

# **Babel babble: A Review of The Bible Made Impossible by Christian Smith**

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**Book:** Christian Smith, *The Bible Made Impossible: Why Biblicism is Not a Truly Evangelical Reading of Scripture* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2011, 2012)

## **Introduction**

How should a person read the Bible? In the Reformation, the emphasis was on placing the Bible in the hands of the laity, so that God's people can read God's Word for themselves. Whatever one can say about the Reformation, one must be able to say that putting the Bible into the hands of the laity, into "untrained hands" as it were, is a good thing. But is that really the case?

Sociologist Christian Smith, in his new book, demurred against this approach. Smith's central thesis is that a plain reading of the Bible is impossible, and that one has to approach the Bible differently from that "biblicist" approach.<sup>1</sup> Smith does not advocate for removing the Bible from the hands of the laity, but he thinks the typical approach they take in reading it is not correct. Given that the "biblicist" approach is the approach of the unwashed masses, what Smith's argument implies is that, while the laity can have the Bible, they cannot read it for themselves, because they will otherwise read it with a "biblicist" and hence wrong hermeneutic.<sup>2</sup> Rather, they must be taught to read it differently from what they have been doing by default.

## **What Smith thinks "Biblicism" is**

According to Smith, "biblicism" is "a theory about the Bible that emphasizes together its exclusive authority, infallibility, perspicuity, self-sufficiency, internal consistency, self-evident meaning, and universal applicability."<sup>3</sup> Summarizing it in ten points, Smith's "biblicism" holds that the Bible (1) is divine writing, (2) totally represents God's revelation, (3) completely covers all Christian life and belief, (4) is available for all to read ("Democratic Coverage"), (5) is to be read with a commonsense hermeneutic, (6) that Scripture can be understood without reliance on external creeds and confessions ("Solo Scriptura"), (7) all Scripture harmonizes internally, (8) all Scripture is universally applicable, (9) all biblical truths are achieved by piecing together truths of Scripture,

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<sup>1</sup> Smith, viii

<sup>2</sup> "Many simply assume a kind of background biblicism without giving it much systematic thought." (*Ibid.*, viii). I will note that this implication of Smith's argument is not much different from the modern Roman Catholic position on Bible reading.

<sup>3</sup> Smith, viii

and (10) the Bible can be made into something akin to a textbook through piecing together what it teaches on any subject (“Handbook model”).<sup>4</sup>

In delineating these ten points, Smith is in no way saying that all ten points must be fulfilled for something to be called “biblicist.” Rather, these ten points are the *general* marks of “biblicism” and some of the points could even be downplayed or denied.<sup>5</sup> Evangelicalism as a whole is indicted for being “biblicist,” both “popular evangelical markets and formal evangelical institutions.”<sup>6</sup> Confessionalism does not escape the accusation of “biblicism,” with Smith including in his example of “biblicism” “unapologetically confessional” denominations and seminaries and even confessions of faith, including the Westminster Confession of Faith.<sup>7</sup> To those who attempt to escape the charge of “biblicism” by either claiming the accusation is “exaggerated,” the problems of “a mere lunatic fringe,” or that it only applies to some other people, Smith does not give them this chance of evasion. Rather, Smith accuses anyone who holds to what he terms “biblicism” to be culpable, both the supposed “lunatic fringe” as well as the respectable churches and scholars. All Evangelicalism and Confessionalism are guilty of “biblicism,” and “deflection through denial” is not an acceptable response to Smith’s charge.<sup>8</sup>

Smith’s approach does not ask one to outright deny biblical authority, but it redefines it as it calls one to see all other normal evangelical assertions of the Bible to be irrelevant and therefore rejected. As exemplified in his criticism of the 1978 *Chicago Statement of Biblical Inerrancy* as being “biblicist,”<sup>9</sup> Smith asserts that the problem with defenses of biblical inerrancy and sufficiency is not that it is wrong, but that is irrelevant.<sup>10</sup> Rather, the problems with biblicism undermine the need for biblical inerrancy or sufficiency such that whether these are so is irrelevant, in the same way that whether humans will invent sustainable nuclear fusion is irrelevant to the Sun continuing to shine.

As it can be seen, Smith’s view of “biblicism” is broad and encompasses many Christians. Anyone who holds to biblical inerrancy and sufficiency, and that one can derive truths just by reading the Bible, is guilty of “biblicism.” It is not possible, under Smith’s definition of biblicism, to reject the label and claim to hold to biblical authority as understood in a Reformed and evangelical sense.

### **Smith’s main problem with “biblicism”**

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<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 4-5

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 5

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 6-8

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 5, 14

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 186

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 14

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, xi

The problem with “biblicism,” for Smith, is the idea of “pervasive interpretive pluralism.”<sup>11</sup> Put simply, there are a plethora of differing and even contradictory interpretations, a “plurality of interpretations,” of what the Bible actually teaches within Evangelicalism. Smith interprets this empirical fact as showing forth that “biblicism” has failed, since the evangelical view of biblical authority “did not actually accomplish the important things that make them relevant, which being official, certified, authorized and specified are meant to achieve—namely, clear, consistent, and focused instruction, direction, information, and guidance for users.”<sup>12</sup> In response to the statement by Vern Poythress that Christians “believe essentially the same things on most of the matters of real importance,” Smith states that such is not the case.<sup>13</sup> Rather, “[o]n most matters of significance concerning Christian doctrine, salvation, church life, practice, and morality, different Christians—including different biblicist Christians—insist that the Bible teaches positions that are divergent and often incompatible with one another.”<sup>14</sup>

Smith next addresses various arguments that might be used in response to his argument that biblicism is impossible. The first argument, which Smith calls the “blame-the-deficient-reader” problem, states that “most Christians who study the Bible actually do so with problematic motives, interests, or skills that prevent them from seeing the coherent truth.”<sup>15</sup> Smith responds by asking why this is so, claiming that this argument undermines biblical perspicuity. The second argument is the “lost-original-autograph explanation,” which Smith disposes of easily.<sup>16</sup> The third argument (“noetically-damaged-reader”) and the fourth argument (“supernatural-confusion explanation”) both undermine the ability of God to actually communicate truth.<sup>17</sup> The fifth argument (“inclusive-higher-synthesis”) asserts that God actually intends to communicate all these truths in the form of a higher synthesis despite their seeming contradictions, and this suffers from the same problem of indicating a failure of God to communicate truth.<sup>18</sup> The sixth response (“purposefully-ambiguous-revelation”) asserts that God intends to make revelation ambiguous for a higher unknown reason, and suffers from the problems with the third, fourth and fifth responses, as well as seeming to make God a God of confusion.<sup>19</sup>

Thus, the problem of “pervasive interpretive pluralism” remains for Smith a major issue for “biblicism.” After all, “why it is that, if everything biblicists say about the Bible is true, well-intentioned Christians to whom scripture has been given cannot read it and come to agreement about what it teaches”?<sup>20</sup> In summary, “if the Bible is all that biblicism claims it to be, then Christians—especially those who share biblicist beliefs—ought to

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<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 17

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 22

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 38, 40

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 38

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 38, 41

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 39, 42

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 39, 42

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 42

be able to come to a solid consensus about what it teaches, at least on most matters of importance. But they do not and apparently cannot.”<sup>21</sup> Therefore, “biblicism” is false.

Later in the book, Smith does a sociological analysis of why he thinks evangelicals hold to “biblicism.”<sup>22</sup> While that might be helpful for some, it is ultimately irrelevant to the issue of “biblicism” since it is reductionistic to reduce belief to a mere sociological phenomenon, not to mention Smith’s analysis reeks of Anglo-American centrism as if only Americans hold to a plain reading of Scripture, showing that Smith has probably little if any exposure to Christians outside the West.

### **Smith’s alternative**

Having criticized “biblicism,” Smith puts forwards some alternatives. Smith first advocates for multivocal and polysemic readings of Scripture,<sup>23</sup> where Scripture has many possible meanings.<sup>24</sup> Under this view that Scripture has many meanings, Smith promotes a “Christocentric” reading of Scripture exemplified by Karl Barth,<sup>25</sup> suggesting that perhaps many doctrines normally considered important should be considered *adiaphora* instead.<sup>26</sup> Christians are thus to accept complexity and ambiguity in Scripture,<sup>27</sup> rejecting what Smith calls “modern epistemological foundationalism.”<sup>28</sup> That said, while Smith rejects the view that the bible conveys objective truths, he insists that certain beliefs such as “dogmas of the Trinity and Nicene Christology” are most certainly true and “nonnegotiable” in Christianity.<sup>29</sup>

### **Response**

#### **On the term “biblicism”**

As noted by Smith, “the term ‘biblicism’ is often used pejoratively” “as a disrespectful slight suggesting ignorance and sophistication.”<sup>30</sup> Smith thus defines it more technically with a focus on the belief and practice of evangelical Christians. Smith therefore has a definition of “biblicism” that is more than a pejorative slight, but is that a proper use of the term “biblicist”?

It might be noticed that this reviewer has so far bracketed the term “biblicist” with inverted commas, precisely because the term itself is under dispute. What, after all, is “biblicism”? In this reviewer’s opinion, the term should be understood in the context in

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<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 26

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 60-4

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 45-8

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 53

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 97-107, 121-4

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 112

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 131

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 149

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 135

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, vii

which it was first used, as one of the pillars of the church historian David Bebbington's Quadrilateral. In Bebbington's magisterial work, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain*, first published in 1989, the four characteristics of Evangelicalism across the centuries are: "conversionism, the belief that lives need to be changed; activism, the expression of the gospel in effort; biblicism, a particular regard for the Bible; and what may be called crucicentrism, a stress on the sacrifice of Christ on the cross."<sup>31</sup> Within the Bebbington quadrilateral, "biblicism" is the belief that "all spiritual truth is to be found in" the pages of Scripture, that the Bible can be clearly understood,<sup>32</sup> and that creeds and confessions and systematic thought are minimized in favor of the explicit teachings of Scripture.<sup>33</sup> "Biblicism" as understood in its Bebbingtonian sense maps onto Smith's points 1-6, but necessarily so. In other words, whereas for Smith, "biblicism" is a catch-all term with the *general* characteristics of his 10 points, for Bebbington, "biblicism" is a specific view of Scripture that must have these *specific* points.

This is important because Smith lumps popular Evangelicalism with Evangelical scholarship, non-confessional and anti-confessional Christians with Confessionalists, in his critique of "biblicism." Even though Confessionalists reject point six,<sup>34</sup> all Confessionalists are implicated as "biblicists" as long as we hold to the final authority, clarity and sufficiency of Scripture, noting Scripture's criticism of the Westminster Confession of Faith here. According to the Bebbingtonian definition, "biblicism" must include adherence to "Solo Scriptura," a rejection of any authority of extra-biblical creeds and confessions. For Smith however, "biblicism" includes both those who adhere to "Solo Scriptura" and those who reject "Solo Scriptura." For Smith, "biblicism" therefore includes everyone who holds to *Sola Scriptura*, as helpfully explained in the Cambridge Declaration:<sup>35</sup>

We reaffirm the inerrant Scripture to be the sole source of written divine revelation, which alone can bind the conscience. The Bible alone teaches all that is necessary for our salvation from sin and is the standard by which all Christian behavior must be measured.

As the work by the church historian David Bebbington came first, it seems strange that Christian Smith, who came later, omits to mention or engage Bebbington, and yet critique the term. It is not right for Smith to come later and usurp an established usage,

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<sup>31</sup> D.W. Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain: A History from the 1730s to the 1980s* (New York, NY: Taylor and Francis; 2005. Kindle Edition), 2-3

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 12

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 143. See also David W. Bebbington, "Response," in Michael A.G. Haykin and Kenneth J. Stewart, eds., *The Advent of Evangelicalism: Exploring Historical Continuities* (Nashville, TN: B&H Academic, 2008), 427

<sup>34</sup> Smith's point six is ambiguous as it depends on how one understands what is meant by the word "reliance." Understood as saying that creeds and confessions are absolutely unnecessary for the faith (though perhaps helpful), point six is indeed *Sola Scriptura*. Understood however as rejecting the view that creeds and confessions are vital for magisterially articulating the faith, point six is not *Sola Scriptura*. See Keith Mathison, *The Shape of Sola Scriptura* (Moscow, ID: Canon Press, 2001)

<sup>35</sup> Alliance of Confessing Evangelicals, "The Cambridge Declaration." *Alliance of Confessing Evangelicals*, April 20, 1996, accessed Dec 29, 2022, <https://www.alliancenet.org/cambridge-declaration>

change its meaning, and then critiqued it. Smith claims to be not just against “biblicism” of the masses, but of entire denominations, seminaries and scholars. Therefore, Smith must engage “biblicism” as scholarly defined, not as it is loosely used in popular Evangelicalism.

There is a proper meaning of the word “biblicism,” and an improper, vaguely defined, and somewhat derogatory definition of “biblicism.” The latter has been used by Reformed polemicists for everything that is wrong with popular Evangelicalism’s use or misuse of Scripture. Without engaging Bebbington, Smith’s definition seems to dignify and codify the popular definition of “biblicism” in a more technical and less derogatory form. This move however is not acceptable if one desires to use the term “biblicism,” an already established term, in a scholarly setting.

### **On the term “evangelical”**

If Smith’s appropriation of the term “biblicism” is unscholarly, his appropriation of the term “evangelical” is a travesty. For Smith, an evangelical “means having one’s life centered on the terrifically good message that God is reconciling the world to himself in Jesus Christ.”<sup>36</sup> How does that exactly make one an evangelical, given that many non-evangelicals believe that to be true as well, including Roman Catholics? If being an Evangelical means having one’s historic roots in the Reformation, the least and most generic thing that can be said is that an Evangelical is someone who rejects Roman Catholicism, which is ironic since Smith since his conversion to Rome calls himself an “evangelical Catholic.”<sup>37</sup>

What is an “evangelical”? Evangelicals of various stripes have put forward definitions of what an “evangelical” is. Prominent 20<sup>th</sup> century British Evangelical Martin Lloyd Jones defined an evangelical as someone who has these qualities: Preservation of the Gospel, entirely subservient to the Bible, learning from history, maintaining negatives, no subtractions or additions to the truth, seeing being evangelical as an prefix thus as being primary in identity and denominational identity being secondary, being watchful, distrust of reason in the form of philosophy, low view of the sacraments as opposed to Rome, takes a critical view of history and tradition, ready to act on beliefs, simplifies everything, dislikes formalism and liturgies and ceremonies, tremendous emphasis on the rebirth, always give primacy to preaching, always concerned about evangelism, and, being focused on “essentials” (Regards the conflict between Calvinism and Arminianism as a secondary issue).<sup>38</sup> Bebbington’s Quadrilateral is a simplified description that applies to all of Evangelicalism, with its four characteristics of biblicism, crucicentrism, conversionism, and activism. Given its

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<sup>36</sup> Smith, 93

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, xiii

<sup>38</sup> Martin Lloyd-Jones, *What is an Evangelical?* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth Trust, 1992), 34-68

broad reception and usage,<sup>39</sup> Bebbington's definition ought to be the standard definition of what an "evangelical" is.

In a certain sense, Smith is not totally at fault, since he is defining "evangelical" based on the watered-down definition of what an evangelical is ever since New Evangelicalism collapsed into apostasy. The collapse of New Evangelicalism as a movement, its conservative elements notwithstanding, can be traced back to the apostasy of Fuller Seminary beginning with "the Battle for the Bible,"<sup>40</sup> and in John Stott's compromise in the 1967 National Evangelical Anglican Congress (NEAC) at Keele, UK, where the evangelical wing of the Church of Anglican committed spiritual and institutional suicide by embracing apostates as "brothers."<sup>41</sup> While certainly there are no questions that there are positive effects of New Evangelicalism especially in the academy and the life of the mind,<sup>42</sup> this has come at a cost of apostasy in the churches and the dumbing down of the Christian witness.<sup>43</sup> That said, Smith is not writing as a sophomore but as someone who asserts how evangelicals should or should not read Scripture. The apostasy of much of New Evangelicalism notwithstanding, Smith should define "evangelical" based on its historic usage and proper characteristics, of which Bebbington's Quadrilateral possesses much utility.

Now Smith may or may not be right in his criticism of "biblicism," which we shall examine. But even if he is right in his critique, he has no right to define what an "evangelical reading of Scripture" is based upon his own idiosyncratic definition of what being an "evangelical" is. In fact, if biblicism is indeed a characteristic of Evangelicalism as situated within the Bebbington Quadrilateral, then a rejection of "biblicism" however defined is a rejection of evangelicalism of any stripe. To put it simply, if Smith's criticism is correct, Evangelicals are wrong and have been wrongly reading Scripture for the last 300 years at least. Now if Evangelicals have it wrong in reading Scripture for the last 300 years, what is to say they do indeed have the Gospel right? If Smith's criticism is correct therefore, what has to go is not just "biblicism" but evangelicalism. Smith's subtitle therefore should be "why evangelicalism does not read Scripture correctly," rather than claiming that he has a more evangelical reading of Scripture.

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<sup>39</sup> Timothy Larson, "The Reception given *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain* since its publication in 1989," Haykin and Stewart, eds., 21-36

<sup>40</sup> Harold Lindsell, *The Battle for the Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1976); George M. Marsden, *Reforming Fundamentalism: Fuller Seminary and the New Evangelicalism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1995)

<sup>41</sup> For more on the history and division caused by New Evangelicalism, read Iain Murray, *Evangelicalism Divided: A Record of Crucial Change in the Years 1950 to 2000* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 2000)

<sup>42</sup> Owen Strachan, *Awakening the Evangelical Mind: An Intellectual History of the Neo-Evangelical Movement* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2015)

<sup>43</sup> Murray, *Evangelicalism Divided*; Also see Richard Quebedeaux, *The Worldly Evangelicals* (New York, NY: Harper & Row, 1978); Richard Quebedeaux, *The Young Evangelicals: The Story of the Emergence of a New Generation of Evangelicals* (New York NY: Harper & Row, 1974); Francis Schaeffer, *The Great Evangelical Disaster* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1984)

## On the problems with “biblicism”

We finally arrive at the main issue: Smith’s criticism of “biblicism.” Does pervasive interpretive pluralism falsify “biblicism”? Since Smith’s “biblicism” includes both non-confessional and confessional views of the Scripture, I will, in this section, minimize using “biblicism” to refer to the object of Smith’s critique and rephrase the questions as follows: does pervasive interpretive pluralism imply that a plain reading of Scripture is impossible?

In order to evaluate this, we must look closely at Smith’s argument, which can be laid out as follows:

Premise 1: If “biblicism” is true, then those who read Scripture with the “biblicist” mentality must come to an agreement over what the Scripture teaches

Premise 2: It is a fact that those who read Scripture all claiming to follow only the Scriptures do not in fact come to an agreement over what the Scripture teaches (Pervasive Interpretive Pluralism)

Conclusion: “Biblicism” is false

The argument is valid. However, why should anyone accept Premise 1? We can break premise 1 into the following parts:

Premise 1a: If Scripture is perspicuous (as what “biblicism” teaches), then all who read Scripture with the same mindset that it is perspicuous and authoritative will see the same thing.

Premise 1b: If “biblicists” see the same thing, they will come to an agreement over what the Scripture teaches.

Here, we start to see the problem, mainly at premise 1b. It is an assumption on Smith’s part that all who see the same thing will come to an agreement over what the Scripture teaches. But there is an even more fundamental assumption related to premise 1a that we must address first: that all who call themselves “evangelicals” actually hold to the supreme authority of Scripture.

In the section on the term “evangelical,” I have said that New Evangelicalism has destroyed the witness of the church concerning the truth, and nowhere is this more evident than in the current malaise in Evangelicalism where everyone who vaguely claims to have the “new birth” however defined calls himself or herself an “evangelical,” regardless of whether he or she actually holds to traditional evangelical beliefs or attends a Bible-believing evangelical church. While this does not necessarily solve the supposed problem of pervasive interpretive pluralism, the fact of the matter is that most of the supposed pluralism will disappear if we only accept as evangelicals those who actually believe the Gospel and practice *Sola Scriptura* or even Solo Scriptura, regardless of their own self-identification. When one erases the last three-quarters of a century of New Evangelical chaos, the amount of variation in the beliefs within



evangelicalism is much less, and Smith's statement that there are "divergent and often incompatible"<sup>44</sup> beliefs on matters of significant Christian doctrine would be in error.

It is still true that there would be much variation among Christians who hold to *Sola Scriptura* (which, let's face it, it is the real target of Smith's criticism). This is where premise 1b is false, because it fails to understand how theology is done. Most of the differences, if not all, of the differences between Christians holding to *Sola Scriptura* are not differences in Bible interpretation but differences in Systematic Theology and Philosophical Theology, or even Practical Theology.<sup>45</sup> In doing theology, one always brings together various texts of Scripture and formulate a way to make them harmonize (Systematic Theology), or to figure out a coherent way to explain biblical teaching concerning the world and how everything works (Philosophical Theology). A Christian is not really interpreting Scripture as much as he is synthesizing various truths of Scripture when he does theology. Differences in theology does not mean there are differences in interpreting Scripture. All Christians see the same Scripture and interpret Scripture similarly, which is why Bible-believing Christians can use and appreciate the same biblical commentaries. If pervasive interpretive pluralism were in fact true, then sharing and recommending the same biblical commentaries would become impossible, but that is not the case.

In the afterword written one year after the first publication of his book, Smith claims that all his critics so far have failed to prove his main thesis false. He states that to defeat his thesis, his critics should prove one or more of the following to be true: "(1) Most American evangelical believers and institutions clearly do *not* believe in or practice biblicism, as [Smith] have described it. (2) Biblicism, as [Smith] have described it, is in fact entirely *compatible* with pervasive interpretive pluralism. (3) American evangelicalism does not embody the kind of pervasive interpretive pluralism that [Smith] describe. (4) Pervasive interpretive pluralism can be explained away by means that leave biblicism, as [Smith] have described it, fully intact."<sup>46</sup> My response in this review so far has undermined rather than address his thesis head-on, as I disagree with his premise that those who hold to *Sola Scriptura* are in fact the majority in professing "Evangelicalism," and hold that one must differentiate between interpreting the Bible and doing theology. Therefore, Smith's "biblicism" is entirely compatible with Smith's idea of pervasive interpretive pluralism, and thus his main thesis is false.

### **The double-sided nature of Smith's criticism**

It would be amiss if this review did not point out Smith's hypocrisy in dealing with the issue of "biblicism." Smith asserts he is no liberal and no postmodernist, and positively

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<sup>44</sup> Smith, 22

<sup>45</sup> That is one reason why I am against the term "partitive exegesis." Exegesis is exegesis, and theology is theology; we must distinguish them clearly.

<sup>46</sup> Smith, 183

makes claims on what the Bible is about.<sup>47</sup> Specifically, Smith extols the Barthian project of “Christocentrism.” This review will not go into the problems with Neo-Orthodoxy except to ask: By what standard is Smith asserting all these things to be true? Upon what basis does Smith have to claim that something is true or not true to Scripture? Smith claims that the most important thing is Christ; reconciling the world to himself, citing 2 Corinthians 5:17-19 in support.<sup>48</sup> But if Scripture is truly polysemic and multivocal, why should we accept Smith’s interpretation of 2 Corinthians 5:17-19 to be the correct interpretation? Smith makes the claim that Jesus Christ is “the purpose, center, and interpretive key to Scripture,”<sup>49</sup> but again since Scripture is multivocal, how do we know this to be true? I note for example the teaching of Joachim of Fiore who hold to a coming Age of the Spirit after the Age of the Father and of the Son. So, while evangelicals do believe that Jesus Christ is central, why should we hold this to be true if Scripture is not clear in what it teaches, if it actually teaches anything at all? Smith in his book criticized a sermon he had heard because it was moralistic and not Christocentric therefore “the subtext of that sermon is flat wrong.”<sup>50</sup> Again, while we agree that moralism is wrong, if Scripture has no clear meaning and we are not to be “biblicists,” upon what basis can Smith say that that pastor is wrong in his handling of Scripture? Lastly, upon what basis does Smith have in saying that the Trinity and Nicene Christology are definitional of Christianity if Scripture itself has many meanings, perhaps one of which deny the Trinity and Nicene Christology so we must accept that within the faith as well?

While Smith rejects postmodernism and claims to adopt a form of “critical realism,” the problem remains as to how he can say anything about what the Scripture teaches if he rejects “biblicism.” Smith does in fact claim that “biblicist objections to Christocentric biblical hermeneutics ... are red herrings,”<sup>51</sup> but the main problem is not that such a hermeneutic is subjective (which it is), but that the very idea itself (Christocentric hermeneutics) is itself subjective if Smith’s view is true. Smith’s idea of polysemy and multivocality reeks of postmodernism despite his explicit rejection of it, with any claim of Christocentrism a mere assertion without proof.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, Smith’s criticism of “biblicism” is utterly without merit. As it can be seen, Smith’s work fails to engage Bebbington’s definition of biblicism and it fails to understand what an “evangelical” is. Smith’s argument fails to take into account both modern evangelical church history as well as the distinction between Bible interpretation and theology. Therefore, Smith’s main thesis fails to establish a credible phenomenon of “pervasive interpretive pluralism” of the Bible among those who hold

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<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, ix, 149

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 93

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 97

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 115

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 114

to *Sola Scriptura*. Smith thinks “biblicism” makes the Bible impossible, but while biblicism as defined by Bebbington has its problems, “biblicists” are able to interpret Scripture correctly because Scripture is indeed perspicuous and remains perspicuous, a gift our Heavenly Father gives to us His children, and nothing can change that.

The natural person does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and he is not able to understand them because they are spiritually discerned. The spiritual person judges all things, but is himself to be judged by no one. For who has understood the mind of the Lord so as to instruct him? But we have the mind of Christ. (1 Cor. 2:14-16)