer some idea of the origin of this problem, he observes that the underlying problem with much of this problem is a modernist view of language that does not admit to such intricacies. As Doctor James Jacobs of Notre Dame Seminary commonly observes, "a bad Philosophy will lead to a bad theology."⁷ From his background as a sociologist, Smith follows some of the historical, philosophical, and sociological pressures that converge to draw American Evangelicalism into this morass and why it frequently appears that those engaged in this hermeneutic are not troubled by the pervasive interpretive pluralism that is the natural outcome of the approach. Smith offers five possible answers to the final question: they do not fully recognize the problem since they generally spend time with those who agree with them, they minimize the differences and deny the scope of the problem, the pluralism offers them a differentiating factor that allows them to identify themselves from other groups, the fear that engaging in dialog to identify and resolve these differences may require specific groups to undergo what they see as compromise of their beliefs, and, finally, a fear of allowing Scriptural texts to be vague or unclear because such a notion seems, to them, unbecoming God as the verbal author of the texts.

Smith's book goes on to discuss several other aspects of the problem and possible solutions to it, but these three lessons will prove useful to Catholics in modern America. First, they will be invaluable in understanding a proper context for the beliefs of American Evangelicals. Second, they will provide valuable challenges to the preconceived notions of these groups that do not require them to first adopt Catholic beliefs, authority, and structures, which would likely prove an insurmountable barrier.

III. Strengths and Weaknesses of *The Bible Made Impossible*

⁷ Dr. James Jacobs, Personal Correspondence.

Overall, Smith's argument is sound. He provides strong support and offers almost overwhelming evidence for his arguments, and his arguments and suggestions are both well developed, defined, and presented. The soundness of his argument in the main body of the book is best defended by his responses in the afterword to the initial reception of the book. A brief survey of responses on the Internet revealed similar responses. Serious criticism of the text was sparse; instead, most negative response came from groups or people so entrenched that it seems they would be unable to critically discuss the challenge to their hermeneutic approach.

Although there are likely examples that could be brought out in further discussion with proponents of Biblicism, one example of his well-developed arguments is found in the discussion mentioned above regarding pervasive interpretive pluralism. Smith first offers the issue as it is. Then, he considers several of the responses that are common among Biblicists and offers rebuttals to those. He even composes a few responses that fit the Biblicist approach to respond to them. In a fashion reminiscent of the Scholastic approach, Smith offers his argument, and then preemptively offers rebuttals to well defined and presented responses to his argument.

The greatest weakness, when approaching this text from a Catholic perspective, lies in the very fact that Smith wrote the book from the perspective of and for American evangelicals. Within this book, Smith was unable to escape some of the other faults of that environment. One glaring example can be found in the fact that he holds up Martin Luther as an exemplar of Christocentric biblical exegesis.⁸ Rather, it must be noted that, in many cases, Luther more closely resembled the approach that Smith rejects in his discussion of some of the problems with Biblicism.⁹ This is clear in Luther's reaction to the Epistle of James as he reacts to the fact that it does not support his notion of *Sola Fides*. In that instance, Luther clearly approaches the bible, as

⁸ Smith, 106.

⁹ Smith, 75.

a tool to support his preconceived notions, and he rejects any passage or content that fails to do so.

IV. Overall Evaluation

Smith's critique of Biblicism stands up to most challenges, and he effectively shows that it is untenable or, in his word, impossible. The second half of the book provides at least a starting point to resolving the issue within the context of American Evangelicalism. In this overall evaluation it is important to note that Smith does not provide a final solution to the problem nor does he set out to do so. As he clearly states, his goal is to "contribute *toward* theorizing a nonbiblicist yet definitely evangelical approach to scriptural authority."¹⁰ He seeks to open the dialog with a suggestion, not close it with a solution. In providing this starting point, he is eminently successful. The fruit of this starting point can be clearly seen in the fact that, as he noted in the afterword, it led him to enter full communion with the Catholic Church.

V. A Significant Section

In offering his proposal for a starting point of a new approach to Scripture, at least in an American Evangelical context, Smith proposes a Christocentric model for approaching the Scriptures. In the section, "Jesus Christ: The True and Final Word,"¹¹ he develops this idea. As a starting point, he observes that the true Word of God is Jesus Christ. Scripture is not of the same level as Christ, but it is rather a "written word of witness and testimony."¹² If the Bible is made an idol in place of Christ, there is certainly a problem; Christ must always be maintained "before and above" it as "God's living Word."¹³ Frequently, American evangelicals seem to perceive the Bible as "God's highest self-revelation." This is a reasonable result of several other forces,

¹⁰ Smith, 97.

¹¹ Smith, 116-121.

¹² Smith, 116.

¹³ Smith, 116.

including the Catholic use of Sacred Tradition as a witness to God's revelation. The over-exaltation of the Bible is not a novel development; its seminal form was already present in the Patristic period and rejected by Saint Ignatius of Antioch.

Furthermore, it is necessary to approach Scripture with the understanding that Jesus was not a Palestinian Jew who died two thousand years ago and left behind a written record for us to follow, but rather a living presence in the Church to this day. Instead of realizing that central point of the living person of Jesus Christ, Biblicism "borders on idolatry" by exalting the written text over the living Word. Some may dismiss this concern as "liberal," but that would be a misnomer. Rather than set Christ as the center of the faith, liberalism tends to attempt to treat Christian texts as fantasy or mythology where they include miracles. Rather than a true critique, the accusation of "liberal" against this concern is a defense that "betray[s] an ignorance of what theological liberalism is."¹⁴

In order for Christ to maintain his proper place and the Bible in its place in relation to Him, it must be recalled that, in the words of Craig Allert, as quoted by Smith, "The Christian faith did not grow in response to a book but as a response to God's interaction with the community of faith."¹⁵ This change in approach to the Bible can begin to address the challenges of Biblicism on several fronts. Two seem most evident. First of all, to help to address pervasive interpretive pluralism, this will remove some of the need to have final clear and concrete answers; Since the Bible is a witness to the Word, and not the Word itself, it does not need such absolute answers. Second, to address the daily handbook usage of Scripture, it will serve to refocus the Christian on Christ rather than seeking Biblical rules for the mundane aspects of life.

¹⁴ Smith, 119.

¹⁵ Smith, 120.

The Catholic Church observes this same concern when it reminds the faithful that, “the Christian faith is not a ‘religion of the book.’ Christianity is the religion of the ‘Word’ of God, a word which is ‘not a written and mute word, but the Word which is incarnate and living.’”¹⁶ Hence, this distinction is important to any proper understanding of the Christian faith. Indeed, it was likely an important step along the path to Smith’s eventual entry into communion with the Catholic Church.

VI. A New Idea

Smith spends several pages offering some explanations of why pervasive interpretive pluralism seems not to concern those who embrace the Biblicist hermeneutic. Building from his own background as a sociologist, Smith’s insights are useful to help a reader take the position seriously and accept it from otherwise sound intellects. It is important to note that, in this section, Smith admits that he is offering possibilities rather than an exhaustive sociological or psychological study. He offers five possible sociological or psychological explanations for this seeming inconsistency.

The first possibility Smith offers is a sociological principle called “homophily.” This is the notion that, as a rule, humans tend to clump into groups that think similarly. Because of this, it is possible that the vast scope of the interpretive pluralism is not clear to many from within. Smith’s second proposal distills to denial of the problem or minimizing the scope or depth of the problem. Frequently, challenges are simply disregarded with the assertion that the differences are minor. As previously noted, this was already disproved in fact in Smith’s book, but it is important to note it as a common response. A third possibility stems from the advantage of having outsiders to create an “us and them mentality.” Even among Christians, individual

¹⁶ Catholic Church, *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2nd Ed. (Washington, DC: United States Catholic Conference, 2000), 31.

ecclesial communities frequently take advantage of differentiating themselves from outsiders to create greater cohesion in their own community. Fourth, Smith proposes that biblicists fall to the temptation to believe that any other reading of scripture would be liberal Protestantism, and not a true reading of God’s word. Finally, Smith suggests that there may be a “grasping for human control”¹⁷ that leads many American evangelicals to accept the shortcomings of Biblicism in exchange for the complete clarity and precision they need from Scripture.

VII. Some New Questions

Early in his text, Smith offers several faith statements and confessions from varying American evangelical groups. Specifically, he excerpts the part of each related to their approach to Scripture. From these excerpts, Smith shows the breadth of application of the Biblicist hermeneutic and removes the possibility of rejecting his text as applying only to a small group of extremists.

The question that arises from his examples, however, relates to creating the proper understandings and distinctions of the biblical interpretation hermeneutic of these groups from that which the Catholic Church asserts. Several of the statements, from the text itself, run very near a Catholic understanding. The question frequently lies in certain modifiers that lack some of the nuance that has developed over the centuries in Catholic theology. Two excellent examples are phrases like (emphasis added) “Scripture makes known *clearly*...” or scripture is “wholly and *verbally* God-given.”¹⁸

VIII. A Great Quote

¹⁷ Smith, 65.

¹⁸ Smith, 14-15.

Driving the rush into Bible-only-ism was not a well-considered theological rationale, but rather the populist, individualistic, democratizing tendencies of the ideology of the Revolutionary and early Republic eras.¹⁹

In this single sentence, Smith sums up a portion of the historical problem with Biblicism as an approach to Scripture. That is, instead of building on the centuries of Church tradition in place, even traditions of the Protestant communities, it is a child of modernity and the philosophies that modernity spawned. Clearly, an argument with such a polemical tone would be ineffective to draw anyone out of this approach to the Bible, but it remains an accurate assessment to understand the origins of this erroneous hermeneutic.

IX. Conclusion

Christian Smith's *The Bible Made Impossible* successfully argues, from a purely Protestant perspective, that the prevalent Biblicist hermeneutic in much of American evangelicalism is not only unbiblical, but actually impossible in application. Smith offers an assessment of the breadth and depth of the problem as well as some ideas and suggestions to resolve the issue and replace Biblicism with a reading of the Bible that is, in his estimation, still evangelical and more appropriate. It is worth noting that, following these suggestions, led Smith into communion with the Catholic Church. It seems likely that anyone, who honestly and fully approaches Scripture, will be similarly led.

¹⁹ Smith, 86.