

# How Evangelicals Became Over-Committed to the Bible and What can be Done about It

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Since my conversion in 1968, the inerrancy of the Bible has been an important and strong belief of mine. Years ago, I published a piece in which I clarified the precise sense in which and defended the idea that it is rational to believe inerrancy.<sup>1</sup> While at seminary in the late 70s, I wrote a paper responding to a book by Dewey Beegle, which sought to undermine the doctrine of inerrancy I had come to embrace.<sup>2</sup> I was appalled at Beegle's claim that in accepting inerrancy, certain Evangelicals were actually guilty of bibliolatry.

Today, I am more convinced of inerrancy than at any time in my Christian life, but the charge of bibliolatry, or at least a near, if not a kissing cousin, is one I fear is hard to rebut. To be more specific, in the actual practices of the Evangelical community in North America, there is an over-commitment to Scripture in a way that is false, irrational, and harmful to the cause of Christ. And it has produced a mean-spiritedness among the over-committed that is a grotesque and often, ignorant distortion of discipleship unto the Lord Jesus. In this essay, I shall (1) clarify what I mean by this over-commitment, (2) explain why I believe it is ubiquitous among North American Evangelicals, (3) present three areas in which it has brought great harm to the church, and (4) provide two suggestions for correcting the problem. If I am correct, it falls to the intellectuals, teachers, pastors, and leaders of our community to be more aggressive in solving this problem among our people.

*1. American Evangelical Over-commitment to the Bible.* The very idea that one could be over-committed to the Bible may strike one as irreligious. In a sense, this judgment is just. One could never be too committed to loving, obeying and promoting Holy Scripture. In another sense, however, such over-commitment is ubiquitous and harmful. The sense I have in mind is the idea that the Bible is the *sole* source of knowledge of God, morality, and a host of related important items. Accordingly, the Bible is taken to be the *sole* source of authority for faith and practice. Applied to inerrancy, the notion is that the Bible is the *sole* source of such knowledge and authority.

The Protestant principle of *Sola Scriptura* does not entail this claim. For example, the Westminster Confession of Faith (1646) says "The Supreme Judge, by which all controversies of religion are to be determined, and all decrees of councils, opinions of ancient writers, doctrines of men, and private spirits, are to be examined, and in whose sentence we are to rest, can be no other but the Holy Spirit speaking in the Scripture."<sup>3</sup> Similarly, the Chicago Statement of Biblical Inerrancy (1978) states:

We affirm that the Holy Scriptures are to be received as the authoritative Word of God. We deny that the Scriptures receive their authority from the Church, tradition, or any other human source. We affirm that the Scriptures are the

supreme written norm by which God binds the conscience, and that the authority of the Church is subordinate to that of Scripture. We deny that Church, creeds, councils, or declarations have authority greater than or equal to the authority of the Bible.<sup>4</sup>

Clearly, the idea that from within the Christian point of view, Scripture is the *ultimate* authority, the *ultimate* source of relevant knowledge, does not entail that it is the *sole* authority or source. But this fact has a severe public relations problem and, as I will illustrate below, many in our community make this entailment, or at least accept the consequent. Right reason, experience, Creeds, tradition have all been recognized as subordinate sources of knowledge and authority within the Christian point of view subject to the supreme and final authority of Scripture.

The idea that Scripture is the sole such authority is widespread among pastors, parachurch staff, and lay folk. And while Evangelical scholars may not admit to accepting the idea, far too often it informs their work. To cite one example of this egregious problem, in concluding his study of the social and political thought of Carl Henry, Abraham Kuyper, Francis Schaeffer and John Howard Yoder, J. Budziszewski observes that

All four thinkers are ambivalent about the enduring structures of creation and about the reality of general revelation. Although Henry vigorously affirms general revelation, he undermines it just as vigorously. Although Kuyper unfolds his theory mainly from the order observable in creation, he insists on hiding this fact from himself, regarding his theory of creational spheres as a direct inference from Scripture. Although Schaeffer acknowledges the importance of general revelation, he makes little use of any part of it except the principle of non-contradiction. No sooner does Yoder affirm God's good creation than he declares that we have no access to it.<sup>5</sup>

## *2. Why are Contemporary American Evangelicals Over-committed to the Bible?*

Whatever the reason—e.g., an aversion to anything that smacks of Catholicism, a commitment to a certain view of human depravity—Budziszewski's observation could be insightfully applied to analyzing why there is a dearth of sophisticated Evangelical political thought and an aversion among white Evangelicals to serious political reflection and engagement, along with appropriation of natural moral law in Evangelical moral/political dialog in the public square. The sparse landscape of Evangelical political thought stands in stark contrast to the overflowing garden both of Evangelical biblical scholarship and Catholic reflection on reason, general revelation, and cultural and political engagement. In my view, this dearth of political thought, and the absence of natural moral law reasoning in Evangelical cultural engagement cannot be explained biblically. Years ago, Alan Johnson wrote what I believe to be a definitive defense of natural moral law reasoning is the Bible.<sup>6</sup> Nor can it be adequately explained theologically. One may think that an aversion to natural moral law is a consequence of strong Calvinist views of human depravity. But Stephen Grabill has shown that there has always been a robust respect for natural moral law in the Reformed tradition.<sup>7</sup> I believe the best explanation is historical and sociological.

In her authoritative work *The Making of the Modern University*, Harvard professor Julie Reuben describes in painstaking – and for Christians – painful detail the transition from the American liberal arts college to the modern research university from 1880-1930.<sup>8</sup> Reuben divides this time of upheaval into three overlapping periods: the Religious Stage (1880-1910), the Scientific Stage (1900-1920) and the Humanities and Extracurricular Stage (1915-1930). During the first years of the period, colleges took themselves to have two mandates: the impartation of wisdom and knowledge and the tools needed to discover them, and the development of spiritually, morally and politically virtuous graduates who could serve God, the state and the church well.

Note carefully that the college's purpose was filled with material content and was normative: *people should be taught how to live well and knowledge was available to give content to what this should look like*. Because the Christian God was a single, unified mind and the source of all truths, the curriculum was unified in that every discipline ought to shed light on and harmonize with every other discipline. College faculty and administrators were confident that knowledge existed in all the fields of study. In particular, spiritual, ethical, aesthetic and political truth and knowledge were real and on a par with truth and knowledge in other disciplines, including science. Front and center were the importance of teaching, gaining a breadth of knowledge, and fostering spiritual and moral virtue.

However, due to several factors, for example, the need to develop technology for industry and defense, the increased specialization occurring in the sciences in particular, this perspective changed. As time went on, a fact/value distinction arose according to which truth and facts, along with the knowledge thereof, were the sole domain of empirical science. Religion and ethical claims were reduced to private feelings, individual attitudes, and personal perspectives. The realm of religion and values became non-cognitive—knowledge was not possible in these domains—and non-factual—religious and ethical claims are neither true nor false; their function is to help people live better lives. The idea that there exists a stable body of knowable truths gave way to the notion that truth changes constantly, that progress, not wisdom, is what matters, and that university education should focus on method and “learning how to think,” rather than trying to impart knowledge and wisdom to students, especially outside the empirical sciences. Academic freedom, “open” inquiry, a spirit of skepticism, and specialized research became the central values of American universities.

The abandonment of Christian monotheism from the cognitive domain meant that there was no longer a ground for a unified curriculum. Without a single, rational God, why think that there is a unity to truth, that one discipline should have anything at all to do with another discipline? Thus, uni-versities gave way to plural-versities, and we have lived with fragmentation in our schools ever since the 1930's. No longer did possession of a body of knowledge distinguish college graduates from those without such an education. Instead, the main gift of a college education, besides helping one get a job, was the impartation of a vague “scientific attitude”, of the mental discipline to “think for oneself,” of a spirit of open inquiry, and of an attitude of tolerance for various viewpoints. Great hostility arose to natural and revealed theology and their claim to provide knowledge of God and related matters and, instead, religion was tolerated as long as it did not claim to be cognitive or factual. As the fact/value distinction prevailed, scientism won the day, and along with it, the widespread view that there is no such thing

as non-empirical knowledge. Because it is difficult to sustain the notion that in a domain of life, such as the religious and ethical domains, there are truths but no one can know what they are, the denial of non-empirical knowledge resulted in the denial of truth outside the empirical sciences.

So far we have noted two important, related shifts: (1) from a unified curriculum, grounded in a monotheistic God, and in which knowledge and truth was present in all areas of study, to plural-versities with a fragmented curriculum in which electives and specialization proliferated, and in which knowledge was limited to the empirical sciences; (2) from a cognitivist view of theological and ethical claims according to which these claims are often both true and items of knowledge, to a fact/value distinction according to which empirical science is the sole domain of facts and knowledge, and non-empirical fields, especially religion and ethics, study the realm of “values,” that is, non-factual, private feelings, attitudes, and behaviors, that are not topics for which knowledge is available.

These shifts left university presidents and administrators in a pickle, and the pathetic way they tried to address the problem should be a lesson to all who would seek to remove theology and ethics from the domain of objective knowledge. Remember the two purposes of college/university education? The first one about acquiring knowledge and the tools necessary to obtain it was retained, though in a modified form. The new goal was not the discovery of truth, but the facilitating of research that could provide useful information against a background of changing truth. This was easy to accomplish in the sciences and, as a result, the better scientific scholars were increasingly rewarded with not having to teach. The humanities were left with shuffling paradigms and teaching students new and different language games. If science is the sole domain that studies reality, then the humanities are the domain that studies how we talk about reality and other things.

The second purpose was simply impossible to achieve--the development of spiritually, morally and politically virtuous graduates who could serve God, the state and the church well. For a moment, forget about spirituality, God and the church. The development of morally and politically virtuous graduates who could serve their culture requires an assumption—the existence of a body of moral knowledge—that is inconsistent with the modern university, which eschews any sort of dogmatism, and values diversity, tolerance, academic freedom.

Given the fact/value distinction and the non-cognitivist attitude towards religion and morality, the universities did the best they could, I suppose, but the history of their attempt to satisfy this second goal is pretty pathetic. At the beginning of the period, all fields of study were understood to be relevant to religious and moral knowledge and training, so this second mandate was integrated throughout the curriculum. This is as it should be if the domains are cognitive ones. But along the way, the scientists wanted to get rid of religious and ethical ideas in their fields and, along with them, the need to teach students how to live. So the responsibility for moral and religious development fell to the humanities. Administrators looked to professors in literature, art, history, language and philosophy to unify the lives of students and teach values for university life in general, and the curriculum in particular.

There was just one problem. Professors in the humanities had accepted the non-cognitivist view of these domains and, thus, they could not find any basis for agreement

about whose values, whose justice, whose religion should be taught. The attempt to teach character was inconsistent with the other values of the university, viz., tolerance, academic freedom, a spirit of non-dogmatic and free inquiry. So humanities professors couldn't mount a robust, common vision of moral and religious truth and knowledge apt for fulfilling this mandate. As a result, ethical and religious training was punted to extracurricular activities.

Universities sought to provide a unifying, distinct university experience that would convey a sense of community and spiritual/moral values by developing these extracurricular structures: (1) Faculty advising which was to go beyond academic aid and include personal mentoring; (2) the expansion of dorms and an emphasis on living in dorms as vehicles for creating a sense of community in which students from various fields could enrich each other and learn spiritual and moral lessons in a community atmosphere in the dormitories; (3) the office of Dean of Students arose at Yale in 1919, and the Dean's job was to facilitate spiritual and ethical community among students; (4) Freshman orientation was instituted as a means of socializing new students into the university community and orienting freshmen to important spiritual and moral values. Again, these efforts failed because no one could agree on exactly what spiritual and moral values these programs should aim to foster. More importantly, by shifting moral and spiritual training from classroom to extracurricular venues, the non-cognitivist, non-factual, purely private nature of religion and ethics was underscored.

All of this signifies the development away from the conviction that there is truth and knowledge in religion and ethics to the view that spiritual and moral guidance is so subjective that it is best left for extra-curricular specialists like the Dean of Students. The university's second mandate to impart moral and spiritual knowledge to its students devolved into the vague aim of developing a rich student life as part of the college experience. Given the scientism that filled the atmosphere, morality soon became morale or school spirit, and the goal of making a college education a distinct experience turned out to revolve around athletic teams and the school spirit associated with supporting them. As scientism permeated American universities, the second mandate went out with a whimper. The moral and spiritual wisdom of Plato, Aristotle, Moses, Solomon and Jesus was replaced with the football and school spirit.

By and large, Evangelicals responded during this shift by withdrawing from the broader world of ideas, developing a view of faith that was detached from knowledge and reason, and limiting truth and belief about God, theology and morality to the inerrant Word of God, the Bible.<sup>9</sup> If I am right about this, then Evangelical over-commitment to the Bible is a result of the influence of secularization on the church and not of biblical or theological reflection.

3. *Three Areas Where Over-commitment to the Bible is Harming American Evangelicals.* Consider the following. Suppose that an archeologist, on the basis of biblical texts, sought and found some previously undiscovered city, temple or some such thing. To make matters easy, let's suppose he/she discovered a portion of the ancient city of Jerusalem that was fairly specifically described in the Old Testament. Now, could the archeologist have discovered that site without the use of the Old Testament? Once discovered, could the archeologist learn things about the site that went beyond what was in the Old Testament? Clearly, the answer is "yes" to both questions. Why? Because the site actually exists in the real world. It does not exist in the Bible. It is only

described in the Bible and the biblical description is partial. If the archeologist claimed to discover something at the site that contradicted the Old Testament description, one would engage in various activities to avoid falsification of the Old Testament text. Without getting into issues of whether or under what conditions the Old Testament description could or would be falsified, such harmonization efforts could easily be epistemically and theologically permissible and even obligatory. But there would be no such obligation to reject further information about the site that did not contravene Old Testament assertions.

This is so commonsensical, that it seems hardly worth mentioning. Unfortunately, what seems obvious about an ancient site has implications to three areas where many Evangelicals fail to engage in parity of approach: (1) natural theology and moral law; (2) the realm of spirits/souls; (3) divine guidance, prophetic revelation, words of knowledge and wisdom.

I have already made reference to natural moral law above, and in regard to it (and natural theology), we Evangelicals could learn a lesson or two from our Catholic friends, for example, Pope John Paul II. In contradistinction to the Evangelical political/cultural reflection by Carl Henry and the others mentioned earlier, when Pope John Paul II reflected on Christian engagement with the political, cultural climate of the West to foster a culture of life and a plausibility structure for the gospel, even though he makes frequent reference to scriptural texts, he grounds Christian engagement on natural theology and moral law, an ontological analysis of the human person and human moral action, and a theological/metaphysical analysis of reason, freedom, human dignity and flourishing.<sup>10</sup> And Benedict XVI has deployed the same strategy.<sup>11</sup>

By way of application, we must teach our people two things: (1) It is appropriate, proper, and obligatory to reason for God's existence from general revelation and to use the natural moral law in moral debate. (2) How to engage in such reasoning regarding the important issues of our day. In my experience, laypersons typically have never been exposed to a course on ethics or moral reasoning. This must be remedied.

Second, because the human soul/spirit and demons/angels are real, it is possible and, in fact, actual that extra-Biblical knowledge can be gained about these spiritual entities. Regarding the human soul, on the reasonable assumptions that it is real and its properties, parts and relations lie within the epistemic bounds of human noetic faculties, there is no good reason to think that psychology, neuro-science, studies in spiritual theology and discipleship could not gain true, helpful information about the soul and its functioning. However, since the early 1970s, thinkers in the Biblical Counseling movement have eschewed these sources of knowledge to varying degrees, ranging from substantial distrust to almost total disregard for them.<sup>12</sup> According to these thinkers, the Bible is “the *sole* source for authority concerning human nature, values, and prescriptions of healthy behavior” (italics his).<sup>13</sup>

Typical in this regard is the following—and in light of our dialectic, ironic--statement by John F. MacArthur, Jr.:

True psychology (‘the study of the soul’) can be done only by Christians, since only Christians have the resources for understanding and the transformation of the soul. Since the secular discipline of psychology is based on godless assumptions and evolutionary foundations, it is capable of dealing with people only

superficially and only on the temporal level....Scripture is the manual for all 'soul work'...<sup>14</sup>

Interpreted modestly, there is a grain of truth in MacArthur's statement. Obviously, one should be wise in evaluating any claim in any field by its comportment with the Bible. And while now is not the time to discuss the role of assumptions in knowing reality, nor to defend adequately the claim that MacArthur paints with too broad of a brush in identifying the assumptions of secular psychology or in characterizing their ubiquity, I simply note that he fails to tease out the implications of the ontological reality of the soul. Given its reality and even partial availability to human investigation, it is hard to see why the Bible is the *sole* source of information for it anymore than for an archeological cite.

Regarding demons and angels, on the reasonable assumptions that they are real and their natures and activities lie within the epistemic bounds of human noetic faculties, there is no good reason to think that extra-biblical knowledge could not be vouchsafed about demons and angels. For example, Charles Kraft has studied the realm of the demonic for years, and, correctly in my view, made the following methodological observation:

Regularities, rules and principles in the relationships between the human world and the spirit world exist and can be studied scientifically. Some do not believe we can approach the spiritual realm scientifically, but I firmly believe we can. The research tools we have learned to use in the behavioral sciences also can be used to discover regularities in the interactions between the human and spiritual realms. We cannot expect the kind of certainty, of course, that we are supposed to have in the physical ('hard') sciences. But we have learned a lot in psychology, anthropology, sociology and each of the other behavioral sciences through discovering *correlations* that may indicate causality....Such methodology can be just as applicable to the results of spiritual interventions as to psychological interventions.<sup>15</sup>

Yea, verily, and amen! Since the spiritual realm is real, one should be able to learn about it in appropriate ways outside the biblical text. Again, the Bible is the *ultimate* and not the *sole* source of knowledge or justified beliefs in this area. The importance of this point seems to be missed by Priest, Campbell and Mullen in their criticism of the proffered insights about the demonic realm from Charles Kraft, Peter Wagner and others:

Our concern about the new doctrines...[is that they] are theories about spiritual realities not given in Scripture.... We do not cast doubt on contemporary accounts of the supernatural which are congruent with what we know about the supernatural from Scripture (as in many account of demonic possession). We believe in the supernatural—within the framework of biblical teaching. It is only when such accounts imply ideas about demonic power not given in Scripture... that we are interested in submitting such accounts and doctrines to careful scrutiny.<sup>16</sup>

By “submitting such accounts and doctrines to careful scrutiny,” Priest et al. mean “rejecting them.” Moreover, the charge of developing extra-biblical doctrine is both a straw man and a red herring. “Doctrine” rightly carries an authority in our community only reserved for the explicit or rationally inferred teachings of Scripture. But Kraft and the others never refer to their inductively derived principles as “doctrines”. More to the point, from what I can tell, Priest, et al. do not take into account adequately the fact that this domain is real and, without grounds for embracing noetic closure here, capable of being studied. Demons do not exist in the Bible. They exist in reality. Information—ultimately authoritative information--about demons exists in the Bible, but knowledge can also be gleaned from studying the relevant aspects of reality as well. Imagine the same argument advanced about an archeological discovery. Presumably, one would only be allowed to discover information about, say, an ancient biblical city that was already contained in the Bible!

The third and final area where over-commitment to the Bible is harming the church is in the rejection of guidance, revelation, and so forth from God through impressions, dreams, visions, prophetic words, words of knowledge and wisdom. If “revelation” is defined as the divine communication of information that was not or could not have been known at the time otherwise, then God is constantly giving revelation to his people. Not revelation of theology and ethics, not revelation for the universal church, and not revelation on an authoritative par with Scripture. But when the elders of the church return from a planning retreat to announce—correctly let us assume--that God has lead them to emphasize the family this year and not, say, evangelism, this is extra-biblical revelation in the sense just mentioned. On the reasonable assumptions that God is real, He continues to speak to and guide his children in various ways, and that all this lies within the epistemic boundaries of human faculties, there is no good reason to reject this sort of thing out of hand. But those who are over-committed to Scripture do this all the time.<sup>17</sup>

*4. Two Suggestions for Correcting the Problem.* Space forbids me from presenting anything but a cursory glance at two points of practical application. First, in dispatching our pastoral and teaching duties, we must teach people how to avail themselves appropriately of the extra-biblical knowledge available in these areas. Great harm has been done to the cause of Christ by over-commitment to the Bible here. To correct this problem, we must instruct those under our care about the availability of this knowledge and helpful ways to use it. Second, in dispatching our scholarly duties as Christian intellectuals, we need to develop biblical, theological and philosophical justifications for such knowledge along with guidance for its use. In particular, we need to direct our efforts in developing epistemological reflections about non-empirical knowledge.

In sum, we Evangelicals rightly confess the ultimate authority of God’s inerrant word. But we can no longer afford the luxury of Evangelical over-commitment to the Bible. In this paper, I have tried to say why this price is too high and why it is an expense that does not need to be paid.



## Endnotes

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- <sup>1</sup> J. P. Moreland, "The Rationality of Belief in Inerrancy," *Trinity Journal NS* 7 (Spring, 1986): 75-86.
- <sup>2</sup> Dewey M. Beegle, *Scripture, Tradition, and Infallibility* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1973).
- <sup>3</sup> John H. Leith, ed., *Creeds of the Churches* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 3d. ed., 1982), p. 196.
- <sup>4</sup> Norman Geisler, ed., *Inerrancy* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1980), p. 494.
- <sup>5</sup> J. Budziszewski, "Four Shapers of Evangelical Political Thought," in J. Budziszewski, *Evangelicals in the Public Square* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2006), p. 120.
- <sup>6</sup> See Alan F. Johnson, "Is There A Biblical Warrant For Natural-Law Theories?" *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 25 (June 1982): 185-99.
- <sup>7</sup> Stephen Grabill, *Recovering the Natural Law in Reformed Theological Ethics* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 2006).
- <sup>8</sup> Julie A. Reuben, *The Making of the Modern University* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1996).
- <sup>9</sup> See J. P. Moreland, *Love Your God With All Your Mind* (Colorado Springs, Colorado: NavPress, 1997), chapter one.
- <sup>10</sup> John Paul II, *The Splendor of Truth* (Boston: Pauline Books & Media, 2003).
- <sup>11</sup> Joseph Ratzinger, Marcella Pera, *Without Roots: The West, Relativism, Christianity, Islam*, translated by Michael F. Moore (N. Y.: Basic Books, 2006).
- <sup>12</sup> See John Coe, "Why Biblical Counseling is Unbiblical or Speaking Psychology Gently into the Church," delivered at the Western Division Meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society, 1991. Available upon request from the Institute for Spiritual Formation, Talbot School of Theology, Biola University.
- <sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 1.
- <sup>14</sup> John F. MacArthur, Jr., *Our Sufficiency in Christ* (Dallas, Texas: Word Publishing, 1991), p. 58.
- <sup>15</sup> Charles Kraft, *Confronting Powerless Christianity* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker, 2002), p. 61. Cf. Charles Kraft, *The Rules of Engagement* (Colorado Springs, Colorado: Wagner Publications, 2000).
- <sup>16</sup> Robert J. Priest, Thomas Campbell, Bradford A. Mullen, "Missiological Syncretism: The New Animistic Paradigm," in *Spiritual Powers and Missions: Raising the Issues*, edited by Edward Rommen (Pascadena, California: William Carey Library, 1995), p. 25. In response, Charles Kraft correctly notes that Priest, et al. are wrongly assuming that truth in the spiritual area must be derived from Scripture, instead of correctly assuming that we are free to follow the evidence as long as our views do not contradict scripture. See *ibid.*, p. 113.
- <sup>17</sup> Fairly typical in this regard is Richard B. Gaffin, Jr., "A Cessationist View," in *Are Miraculous Gifts for Today?: Four Views*, edited by Wayne A. Grudem (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 1996), pp. 25-64. Cf. Sam Storms, *Convergence: Spiritual Journeys of a Charismatic Calvinist* (Kansas City, Missouri: Enjoying God Ministries, 2005).