Servants, not Judges: Restoring Doctrines of Scripture and Critical Methods[1]

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> Pilate said to him, "You will not speak to me? Do you not know that I have power to release you, and power to crucify you?" Jesus answered him, "You would have no power over me unless it had been given you from above." (John 19:10-11 RSV)

Introduction: The critical Bible. I was in my second year of a master's program at Fuller Seminary. My research project for my Old Testament Theology course was an analysis of Gerhard von Rad's *Old Testament Theology* (Von Rad 2001). I was somewhere in volume two when something just snapped. I threw the book across the room in frustration and cursed. I had had enough of German biblical criticism.

On every page were claims that seemed to come out of nowhere. They treated passages and whole books of the Bible in ways I couldn't predict or verify, according to some kind of esoteric knowledge I had never seen before. *This* passage of Paul's was authentic; *that* was not. One bit of Israelite prophecy came from centuries after the fact, and the one next to it came from generations later. I think what frustrated me most was the *attitude*. These claims were all made with such serene confidence that they sounded unassailable. And they turned the Bible into something shockingly unlike what I had known.

Was this just a passing storm during my seminary years? My faith did survive those trials, and today I have the truly delightful job of teaching the Christian faith to hundreds of wonderful undergraduates every year. And many of the claims of biblical criticism no longer trouble me. Sometimes this is because I accept them as unproblematic; sometimes it is because I reject them as disproven, unlikely, or overly speculative; sometimes it is because they seem irrelevant. Yet it *wasn't* just a passing storm. My years in the academy have impressed upon me a stubborn picture

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of Holy Scripture that is somewhat alien to the historic Christian faith and even more alien to most of my fellow believers. And while I do love the Bible and regard the improved understanding as a genuine blessing, my grad school legacy is still a mixed one. My exposure to biblical criticism subdued the enthusiasm that had brought me to seminary in the first place, and has left me more distanced from scripture's voice than I should be. And I have colleagues whose ministries and even faith did not survive their exposure to biblical criticism. Their stories still weigh on me.

Some readers will take liberal theology as the villain here and conservative apologetics the hero who unfortunately arrived too late to save me. However, I was already well versed in conservative evangelical apologetics, having found people from Cliff Kenechtle to Josh McDowell to C.S. Lewis exceedingly helpful in breaking through my adolescent skepticism and protecting my maturing evangelical faith. Some other readers will see shoddy conservative evangelicalism as the villain, or at least the dupe, and liberal theology the emancipator of my reason and my intellectual authenticity. However, I was raised a liberal Protestant, and I have never found reason to regret leaving that declining tradition. This story does not follow the usual plot lines.

What role, then, does my exposure to German biblical criticism play in my story? It is neither villain nor hero, but a manifestation of a deeper problem. Biblical criticism is like an old schoolmate of my wife's who shows up in a larger group of friends at a school reunion. As they all exchange stories about her, a past is revealed that I had sometimes heard about but not taken seriously. And as I listen, the one I live with and thought I knew suddenly seems like a stranger. It's quiet as we drive home and get ready for bed, my mind tired and racing with unwelcome thoughts.

A lone voice—even German biblical criticism—wouldn't have had the same effect on me. So who are those other friends of his?

Well, since early adolescence I had absorbed our culture's folk skepticism about the Bible, repeating the usual canards that it is the product of a backward ancient culture, that it is just "a translation of a translation of a translation," and that "you can make the Bible say anything" anyway. In a high school "great books" course I had read passages in Genesis and Matthew not as holy writ but as literary foundations of western culture. And I had long placed the Bible mentally alongside the canons of other world religions, from Mormonism to Islam, relativizing all of them.

The legacy of the Enlightenment is peeking through here. Yet I need to look more deeply than that, because many of these forces are older. The conviction that one can make the Bible say anything arises out of the bitter experience of a whole western world reeling from the Reformation's hermeneutical chaos. Other factors are older than Protestantism. It is a standard Muslim assumption that Jews and Christians have corrupted our biblical texts. And the Reformation reflected pent-up frustrations with medieval biblical interpretations that found obscure meanings (or imposed and unpersuasive theological interpretations) on the texts. These 'spiritual senses' were within reach of ecclesiastical experts and saints alone. Wycliffe and Hus had good reasons to reject technical, mystical, and simply implausible exegesis – some dating all the way back to the patristic and subapostolic eras – that distanced common European Christians from the Bible. Von Rad and his fellow critical experts were making surprisingly similar arguments that the Bible was something other than a collection of texts whose meanings were intuitively clear.

Yet these experts, in every era from the apostles' to Von Rad's, were reacting to genuine ambiguities, complexities, contradictions, and mysteries in the texts. These could not simply be dispelled by assertions that the Bible was 'perspicuous' or clear.

These were among the burdens I was already carrying when I enrolled in seminary. They were what made news about my wife's past suddenly seem so ominous and disturbing.

Contested Bibles. The 'critical Bible,' so to speak, that these voices describe contrasts with another picture I will call the 'ecclesial Bible.' This is my wife as my friends and I know her, the Bible whose life is the life of our churches. For all the distinctions between Roman Catholic ecclesial Bibles, Lutheran ones, and all the others, in each of these locations the Bible is at home. I have been involved in churches of a variety of denominations. Some embraced inerrancy, some infallibility, some neither; but each one's ecclesial Bible seemed to live more or less unproblematically at or near the center of its life and worship.

In such places, the Bible was and is *holy* scripture: sharing somehow in God's strange sanctity and sharing its holiness graciously with us. It was and is *powerful*: it operates, in ways so numerous and varied that none of our traditions has fully articulated the scope of its work, not merely as words but in the Spirit (cf. 1 Thess 1:5). It was and is *ours*—formally and supernaturally directed to all who assemble in Christ's name.

These two pictures of the Bible are not held apart by details such as positions on the authorship of the Pentateuch or the authenticity of 2 Peter. Both the critical and the ecclesial picture can accommodate a variety of positions on those questions. (Not *any* variety, but a reasonable variety.) But the two pictures remain distinct. What distinguishes them above all is the stance of the reader. The critical Bible is scrutinized and judged, however respectfully; the ecclesial Bible is received and heard, however interactively.

The critical Bible has long weighed on many ecclesial Bible readers. It weighed on me before and after my conversion in college to conservative inerrantist evangelicalism. It *still* weighed on me when I temporarily traded biblical inerrancy for biblical infallibility while at Fuller Seminary and Duke University.[2] Yet it was not some Enlightenment skeptic or medieval allegorist

[2] This was in part due to my disappointment with accounts of biblical inerrancy such as Norman L. Geisler's edited volume, *Inerrancy* (Geisler 1980).

who got to me; it was Von Rad. And it is Von Rad's guild of modern biblical scholars that seems to get to so many other seminary students. I think that's because academic theology and biblical studies have in effect become traditions of their own in which the Bible lives differently than "at home," so to speak, in its original communities of faith.

I am not at all against the critical stance as such. It has yielded invaluable knowledge about God and God's people that can serve Christ's mission and Church. We have nothing to fear from honest, accurate investigation. Students and leaders should learn everything from original languages to basic exegesis to historical background to the histories of the biblical texts. However, we cannot go on living with the dissonance between these two stances. We need to turn these two different pictures back plausibly into one. We need to learn and pass along the skills and findings of biblical scholarship in ways that are not a burden on the faithful. Critical reading of the Bible should be a tradition that invigorates and strengthens ecclesial reading and vice versa. Each stance ought to express and serve, or at least respect the primacy of, the mission out of which the Bible emerged in the first place.

Tradition as revolution and reaction. John O'Keefe and R.R. Reno point to a difference in how the two traditions treat the scriptures. Much critical interpretation has aimed at getting something *out* of the Bible like ore from a mine. The ore is then delivered to others – theologians, preachers, philosophers, and ethicists – to refine. By contrast, the church fathers treated the text *itself* as the focus, and the interpreter's task to help us all conform to the God revealed there (O'Keefe and Reno 2005, 116).

The mining approach seems to have roots in the church, not least in Martin Luther, who found the Bible's power to lie in the law and gospel it *contains* rather in the canon as such. It is probably not coincidental that the research university was born among Germans, who had acquired habits of scrutinizing the scriptures for the treasures that lay within. Yet Luther's Bible was

fundamentally ecclesial, not critical; his 'biblical criticism' aimed only at discerning where *in* scripture to focus, not what to pull *out* of it. He treated it not as a mine but as powerful communication between God and God's people. It so profoundly represents the body of Christ that when we 'practice' it, God's grace sweeps us into that body.

By contrast, judging and mining both turn the Bible and its readers into something else. David Kelsey's analysis of modern Christian theological education describes a similar shift from one to another model of the Christian theological school. The first is education as *paideia* that emphasizes moral training in order "to know God by *gnosis*, an immediate intellectual intuition" (Kelsey 1992, 72). It aims at a better understanding of God through the divinely assisted conversion of the learner through exposure to publicly available material, conceives of the teacher as "midwife" (since knowledge of God cannot be given directly), and focuses on the student as personally shaped by the subject. Following Werner Jaeger, Kelsey claims that *paideia* was the original model for excellence in schooling, and the most influential one from the patristic age through the Renaissance and Reformation (Kelsey 1992, 72-75). The second model is education according to the agenda of the modern European research university, emphasizing *Wissenschaft* or orderly and disciplined critical research (Kelsey 1992, 83). Faculty produce professionals who are taught critical historical research methods and trained in the scientific use of reason as the final arbiter of all questions about truth. These disciples then join their *Doktorvatern* – their academic parents – in the shared enterprise of original research protected by traditions of academic freedom, which subject all other authorities to reason (Kelsey 1992, 78-81). The goal is transformation of the character "upon the basis of the unity of human civilization and scientific work, the unity based on the modern ideal of humanity."[3]

[3] Friedrich Paulsen, quoted in Kelsey 1992, 81; see Work 2007b.

Kelsey sees theological education as shifting from "Athens" toward "Berlin," rather as O'Keefe and Reno see the Bible's contemporary readers engaged in fundamentally different pursuits than the Bible's original readers. And he reports that theological educators live in some confusion over whether and how we can arrive at Athens' conclusions through Berlin's techniques.[4] Our theological schools' curricula generally center on teaching material content (what O'Keefe and Reno would call "an *x*": biblical, historical, theological, and practical information that emerges from assured results of scientific research) and then interpretive techniques (Berlin's various ways toward that *x*).

What's wrong with that? Well, it still treats the Bible as a repository of something called "content" that is distinguishable from the Bible itself and recoverable through technical methods. It treats biblical writings as something other than the New Testament writers and their successors did, imposing a distance between the holy Bible and its true ecclesial context (and sometimes making me want to throw it across the room).

By relying on modern academies for pastors' formative theological education and professional knowledge base, we train leaders to prefer critical academic biblical traditions to ecclesial biblical traditions. These efforts catechize them in still another confession and culture that asserts primacy over all others. We take some of our churches' most promising Athenians and tell them that faith only happens in German. This inheritance has shaped us into who we are, and it can seem impossible to imagine any other way. Yet there is one, and always has been.

Tradition as apostleship. In an age when our instincts have been formed so profoundly by critical biblical scholarship, it is worth mentioning what the New Testament writings are not, in order to get a better idea of what they are. They are not an authorized history of Jesus and his

[4] In *After Virtue* (MacIntyre 1984) Alasdair MacIntyre makes the similar observation that modern ethicists have used prooftexts and technical terms of classical ethics selectively, from a great conceptual distance, and without a real understanding of the roles they originally played.

movement. They are not a manual of directions on how to be the church. They are not minutes of executive meetings or canons of councils. They are not a prayer book or hymnal or catechism. They are a *collection*, and a rather haphazard one at that. The New Testament collects writings that arose from the church of Jesus Christ *being* the church, in some of the crucial ways that reflect just how it *was* that church.

Namely: very soon after its founder's departure, Jesus' church was a network of small communities that had sprung up in towns across the eastern Roman Empire. This happened because disciples and leaders had quite deliberately brought Jesus' good news there. Jesus' designated apostles were key figures in this network, both as missionaries who fostered new churches and as guardians of Jesus' traditions who catechized and oversaw them.

We have the letters of the New Testament because of the ways these figures and communities communicated, and because audiences prized these communications and held onto them, copied them, and distributed them around their far-flung network. We also have four stories of Jesus, which most likely arose within this apostolic network as his eyewitnesses preserved the most significant details of his life and teaching to aid the church's mission and catechesis (Bauckham 1997, Bauckham 2008). The book of Acts straddles and organically connects these two eras and families of writings. It is significant that the New Testament writings that remained longest at the canon's margin, Hebrews and Revelation, also departed the most from these two. Yet Acts shows that they too represent common Christian activities from the church's first generation: preaching, and prophecy.

Only by being this kind of church could the New Testament's writers, readers, and collectors ever have brought anything like it into being. Only the apostolic mission, lived out imperfectly but faithfully, explains it. Similarly, the Old Testament arose through Israel living out the drama of being Israel. (I am often struck by how new this information is to many of my

students. They regard the Bible devotionally, or critically, but not really ecclesially or missionally. It comes as something of a revelation for them to see what the composition and content of the Bible actually is, and suggests about its origins and character. This just illustrates the problem.)

In sum, "the ecclesial Bible" is demonstrably primary because the Bible arose from within its ecclesial context and remains at home there. Our studies of scripture will be healthier, richer, and more coherent when ecclesial readers, however critical some of their methods might be, are fully reconciled to the ecclesial Bible's primacy.

The Bible at home. So far we have concentrated on problems. What might evangelical faith and classic evangelical convictions such as biblical inerrancy, infallibility, and inspiration look like when they refocus on the Bible's primary ecclesial context and missional character? The following sketch is not of an idealized 'dream church' or future Christianity, but of a present reality. It draws on churches and believers I already know, doing what they do (sometimes unreflectively) with the Bible as they follow Jesus in word and deed. In fact, it describes the tradition that had shaped me well enough to make my seminary immersion in biblical criticism so discouraging.

Inerrancy as truthfulness. Ecclesially- rather than critically-focused evangelical faith considers the Bible to be *true*, and *worthy* of its trust. And rightly so; after all, the Bible *is* true. Jesus trusted the scriptures of Israel. He didn't take a critical stance towards the Torah, Prophets, or Writings, though he did sometimes interpret them quite differently than his contemporaries. Indeed, like nothing else, his life, death, and resurrection fulfilled them in plain as well as subtle ways. Jesus' commissioned followers stayed true to his traditions, conveying eyewitness testimonies in their lives and ministries and eventually in written accounts, and testifying to him in their work and worship. We see all this in the New Testament writings that follow the oral and literary habits of their day. Those habits and genres may not resemble ours—for instance, Greco-

Roman historiography has different conventions than present-day academic historiography—but the writings don't compromise the integrity or clarity or power of their apostolic tradition, and they honor the indwelling Spirit who was working and speaking through them. So the Bible gives a clear picture of the fundamental shape of Christian knowledge and faithfulness. We stand under every book and every verse because we stand in the holy tradition that it norms.

Awareness and trust of the Bible's truthfulness animates many a church and many a disciple I know. It also moves beyond the classic understanding of biblical inerrancy. A weakness of that doctrine is that it opposes a flawed critical stance with what is another essentially critical stance. It therefore concedes too much to the errantists it opposes. Modernist biblical critics have been guilty of two errors: reducing the Bible's value to modern epistemological categories of factuality, and judging it to have fallen short there. Fundamentalists have addressed the latter shortcoming in a way that tends to reinforce the former one, abstracting the concept of scripture from the Bible's many useful and colorful forms of discourse.

Disciples who really know the Bible's truthfulness will be less interested in battles over accuracy – "Is this detail really right?" or "What really happened?" or "What explains this passage?" – and more willing to take the writers on their own terms: "What is this writer saying?" and "What is the Lord saying?"

Evangelical theologians who treat the Bible as truthful rather than simply accurate will be less prone to continue treating the Bible *merely* as Charles Hodge's "storehouse of facts" – as a collection of propositions for them to isolate and string together into theological generalizations, then arrange into theological systems.[5] Since these systems often just reproduce the arrangers' own assumptions, when they invariably clash with one another they perpetuate the cycle of critical

[5] This is not to imply that propositional claims and inferences, which are among the many legitimate uses of language, are inappropriate to theology! They have always been necessary aspects of articulating the gospel and its implications – just not in the ways they came to dominate and be understood in much of the modern era.

reaction and revolution so debilitating to our institutions and imaginations.[6] They also take on a rather sterile tone that many fellow evangelicals have long found off-putting and alienating. Regarding the Bible as truthful and transformative rather than merely accurate and informative will yield different kinds of theological readings that will shape a different kind of debate than the battles so familiar to evangelical theology. Its different hermeneutics will lead readers to make more appropriate inferences and ask better questions, shaping theologies that describe the apostolic faith less artificially. It will help readers appreciate the humanity and cultures of the biblical writers less as problems and more as something we share with them as common objects of God's justifying and sanctifying grace.[7] Kevin Vanhoozer is one of the evangelical theologians whose work respects the scriptures in these ways (in, for instance, Vanhoozer 2005).

Readers who treat the Bible as wholly truthful rather than merely accurate will be less troubled by the biblical oddities that drive liberals to artificial demythologization and arrogant dismissal and conservatives to strained apologetics. Indeed, as experience gives them a sense of the whole of the Bible's riches, they will rejoice in these oddities as in the quirks of a beloved and respected family member. (I may not always know what to make of my eccentric uncle, but I trust him.) Such readers can also come to appreciate that quirkiness is a universal aspect of the human condition that the scriptures themselves share; it is not something to be excised or even bracketed, only disciplined by God's reign. They will treat the cultural distances between biblical writers and themselves more as liturgists and cross-cultural missionary Bible translators do: not as insurmountable ditches or occasions to modernize, but as signs of the church's universality—catholicity, we call it—to celebrate as we work carefully to discern how messages delivered in one context resonate in the church's other contexts. After all, the church of Jesus Christ is an

[6] This common (though not ubiquitous) structural feature in evangelical theological proposals can be identified by examining, for instance, the various positions catalogued in Boyd and Eddy 2009.
[7] I have tried to develop an account of scripture that respects these aspects of its character and life (Work 2002).

eschatological work of God that transcends and connects those contexts, transforming rather than eradicating them.

The Spirit's truthfulness is more profound and more penetrating than mere freedom from error. After all, accuracy alone is no guarantee of reliability. Adam's protest to God that "the woman you gave me – she gave me of the tree, and I ate" (Genesis 3:12) is both a string of technically accurate statements and a monstrously sinful abuse of language that cannot be called true without doing violence to the term. It is a world away from the *honesty* that the Spirit has inspired in the Bible's voices. Israel's extraordinary self-criticism in the Old Testament and the disciples' New Testament counterpart are wonders of supernatural truth-telling whose candor sometimes even discomforts the pious. The gift of the Spirit has given God's prophets and apostles an *awareness* borne of divine revelation that knows what no logic itself can deduce and no intuition can anticipate. As it sinks into our own consciousness, the Spirit cultivates the same biblical honesty and self-awareness in us.

Change like this comes not by putting biblical language on a modern pedestal of inerrancy or putting ourselves on a critical pedestal of superiority, but by identifying *with* the canonical writings we learned to trust. The Bible is unique in its canonicity and its place in the church's life; however, that does not distance it from us and turn it into some esoteric or exotic thing. Quite the opposite! Its Spirit and Lord is ours; its figures are our progenitors; its legacy is our inheritance; its good news is directed to our needy souls; its mission has reached and enrolled us.

Inerrancy sought to defend the Bible's integrity against liberal assumptions that its observations were so deeply conditioned by the limited cultural horizons of its original audiences that recovering its truth required thoroughgoing criticism, retranslation, and even theological revision. The doctrine depended on the classic theological claim of the scriptures' inspiration, while moving in a somewhat different direction from John Calvin's doctrine that God

accommodates his word adequately to limited human categories and mysteriously illuminates human understanding (Sparks 2008, 230-247). Each of these three approaches – accommodation, revision, and inerrancy – has its strengths; yet none adequately honors the redemptive logic of God's engagement with human life in the word of truth. In *The Open Secret* (Newbigin 1995a), Lesslie Newbigin describes this as a three-way exchange between the acculturated missionary, the cultural mission field, and scripture as they understand it. As they interact, the Spirit's power converts both the gospel's herald and its audience to bigger and better visions of God and God's new creation that show scripture in their new light (1 Thess 1; see Work 2007a). As the faith spreads across the world, the Bible as we understand it is becoming a 'catholic' shared heritage of redeemed peoples: a Spirit-authored universal memory of God's truthfulness to the world the Son and Spirit came to save. No critic or civilization stands above it or outside its scope.

Have you seen the Bible's catholicity at work in churches, families, and ministries? I have.[8] What distinguishes these flourishing contexts from poorer ones is the assumption of the common ecclesiality of the Bible's original communities and its current ones. The Bible is truly at home in every church that knows it occupies a place in that commons of settings, times, peoples, and places that reach all the way back to the Bible's original ones.

Biblical infallibility as trustworthiness. Truthfulness is an inherently personal quality. A watch may be accurate, but it is not truthful. So we respond to the Bible's equally personal discourse not with mere recognition or assent but with personal suspicion or trust, resistance or reliance, doubt or assurance. This response brings up another honored evangelical conviction, a corollary of inerrancy (and sometimes an alternative to it): the evangelical doctrine of biblical

[8] Often these communities still claim biblical inerrancy. Inerrancy as a doctrine does not need to be abandoned (Work 2002, 318-319). My own college and many of my past and present churches have embraced it and even benefited from it. However, how it *functions* in these healthy communities tends to be determined more by these sorts of ecclesiological qualities than by predominantly philosophical and critical ones.

infallibility. Infallibility holds that the Bible cannot fail or mislead its readers, particularly in the matters of faith and practice that are its focus.

Infallibility guards against the stance of critical suspicion and even skepticism that characterizes much mainstream biblical scholarship. Yet, like inerrancy, it begs bad questions. Defenders end up debating alleged failures on the part of biblical writers. Is Paul sexist? Are the psalmists triumphalists? Is the Fourth Evangelist anti-Semitic? If so, are these failings really incidental to the faith and practice they are teaching? The doctrine of infallibility thus turns readers into critical evaluators – in this case, juries of the apostles' and prophets' character – and trains us to hear the writers' voices only against the backdrop of some other moral standard to which they should measure up. That moral standard must come from somewhere else than scripture in order for the affirmation of infallibility not to be tautologous. And it becomes the real canon of both infallibilists and their fallibilist opponents.

Like inerrancy, infallibility casts our accounts of the Bible's truthfulness in modern terms of radical certainty over against radical doubt (Newbigin 1995b). Either the Bible is infallible or it isn't; and what if it isn't? Some fundamentalist churches argue in just this way – "if this or that detail isn't accurate, then why believe the Bible on anything else, such as Jesus' divinity or resurrection?" – in effect holding their congregations' regard for the Bible hostage to their fear of abandoning their core convictions. If we become convinced that the Bible is errant or fallible, then we are left seeking some other source that is not, or else left in a sea of uncertainty and relativism. Either way, we have departed from the Christian way of knowing.

A better framework for situating readers in the apostolic tradition is simply to honor, in word and deed, the *trustworthiness* of the Bible and its authors. This takes us out of the jury box and sets us at our teachers' feet. It is hardly a novel approach; in fact, it is a common assumption behind the way evangelical churches usually preach the Bible. A sermon that honors the Bible's

trustworthiness does not criticize the scripture, nor spend much time defending its veracity either rhetorically or apologetically, nor distance the congregation from its voice by emphasizing cultural or historical differences. Instead, it demonstrates the scripture's trustworthiness by reading the text attentively and respectfully and by focusing on conveying its meaning and implications for a trusting congregation to hear.

Imagine a mother at the dinner table, reading a letter from a traveling relative to an attentive family. She might gloss sentences or simplify the language, answer curious children's questions, allow for authorial style and tendencies, and fill in details and background. But in a healthy family she wouldn't be defending, deconstructing, or discounting the letter. This simple stance is what I have usually encountered in evangelical sermons, Bible studies, and devotions. It is intuitive. Available evidence warrants it. And it expresses the relationships we are graced to have with God and God's representatives. It is probably the church's most powerful hermeneutic.

It can look naïve, but there is no reason it must be. Affirming trustworthiness is not an *anti*-critical stance: we judge whether we ought to place our trust in the Bible's authorities. The Christian tradition supplies grounds for such evaluation, outside as well as inside the canon. Do these texts seem to be faithful witnesses to what God has done in Israel, Jesus, and the church? If so[9], then we should heed them as fellow disciples of a trustworthy God.

Evangelicals still display varying degrees of trust and affirm the Bible's trustworthiness to varying extents. Many of us are bothered by the Bible's rough edges, its contrasts and discrepancies, its silences and approvals on matters we find morally outrageous, and its many passages that startle us and puzzle us and fail to convince. Some respond to these difficult passages in ways that remind me of Paul's description of the "weak" or "powerless" (Romans 14-

[9] This is not the place to argue the point, but no critical results I have seen have convinced me otherwise; indeed, on the whole they have grown and supported my trust in scripture.

15): They avoid what they find troublesome by either sticking to familiar passages or finding refuge in safe interpretations that seem to explain away the difficulties. There is trust there, but fear too, which guards and supports it but also shelters it from the challenges that might grow it. Others respond in "stronger" ways, eager to hear the Bible's unfiltered voices and engage its irksome passages without scandalizing congregations or forfeiting the apostolic faith. The admirable trust here can be mixed with the arrogance that Paul warned about, which might bring the powerless and even the powerful to ruin.

The best evangelical preaching and teaching carries a tone of grateful, confident humility and maintains a fruitful dialectic of support and challenge that honors both our trustworthy Bible and our own universal weakness and depravity. One happy example of the exegetical fruits of trust is N.T. Wright's work with the biblical traditions on hell and the intermediate state (Wright 2008). Wright never fails to honor even the biblical texts that his culture finds most difficult and unattractive texts as he puts them in challenging conversations with each other. He trusts them.

Authorial intent and the whole sense of scripture. Scholars in seminaries complain endlessly and justly about the hermeneutical malpractice of the many preachers and teachers who practice eisegesis rather than exegesis. These people chronically prooftext, disregard literary and historical context, spiritualize what is straightforwardly literal, and cherry-pick Bible translations to get the Bible to say what they want. To counter this plague of biblical misinterpretation, evangelical scholars usually insist on giving priority, and even determinative meaning, to the biblical authors' original intentions. To recover these, scholars tend to restrict their readings to those of grammatical-historical method.

I endorse grammatical-historical method. It trains interpreters in habits of modest, sober judgment that beat both the inaccuracy of some folk interpretation and the reckless audacity of much contemporary revisionist interpretation. It also has the considerable virtue of linking present

audiences and the Bible's originators. However, restricting meaning to original intent can cultivate a spirit of caution that ironically distances us from the biblical writers' interpretive boldness, prophetic vision, and hermeneutical imagination. Suddenly the New Testament looks like *it* is mishandling the Old—and presto, we have turned both into critical rather than ecclesial scriptures. We can grow similarly alienated from powerful and beloved hymnody, respected literature, and influential folk evangelicalism when they go beyond original meaning and exploit biblical material's synthetic and allegorical potential. Seminary grads can end up acting like dour and self-righteous Pharisees nattering about messianic parties and Sabbath healings.

A better way seeks to share "the mind of Christ" that the Old Testament anticipates, the New Testament exemplifies, and healthy churches cultivate. It develops apostolic judgment that can appreciate both the original senses of biblical texts and the fuller resonances that have sounded over time. It unhesitantly prizes the theological interpretation of Luther, Calvin, Simons, and Wesley, of Anselm and Thomas Aquinas and the Middle Ages' other brilliant interpreters, of the ancient church fathers who explicated and developed the orthodoxy of the apostles – and of the contemporary readers among us who follow in their footsteps. Yet it is also open to revisiting old conclusions where responsible scholarship and tradition call them into question or develop them in new ways – not out of some grander commitment to revisionism or the principle of *semper reformanda*, but out of confidence that scripture's clarity, coherence, and fullness are actually discernable, even if they will never be exhaustively or flawlessly expounded.

An enriched evangelical academic hermeneutic shouldn't involve *fanciful* exegesis that turns the scriptures into playthings of our own imaginations. That would impose another unhealthy distance, now a postmodern one, from the ecclesial Bible. It would be disciplined by scripture's own plain sense, the unchanging but ever-deepening apostolic faith, the Spirit's work to renew minds in the living church (Romans 12:2), the explosion of knowledge that has happened over the

last five centuries, and the common hope that the first generation of Christians shares with all of its predecessors and successors (Hebrews 11:39-12:2).[10]

Examples of such good work abound. One fine example is Tim Keller's spiritual exegesis of the parable of the Prodigal Son (Keller 2008).[11] Drawing not only on careful exegesis but the tradition's theological wisdom, Keller's own pastoral experience, and insights from the behavioral sciences, it translates and develops the whole gospel brilliantly. Another is "In Christ Alone" from Irish hymnwriters Keith and Kristyn Getty, a lyrical and powerful synthesis of biblical and theological themes that too few contemporary hymns achieve.[12] Both these achievements go beyond original intent to what Jeannine K. Brown nicely calls the wider *implications* and *effects* of the text (Brown 2007).

'The Bible alone' as the church's canon. In the Reformation, disillusionment over medieval overconfidence in tradition spawned a new regard for the Bible's canonicity, clarity, and especially its sufficiency as a source of knowledge of God and God's good news. This has driven the steady evangelical conviction that the Bible alone – *sola scriptura* – is the final authority on Christian faith.

This "Scripture principle" can narrow into a popular attitude that the church is incidental to God's real work of communicating revelation to individual consciences. That attitude deposes the ecclesial Bible, which is the church's common inheritance and teaching task, and sets up the individual as scripture's private critic. Then even the wisest of the church's biblical interpreters take a backseat to one's life experience, academic qualifications, folk knowledge, and personal preferences. We are all too familiar with the resulting jumble, as well as the cliché that one can

[10] A helpful account of discipline's role in figural biblical interpretation is O'Keefe and Reno 2005, chapter 6.
[11] Incidentally, Keller affirms the Bible's infallibility in *The Reason for God: Belief in an Age of Skepticism* (Riverhead 2009), xiv.
[12] "What we sing affects how we think, how we feel and ultimately how we live," Keith Kelly says, "so it's important that we sing *the whole scope of truth the Bible has given us*" ("Keith and Kristyn Getty," http://www.gettymusic.com/about.aspx, accessed 8/19/2010, emphasis added).

make the Bible say anything. Some biblicists leave orthodoxy to become eccentrics or leaders of new religious movements, while others grow weary of the chaos and leave Protestantism for the order, stability, harmony, and beauty in Roman Catholicism and Eastern Orthodoxy.

Yet *sola scriptura* when properly understood already addresses these problems. It means that the Bible is *canonical*, and that involves respect for scripture's intrinsic ecclesiality.[13] The Bible is *ta biblia*, "the books," a collection of believers' writings that did not come from a newspaper or a bookstore for indiscriminate public consumption, but from Israel's and the church's leaders communicating in the course of their life of shared covenantal faith. The biblical canon carries to us the full force of their words. In fact, as a collection it intensifies that force, as the Holy Spirit indwells Christ's communion of saints and numbers us among them.

An inerrant or infallible Bible implies, in some sense, an inerrant or infallible church – if only in its role in the Bible's origin and canonization. But that strains the Scripture principle. Why should Israel and the church not have erred *only* in these roles – in factual recall and authorial intent? It seems like a *post facto* boundary drawn to support Protestant convictions. Our alternative categories of truthfulness, trustworthiness, and whole sense are friendlier to the spirit of *sola scriptura* because they are better at honoring the Bible's natural relationship with the church. An inerrant Bible must contrast with its otherwise errant apostles and prophets and their errant successors, weakening the credibility of *sola scriptura* and then the doctrine of inerrancy itself. Whereas affirming our canonical collection of true and trustworthy texts at the heart of our tradition reflects the truthful and trustworthy figures whom we do and must depend on for their Spirit-driven roles in bringing the Kingdom's good news to us. That these writings are canonical does not diminish these people's reliability or authority in any way. Instead, it honors precisely

[13] William F. Abraham points out that canonicity in the early church referred to a cluster of traditions rather than one collection of scriptures treated as epistemically unique (Abraham 2002). Even so, within that canonical cluster of traditions the Bible held a unique place as God-inspired words that were not to be contradicted or relativized by any church tradition, but only interpreted through, alongside, *and* over them – a true 'canon within the canon'.

that reliability and authority by judging all things, even these people's other works, according to their standard (which is Christ's standard). Because they are the people of God doing what they have been doing, the Bible is the incomparable and reliable canon that it is. We don't extend the same trust or commitment to truths that lie outside the canon, even inspired truths, not because we suspect they are unreliable but because they aren't canonical.[14]

I see evangelical canonicity in action in churches where the Bible is treated as the living voice of God's agents to every local gathering of believers, to outside observers among them, and to the whole church in all times and places.[15] Not as a political blueprint for a nation-state's Constantinian restoration or Christian reconstruction.[16] Not as a personal spiritual medium whose authenticity contrasts with 'organized religion.' Not as just one of the church's many treasures. Not as a cryptic or esoteric document whose meaning can only be unlocked by elite scholarly or clerical custodians. Not as the only trusted source of truth in an otherwise dark world or a corrupt church. Not as a wild and dangerous thing that must be tamed by orthodoxy or sensible thinking.

A healthy contemporary combination of canonical respect and critical savvy is found within some 'postcritical' circles, for instance in the work of Lesslie Newbigin and Richard Hays. Neither exegete restricts his research or intellectual respect to the canon, nor even the Christian tradition. However, both submit every authority and every proposal to the Bible, including the church traditions and the biblical- and theological-critical methods that have made them who they are. They embody a canonical rather than critical spirit.[17]

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[14] Pentecostals and Catholics routinely treat extrabiblical prophecies this way. In our everyday lives we make similar distinctions between, say, official pronouncements from the boss and unofficial comments.

[15] Canonicity can function in a way that is magisterial, but it need not, as free church traditions have learned. At any rate, it is certainly not civil, individualistic, or idiosyncratic except where we force it to be.

[16] Why not? Because the church and nation-states are different entities with different characters, purposes, and destines.

[17] However, in congregational preaching and life I have found the happiest results in healthy charismatic and evangelical churches where a lived-out respect for canonical biblical primacy informs church-centered preaching, teaching, and discipline and where there is a greater (but *qualified*) suspicion of critical methods, less intellectualism, and lower acculturation to academic habits.

Power received rather than harnessed. Reformations, revivals, and awakenings across the globe have taught evangelicals to appreciate the Bible's power. It is the power of truth and the power of salvation (1 Thess 1:5). Evangelicals have historically centered our preaching and study on scripture. Bible translation is a focal point in cross-cultural mission. The Gideons distribute Bibles and New Testaments that largely speak for themselves.

Yet some uses of scripture cross the line between honoring its power and redirecting it. Activists press select biblical themes into service to promote contemporary causes of political freedom, social justice, and personal prosperity. Pastors develop campaigns for church growth or personal progress, then underwrite them with supporting material culled from scripture. Civil authorities try to turn ethical codes into policies that govern the willing and unwilling alike. Apologists treat biblical information as 'ammunition' to use against skeptics and antagonists. These all seek to *harness* the Bible's power as a resource for some other project. This moves the reader from an ecclesial stance to a critical one, because it inevitably involves sorting out which of the Bible's many diverse materials are best suited to that project. And that turns the reader into a miner and a judge.

What these exercises sacrifice is the *wholeness* of the gospel's power. The word of God does more than just remake aspects of our present age; it ushers in the next. It changes not just aspects of a world but the world itself. Such a transformation is not harnessed or coerced. It can only be *received*, with patience borne of trust. This yields the whole new life of shared anticipation and celebration that the creeds call the fellowship of saints. Participants in this life do not approach the Bible selectively – as, say, a blueprint of a just society, a manual for family harmony, or a roadmap of our geopolitical near future – but wholistically: as a gift whose mysterious power to liken us to the risen Christ us never lies in our grasp.

An influential evangelical tradition that hopes to receive rather than harness the Bible's power is inductive Bible study: close reading of biblical passages to observe their details, interpret their significance, and apply them in readers' lives. Inductive Bible studies are happening among graduate students at Chinese and American research universities, among imams in mosques and madrasas, in parliaments and headquarters of international businesses and among homeschooling parents, in prisons in Australia and brothels in southeast Asia.

Critics warn that readers' questionable assumptions shape their expectations of what they will find. However, the technique's governing assumption is that the Bible's authors *have* voices, that God *does* speak and act through them when we approach scripture humbly and attentively, and that we should expect surprise and even remaking when we listen to him and each other.

Such surprises do not always run in a revisionist direction. (At the dissertation stage in my graduate education, I was so inured to critical suspicion that it shocked me to discover how *orthodox* the New Testament was![18]) Much fine inductive biblical reading happens among scholars who find greater support for traditional conclusions. A rewarding recent example is Richard Bauckham's work on the Gospels. He finds that their internal evidence and historical horizons better support the subapostolic accounts of their authorship, purpose, and message than the form-critical consensus, whose rise and dominance owed more to the plausibility of modern social theory than to the Gospels' actual suitability to its approach.[19] His conclusion that the gospels are largely eyewitness testimony is a critical insight that can strengthen readers' regard for the power of that testimony, which arose not because of flesh and blood but by our heavenly Father, and on which rests Christ's whole church (Matthew 16:17-18).

[18] Sharing this observation at my dissertation defense provoked round and merry laughter from my committee, who were glad I had *finally* stumbled into what was obvious.
[19] Bauckham 1997, Bauckham 2008.

Conclusion: a missional restoration. Let me reiterate that I am not against biblical criticism as such. My claim has been that when Christians situate our understanding and use of the Bible more truly in the ecclesial setting in which it arose and naturally operates, we become better readers of scripture, better practitioners of the faith, even better critics. Restoring inerrancy as truthfulness, infallibility as trustworthiness, authorial intent as the whole sense of scripture, the Scripture Principle as canonicity, and power as reception of God's sovereign initiating grace do not amount to an ambitious proposal for 'reconstructing evangelical biblical practice' or some such. They merely contrast the critically shaped approaches and convictions in some areas of the evangelical imagination with the more ecclesially shaped practices and sensibilities of other areas of the same imagination. And as I've demonstrated, we are often already working this way.

Yet we are also often working at cross purposes—to our peril. I opened with verses from Jesus' exchange with Pontius Pilate concerning the power they each have. Pilate's power over Jesus was real, but he could not fathom its true source and purpose, or his prisoner's. That failure of discernment neutralized his powers of judgment, and he had to relinquish his role as critic and step to history's sideline (John 19:16). A critic's powers are for serving, not controlling.

If there is one word for summing up the shift I am advocating, it is *missional*. Any approach to the Bible that fails to respect the missional character of the church and its holy scriptures cannot help but be artificial and ultimately alienating. However, we need not reject wholesale the techniques that inspired the contemporary critical perspective. Many of those techniques go back at least to careful patristic practitioners such as Origen, Augustine, Jerome, and John Chrysostom. Properly reoriented in the Bible's missional setting, scholarly study and characterization of the texts themselves, their historical backgrounds, their likely prehistories, their

genres and grammatical particulars, and their interrelationships is a servant's good and faithful work, instrumental for the church's healthy understanding of scripture.[20]

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[20] Contemporary scholarship is blessed with a number of scholars who have a good sense of the Bible's character. Among my personal favorites are Richard Bauckham, Richard Hays, Marianne Meye Thompson, N.T. Wright, Markus Bockmuehl, and Robert Alter. In their work one senses how natural the compatibilities are between the Jewish and apostolic faith, the generations of believers whose words comprise the scriptures, the church that carries on their traditions, and careful research in the various disciplines within the field of biblical studies.

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