EVANGELICALS, INERRANCY, AND THE QUEST FOR CERTAINTY:
MAKING SENSE OF OUR BATTLES FOR THE BIBLE

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ABSTRACT

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This dissertation seeks to understand and evaluate the hermeneutical logic and apologetic mentality behind American evangelicalism’s appeal to biblical inerrancy during its twentieth- and twenty-first-century battles for the Bible. In nuanced agreement with Christian Smith’s charge that evangelicalism’s pervasive interpretive pluralism renders appeals to biblical inerrancy meaningless, I argue that what drives the perpetuation of such appeals is a fundamental desire for epistemic certainty in the face of what is perceived to be a devastating subjectivism. This is a certainty said to be obtained and maintained by an oversimplified conception of sola scriptura and a biblical hermeneutic replete with modernistic assumptions about textual objectivity and the effects of history and tradition upon interpretation. After attending to the intersection of the hermeneutical theory of Hans-Georg Gadamer with those of high-profile evangelicals James Packer and Clark Pinnock, I propose the adoption of a more community-centered
conception of biblical authority alongside a rehabilitation of faith as trust in God’s own faithfulness.
For my mother –
whose countless conversations with me, most unknown to her,
made this not only possible but also worthwhile.
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Research is rarely an individual affair. Lolana Thompson at Dallas Theological Seminary’s Mosher Library welcomed me warmly to the school’s archives. Her knowledgeable guidance, regarding both the collection and good places for lunch, was instrumental in my research into the ICBI. I look forward to continuing my work there. At Dayton’s Roesch Library, Chris Tangeman located not a few exceptionally obscure books and in doing so quite simply made this project possible. The same must be said for the three King James Only churches I visited in Dayton. These congregations and their pastors are some of the warmest and most generous people I have met and with which I
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Paula Braley, a wonderful writer and former student of mine, edited the entire
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He is my teacher, colleague, mentor, and friend. When we heard that my father had
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I dedicated this dissertation to my mother. Over the past nine years, she has been my faithful dialogue partner. When I needed to run something by an evangelical who would listen and challenge me, I would turn to my mom – sometimes simply to have a conversation in my head. This dissertation was not written to her but for her. She and my dad together taught me about Jesus and what it means to love well. Their names deserve to be on the cover as much as mine.
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Certainties – even the idea of certainty itself – were shaken and reclaimed. It had not felt like fracture. It had felt like war.

Daniel Rodgers, Age of Fracture

If the “Battle for the Bible” is indeed a war – and many evangelicals think it is – then its casualties are not hard to find. The dismissal of Michael Pahl as well as a number of other faculty and administrators from Cedarville University is but one of the more recent examples. What stories trickled out of the small Baptist college in central Ohio mirrored earlier purges and splits of other broadly evangelical schools, institutions, and denominations. As in many of these evangelical battles, the role played by inerrancy at Cedarville was explicit. Much of the turnover stemmed from the trustees’ release of doctrinal white papers in response to the publication of Pahl’s *The Beginning and the End*, a wonderful little book highlighting literary connections between Genesis and Revelation. At stake was the historicity of Adam and Eve, a position with which Pahl confessed his wholehearted agreement, though for theological – not exegetical – reasons.

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2 For example, Harold Lindsell’s 1976 incendiary text, which is widely understood to have been the catalyst for the ferment surrounding the formation of the International Council on Biblical Inerrancy, took the title *The Battle for the Bible.*
3 See, for instance, Barry Hankins’ often disturbing account of the conservative resurgence at Southern Baptist Seminary: *Uneasy in Babylon: Southern Baptist Conservatives and American Culture* (Tuscaloosa, AL: University of Alabama, 2003).
Though the book itself is mute on the first parents’ historicity, Cedarville determined that Pahl had misunderstood and thus failed to adhere to the school’s doctrinal statement, particularly its expression of biblical inerrancy. Their white papers were given as an attempt to forestall other such misunderstandings by attaching to inerrancy particular interpretations of scripture, many of which continue to be hotly debated in evangelical circles today – not unlike biblical inerrancy itself. The following chapters seek to understand and evaluate the hermeneutical logic and apologetic mentality behind such appeals to biblical inerrancy.

Postwar Americans experienced decades of cultural upheaval in the closing half of the twentieth century. From the civil rights movement and the rise of feminism to a brazen sexual revolution and the secularization of American life, a profound anxiety of an unknown and unfathomable foreign nuclear threat came coupled with an intense unsettling of society at home. Biblical inerrancy took its modern shape within this volatile culture and so inherited an enduring and peculiar apologetic tinge that has colored evangelicals’ understanding of God, scripture, and the nature of the Christian life. Evangelicals rigorously reemployed the doctrine of inerrancy as the litmus test used to judge authentic Christian faith and practice, and in doing so once again lifted up an

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errorless Bible as the certain answer to the increasing uncertainties of life. Such a Bible promised a reliable response to the many questions of right and wrong, truth and fiction, holy and profane brought on by the second half of the twentieth century.

The cost has been significant. Different interpretations of individual texts – now themselves proclaimed inerrant readings of an inerrant Bible – have become new battlegrounds, splitting denominations, churches, and families with the result that evangelicals have come to define right belief with affirmation of whatever particular interpretation then happened to be favored. Bound to such interpretations, God has ironically become lost to history and the historical community of believers. Or, to describe the same result from a different angle, this plurality of interpretations created a plurality of gods, each hyper-localized in a particular historical interpretation, even in a particular individual church community. Seen from either perspective, the ultimate result appears the same. In a desperate attempt to secure for traditional Christianity a trustworthy, authoritative Bible along with a certainty that what we know from that book is really true, evangelicals created a plethora of embattled authorities all claiming in the name of an inerrant Bible to be the only truly orthodox Christianity. In his relatively new

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6 To evoke the specter of a late twentieth-century American culture war is to enter into a historiographical and sociological mess. To a large extent, N. J. Demerath rightly reminds us that America is not suffering a true “culture war,” at least not in the sense experienced by, for example, modern Israelis and Palestinians. While American evangelicals – not to mention Americans as a whole – are quite diverse, that very diversity exhibits what Demerath calls various “cross-cutting” beliefs that inhibit the formation, at least since the Civil War, of the kinds of political or cultural blocs typical of widespread revolt (whether violent or not). N. J. Demerath, III, “America’s Culture Wars in Cross-cultural Perspective,” in Re-Forming the Center: American Protestantism, 1900 to the Present, ed. Douglas Jacobsen and William Trollinger, Jr. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998), 43-4.

I have found it necessary, however, to continue to use such militaristic language – even to address the cultural shifts in postwar America as provoking a “culture war” – precisely because this is the rhetoric employed by inerrantists themselves. The doctrine of inerrancy is built upon a mentality of us against them, often expressed in militant and violent tones. (One need only glance at the multiple layers of emphasis used by many King James Only proponents throughout their works: italics, bold, and all capitals, often all at once!) In other words, the work culture war rhetoric does for inerrantists is significant and often illuminating of the depth, passion, and content of their concern.
history of Protestantism, *Christianity’s Dangerous Idea*, Alister McGrath argues convincingly that this divisiveness over who gets to decide what the Bible really means is a quintessentially Protestant problem, intimately tied to the central Reformation principle of *sola scriptura*. Evangelicalism’s appeal to an inerrant Bible is a vivid manifestation and compounding of this greater Protestant problem.⁷

My thesis is simple: the doctrine of inerrancy as asserted by the International Council on Biblical Inerrancy (ICBI) during its ten-year program (1978-88) and subsequently adopted by much of evangelicalism over the next three decades is rendered meaningless in light of evangelicalism’s inability to delineate what the biblical text actually means. The council’s assertion of inerrancy was hardly novel. Over a decade prior to the ICBI’s first congress in Chicago in 1978, a select group of evangelicals met at Gordon College in Wenham, Massachusetts, to deliberate on the nature and role of inerrancy among conservative Christians in America. The conference sessions reflected the diversity of approaches to biblical inerrancy then at play within evangelicalism. The seriousness of this situation becomes particularly poignant in light of the fact that most of these sessions were conducted behind closed doors. By the mid-1960s, inerrancy had become divisive enough that honest discussions demanded McCarthy-like secrecy.⁸ But even then postwar evangelicalism only appropriated what earlier conservatives, most

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⁸ Harold Lindsell reflects negatively on this situation, seeing in it the early signs of scriptural infidelity among evangelicals. Harold Lindsell, *Battle for the Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1976), 131-2. He would be followed by many leading up to the formation of the ICBI (see below for an example with regard to Carl F. H. Henry) and would continue to be echoed in more recent years by those who have found it their duty to champion the Council and its Statements among a new generation of evangelicals. See, for instance, Al Mohler’s contribution to *Five Views on Biblical Inerrancy* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2013), 29-58.
notably those associated with and otherwise indebted to the Reformed scholasticism of Princeton Seminary, had defined and developed.

The mustering of the International Council on Biblical Inerrancy can be seen as the high tide of this century-old appeal to inerrancy. Fueled by decades of tumultuous and often violent cultural flux and ignited by widely publicized apostasies from within, the decision to convene the ICBI and thereby define evangelicalism as inerrantist was a tactical response to an era, a nation, and a culture seen spinning wildly out of control. Reflecting on the 1966 Wenham Conference in the lead up to the Council’s first Chicago meeting, Carl F. H. Henry, the dean of postwar evangelicalism at the time, warned against the noncommittal stance taken by many of those at Wenham a decade earlier. While cautioning against too quickly labeling any evangelical who would not commit to inerrancy as “false or unauthentic,” Henry nevertheless charged his readers to “prod [the ‘noncommitted’] toward an inerrancy commitment by means of rational considerations.”

That a list of those “noncommitted” evangelicals in attendance at the Wenham Conference reads like a roll call of ICBI all-stars, including Gleason Archer, Ken Kantzer, Gordon Clark, Roger Nicole, and Jim Packer, is evidence of just how shaken and fearful evangelicals had become by the rapidly changing cultural scene.

In the late seventies, Packer described Wenham as representative of a time when “nobody wanted a breach in the ranks.” Now a decade later, in a report to the ICBI’s executive committee, he warned that the situation had changed considerably: “The ranks

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9 Carl F. H. Henry, *God, Revelation and Authority, Volume IV: God Who Speaks and Shows*, 2nd ed. (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1999), 367. “None of the participants in the 1966 Wenham Conference on Scripture either affirmed the errancy of Scripture or contended that scriptural errancy is the historic view of the church; in other words, those who did not champion inerrancy did not on that account automatically express commitments to errancy. They were simply noncommittal on the question of the errorlessness of Scripture…The weaknesses of this position are multiple.”
have already been breached and we are a group of folk who are trying to handle the situation in a theological and positively constructive way.” As Packer understood it, the Battle for the Bible was not of inerrantists’ own making – it was forced upon them.

Daniel Rodgers, in his masterful study of these last few decades of the twentieth century, describes this period in American history as an “age of fracture.” It was a time when traditional political, religious, racial, and even gendered communities splintered into multitudinous “little platoons of society” held together, when they did not disintegrate outright, only by rhetoric and the occasional hot issue. And yet, whether it was Brown v. Board, Vietnam, Woodstock, Watergate, the OPEC oil embargo, Roe v. Wade, the ERA, or Afghanistan, such threats to “the way things were” or “the way things should be” – which were more often than not indistinguishable – only scotch-taped over deeper fractures within these isolated societies that the next foreign war, market collapse, political rally, and Grateful Dead tour rarely failed to shatter.

In a word, it was an age of choice, when every desire and decision faced a fast expanding marketplace of options. From one’s theory of economics to one’s translation of the Bible, brand of toothpaste to church denomination, postwar America from the “golden years” of the 1950s onward was the epitome of a “consumers’ republic,” to

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10 Packer went on to claim that Wenham’s indecision on inerrancy was less about the “subject matter” and more about the undesirability – according to a number of parties present – of using the term as a brand for evangelicalism. That he would also suggest the conference’s failure to achieve anything was due to obvious disagreements over inerrancy – presumably that “subject matter” – is therefore curious. J. I. Packer, “J. I. Packer’s Comments on the Wenham Conference – May 6, 1977,” Records of the International Council on Biblical Inerrancy, Box 24, “E.C. - Spring 1977 Packet,” Archives, Dallas Theological Seminary.

11 Rodgers, Age of Fracture, 3. The descriptor “little platoons of society” comes from Rodgers’ chapter by the same name. Ibid., 180. Edmund Burke had originally used the phrase to describe Revolutionary France’s third estate in his Reflections on the Revolution in France (2nd ed.; London: J. Dodsley, 1790). It was popularized among conservatives in the early 1990s as a title for those “sites where civic life and obligations were most surely grounded.” Rodgers, Age of Fracture, 197.
borrow from Harvard’s Lizabeth Cohen. Yet it was in the destabilization of gender roles and sexual conventions that the last quarter of the century experienced some of its most disconcerting and enduring fracturing, and for no group did this hold truer than for evangelicals. Though hardly their sole concern, gender became the labarum these culture warriors carried high as they once again did “battle royal for the fundamentals.”

Questions about gender and human sexuality were questions about human nature. They focused on the universal, the eternal, the objective. Moreover, they were answerable thanks in no small part to the Bible – God’s great textbook on the subject. To challenge traditional views on gender and sex was therefore to challenge what God created and for what purpose he created it, and to deny the evidence of that nature was to forsake truth altogether. It was not immorality evangelicals fought against but amorality – an amorality birthed, as evangelicalism’s leading cultural guru of the day would have it, in relativistic humanism and its consequence, nihilism. An anti-ERA flyer from this period set the point in clear binaries: “Society can be good or depraved, civilized or uncivilized...It either possesses order or chaos depending on the degree in which the male and female sex roles are accepted or rejected.” What God tells us about men and women was said

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14 Francis Schaeffer, *The God Who Is There: Speaking Historic Christianity into the Twentieth Century* (Chicago, IL: Inter-Varsity, 1968), 17. Schaeffer defines humanism as “the system whereby man, beginning absolutely by himself, tries rationally to build out from himself, having only man as his integration point, to find all knowledge, meaning and value.” Schaeffer sets this “humanism” up against genuine rationality (not “rationalism,” however), which he defines simply as recognition that there are absolutes or, rather, that some things are absolutely true and some things are not. In this we can see the philosophical roots and rhetorical shape of evangelicalism’s assertion of biblical inerrancy and its battles for the Bible. Ibid., 47.

to transcend time and culture. Discoverable by faithful readers of nature and scripture, his laws are fundamental, absolute, and binding. Their rejection signals not just a moral lapse but a cosmic collapse of reason altogether. “Let gender roles slip,” Daniel Rodgers tells us in his description of the conservative mood at the time, “and every other certainty threatened to give way.”

Evangelicals’ war against alternative interpretations of scripture and society was thus fought on the soil of a nation and culture whose very idea of certainty was being contested. “To release and destabilize,” Rodgers explains, “not merely goods and fashions but ‘everything’ – tradition, certainties, truth itself – was, for other Americans, a source of fear and outrage.” Evangelicals only made up a portion of these “other Americans,” but they were a large portion and one that would not go down without a fight. Sparked by challenges to traditional biblical interpretations and social mores from within the evangelical fold, the ICBI was shaped and powered by such fear and outrage. In 1978, these three hundred plus evangelical leaders put forward a new evangelical creed, a statement of faith declaring allegiance to a belief in an inerrant Bible, one “free from all falsehood or mistake[,]…entirely true and trustworthy in all its assertions.” Such a belief, the council declared, would protect the faithful from sliding down that slippery slope into the apostasy of an “unstable subjectivism.”

Despite all the original bluster, it took little time to realize that this renewed assertion of inerrancy was toothless. Without hermeneutical support, any definition of biblical errorlessness – even one as direct as the “Chicago Statement on Biblical

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17 Ibid., 145.
Inerrancy” – could only hope to be minimally effective in practice. A cacophony of voices is still a cacophony, despite the fact that these voices all stem from one inerrant and authoritative book. The ICBI thus sought during its second Chicago assembly in 1982 to explicate a nuanced biblical hermeneutic that would add teeth to the council’s doctrine of inerrancy by enabling any reader who had the time and tenacity to uncover the Bible’s universal and authoritative truths.

However, after years of faithfully employing this hermeneutical method, evangelical scholars (not to mention everyday readers) consistently come to different and often contradictory interpretations of the same biblical texts. Those universal and authoritative truths known to be in the Bible have proven just as elusive as they were before 1982. Despite promises that future historical and cultural discoveries would add that missing ingredient and unite all inerrantists around a common interpretation, this hope has consistently failed to materialize. Now over three decades later, some evangelicals and ex-evangelicals are wondering whether inerrancy was the correct path to take from the beginning.

Christian Smith, one of the leaders of this group of critics and author of The Bible Made Impossible, has offered an insightful socio-theological critique along these lines. Highlighting what he calls evangelical biblicism’s “pervasive interpretative pluralism,” Smith asks the following question: “[If] the Bible is given by a truthful and omnipotent God as an internally consistent and perspicuous text precisely for the purpose of revealing to humans correct beliefs, practices, and morals, then why is it that the presumably sincere Christians to whom it has been given cannot read it and come to common agreement about what it teaches?” This being the case, Smith concludes that
“the actual functional outcome of the biblicist view of scripture belies biblicism’s theoretical claims about the Bible. Something is wrong in the biblicist picture that cannot be ignored.” The problem, he writes, lies in a general evangelical disinclination to accept that we interpret the Bible from within “a well-developed community of interpretation relying on particular (though, to them, invisible) hermeneutical tools and paradigms that many other biblicists do not share.” By failing to recognize these hermeneutical differences, evangelicals have missed just how inescapable their interpretive pluralism actually is and thus how deep inerrancy’s meaninglessness actually goes.

That said, there are two ways in which we can speak of the meaningfulness or meaninglessness of inerrancy. Inerrancy, at least in its post-World War II form, is intended to provide an objective epistemological certainty that what the Bible says is really true. This is what evangelicalism’s deductive and inductive arguments for biblical inspiration and errorlessness are effectively trying to demonstrate. Following Smith, I maintain that in light of the plethora of inerrant interpretations among evangelicals, inerrancy has shown itself to be incapable of providing such certainty. Instead, what we get is empirical affirmation of Kathleen Boone’s recognition that an inerrant text demands an inerrant reader, a state of perfection that we simply cannot attain.

But, there is a way – and an immensely important one at that – in which the doctrine of inerrancy has proven a tremendous success and has been profoundly meaningful. While inerrancy has failed in its intended goal to provide an objective certainty that can be demonstrated, the assertion of biblical inerrancy and its general acceptance among evangelicals has succeeded remarkably in providing a subjective or

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19 Smith, The Bible Made Impossible, 26, 48. Emphasis in original.
psychological certainty reflected in the numerous absolutist arguments – both formal and informal, academic and casual – for the truth of particular biblical propositions, including inerrancy itself. These evangelicals are certain, and it is in that certainty, provided by claims to biblical inerrancy which in turn are strengthened by volumes of apologetic arguments, that they draw comfort.

Of course, these same evangelicals recognize the plurality of biblical interpretations held among them. Their typical reaction to this pluralism, however, is not to reject inerrancy. Instead, the history of postwar evangelicalism shows various attempts to maintain the illusion of objective certainty, including: 1) the rejection of opposing interpretations as false, often with reference to misleading presuppositions; 2) the retreat into likeminded groups where that undermining pluralism is perceived as a nonfactor, what Christian Smith labels “homophily;”21 and 3) the appeal to methods of interpretation said to avoid or negate the fallibility of the interpreter, thus promising that inerrant reader demanded by an inerrant biblical text. Many of the attempts to rethink inerrancy in light of interpretive pluralism, such as J. I. Packer’s appropriation of the language of phenomenological hermeneutics22 and Kevin Vanhoozer’s appeal to the performative nature of language itself,23 continue to assume that the inerrant truth of the Bible can be obtained with a measure of objective certainty. The following chapters flesh out this desire for epistemological certainty and argue that evangelicals’ quest for it is not only futile but also misplaced.

21 Smith, The Bible Made Impossible, 60.
What inerrantists are actively resisting, if not outright rejecting, is the postmodern turn in hermeneutics and its parallel turn in theology – that is, a thick historical consciousness – as detailed by philosophers and theologians such as Hans-Georg Gadamer and George Lindbeck, respectively. To say that all evangelicals wholly reject this turn, however, would be disingenuous. Since at least the early 1990s, a “postconservative” contingent of evangelicals has been in conversation with these more mainline movements\(^{24}\) – a conversation which has led to what we might call a new “Battle for the Bible.” And, as with the earlier controversy in the 1970s and 1980s, this battle is once again inter-evangelical. Theologians such as the late Stanley Grenz have proposed adopting an anti-foundationalist theological methodology, with its corresponding biblical hermeneutic,\(^{25}\) only to be met with a forceful rejoinder by a contingent of “traditional” evangelicals intent on keeping as close as possible to the original impetuses and solutions of the ICBI.\(^{26}\) Christian Smith argues that this latter group’s resistance to the postmodern turn, besides being grounded in a palpable fear of subjectivity with its inherent lack of certainty, is strengthened (if not enabled) by the general human tendency, exemplified here by evangelicals, “to cluster together into homogeneous social networks of similarly believing people.” These networks then

\(^{24}\) For example, see the compilation of papers given at a gathering of postliberals and postconservative evangelicals for the 1995 Wheaton Theology Conference. Timothy Phillips and Dennis Okholm, eds., *The Nature of Confession: Evangelicals and Postliberals in Conversation* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1996). For a more recent attempt to advance the postconservative position in evangelical circles, see Roger Olson, *Reformed and Always Reforming: The Postconservative Approach to Evangelical Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2007).


function as “effective ‘plausibility structures’ to sustain the ‘reality’ and believability of their particular assumptions and convictions.”

Seen in this light, the doctrine of inerrancy can protect already held and shared beliefs, but it cannot grant space to divergent ones, precisely because such beliefs – on account of the resulting dissonance – would undermine the very “plausibility structure” itself. Hence, inerrancy is only useful as a tool to keep out (or, more commonly, cast out) contrary interpretations and the people who hold them; it is useless as a tool to let in and allow genuine dialogue with such interpretations. To use an analogy, inerrancy raised a wall that could protect evangelicalism from the perceived engines of liberalism with their undermining of biblical authority – a wall that included certain shared interpretations of scripture built right into it. Unfortunately, when inerrantists put up that wall, they forgot not only to include an entrance but also to check for cracks; indeed, to entertain the mere possibility of cracks was to threaten to bring the whole thing down. I suggest in what follows that despite the forcefulness of conservative evangelicalism’s assertion of biblical inerrancy, its wall has had from the beginning such dangerously wide fissures.

The following chapters illumine these fissures by looking at evangelicalism and its view of the Bible through a diverse set of historical, philosophical, socio-cultural, and biographical lenses. With regard to the latter, James Wm. McClendon has campaigned for explicit inclusion of biography into the discipline of theology. “[In] their integrity and compelling power,” he explains, the biographies of people of faith “do not just illustrate, but test and verify (or by their absence or failure falsify) the set of religious convictions

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27 Smith, The Bible Made Impossible, 60-1.
28 In his recent ecumenical work, Curtis Freeman has described such dialogue as “contesting catholicity.” Curtis W. Freeman, Contesting Catholicity: Theology for Other Baptists (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2014).
that they embody.”

Chapters one and five, which focus on the life and thought of Jim Packer and Clark Pinnock respectively, provide such “biographical theologies.” They do so by humanizing evangelicals’ struggle with historical consciousness in its contact with biblical inerrancy and the role of the Bible in American life, giving us along the way two possible trajectories for evangelicalism’s future. Moreover, the stories of Packer and Pinnock display in an explicit way what the rest of this dissertation performs implicitly – that is, that theology is less the “study of God” and more the “investigation of the convictions of a convictional community.” It is therefore fundamentally illegitimate to approach theology as a mere academic enterprise. Theology is instead, as McClendon explains, always seeking “to creatively [transform convictional communities] into better ones.”

Specifically, chapter one offers a thick intellectual biography of one of the ICBI’s principal members, James I. Packer, arguing that, while his thought reflects a sensitivity toward a growing historical consciousness among evangelicals, his hermeneutical project ultimately fails to escape modernity’s characteristic demand for certainty. His is a story mirrored by evangelicals then and since, and it serves as a lens through which we can explore the occasion and logic behind the Battle for the Bible. That said, as the postwar period wore on, it became clear that a few fellow evangelicals could not wholeheartedly follow Packer and the ICBI in their attempt to neutralize the rising tide of historical consciousness.

In chapter five, I investigate how this rise has forced an increasingly large number of evangelicals to question the appropriateness of their inherited quest for certainty and,

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by extension, their conception of biblical inerrancy. The life and thought of Clark Pinnock serves as a particularly rich case study for why such folk, while refusing to discard the label, have come either to reject or redefine evangelicalism’s traditional insistence on biblical inerrancy. His is a story of another avenue evangelicals might take in their struggle with historical consciousness – one centered on the issue of trust, not certainty.

Chapters two, three, and four attend to evangelicalism more generally. For instance, chapter two takes an ethnographic look at King James Onlyism, a uniquely American movement among twentieth-century evangelicals, and how it offers in its doctrine of the providential preservation of the Bible a vivid and hotly contested expression of evangelicalism’s general fear of subjectivity in biblical interpretation. The comparison of King James Onlyism with greater evangelicalism suggests that a fear of modernity’s humanistic tendencies and postmodernity’s relativistic ones – with their perceived emphasis on human subjectivity over and against objective fact and the authority of scripture – reigns in postwar evangelicalism. This fear gives shape to evangelicals’ appeal to inerrancy and defines their core concerns.

Chapter three peers through the lenses of evangelical commentaries on the Book of Jonah and the postwar debate over redaction criticism within the Evangelical Theological Society at how and why evangelicals have come to invest biblical inerrancy with explicit claims regarding its historical accuracy. In order to procure objectively stable, eternal, and universal scriptural truths in defense against the antisupernaturalism of historical criticism and the experientialism of neoorthodoxy, evangelicals equated inspired truth with the historical event they claimed was the duty of scripture to record.
Biblical truth thus became identified with historical fact, and all claims to authorial creativity in scripture or the development of Christian truth in tradition thereby suffered the stigma associated with subjectivism and relativism. In the process, evangelicals were forced by dissension from within to undergird the doctrine of inerrancy with a linear and phenomenologically unfaithful hermeneutic, one driven by a strict propositional view of revelation, invested with pre-determined, objectivistic interpretations of controversial passages, and thereby said to deliver both reader and text from the distorting contingencies of space and time.

Chapter four takes us to eighteenth-century Scotland when Thomas Reid gave to Common Sense Realism its early definitive expression. This epistemological rebuttal to Humean skepticism would find reinvigoration in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries under the auspices of Reformed scholastics then at Princeton Theological Seminary. For these early framers of biblical inerrancy, Scottish Common Sense Realism provided an amicable epistemological foundation for their own defense of scripture. A closer look at Reid’s writings – which are too often taken for granted in both histories of evangelicalism and theological defenses of inerrancy – suggests however that the Princeton theologians fundamentally misappropriated Scottish Common Sense Realism (at least in its definitive Reidian form) in their quest for certainty and bequeathed this misappropriation to evangelicalism’s Battle for the Bible. It would seem that each group’s enthroning of a rationality based on “common sense,” seen expressly in the cold description of Christian faith as a body of knowledge demanding rational assent, is more indebted to a Cartesian demand for epistemological certainty than to what we will see was Reid’s interest in right moral action.
Running underneath all of these chapters is a challenge to the mainstream – though increasingly contested – definition of American evangelicalism and fundamentalism. Many historians continue to accept George Marsden’s classic definition of fundamentalists as those evangelicals who are militant or angry about something. We read that whereas fundamentalists prefer separatism, evangelicals seek out active engagement. Such lines, however, are rarely so distinct. Separatist fundamentalist Jerry Falwell’s marked embrace of political and social engagement in his establishment and direction of the Moral Majority serves as only the most recognized outlying case. If there once existed a clear line distinguishing the postwar fundamentalist from her evangelical cousin, that line has now ceased to exist. The point is not that fundamentalists do not take positions that can often be deemed militant and separatist, but that such militancy and separatism are becoming increasingly more difficult to define.

Marsden’s definition as such fails to explain how both evangelicals and fundamentalists can cling to biblical inerrancy while simultaneously exhibiting great diversity and division within their own ranks on any number of issues – a divisiveness that hot-button topics such as

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32 Considering the growth and financial backing of the Moral Majority, alongside other similarly fundamentalist lobbies (e.g., Pat Robertson’s Christian Coalition), Falwell does not seem to be the exception that proves the rule.

33 In actuality, the real question surrounds whether fundamentalist militancy and separatism were ever so easily defined or recognizable in the first place. My suspicion is that they were not, but that we, now confronted by a risen and powerful Religious Right, are only coming to recognize the plasticity of these terms.
abortion and gay marriage often mask but do not efface. A more accurate and fruitful
definition of both groups lies instead along the lines of their use and development of the
doctrine of inerrancy in their mutual quest for certainty.

This diversity within postwar evangelical/fundamentalism should not be surprising. As William Trollinger and Douglas Jacobsen have shown, the common liberal-conservative binary, though politically and culturally powerful, is historically unfaithful.\textsuperscript{34} Even at the height of the Fundamentalist-Modernist Controversy in the first quarter of the twentieth century, we must admit a wide diversity within conservative Protestantism, not to mention American Christianity as a whole.\textsuperscript{35} Though the actual impact of \textit{The Fundamentals} (1910-1915) upon conservative Christianity continues to be a point of debate, the occasional dissonance of its articles more faithfully represents the state of early fundamentalism as a genuinely diverse body, although one increasingly fixated on a few relatively broad issues – the most basic and obvious being the authority and inerrancy of the Bible.

Here James Barr’s theological analysis and critique of fundamentalism is particularly helpful. Barr’s work, while not as often heard – much less engaged – in recent years, continues to weigh heavily upon discussions of that “certain basic personal religious and existential attitude” that defines fundamentalists and, for Barr, most of

\textsuperscript{34} Douglas Jacobsen and William Trollinger, \textit{Re-Forming the Center: American Protestantism, 1900 to the Present} (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998). So powerful and so entrenched is this binary that it is virtually impossible to critique it without at the same time assuming it. We might say at this time that we have no terminology other than “liberal”/“conservative” by which we can effectively identify and communicate divergent positions within American Christianity. The trick, therefore, is to qualify these terms when we do use them.

\textsuperscript{35} As I have argued elsewhere, this liberal-conservative binary not only ignores a vast number of voices within American Protestantism, but also those various voices within an equally diverse American Catholicism, resulting in what we can call a historiographical anti-Catholicism. See my “Another Look at Scopes: Catholic Perceptions of the ‘Trial of the Century,’” unpublished paper presented at the American Catholic Historical Association, March 2014.
today’s evangelicals. His critique of fundamentalism, presented throughout the 1970s and 1980s from various angles and with various audiences in mind, focuses on what he coins as fundamentalism’s “maximally conservative” approach to the Bible – an approach that seeks to protect under the guise of biblical authority deeply entrenched traditional doctrines and interpretations of scripture. Such a maximally conservative approach to biblical studies, Barr complains, muzzles the text, restricting its voice to a mere mirroring of the reader’s own presupposed interpretation.36 Fundamentalists’ all-encompassing emphasis on biblical inerrancy, in other words, defines their biblical studies over and against modern critical scholarship and thus colors their approach to scripture as markedly polemical. Moreover, in what may be his most damning and historiographically significant judgment, Barr accuses neoevangelicals (a self-assigned label used by some postwar evangelicals to distinguish themselves from separatist fundamentalists) like Carl F. H. Henry and the ecumenical Billy Graham of betraying the same maximally conservative mindset.

As an illustration, consider that young earth creationist Ken Ham feels justified in writing off staunch inerrantists B. B. Warfield and C. I. Scofield as biblically unfaithful and thus insufficiently Christian because of their acceptance of theistic evolution.37 In the same way, Gail Riplinger vilifies James White, D. A. Carson, and millions of other evangelicals who have moved from the King James Bible to the New International Version.38 What these sharp and often caustic divisions cannot obscure, however, is a

37 See William Trollinger and Susan Trollinger’s forthcoming commentary on Ken Ham’s Answers in Genesis and the Kentucky-based Creation Museum, *Righting America at the Creation Museum*, op. cit.
shared concern to protect the authority of scripture by means of an appeal to biblical inerrancy. Here is a concern that not only unites these widely divergent figureheads and their constituencies, but drives their ostensibly different positions as well. This is not to say that the lines drawn in these two examples delineate a homogenous fundamentalism. We need only point out that of those Christians holding to either young earth creationism or King James Onlyism – the two positions often labeled “fundamentalist” – these Christians do not necessarily share both positions. Many young earth creationists find the NIV to be a perfectly acceptable translation of the Bible while some adherents to King James Onlyism would not consider themselves young earth creationists (though the latter is becoming less common).

Harriet Harris has described this appeal to biblical inerrancy as expressive of evangelicalism’s “rationalist strain.” In her telling, twentieth-century evangelicalism began increasingly to favor a cold rationalism over what had been its equally strong, if not dominant, pietism.\(^{39}\) Though evangelicalism has never given up its pietism, when traditional Christian doctrines and established ways of life became threatened by various intellectual and cultural developments, evangelicalism’s concern for epistemological certainty gained prominence and strength. This resulted in the subordination of evangelical pietism to a rationalistic appeal to biblical errorlessness.

In her recent *Apostles of Reason*, Molly Worthen picks up on this rationalism-pietism dialectic and offers a powerful critique of the role of intellectual authority in evangelical life. Though the “children of estranged parents – Pietism and the Enlightenment,” evangelicals “behave like orphans,” often as unconscious of their intellectual heritage as they are of the “confusion over authority” which that heritage has

furnished them. And yet, she goes on to suggest, while such confusion has proven to be evangelicals’ “greatest affliction,” it has also served as their “most potent source of vitality.”

Here Worthen explores some of the implications of what scholars like Donald Dayton and Robert Johnston have for some time now noted about evangelicalism, that we should always understand it in its complexity and variety – that is, we do not have one evangelicalism but many evangelicalisms. Specifically, she shows how the largely successful attempt by postwar neoevangelicalism and its publicizing wing, Christianity Today, to unite all of conservative American Christianity under a single, uniform banner of inerrancy was itself a crisis of authority within the evangelical fold. Adopting a historically broad panorama of evangelicalism – including within it many who might not have typically employed the label for themselves, e.g., the Mennonites – Worthen keenly perceives that the largely successful attempt to unite all of evangelicalism under the banner of inerrancy resulted in a soft-pedaling, even an effacing, of its inherent differences. The insistence that biblical inerrancy serve as the litmus test for orthodoxy ultimately colored the bulk of conservative American Christianity in bold rationalistic, or Reformed, shades.

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40 Worthen, Apostles of Reason, 7. I suspect that Worthen here has placed her finger on that aspect of evangelicalism which keeps even some of its most enduring and astute critics, such as James Barr and Christian Smith, searching not for some alternative to evangelicalism but for its reformation. Both Barr and Smith were spiritually formed within Protestant evangelicalism. Barr, for his part, argues for a return to what he understands to be a more faithful and fruitful evangelicalism – an evangelicalism that allows the Bible to speak on its own terms. “Escaping from fundamentalism,” as Barr titles one of his books, does not then mean abandoning traditional evangelicalism but rehabilitating its revivalist and pietistic strains. See James Barr, Escaping from Fundamentalism (London: SCM Press, 1984). Christian Smith, though a convert to Roman Catholicism, continues to describe himself as an evangelical Catholic. As the subtitle to The Bible Made Impossible makes clear, what Smith finds wrong with inerrancy is that it is not “a truly evangelical reading of scripture.”
The present dissertation can be read in two ways as a theological extension of Worthen’s thesis. First, where she traces the consolidation of conservative American Christianity into a highly rationalistic evangelicalism centered on biblical inerrancy, I go further and argue that groups with traditionally strong pietistic strains – e.g., Methodists, Mennonites, and Pentecostals – have found inerrantist evangelicalism so attractive in large measure due to the certainty it promises. Second, I push on Worthen’s discussion of the “fission of faith and reason” within postwar evangelicalism, arguing that her narrative can be read profitably as another in a web of stories concerning the desacralization of the world.\(^{41}\) In an attempt to protect faith, evangelicals have subsumed it to reason, with the unfortunate consequence that faith has come to be defined as rationalistic assent to certain biblical propositions. But if this is so, then we do not actually come to know the God who meets us through scripture.\(^{42}\) Instead, we only come to know propositions about him, and the person of God becomes masked – if not expelled – from the world by the very Bible said to make him clear and present.\(^{43}\)

Such desacralization should not be taken lightly. Growing up in the Dallas-Fort Worth area and catechized in a young church plant with close ties to the staunchly

\(^{41}\) Worthen, *Apostles of Reason*, 263. In fact, *Apostles of Reason* is a constant rise to just this point, but in the end Worthen pulls her punches.

\(^{42}\) As N. T. Wright has pointed out, “the phrase ‘authority of scripture’ can make Christian sense only if it is a shorthand for ‘the authority of the triune God, exercised somehow through scripture.’” N. T. Wright, *Scripture and the Authority of God: How to Read the Bible Today* (New York, NY: HarperCollins, 2011), 21. Emphasis in original.

\(^{43}\) Like Worthen, Paul Maltby has recently raised the question of the relationship between Christian fundamentalism and the disenchantment of the world. Yet, Maltby unfortunately falls victim to the all too common misassumption that evangelicalism/fundamentalism is pre-modern, an error presumably encouraged by his understanding of evangelicalism as still “enchanted” or, at least, as still longing for an enchanted world. While it is true that evangelicalism revels in metaphysical and absolutist presumptions and beliefs, it does so in a quintessentially modern way and for quintessentially modern reasons. (See, for instance, William Portier, “Fundamentalism in North America: A Modern Anti-Modernism,” *Communio* 28 (Fall 2001): 581-98.) It is thus appropriate to ask how evangelicalism might have itself participated in the disenchantment or desacralization of the West – and this in the midst of inerrantists’ claim that it is in the very words of the Bible that we meet God. Paul Maltby, *Christian Fundamentalism and the Culture of Disenchantment* (Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press, 2013).
conservative and dispensational Dallas Theological Seminary, I came across a rather
tongue-in-cheek quip that has over time proven both self-deprecatingly honest and
uncomfortably true: “Evangelicals believe in the Holy Trinity: God the Father, God the
Son, and God the Holy Scriptures.” However haphazardly spoken, this “evangelical
Trinity” has the odd result of placing a functional modalism, not Trinitarianism, at the
heart of evangelical life. For all intents and purposes, the Bible in much of evangelicalism
is God. Popular – and some academic – evangelical rhetoric, more so than official
evangelical doctrine, makes this clear.\footnote{It is, of course, of great importance that specialized evangelical doctrine often holds a more classically orthodox position than that reflected by common evangelical practice. That being said, here I suggest that rhetoric – by which I mean apologetic statements, evangelistic methods, personal testimony, hymns, “praise and worship” music, and especially preaching – rather than explicit doctrinal formulation is a more accurate lens into genuine evangelical belief. It is, indeed, this point that makes the above quip about the evangelical Trinity so apposite.}

Consider the lyrics of the following hymn, “God’s Sufficient Word,” by one-time
chairman of the International Council on Biblical Inerrancy, James Montgomery Boice:

\begin{verbatim}
  When God from heaven gave His Word,
  His Word was all-sufficient;
  It needs no words I may have heard
  To add to or be in it.

  Sufficient for God’s work in me:
  My soul’s regeneration,
  A life in which good works will be
  The fruit of my salvation.

  Sufficient too in daily strife,
  Providing clear directions
  For how to live a godly life,
  Creating right affections.

  Sufficient! If I stoop to sin,
  God’s Word will soon correct me,
  And if I wander from God’s way,
  His Word will redirect me.
\end{verbatim}
So I will take God’s Book and read,
To learn what God desires;
The Bible gives the strength I need
To do what God requires. 45

While undoubtedly a hymn focused on the certainty we have concerning scripture’s sacramental nature, it is surprising to note that, by the last stanza, God is effectively absent, relegated to a status secondary to scripture.

Sacramental language is rather tricky, especially when used to describe the intent of a person or subculture that would not normally employ such terminology. I have found such language, however, to be helpful for understanding how many evangelicals view and make use of the Bible. In general, I define sacramentalization as a subspecies of sacralization, which I in turn equate with enchantment. This language is complicated by the tradition in certain circles – especially within Roman Catholicism – to distinguish between a sacramental and a Sacrament, where the latter is intended to designate the formal and established material means by which we are most expressly brought into the presence of God. Hence, Marriage, Baptism, the Eucharist, etc., are considered Sacraments (with a capital “S”) whereas religious icons, for instance, are considered sacramentals (with a lowercase “s”). It should also be noted that while Catholics read both “Sacrament” and “sacramental” as describing the mediation of God to humans and thus imply proximity to the divine, evangelicals have traditionally read these terms as describing divine distance, thereby establishing an obstacle between humans and God. A mediator, they would say, divides as much as it unites.

With these distinctions in mind, we can say that Boice conceives of scripture as the means by which God meets us. That is, he conceives of the Bible as a Sacrament

(capital “S”). However, while this may be so, the actual lyrics of “God’s Sufficient Word” defeat the very point Boice is trying to make. A close reading of the hymn discovers that, instead of presenting an active God who moves through scripture today, the hymn offers a now static deity who once moved in the past to inspire scripture, making it into, we might say, a reservoir of his grace to which we gain access by coming to know true biblical propositions.

Clearly Boice intended his hymn to counter the common tendency to seek out other means by which people might be saved and live holy lives (in other words, as a counter to other religious authorities), but in doing so he effectively adopts the picture of a deist’s God. Instead of being the one who saves us and forms in us all truth and virtue, God has deeded the entirety of his earthly activity to the very words of a written text. It is this book – not the God to which the Bible bears witness – that has the power to heal and transform. In this way “God’s Sufficient Word” participates, however subtly, in desacralizing the world.

Another, older hymn written by Daniel Webster Whittle, an evangelist and hymnist who at one time traveled with Dwight L. Moody, might help clarify the implications of Boice’s and evangelicalism’s deification of the Bible:

\begin{quote}
I know not why God’s wondrous grace
To me He hath made known,
Nor why, unworthy, Christ in love
Redeemed me for His own.

But I know Whom I have believed,
And am persuaded that He is able
To keep that which I’ve committed
Unto Him against that day.
\end{quote}
I know not how this saving faith
To me He did impart,
Nor how believing in His Word
Wrought peace within my heart.

I know not how the Spirit moves,
Convincing us of sin,
Revealing Jesus through the Word,
Creating faith in Him.

I know not what of good or ill
May be reserved for me,
Of weary ways or golden days,
Before His face I see.

I know not when my Lord may come,
At night or noonday fair,
Nor if I walk the vale with Him,
Or meet Him in the air.46

Two elements of this hymn are particularly striking in relation to Boice’s. First, it is the
Trinitarian God who takes center stage. The Father, Son and Holy Spirit are the active
powers – not secondarily but primarily. Whereas in “God’s Sufficient Word” we are
encouraged to trust the all-sufficiency of the written word, in Whittle’s hymn our trust is
directed to the living Word, the person of Christ himself. This “personal” versus
“propositional” distinction is nothing new, especially since Karl Barth drew our attention
back to it, but it highlights an important implication that evangelicalism’s view of
scripture has on the movement’s understanding of God and church.47

46 Daniel Webster Whittle, “I Know Whom I Have Believed,” in Celebration Hymnal (Nashville,

47 Barth has played and continues to play a controversial role within evangelicalism, most often
with regard to his doctrine of the Word of God, especially his distinction between the personal and the
propositional Word – a point which makes referencing him in this regard quite appropriate. Whereas some
evangelicals have found Barth’s theology of revelation and scripture to be helpful and productive,
producing autobiographical collections such as Donald McKim’s How Karl Barth Change My Mind, others
– including entire denominations – have taken pains to protect scripture and orthodoxy from the acids of
Barth’s distinction, however sweet-smelling they may be. In 2000, for instance, the Southern Baptist
Convention revised its Baptist Faith and Message to read, “The Holy Bible was written by men divinely
inspired and is God’s revelation of Himself to man.” This replaced the traditional “is the record of God’s
Second, Whittle is insistent that there is much we do not know for certain. The repetition of “I know not…” instills in us a much different mindset than that of Boice’s hymn. The latter attempts to assure us that scripture has all the knowledge and power needed to live a holy and fruitful life. That is, Boice expresses a hope that we will emerge from singing his hymn with a certainty that what we find in the Bible – notably true propositional knowledge – is indeed sufficient.

While we might call this certainty “faith” – and evangelicals often do – it is a faith quite different from the trust that Christians, including many evangelicals in the past, have traditionally claimed we address to Jesus Christ. We trust that Christ himself will be faithful to bring us salvation, even in the midst of our otherwise immense uncertainties about the path laid before us. Such a view of faith is true to Whittle’s hymn, which defines trust in Christ’s faithfulness in clear reference to our own lack of certainty.

With these uncertainties of life in mind, Curtis Freeman describes the sin-sick soul of modern culture and its church as the fear of difference – more specifically, of those “Others” among us who embody different cultures, times, and traditions. Such a “pathological fear of the Other,” he explains, “lies at the root of human existence and comprises the essence of sin,” and it is terminal, a “sickness unto death.” These “Others” are the ones who experience God differently, who see the world in a way

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48 In Faith and Belief, Wilfred Cantwell Smith traces the evolution of “I believe” as used in popular discourse from a statement of faithfulness to and trust in a divine savior to a statement of assent to doctrinal propositions. Wilfred Cantwell Smith, Faith and Belief (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University, 1979).

49 Freeman, Contesting Catholicity, 43, 21.
foreign to us, who navigate its pleasures and pitfalls unlike we do, who read our scriptures unconventionally, or who read a different scripture altogether, if they read one at all. We fear these “Others” because we do not like their ways or their beliefs, or because we do not or even cannot understand them. The “Other” represents confusion, uncertainty, despair. It is the enemy of inerrancy and evangelicalism, and it can be found in evangelicals’ attempts over the years to shut out alternative beliefs, to lock down what is true and right for all times and all peoples, and to reduce unity to uniformity. Freeman often refers to this sickness as a fundamental aversion to “alterity.”\textsuperscript{50} We might describe it, however, as evangelicals’ quest for certainty.

\textsuperscript{50} Ibid., 43.
CHAPTER 1
DESIRING CERTAINTY

*Man who lives in a world of hazards is compelled to seek for security.*

*John Dewey, The Quest for Certainty*

*Preaching is hazy; heads are muddled; hearts fret; doubts drain our strength; uncertainty paralyses our action...We know in our bones that we were made for certainty, and we cannot be happy without it.*

*J. I. Packer, God Has Spoken*¹

As a leading voice in the internecine debate over inerrancy among American evangelicals during the 1970s-1980s, James I. Packer presents an important and intriguing case study for the Battle for the Bible and much of the conservative evangelicalism driving it. While genuinely insistent that many of the particulars of the debate actually concern matters of biblical interpretation and not inspiration or authority, Packer never waivers in his belief that conservative evangelicals need to insist upon and adamantly promote the sole authority of the Bible and a strict understanding of inerrancy. Driving this insistence is a profound concern for certainty in one’s knowledge and understanding of scriptural and, therefore, divine truth.

In light of his desire to obtain and maintain certainty, however, Packer’s discussion of the interpretative enterprise presents what appears to be a significant – though apparently unrecognized – complication. The issue surrounds his conception of the Holy Spirit’s role in interpretation, which Packer divides into three deeply interconnected and equally indispensable processes: 1) discovering the authorial intent of the biblical text through the correct application of grammatical-historical exegesis, 2) synthesizing the historical meaning of each text into a coherent whole, and 3) applying that original historical meaning to one’s own life today. Notably, Packer does not explicitly define the Spirit’s role in terms of the first two processes – that of the exegesis and synthesis of scripture – but in terms of the third, or scripture’s application. This Packer calls spiritual illumination, and it provides a certainty that the Bible is true and reliable.

Under the assumption that today’s exegete can accurately and scientifically discover the historical meaning, what Packer calls the authorial intent of the text, his theory of interpretation serves to support his concern for certainty. However, as early as the late 1970s, Packer had come to accept the notion that we cannot so easily and effectively cross the hermeneutical gap separating us from the biblical authors. He admits the reader’s “historically effected consciousness,” even going so far as to grant Hans-Georg Gadamer’s two horizons, though in a significantly nuanced form.

It is here that Packer runs upon thin ice, particularly in relation to certainty. It appears that he actually needs the Spirit’s certifying assurance in the process of grammatical-historical exegesis just as much as in scripture’s application, for subjectivism rears its head in both places. Yet, surprisingly, Packer does not grant the
Spirit any discernibly legitimate role in exegesis, seemingly placing full confidence in the objectivity and hence certainty of human reason as it carefully follows the grammatical-historical method. An interesting consequence of this is that Packer, in restricting the Spirit’s work to application, downplays the verbal plenary inspiration of scripture and focuses instead on the reader’s subjective experience. This is certainly not what he intends nor what inerrantists in general have consistently maintained, resembling as it does Karl Barth’s notion of scripture becoming the Word of God.

In the end, by locating the Spirit’s role in application alone and not in the initial exegetical process as well, Packer fails to procure the certainty he seeks and simultaneously undermines the greater evangelical attempt to locate God’s saving truth in the literal words of the Bible. My argument to this end will proceed in three moves. First, from his early entrance into evangelicalism and the debate over the Bible’s inerrant authority, Packer has consistently emphasized the importance of the biblical text for understanding the substance and exercise of the Christian life. Apart from a knowable and trustworthy Bible, Christians suffer from what Packer calls an “infection of uncertainty,” the symptoms of which include insecurity, tentativeness, and confusion as to what beliefs and behaviors are properly Christian.² This desire for certainty and the pastoral help it provides drives Packer’s insistence that scripture be both authoritative and inerrant.

Second, Packer recognizes early on that any appeal to biblical authority and inerrancy is useless in practice if the very meaning of the text is left unknown and uncertain. It is not the mere words of the Bible that are authoritative and inerrant, but its semantic content – that is, what God wants humanity to know about himself and creation.

² Packer, God Has Spoken, 24.
That meaning is only discoverable, however, through a threefold process of interpretation which brings the original authorial intent of the text to bear on the present through the indispensable help of human reason in exegesis and the Holy Spirit in application.

Third, Packer’s voluminous corpus presents an uncommon consistency of thought and position. One area of particularly significant development, however, lies in his attitude toward modern hermeneutics, exemplified by philosophers Martin Heidegger and Hans-Georg Gadamer, and distilled, at least in Packer’s case, by his Anglican colleague, Anthony Thiselton. Though initially wary of this hermeneutical turn – especially how it tends to separate text from meaning – Packer comes to embrace a number of its principles, including its insistence on the text’s and the reader’s indissoluble historical and cultural location. In doing so, however, Packer welcomes a gap between text and reader that his own nuanced hermeneutic cannot cross, at least with any result approximating the desire for certainty driving that interpretative process.

The Quest for Certainty

The question of biblical authority has played a central role in the life and thought of James Packer from his earliest days at Oxford. As he tells the story himself, hardly two months into his first term and newly converted to evangelical Christianity, Jim attended an exposition on the book of Revelation sponsored by the local Inter-Varsity Fellowship. At the close of the exposition, he discovered that he no longer viewed the Bible as “a mixture of history, legend, and opinion,” a common perspective among many Anglicans at the time, but as “a channel of divine communication, triggering insight and praise” – a
guidebook detailing God’s intent for the Christian life.\(^3\) A number of years later an older Packer came to understand this experience in terms of Calvin’s “inward testimony of the Holy Spirit” which leads all Christians to know scripture as the authoritative word of God.\(^4\)

Packer’s insistence on biblical authority found its earliest extensive expression in his book length response to A. G. Hebert’s *Fundamentalism and the Church of God*.\(^5\) The former’s critique, polemically titled “*Fundamentalism*” and the Word of God, lays the foundation for much of his later work while also firmly establishing him as an astute and careful proponent of conservative evangelicalism. Here Packer details two distinct classes of doctrinal division, distinguished by their respective views of authority. Those in the first class, whatever their disagreements about the meaning of the text, still hold in common the fundamental principle of the Bible’s absolute authority. Packer offers as an example the classic debate between Calvinists and Arminians, who while holding positions remarkably at odds with each other, nevertheless share a singular view of the Bible as absolutely authoritative. Those located within the second class of doctrinal division, however, disagree on the issue of biblical authority itself. This is “the deepest doctrinal divergence of all,” and it defines the heart of the liberal-evangelical controversy over the Bible.\(^6\)

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Moreover, to speak of the Bible as authoritative is necessarily to speak of it as inerrant, “for statements that are not absolutely true and reliable could not be absolutely authoritative.” Packer reasons to this intimate linking of authority with inerrancy by appealing to the trustworthiness of the God whose revelation the Bible purports to be. When evangelicals use the terms infallibility or inerrancy, he argues, they are doing nothing more than confessing that the entire Bible is God’s word and that God qua God cannot lie. Hence, Packer understands the debate over the Bible’s authority as presenting Christians with a moment of decision of the utmost importance:

Will we let ourselves be guided by a Bible received as inspired and therefore wholly true (for God is not the author of untruths), or will we strike out, against our Lord and his most authoritative representatives, on a line of our own? If we do, we have already resolved in principle to be led not by the Bible as given, but by the Bible as we edit and reduce it, and we are likely to be found before long scaling down its mysteries (e.g., incarnation and atonement) and relativizing its absolutes (e.g., in sexual ethics) in the light of our own divergent ideas.  

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7 Ibid., 95-6. While much of the Battle for the Bible revolved around an intense debate as to the very usefulness of the term “inerrancy,” often because of its relative novelty, Packer consistently argues for its validity and profitability as a clear expression of what he considers the historic Christian position that all scripture is absolutely true in all it intends to teach. Though a negative term, Packer considers inerrancy to express effectively this affirmation. He argues that the word inerrancy does more positive and necessary work than those opposed to its use normally allow. The logical function of inerrancy as a term is to define, circumscribe, and safeguard correct theological method. Specifically, inerrancy asserts that “we may not 1) deny, disregard, or arbitrarily relativize, anything that the biblical writers teach, nor 2) discount any of the practical implications for worship and service that their teaching carries, nor 3) cut the knot of any problem of Bible harmony, factual or theological, by allowing ourselves to assume that the inspired authors were not necessarily consistent either with themselves or with each other. It is because the word inerrant makes these methodological points about handling the Bible, ruling out in advance the use of mental procedures that can only lead to reduced and distorted versions of Christianity, that it is so valuable and, I think, so much valued by those who embrace it.” James I. Packer, “Encountering Present-day Views of Scripture,” in The Foundation of Biblical Authority, ed. James Montgomery Boice (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1978), 77.

Here we see that Packer understands the rejection of biblical authority as the beginning of a slippery slope – what he elsewhere refers to as “domino thinking” – into apostasy and utter subjectivity, a concern we will examine more fully in the next chapter.9

We also catch a glimpse of what Packer finds most troubling about the rejection of the Bible’s inerrant authority. Here and elsewhere he laments that a significant number of Christians have by jettisoning the absolute authority of the Bible discarded along with it God’s guidance in the way of salvation and the Christian life. Packer explains this pastoral focus of his most clearly in an entry authored for the second edition of the *New Bible Commentary*, his first publication on scripture. God gave the Bible not merely to provide a ground for personal faith and guidance for individual Christian living, but also to enable the worldwide church in every age to understand itself, to interpret its history, to reform and purify its life continually, and to rebuff all assaults made upon it, whether from within, by sin and heresy, or from without, by persecution and rival ideologies. All the problems that ever faced or will face the church are in principle covered and solved in this book.10

Throughout his works, Packer continually expresses a deep concern that, by ceasing to view biblical teaching as authoritative or even true, liberal Christians and those evangelicals who increasingly come to question the conservative position have rejected the only source of God’s revelation to humanity and thus the only source for Christian self-understanding. Though they once relied upon the solid, objective ground of God’s

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9 Packer, “Encountering Present-day Views of Scripture,” 66. The slippery slope metaphor is not unique to Packer. Much of evangelicalism during the 1970s-1980s employed this warning, usually doing so against those individuals and institutions who, once part of the evangelical fold, were then viewed as careening toward apostasy and moral failure. For instance, Harold Lindsell applies the metaphor most earnestly to Fuller Seminary, which originally had been considered evangelicalism’s standard-bearer but had since fallen from that grace on account of its general rejection of certain inerrantist principles. Lindsell, *The Battle for the Bible*, op. cit. For a historical account of Fuller’s part in the debate, see the excellent study by George Marsden, *Reforming Fundamentalism: Fuller Seminary and the New Evangelicalism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1987).

own word, such liberals and wayward evangelicals now live confused and directionless lives with only their own inner subjectivity as a guide.

In this light, Packer’s interest in the question of biblical authority reflects a fundamental concern for obtaining and maintaining certainty as to what is indeed true and right in the world and in contradistinction to what he understands to be a snowballing epistemological and moral relativism, an utter subjectivism leading only to a confused insecurity about one’s present and eternal states. This desire for certainty is most clearly expressed in another of his earliest works on scripture, *God Has Spoken*.\(^{11}\) In an introductory section titled “The Infection of Uncertainty,” Packer equates the spiritual starvation decried in Israel by the prophet Amos with the “unsure, tentative, and confused” state of the twentieth-century church. As God spoke a message of instruction and salvation through the prophets during the period of the divided kingdom, so the Holy Spirit promises to speak today in the scriptures, interpreting and applying them to the church. But, Packer laments, that is far from reality today. “Preaching is hazy; heads are muddled; hearts fret; doubts drain our strength; uncertainty paralyses our action…We know in our bones that we were made for certainty, and we cannot be happy without it.” Why? Packer initially provides only an enigmatic explanation: the church has “grieved the Spirit” and now suffers from a bewildering uncertainty about what to believe and how to act.\(^{12}\)

Only toward the end of his book do we receive any detailed reason for this grievance. It is threefold: 1) unwillingness to see the human words of scripture as God’s

\(^{11}\) Packer, *God Has Spoken*, 24. The first edition of this work was published in a series called *Christian Foundations* and did not include the introduction found in the second and third editions. The section entitled “The Infection of Uncertainty” thus served as the original beginning to the work.

\(^{12}\) Ibid., 24-5.
words; 2) unwillingness to follow the analogy of scripture, or the hermeneutical principle that scripture should always interpret scripture; and 3) indolence in applying what the Bible actually says. Here once again is the central question of authority. Christians today live in a state of uncertainty because they have lost “the historic conviction that what Scripture says, God says.” This uncertainty has not only weakened the faith of many, it has led them into “superstition” where “instead of faith there is fog.” In an historical analysis common throughout his work, Packer unsurprisingly lays the blame for this squarely on the shoulders of Enlightenment skepticism and the turn to the subject:

Listening to the babel of Renaissance theologians’ voices, confident though they often are, one soon sees that there is no hope of reaching certainty about anything in such company. Relativism is the ruling principle; every question goes back again and again into the melting-pot; syntheses are merely provisional, and the state of flux is never-ending.

The only solution to this uncertainty, once again, is to trust that the Bible is inerrant and, on that account, authoritative. Hence, evangelicals who question the Bible’s total inerrancy, particularly its communication of historical and scientific fact, yet continue to uphold its supreme authority do not escape this inevitable collapse into a paralyzing uncertainty. Again, Packer resorts to the logic of the slippery slope: “If the canonical Scriptures were not God’s revealed Word, but only a mere fallible human witness to God’s Word, no present-day Christian could emulate Abraham’s faith, because none could be sure that he had a single definite promise from God on which to rest.” Instead, such a Christian must exchange what is “the rational biblical notion of faith” for “the irrational existential idea of faith as a leap in the dark.” She must, in other words,
“abandon the firm foundation of the divine promises for the yawning abyss of a foggy uncertainty.”

The Role of the Holy Spirit in Interpretation

It is worth clarifying that while Packer’s desire for certainty drives his insistence that Christians embrace the authority and inerrancy of scripture, the bulk of his argumentation runs in the other direction. In accepting the Bible’s inerrant authority, Christians discover an assurance of divine truth and direction that frees them from the doubt, confusion, and despair they once suffered. Packer, however, is insistent that what provides this certainty is not belief in biblical inerrancy and authority itself, but understanding the true and authoritative message of God revealed in scripture’s inerrant words. But, as he often reminds his readers, discovery of that meaning requires a thoroughgoing interpretative process.

In stressing the importance of interpretation alongside inerrancy, Packer makes an important and helpful distinction. Whereas inerrancy considers the truthfulness of a text, interpretation is only concerned with what that text actually means. While he grants that inerrancy refuses by definition to set one passage over and against another, it makes no hermeneutical claims in and of itself. Thus, while on the one hand its purpose is to ensure

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16 James I. Packer, “The Necessity of the Revealed Word,” in Honouring the Written Word of God: The Collected Shorter Writings of J. I. Packer, Volume 3 (Carlisle, UK: Paternoster, 1999), 107-8. Packer elsewhere fields the claim that evangelicals’ “unqualified confidence” in the Bible is intellectually and morally restrictive. He replies in typical fashion by appealing to the certainty such a view of scripture brings: “The truth is that such confidence produces liberated living – living, that is, which is free from uncertainty, doubt and despair – which otherwise is not found anywhere. The man who trusts his Bible knows what God did, does and will do, whatever he commands and promises.” Again, “Bible certainties” allow us to live out our lives “in peace and hope.” James I. Packer, Freedom, Authority, and Scripture (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1982), 25, 31.
that Christians accept as true and authoritative what the Bible does indeed teach, on the other hand, as Packer is wont to note, inerrancy is for all practical purposes meaningless apart from interpretation.

The impact that this distinction has upon Packer’s driving concern for certainty cannot be overstated. By claiming that an inerrant authority is only as good as its interpretation, Packer makes his desire for certainty dependent upon the ability of the interpreter to uncover the singular objective meaning of a text and to be certain that she has done so. This would presumably require the interpreter herself to be inerrant, a conclusion that appears inevitable but which Packer rejects out of hand. Instead, he offers a hermeneutic which, he guarantees us, can accurately discover that singular meaning of a biblical text, if only the correct interpretive principles are carefully followed.

Packer describes the task of biblical hermeneutics as a threefold process of exegesis, synthesis, and application that seeks, on the one hand, to discover the authorial intent of the text in its historical and cultural setting and, on the other hand, to apply that original meaning to our own lives today.

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18 Not surprisingly, this point finds particular emphasis in Packer’s exposition on the International Council on Biblical Inerrancy’s 1982 statement on biblical hermeneutics: “To have formulated the biblical concept of Scripture as authoritative revelation in writing, the God-given rule of faith and life will be of no profit where the message of Scripture is not rightly grasped and applied. So it is of vital importance to detect and dismiss defective ways of interpreting what is written and to replace them with faithful interpretation of God’s infallible Word.” James I. Packer, “Exposition on Biblical Hermeneutics,” in Hermeneutics, Inerrancy, and the Bible, eds. Earl Radmacher and Robert Preus (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1984), 905.
19 See, for instance, Packer, Beyond the Battle for the Bible, 57. Ultimately, Packer provides three disclaimers as to how inerrancy affects interpretation: 1) It does not make the interpreter inerrant; 2) It does not mean that one side can claim the other side to be unbiblical on sheer disagreement over an interpretation of a certain “problem passage;” and 3) It does not mean that the interpreter can ignore human particularity. Though he generally has high praise for the book, Packer faults Lindsell’s Battle for the Bible precisely on its tendency to conflate inerrancy and interpretation (particularly in relation to Lindsell’s unwarranted treatment of certain differences of interpretation as unbiblical). Ibid., 144-6.
Exegesis means bringing out of the text all that it contains of the thoughts, attitudes, assumptions, and so forth – in short, the whole expressed mind – of the human writer.

Synthesis means here the process of gathering up, and surveying in historically integrated form, the fruits of exegesis – a process which is sometimes, from one standpoint, and at one level, called “biblical theology” in the classroom, and at other times from another standpoint, and at another level, called “exposition” in the pulpit. This synthetic process assumes the organic character of Scripture.

Application means seeking to answer the question: “If God said and did what the text tells us he did in the circumstances recorded, what would he say and do to us in our circumstances?”

Biblical interpretation is thus a task that involves both the mind (in exegesis and synthesis) and the heart (in application). It is also a task that is supposedly dependent from beginning to end on the ministry of the Holy Spirit who inspired scripture – ensuring that what the human writers said, God said – and who brings readers to an understanding and acceptance of its meaning. Moreover, to separate these two moments – exegesis/synthesis from application or head from heart – either fails to complete the process or severs it from its foundation. Just as historical exegesis cannot become interpretation without application, so application ceases to be genuine interpretation when cut off from the historical meaning of the text, becoming instead merely a product of the


21 Just how involved the Spirit is in each step of the process is a question Packer fails to answer in relation to exegesis and synthesis. Though in his later writings he does affirm the Spirit’s role in these areas, Packer provides no detailed explanation as to what this looks like nor how it relates to the scientific and human aspect of exegesis/synthesis. As we will see, this oversight – if it is such – presents a particularly acute problem in Packer’s argument for it comes at a critical juncture in his overall doctrine of scripture, particularly in light of his driving concern for certainty.
human imagination. Packer’s discussion of the interpretative enterprise can thus be seen as an attempt to navigate this relationship between exegesis and application.\(^\text{22}\)

Evangelicalism is famous (or notorious) for its insistence that the meaning of the biblical text is only found in the “literal” sense of each passage. Packer is adamant, however, that reading scripture literally will not ignore its use of common literary techniques such as metaphor, hyperbole, and imagery. On the contrary, it merely expresses evangelicals’ attempt to distance their method of interpretation from the allegorical, spiritual, and anagogical methods practiced in earlier periods of church history. The literal sense, as evangelicals such as Packer understand it, refers to the “natural” or “literary” sense – that is, what the writer originally intended. Because the scriptures, though inspired by the Holy Spirit and so truly the very words of God, remain fully human writings, the reader should expect the biblical authors to employ any number of literary techniques to communicate their message.\(^\text{23}\) This message, moreover, will necessarily reflect each author’s own unique cultural, social, and historical context. The task of the exegete is to place herself “in the writer’s linguistic, cultural, historical, and religious shoes.”\(^\text{24}\) As Norman Geisler summarizes in his commentary on the Chicago Statement on Biblical Hermeneutics, “Meaning is determined by an author; it is


\(^{23}\) Packer bases this equation of God’s words with those of the human authors on the principle of the plenary verbal inspiration of scripture, by which Packer means that “God has condescended to identify with what His messengers said and wrote: to identify so completely that their words and message are also equally His – therefore, not only their witness to Him, but also His own witness to Himself.” Packer goes on to explain the importance of using the terms “plenary” and “verbal” in relation to this understanding of inspiration: “The point that plenary and verbal make is that the biblical words themselves (in Hebrew, Aramaic, or Greek) are to be seen as God-given. Men were not left to articulate information about, and interpretations of, God’s ways with men apart from His superintending providence. On the contrary, the Lord who gave the Word also gave the words.” Ibid., 196, 211. Emphasis in original.

\(^{24}\) Packer, “Biblical Authority, Hermeneutics, and Inerrancy,” 146.
discovered by the readers.”

Packer calls this exegetical attempt at discovery the grammatical-historical method, and he understands it to be the traditional evangelical practice since the Reformation, represented at its best by the likes of John Calvin and John Owen, the seventeenth-century Puritan.

Scriptural exegesis, then, must be practiced inductively and a posteriori. The reader should bring no a priori commitments to the text except “the knowledge that the human writer wrote to be understood and the message that he sent to his own readers in their situation is precisely the message that the Holy Spirit here and now directs and applies to us in ours.” Exegesis, moreover, seeks to read the passage at hand in accord with the rest of the biblical witness. This canonical emphasis, what Packer calls the analogy of scripture, finds its precedent in Jesus’ insistence that his life and message be interpreted not as abrogating the Law and the Prophets but as fulfilling them. In evangelical interpretation, the analogy of scripture expresses three principles: 1) Scripture should be used to interpret other scripture. The Bible is an organic text in which one part

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26 Packer, “Biblical Authority, Hermeneutics, and Inerrancy,” 146. In Packer’s earlier writings, he often uses the term “grammatico-historical.” Grammatical-historical is the more preferred designation today. Concerning his reference in this context to Calvin and Owen, see James I. Packer, “In Quest of Canonical Interpretation,” in The Use of the Bible in Theology/Evangelical Options, ed. Robert K. Johnston (Atlanta, GA: John Knox Press, 1985), 45. Packer often notes his indebtedness to Calvin and the Puritans. It was the latter, especially Owen on the mortification of sin, which provided Packer with an answer to a number of early struggles he had with the Keswick doctrine of the victorious life, which he found to be foreign and disconcerting. It was also, seemingly, the Puritans who led Packer to embrace the Reformed tradition of Protestant Christianity as thoroughly as he has. See James I. Packer and John H. Armstrong, “A Reformation & Revival Journal Interview with James I. Packer,” in Reformation & Revival 13, no. 4 (September 1, 2004): 166-70.


will help to interpret other parts more accurately and fully. 2) Scripture is internally consistent. No two passages will contradict. 3) Secondary and obscure issues should be interpreted “in light of what appears primary and plain.”

In a particularly characteristic (and some might add unconventional) move, Packer extends this canonicity to include the history of Christian interpretation – but not, notably, much of its pre-Reformation methodology – warning readers against turning the interpretative process into an individual enterprise. Precisely because the Spirit has guided Christian interpretation of scripture from the first, the discoveries of past exegesis can provide further and often corrective insight into the meaning of a text, and we risk impoverishing our own exegesis by rejecting them. However, the tradition of interpretation is not in and of itself infallible. We cannot know with any certainty which past interpretation the Spirit has guided and which he has not; therefore, exegetes should always test the interpretive tradition to see if it accurately reflects the meaning of the biblical text.

The second process within evangelical interpretation, the synthesis of one’s exegetical findings, is effectively an extension of exegesis. The basic concept is already present in the analogy of scripture, which emphasizes the organic nature of the biblical text and its internal consistency. It is noteworthy, in this regard, that Packer spends remarkably little time explaining the synthetic process, especially in relation to exegesis.

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30 James I. Packer, “Infallible Scripture and the Role of Hermeneutics,” in Scripture and Truth, eds. D. A. Carson and John D. Woodbridge (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1983), 352-3. Kathleen Boone addresses the apparent motivation underlying this subordination of the Spirit to the text: “Everything smacking of subjectivity – the Holy Spirit, prayer, one’s emotions during worship – is subordinated to the biblical text. The Holy Spirit, the third person of the Trinity, is like Christ made a handmaiden of the text…It is impossible for the fundamentalists to deny the agency of the Holy Spirit, but clearly someone as nebulous and unverifiable as the Holy Spirit must be carefully reigned, lest he break the bonds of the text…The Holy Spirit is a helpful librarian leading one to the text, the inner light a reading lamp illuminating the pages of scripture.” Boone, The Bible Tells Them So, 35.
and application. His inclusion of it within the overall interpretive act emphasizes the importance of comprehending the full or canonical meaning of any biblical assertion. Underlying this is Packer’s understanding of the greater theological enterprise, which seeks to take up all that scripture has to say about God and humanity in order to grasp it properly as a systematic whole.\(^{31}\) As a process within biblical interpretation, the synthesis of individual texts provides a more coherent and complete bedrock upon which to base one’s application of the text.

Concerning biblical application, then, Packer is emphatic that until the findings of exegesis are applied to the reader in the present, scriptural interpretation remains incomplete. “Here the Holy Spirit’s ministry is decisive. Commentaries will tell us what each writer’s words meant as an utterance spoken into that immediate historical situation, but only the Spirit who gave them can show us, by using them to search us, what they mean as they bear on us today.”\(^{32}\) Though cognizant of the historical and cultural divide between reader and text, Packer reasons that this gap, however wide, is not unbridgeable with the help of the Spirit.

Packer explains that such communication is materially possible because humanity bears God’s own image, which Packer interprets to be the Creator’s enabling of verbal communication between human creatures and himself. Understood in this light, Christ’s incarnation stands as the eternal affirmation of God and humanity’s essential co-communicability.\(^{33}\) Hence, Packer rejects as groundless the notion that the gap between reader and text means that ancient Near Eastern documents such as the Bible are

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\(^{31}\) See, for instance, Packer, “Fundamentalism” and the Word of God, 101.

\(^{32}\) Packer, “In Quest of Canonical Interpretation,” 44. Emphasis in original.

\(^{33}\) Packer, “The Adequacy of Human Language,” 206. This does not mean that Packer understands scripture to provide exhaustive knowledge of God, “but only knowledge of those matters that He sees to be adequate (i.e., sufficient) for our life of faith and obedience.” Ibid., 220.
incapable of communicating the divine mind and will. On the contrary, “God is rational and unchanging, and all men in every generation, being made in God’s image, are capable of being addressed by Him.”34 That being said, while bearing the divine image makes such communication possible, only through the agency of the Holy Spirit can any application of the ancient text actually occur.

Packer describes biblical application in terms of what Christians have traditionally called spiritual illumination:

He teaches us not by fresh disclosures of hitherto unknown truth, like those whereby the apostles were taught, but by enabling us, who, being fallen, are by nature wholly insensitive and unresponsive to God and the things of God, to acknowledge the reality, recognize the divinity, and bow to the authority of divine facts and truths set before us, and to see how they bear on our lives. Historically, theologians have called this work illumination, or enlightenment, or the inner witness of the Spirit.35 Elsewhere Packer refers to this spiritual act as “sealing Scripture on men’s hearts.”36 As sin darkens the human mind, so the Spirit must illuminate that mind by causing it to hear the words of scripture – now carefully exegeted – and to receive them as God’s call. True understanding of scripture, then, is not the abstract, scientific understanding of exegesis, but “the understanding of the work and will of the living God who constantly demands to change us.”37 This God does “subjectively in experience,” so that what he disclosed objectively in the Bible can be apprehended and known today.38 Such illumined understanding, being the divinely chosen way that scripture creates, sustains, and renews the divine-human relationship, is thus necessary for a healthy Christian life.39

34 Ibid., 201.
38 Packer, *Fundamentalism* and the Word of God, 118.
Though the Spirit is in this sense scripture’s interpreter *par excellence*, Packer reaffirms the foundational necessity of grammatical-historical exegesis and in doing so protects the primacy and inviolability of the human role in the interpretative process. “This learning through the Holy Spirit does not cancel the need for study, any more than it invalidates the rules of interpretation that we spelled out earlier. Never oppose the work of the Spirit giving understanding to your work as a student seeking it; the Spirit works through our diligence, not our laziness.” Each interpretative process has an indispensible role to play, and none can be conflated into or abstracted from the other two. Interestingly, however, by demanding that application work strictly from the findings of grammatical-historical exegesis, Packer implicitly subordinates the Spirit to an exegetical task thoroughly dependent upon errorless human implementation.

Two key aspects of Packer’s presentation of the interpretative enterprise deserve further mention here. In distinct though integrated ways, both concern the relationship between exegesis and application. First, by way of review, while Packer consistently emphasizes that exegesis and synthesis merely pave the way for application, there is no denying that without the discovery of the ancient meaning of the text through exegesis, no possibility of application exists. Packer is driven to this strict relationship by his insistence that the text’s applied meaning be firmly grounded in its original authorial intent – a point he makes in order to protect evangelical hermeneutics from accusations of subjectivism and relativism. We have just seen how this relationship subordinates the Spirit to what appears to be a predominately human process.

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Our second note is more critical and, on that account, more extensive. What stands out in Packer’s explication of the interpretative enterprise is the predominately rationalistic or notional nature of the exegetical process in contradistinction to the markedly experiential nature of spiritual illumination in application. Packer’s description of grammatical-historical exegesis, including that of the analogy of scripture and the benefit of the interpretative tradition, comes across as an enterprise of the “unassisted human rationality,” to borrow a phrase from one of Packer’s more astute interpreters.\(^{41}\) The convention here appears wholly literary and historical, not spiritual. Only when the Holy Spirit brings the historical meaning of scripture to bear on the life of the interpreter in the process of application does Packer provide any detailed explanation of the interplay between human rationality and divine illumination. As we have seen, the Spirit takes up and applies what human reason, seemingly on its own, discovers through grammatical-historical exegesis. Packer expresses this exegetical-notional, applicational-experiential divide well in his analysis of biblical “understanding”:

“Understanding” may stop short at a theoretical and notional level, or it may advance via the assent and commitment of faith to become experiential through personal acquaintance with the God to whom the theories and notions refer. Theoretical understanding of Scripture requires of us no more than is called for to comprehend any ancient literature, that is, sufficient knowledge of the language and background and sufficient empathy with the different cultural context. But there is no experiential understanding of Scripture – no personal knowledge of the God to whom it points – without the Spirit’s illumination.\(^ {42}\)

As Don Payne points out, this distinction, already evident in Packer’s separation of exegesis from application in the overall interpretative enterprise, implies that “revelation


can be understood at a rational level before it is embraced at an experiential level.”

Needless to say, if this is the case, then the discovery of the historical meaning of a text is left to unassisted human reason. Packer’s desire for certainty would thus hinge on whether or not human rationality could on its own power effectively navigate the historical and cultural distance separating interpreter from text.

But, despite many semblances to the contrary, Packer asserts that the rational-experiential divide between exegesis and application is not absolute. While the Spirit’s primary function does lie in application, Packer insists that the Spirit must likewise work within exegesis if the interpretative process is ultimately to succeed:

The Holy Spirit is involved in all three inquiries. We shall be more conscious of his operation in the hermeneutical inquiry than in the historical exegetical inquiry; nonetheless, the Holy Spirit must be with us in that also if we are to understand the actual faith in God that the writer, by his style as well as his substance, is expressing. We shall be most conscious of all, I suspect, of the Holy Spirit’s activity at level three [i.e., application] when we are asking the practical question of what obedience to this word involves. But let us be clear, the Holy Spirit must be with us in all three stages of the inquiry. Otherwise, it will fail.

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44 Take, for instance, a typical example from Packer’s discussion of the application process: “[Understanding] of what God’s written word means for me comes through seeing what it meant when first put on paper, and applying that to ourselves. It is in application specifically that we need divine help…So we should look not only to the commentators for the exegesis but also to the Spirit for the application.” Packer, *Beyond the Battle for the Bible*, 30. It is worth noting in this context that Packer grants that non-Christians as well as Christians, by employing the same principles of grammatical-historical exegesis, can arrive at the same (and hence correct) ancient meaning of the text. See, e.g., James I. Packer, “Upholding the Unity of Scripture Today,” in *Honouring the Written Word of God: The Collected Shorter Writings of J. I. Packer, Volume 3* (Carlisle, UK: Paternoster, 1999), 141-2. Norman Geisler, writing for the ICBI, is clear that only in the application process do Christians and non-Christians inhabit different worlds, and that because no matter what the non-Christian may understand to be the meaning of scripture, “without the Holy Spirit’s work he will not welcome the message in his heart.” Geisler, “Explaining Hermeneutics: A Commentary on The Chicago Statement on Biblical Hermeneutics Articles of Affirmation and Denial,” 892.

Moreover, this emphasis on the Spirit’s comprehensive interpretative role often carries an apologetic tone specifically geared to counter the accusation that evangelical hermeneutics is utterly rationalistic:

Evangelical theology affirms a correlation between the rational process whereby principles, having been established from biblical particulars, are applied to cases and persons, and the teaching ministry of the Holy Spirit, who enables our sin-darkened minds to draw and accept these correct conclusions as from God. Because correct application is a strictly rational process, most evangelical textbooks on interpreting Scripture say little or nothing about the Holy Spirit, Scripture’s ultimate author, as the great hermeneut who by leading and enlightening us in the work of exegesis, synthesis, and application, actually interprets that Word in our minds and to our hearts. The omission unhappily allows evangelical rationality in interpretation to look like a viciously self-reliant rationalism, while by contrast the regular neoorthodox appeal to the Spirit as interpreter…looks like proper humility – and that is ironical indeed, since Evangelicals have in fact more to say than anyone else about the spiritually blinding effect of sin on our minds. 46

Alongside his insistence that the Spirit colors the entire interpretative process, Packer notably describes not only exegesis but also application as strictly rational, a point grounded in his conception of the nature of revelation itself as fundamentally propositional.

Though he will affirm the personal character of the Bible, Packer has in mind here not the experiential nature of, for instance, some neoorthodox conceptions of revelation, but the idea that what the Bible reveals propositionally is knowledge of the personal God who speaks to humanity in personal terms. To set propositional over against personal language presents a false dichotomy. 47 In application, the Spirit brings the reader to accept rationally what the Bible teaches propositionally – that is, the “conceptual and

relational knowledge of the Father and the Son to whom the Scriptures introduce us.”

Just how Packer understands such rational application and the Spirit’s “leading and enlightening” role in exegesis may be found in his appropriation of Hans-Georg Gadamer’s hermeneutical theory of the interaction between the horizons of text and interpreter. Unfortunately, Packer’s adoption of this development in modern hermeneutics presents a further complication in his search for certainty, especially when coupled with the deepening of his respect for our historically effected consciousness.

**Evangelical Hermeneutics and the Two Horizons**

So far we have steered clear of specific hermeneutical questions in our analysis of Packer’s discussion of the interpretative enterprise, notably those arising out of the philosophies of Martin Heidegger and Hans-Georg Gadamer, due to Packer’s early distrust of the phenomenological approach. The year 1977, however, encouraged him to grant that modern hermeneutics could contribute something to evangelical interpretation. The turning point came in April during the National Evangelical Anglican Congress at Nottingham.

The stimulus was a lecture given by Anthony Thiselton, a former colleague of Packer’s at Tyndale Hall, on the legitimacy of hermeneutics for the church. At the center of Thiselton’s talk was the question of Gadamer’s two horizons. Can scripture speak to the modern world, since they belong to two remarkably different historical situations, and if so, how can this be done? Most evangelicals, Packer among them, had always assumed that scripture could so speak, at least as long as interpreters followed the correct exegetical procedures and recognized their dependence upon the Spirit. Hermeneutical

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48 Packer, “Encountering Present-day Views of Scripture,” 64.
questions on the nature of the text were in this sense nothing foreign to Packer’s own project. But, Thiselton’s lecture prompted discussion as to whether interpreters could ever know their own historical situation, not just the Bible’s, well enough to read the text honestly.

This means that, whilst the first half of the task of interpretation is to reflect on the ancient text, the second half is to reflect on one’s own historical conditionedness as hearer or interpreter in the modern world. I must ask: Is it possible for me to hear the text in a way that accords with its purpose, or must I first pay attention to my own assumptions, presuppositions and horizons?49

Thiselton, answering “yes” to the latter question, identifies this historical conditionedness as the central question defining the horizon of the reader – that is, her “pre-understanding” – and so highlights the key issue Packer found so unsettling at the time. As McGrath explains, Packer was particularly concerned that Thiselton’s talk “risked generating a relativistic mindset, which would pervade every aspect of theology.”50

There is warrant for such a fear when we consider Packer’s own interpretive scheme. One of the hermeneutical faux pas Thiselton highlighted that day involved the treasured analogy of scripture, which he saw as more often than not in practice reflecting the reader’s own preconceived theology – not the biblical message as traditionally assumed.51 In making such claims, Thiselton effectively drew a harrowing question mark over much of evangelical interpretative tradition, including its very methodology. It might then come as something of a shock to find Packer, only a couple of years later, employing Gadamer’s two horizons theory and affirming his insight into the historically effected consciousness, though admittedly in a heavily nuanced form.

In *Beyond the Battle for the Bible*, published in 1980 and so early on in the ICBI’s tenure, Packer calls for an alignment of the grammatical-historical method with many of the discoveries of modern phenomenological hermeneutics:

Recently the more traditional guidance on biblical interpretation...has been augmented by the academic discipline called *hermeneutics*. This covers more than principles for interpreting the text; it centers on the interpreting subject, and the way he comes to perceive and embrace what God is showing him in and through the text. It is an important field of enquiry, into which evangelicals do well to move.\textsuperscript{52}

Only a few pages later Packer enters into a discussion of the “blinders” or blinders all interpreters necessarily wear:

I am talking about what sociologists call *cultural prejudice*. I am saying that we all suffer from it, most of all those of us who think we don’t, and that as a result we are constantly missing things that are there for us in the Bible. We are ourselves part of the problem of understanding because of the way that tradition and reaction have conditioned us...We cannot hope in this world to lose our blinders entirely; we shall always be men and women of our time, nurtured by our own cultural milieu and also narrowed by it; that is the inescapable human condition. But we can at least be aware of the problem, and try to surmount it as far as possible.\textsuperscript{53}

This is a remarkable admission affirming the inescapability of the historically effected consciousness. But, while Packer here grants that we can never wholly cross the hermeneutical gap separating the interpreter from her text, his nuanced appropriation of Gadamer’s two horizons reveals that what may be impossible for us is no obstacle for God.

Packer suggests that the crucial insight found in Gadamer’s theory lies in his recognition that at the center of the hermeneutical process the horizon of the text and the horizon of the interpreter intersect and interact, constantly challenging each other. This

\textsuperscript{52} Packer, *Beyond the Battle for the Bible*, 21. Emphasis in original. *Beyond* is actually a compilation of previously presented or published works. The particular chapter in which this passage and those that follow are found is based on two presentations given at Wheaton College in November 1979.

\textsuperscript{53} Ibid., 27. Emphasis in original.
means, for Packer, that as the interpreter questions the text “he becomes aware that the text is also questioning him.”

We thus can see that in focusing the fact that serious interpretation of anything, secular or sacred, involves dialoguing with and being vulnerable to the text, laying oneself and one’s present ideas open to it and being willing to be startled and to alter one’s view if what comes from the text seems so to require, Gadamer and those who follow him make a true and important point.  

Gadamer will err, however, when he claims that the meaning discovered in the intersection between the horizons arises from out of “the existential language-event, as the horizons we brought to the text fuse with horizons that emerge from the text itself.”

The brand new meaning born from this now highly complex fusion is a product of both text and interpreter. On account of the inclusion of the latter as an actual contributing agent, the result can only be subjective.

According to Packer’s own nuanced version of the theory – one echoed, as we will see in Chapter 3, by a number of evangelicals during this period – a genuine fusion of horizons occurs in such a way that while questions are asked of both sides, ultimately the text is the controlling factor, stripping off the interpreter’s blinding presuppositions and thus communicating an accurate – and presumably objective – interpretation of the text. Packer explains that such a rooted intersection of horizons is possible precisely because the text is the word of the eternal, immutable God. “Where Gadamer speaks of the intersecting of historically separate worlds of human thought, there evangelical application theory posits encounter with the revealed mind of the unchanging God whose

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54 Packer, “Infallible Scripture and the Role of Hermeneutics,” 339. It is interesting how similar this description of Gadamer’s project is to the earliest statements given by Packer concerning how Christians must be subject to the authority of God’s word upon our life and action. This suggests that what Packer actually appropriates from Gadamer is merely a reaffirmation of what the former has been saying all along. Hence, it is what Packer does not adopt that is more telling.

55 Ibid., 355.
thoughts and ways are never like those of fallen mankind in any era at all.” Not surprisingly, Packer attributes the working out of this intersection of horizons to the activity of the Holy Spirit in application.

It appears, however, that what Packer gives with one hand, he takes back with the other. Whereas he earlier accepted that every interpreter is historically conditioned, by appealing to God’s eternality now, Packer effectively avoids Gadamer’s fundamental point that every interpreter is so conditioned. Moreover, the logic of Packer’s argument suggests that because the Bible is the word of God and God is eternal, then the problem of historical conditionedness does not reach the biblical text. It is questionable, however, whether Packer actually believes this. He hammers home throughout his works on scripture that because the biblical authors are, indeed, human and historical creatures, interpreters must engage in grammatical-historical exegesis in order to discover what the text meant – which is necessarily what God meant, too. It would seem that Packer believes that God’s “ahistoricity” is able to trump the historicity of the Bible’s human writers at the very level of interpretation. But this is precisely the level that leads one to propose the existence of a hermeneutical gap in the first place – a point Packer has granted and because of which he accepts Gadamer’s two horizons as helpful.

What appears to be operating here is what we noted above concerning the practical divide between notional/theoretical exegesis and experiential/spiritual application. According to Packer’s conception of the interpretative process, only in application when the Spirit illuminates the mind of the reader to accept the findings of exegesis does God’s message bear meaning for today.

56 Ibid., 346.
Only the evangelical theory of application remains rationally intelligible to the very end. On that theory, application is the last stage in the temporal process whereby God speaks to each generation and to individuals within each generation: God who gave His Word in the form of the rational narration, exposition, reflection, and devotion that Holy Scripture is, now prompts the making and receiving of rational application of it. This application is the Word of God to you and to me.\(^57\)

While application understood in this sense rescues Packer out of the subjective hole dug by the historically conditioned character of interpretation, it also weakens that crucial link between the Word of God and the very words of the biblical text. In the end, the Bible only becomes the Word of God for today in the subjective experience of spiritual illumination. This implies that the Bible’s words, which Packer insists are God’s words written, are not truly in themselves the Word of God for today. As Payne insightfully points out, the idea that God’s Word is only meaningfully received in the experience of the Spirit’s illumination is not far from Karl Barth’s notion that the Bible becomes the Word when God uses it to address the reader in the present.\(^58\) Such a conclusion, if correct, would undermine evangelicalism’s stalwart defense of the doctrine of plenary verbal inspiration and its insistence that God’s saving truth can only be found in the actual written words of the Bible.

Packer, however, adamantly maintains that the meaning of the Bible for today is intrinsically tied to the original, historical meaning of the text. To move away from this position is to welcome the uncertainty of human subjectivity. It is for this reason that Packer, although encouraging the modern reader to take heed of tradition (including whatever interpretations are developed today), insists that it must be “controlled and

\(^57\) Packer, “Infallible Scripture and the Role of Hermeneutics,” 47.

\(^58\) See Payne, The Theology of the Christian Life in J. I. Packer’s Thought, 256-68, for an extensive treatment of Packer’s thought along these lines.
judged by the very Word of God which it seeks to elucidate.” For Packer, only the stability of the objective text can check the human tendency toward relativism in interpretation and thus provide certainty about the character and content of God’s person and will. However, Packer’s admission that both text and interpreter are historically conditioned – when combined with his minimalization of the Spirit’s role in exegesis – threatens this idea of an objectively discernable certainty of biblical meaning. How can an inescapably conditioned interpreter read the text in a way that she can be certain that she interpreted truly and accurately? Packer seeks to answer this question by appealing to the interaction of the two horizons in application. However, as we have seen, this move not only abstracts the Word of God from the text; it also fails to answer the problem of a historically conditioned Bible.

What Packer would seem to need is an inerrant human interpreter who can escape the dual conditionedness of reader and text in order to procure the certainty which Packer deems necessary for a healthy and confident Christian life. Such an interpreter, of course, would then bear at least the same authority as the text, even if that authority were derivative. *Sola scriptura*, on this account, would be jeopardized and the heart of traditional evangelicalism thereby endangered. This is a move that Packer does not want to make, for it suggests the need for a type of evangelical magisterium and the conflict of authorities such a development would bring. But, in light of the logic of his position and the “pervasive interpretative pluralism” plaguing evangelicalism, he would seem to have little other choice.

That Christian Smith, whom we met in the Prologue, converted to Catholicism on account of this evangelical pluralism should not then be surprising. If evangelicals are

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59 Packer, “Fundamentalism” and the Word of God, 39.
intent on maintaining their quest for certainty in the midst of their own rising historical consciousness, then the Catholic magisterial option is certainly attractive. This is not to say that American evangelicalism has not developed its own functional human authorities above – or, at least, alongside – scripture, whether confessions, creeds, or particular “anointed” personalities.\textsuperscript{60} It is to say, however, that merely recognizing the failure of inerrancy and the grammatical-historical method to solve evangelicalism’s interpretive pluralism hardly guarantees that one will renounce the quest for certainty altogether (or at all). It is also to suggest that evangelicalism might not be alone in its quest.

To this point, the character and story of Jim Packer is in many ways a window into the religious and cultural struggle that enveloped much of American Christianity, especially evangelicalism, during the second half of the twentieth century. In a world of intense cultural flux and changing attitudes toward the nature of truth, history, and reality – due in large measure to a widespread rise in historical consciousness – evangelicalism fought particularly hard to maintain its grip upon an objective “word from outside,” as many within the movement would put it.\textsuperscript{61} Such a word, encapsulated in the written text of the Bible, promised to provide the epistemological and moral certainty that had been undermined by a growing pluralism and a deeper interest in the knowing subject. The Battle for the Bible was waged then as a fight against the loss, if not the dissolution, of all truth at the hands of a rising subjectivism that threatened to seat human reason and human feeling above the only truly trustworthy and certain norm: God’s inerrant Bible.

\textsuperscript{60} See, for instance, the fascinating book by Randall J. Stephens and Karl W. Giberson, \textit{The Anointed: Evangelical Truth in a Secular Age} (Cambridge, MA: Belknap, 2011), which identifies four large personalities who bear the mantle of evangelical pacesetter and so decide authoritatively for their followers what their inerrant Bible actually means.

\textsuperscript{61} See Chapter 5 below, pp. 196-198.
CHAPTER 2
FEARING SUBJECTIVITY

One of the things I believe: Man’s word versus God’s word. Do we take God’s word at
his word and believe it? Or, do we want to start looking at God’s word and try to
compare it? [...] Does God’s word have to pass the test of man?

Matthew Tabor, Kiefaber Community Baptist Church

Today we also can be victorious through faith if we doubt not, if we take God and His
revelation of Himself in holy Scripture as the starting point of all our thinking. In science,
in philosophy, in New Testament textual criticism, and in every other field of intellectual
endeavor, our thinking must differ from the thinking of unbelievers. We must begin with
God.

Edward Hills, The King James Version Defended¹

King James Onlyism, an intra-evangelical movement come of age in evangelicalism’s
postwar struggle for certainty, presents a relatively straightforward illustration of how
American evangelicals in general view and make use of their Bibles. Like Packer and the
greater evangelicalism he represents, King James Only adherents display a driving desire

¹ Matthew Tabor, personal interview with the author, 31 July 2012; Edward Hills, The King James
thanks should be mentioned. First, the work for this chapter has been supported in part by the University of
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Second, heartfelt thanks go out to the three congregations and their pastors who graciously welcomed me
into their communities and generously shared their thoughts and experiences.
for certainty in the face of what both commonly refer to as an encroaching and destructive subjectivism. Unlike Packer and greater evangelicalism, however, King James Only adherents claim, often vehemently and usually by reference to the underlying Greek and Hebrew texts, that the Authorized Version is the only wholly and truly Christian translation.\(^2\) Across the board, the King James Bible is understood to be their one rock of certainty. It is that absolutely trustworthy book which grants an assurance that what these individuals know to be true is really true.

This conclusion stems from two separate ethnographic studies performed during the spring of 2011 and the summer of 2012, which together involved three King James Only churches within the Dayton, Ohio, metropolitan area. Each of these churches belongs to the “Bible Believers’ Church Directory,” a loose, 1,000-plus member association of churches from every state and over thirty countries. Upon admission to the directory, each church must affirm the following doctrinal statement:

*We believe* the King James “ Authorized Version” Bible to be the perfect and infallible word of God. We believe the Bible was inspired in its

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\(^2\) A small, more radical contingent of King James Onlyism further proclaims the KJV to be the product of a second inspiration, which can on that account correct the original Greek (and presumably Hebrew) texts. This position, referred to as “double inspiration,” is often linked to the thought of popular spokesman Peter Ruckman. See the chapter, “Correcting the Greek with the English,” in his *The Christian’s Handbook of Manuscript Evidence* (Pensacola, FL: Bible Baptist Bookstore, 1970), esp. 138-9, where Ruckman stresses that “Mistakes in the AV 1611 are advanced revelation!” For a generally helpful taxonomy of KJV-Onlyism, see James R. White, *The King James Only Controversy: Can You Trust Modern Translations*, 2nd ed. (Minneapolis: Bethany House, 2009), 23-9. Concerning the nature of the King James as an English work, Samuel Gipp, in *The Answer Book*, claims in disturbingly imperialistic language that God chose English because of its present universality: “The English language had been developing for many centuries until the late sixteenth century. About that time it finally reached a state of excellence that no language on earth has ever attained. It would seem that God did the rest. He chose this perfect language for the consummation of his perfect Book. First England and later the United States swept the globe as the most powerful nations on earth, establishing English in all corners of the globe as either a primary or secondary language. Today nations who do not speak English must still teach English to many of their citizens. Even nations antagonistic to the West such as Russia and Red China must teach English to their business and military personnel.” My research suggests that this position is in the minority within King James Onlyism. Even Stonemill Baptist Church, which recommended Samuel Gipp as representative of the King James Only position, did not appear to hold strictly to the ultimate superiority of the English, supporting a translation of the King James Bible into Spanish. Samuel C. Gipp, *The Answer Book* (Northfield, OH: Daystar, 1989), 33.
The data from these studies suggests that a deep-seated fear of doubt drives these three local Dayton churches and their members to claim that God has providentially preserved the Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek texts behind—and, by extension, the English text of—the King James Bible, a conclusion supported by many of the movement’s major published defenses. For example, when asked about the nature and role of modern textual criticism—a method which many non-KJV-Only evangelicals feel insures that the Bible they do have is accurate and trustworthy—one respondent claimed that such criticism is a thinly veiled, rampant exercise in relativistic subjectivism where each text critic serves as his or her own authority. The fear here is that in the midst of this plurality of authorities, objective certainty threatens to disappear. Christians would then be able to do no more than read their Bibles always in doubt of God’s truth and their own salvation.  

**Preserving Certainty**

That a fear of doubt and its corollary desire for certainty drive the King James Only position today is evidenced in each of the interviews performed throughout this study, though with varying degrees of emphasis reflective of each respondent’s comfort around Christians of other traditions.  

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4 Paul Brown, personal interview, 23 February 2011. All names, both of the churches and respondents, are pseudonyms.

5 For example, both respondents from Kiefaber Community Baptist Church, which stands out as a rather moderate member of the King James Only movement, displayed a remarkable openness toward those Christians, even within their own congregation, who used in personal study at home a version of the Bible.
respondent felt certain that the King James Bible was the most trustworthy and spiritually meaningful version for American Christians today. Consider the following discussion with George Robertson, pastor of Lowes Baptist Fellowship, a lively and growing congregation averaging 650 on Sunday mornings, which claims on the front page of its Sunday bulletin – next to “independent,” “fundamental,” and “soulwinning” – that it proudly stands upon that old trustworthy “KJV 1611.”

Jason: Do you personally believe that God has preserved his inerrant word in the King James Bible, and if so, what exactly does that mean to you?

George: I believe he has preserved it in the King James Bible, and it means to me that when I open up a King James Bible that I have something that’s pure and right and I may not understand it all but if I could understand it, it would all be right. And, I don’t have to question it; I don’t have to correct it. I use it to correct myself, but it’s something that I can’t correct. It’s perfect, and God has preserved it. For English speaking people, I believe the King James Bible is the English version or English translation that’s been preserved accurately for English-speaking people.°

George would go on to confess that while he is familiar with some translations that are different from the King James, there are none that he would hold “with the same respect that I

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° George Robertson, personal interview with the author, 2 August 2012. Edward Hills makes the same point more directly: “It would have been passing strange if God had guided His people in regard to the New Testament canon but had withheld from them His divine assistance in the matter of the New Testament text. This would mean that Bible-believing Christians today could have no certainty concerning the New Testament text but would be obliged to rely on the hypotheses of modern, naturalistic critics.”

hold the King James.” Because no other translation so perfectly preserves God’s word, there is a danger that comes with preaching and teaching from any translation other than the King James:

Jason: What do you believe would be lost or different if God did not preserve his inerrant word in the KJV? This may also be said from a different perspective – or different way around – as, what may be the danger of these other translations?

George: If I was preaching from something that I did not believe was 100% true and pure, I don’t know that I would have the ability to discern what was the untruth from the truth, and then, therefore...I think I would wonder, “Am I teaching the truth or am I teaching something that’s not true?” So, believing that I have a Bible that’s 100% pure and true then I have the confidence to preach it and know that I’m giving forth the truth. [Whereas] if I didn’t believe that [that] Bible was 100% pure then I would be putting into the hands of someone something that I would be fearful that they would find the error that’s among the truth.7

George has a point. A simple walk through the religious section of any bookstore will leave even the well-attuned overwhelmed, if not mystified, by the sheer variety of English translations and editions. Should we read the old American Standard or the New American Standard? What about the Revised Standard Version or the New Revised Standard? What, our bafflement only seems to grow, can “standard” possibly mean in such a context? We could choose the New International Version, the Good News for Modern Man, or even the Living Bible. But, next to those are The Message and the King

7 This is a common fear not only among King James Only adherents, but also among many of their critics. Note the similar driving desire for truth and accuracy expressed by Douglas McLachlan, who wholly adopts modern textual criticism as a necessary tool for procuring an accurate biblical text: “We believe that investigating and probing the abundance of available manuscript evidence that is accessible to the serious student has merit. Then we can preach and teach with the authority of true biblicists, speaking God’s absolute truth accurately, passionately, and relevantly into the hearts and minds of our postmodern world.” Though McLachlan and Pastor Robertson disagree strongly over method, they agree wholeheartedly, though tacitly, that the goal is a true and accurate Bible. Moreover, I suggest here at the outset that both likewise seek a certainty that the Bible they have before them is indeed a true and accurate one. Douglas McLachlan, “Preface: The Richness of Scripture,” in One Bible Only? Examining Exclusive Claims for the King James Bible, eds. Roy Beacham and Kevin Bauder (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel, 2001), 12.
James followed closely by the New King James. We need not go any further down these bookshelves of English Bible versions to understand just how uncertain Holy Scripture might become in such a situation. Except, even when we do choose a translation, we are then forced to decide whether or not we want a “study” Bible and, if so, whose? Scofield’s? Thompson’s? The One Minute Bible? Maybe the youth, adult, or senior edition? Which of these is the real, “100% pure and true” Bible? Which one should we choose? Which one should we trust?

Even in 1955, before the flood of new versions and editions took the shelves, James Jasper Ray could gripe that in the face of this “multiplicity of differing Bible versions” we are simply left bewildered and confused. And, he would add, the uncertainty does not stop there. Should we compare just two of these versions, we would find that not only do their translations differ, those differences often reflect deeper conflicts in the very texts being translated. Some versions contain words, phrases, entire paragraphs or even multiple paragraphs that are missing from other versions. Wilbur Pickering, writing two decades after Ray, sounds the same troubled note:

But if you have used a number of the modern versions you may have noticed some things that perhaps intrigued, bewildered, or even distressed you. I am thinking of the degree to which they differ among themselves, the uncertainty as to the identity of the text reflected in the many footnotes regarding textual variants, and the nature and extent of their common divergence from the King James Version.

Note the two reasons Pickering gives for this intrigue, bewilderment, and distress. First, we suffer uncertainty due to the many variants among our Bibles, with some versions

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offering multiple readings in their own footnotes. Pickering will later mourn the “incipient uneasiness” this cacophony of options has upon the reader. What was once our one reliable guide in times of trouble and uncertainty has now become a source of that trouble and uncertainty.

The second reason concerns the specific claim that all these modern versions diverge from the King James translation, not its underlying Greek and Hebrew texts. A standard calculus of the movement involves comparing the text, language, and meaning of the modern translations up against the gold standard of the KJV. Whatever attention is paid to the textual tradition of the King James, it is done so in defense of the English. Certainty for King James Only advocates is as much a certainty about the English text as it is about what might be present in ancient manuscripts. Understood as such, King James Onlyism exhibits a genuine conservatism, a mentality that at times stands firmly at odds with that of the movement’s evangelical critics.

As if to make this very point, David Brothers of Kiefaber Community Baptist Church, a congregation much smaller than Lowes Baptist, claims that there is a blessing that comes with simply believing that the King James is God’s preserved word. Any

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10 Ibid., 18.

11 For instance, Daniel Wallace argues that a distinction must be maintained between the quest for certainty and the quest for truth. “There is a subtle but important distinction between the two. Truth is objective reality; certainty is the level of subjective apprehension of something perceived to be true.” Each and every Christian, Wallace insists, is called to seek out the truth, which means for Wallace that every Christian must embrace textual criticism’s attempt to put together a text as close to the autographs as possible. What Wallace unfortunately overlooks is the stalwart belief held by King James Only advocates that they already have the truth. They defend the King James because it is presumed to be orthodox, as is; they are not, consequently, out to discover “new” truth. Hence, because King James Only advocates already believe they have the truth in the KJV, modern translations based on modern critical texts that differ from the King James can only be corruptions. Often, these texts and translations are even viewed as being hostile to the truth preserved in the King James. Modern textual criticism, therefore, is not viewed as a tool by which Christians can and should discover new (or, rather, long lost) truth, but as a weapon by which Satan, using that great Enlightenment general – Human Reason, can wreak havoc upon the faithful, as has been his wont since successfully tempting Eve in the garden. Daniel Wallace, “Inspiration, Preservation, and New Testament Textual Criticism,” in *New Testament Essays in Honor of Homer A. Kent, Jr.*, ed. Gary T. Meadors (Winona Lake, IN: BMH, 1991), 80.
believer, David assures us, can legitimately and honestly say when referring to her King James Bible that it provides peace – a peace rarely spoken of by Christians who use other Bible translations. Such peace is found simply in trusting that the King James is indeed God’s pure word. “[A] lot of the people that have the [New International Version]…don’t argue for its perfection,” David explains. “Anybody usually that’s arguing about that, or presenting a case for it, is King James. So, to me, I think there is a certain amount of a blessing that comes to an individual when they accept that this is the word of God and allow it to be the authority in their life and the manual for what they’re going to do and how they look at it.” Notice that David’s argument, while structurally the same as other evangelical arguments for biblical authority, has the King James Bible as its specific subject over and against – importantly – the New International Version, today’s best-selling “evangelical” translation.¹²

Consistently, King James Only advocates find to be a useless – if not dangerous – fiction the claim, first formulated in the nineteenth century by theologians at Princeton Seminary, that the Bible is ultimately inerrant only in the original autographs. What use is an inspired Bible, argues Edward Hills in his seminal defense of the King James, if we do not have access to it today? In a move that strikes many critics as unbiblical and generally specious,¹³ Hills connects the divine inspiration of the scriptures to God’s preservation of the King James:

If the doctrine of the divine inspiration of the Old and New Testament Scriptures is a true doctrine, the doctrine of the providential preservation

¹² For the history of how the New International Version became the “authorized” modern translation for American evangelicals, see Peter Thuesen, In Discordance with the Scriptures: American Protestant Battles over Translating the Bible (New York, NY: Oxford, 1999), esp. 121-55.
of the Scriptures must also be a true doctrine. It must be that down through the centuries God has exercised a special, providential control over the copying of the Scriptures and the preservation and use of the copies, so that trustworthy representatives of the original text have been available to God’s people in every age. God must have done this, for if He gave the Scriptures to His Church by inspiration as the perfect and final revelation of His will, then it is obvious that He would not allow this revelation to disappear or undergo any alteration of its fundamental character.14

If God truly loves and cares about his people no matter the day and age, then he will not leave them without a trustworthy witness. To deny this is to suggest that he is a faithless, unloving God tragically unconcerned with the salvation of his people.

If any argument can be said to stand at the heart of King James Onlyism, it is this appeal to providential preservation, which here takes the form of a dogmatic presupposition. This is important to remember when trudging through volumes of arguments for the Hebrew and Greek texts underlying the King James Bible. Such adventures in textual criticism are for King James Onlyism an apologetic that reflects a strange combination of what James Barr calls the dogmatic and “maximal-conservative” approaches.15 When the movement’s proponents engage in technical methodological discussions, they do so in order to support a prior dogmatic position – here, that God has preserved his word in the KJV. Hence while any defense of the Majority (MT) or “Traditional” or “Byzantine” text – or of its more particular expression, the Textus Receptus (TR) – may appear to be an “objective” scientific evaluation of the textual evidence, there is a theological presupposition guiding that evaluation. Moreover, not only does this presupposition serve as a lens through which the evidence is interpreted,

14 Hills, The King James Version Defended, 2. Emphasis in original.
15 James Barr, Fundamentalism (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1978), 85-9. See also Harriet Harris’ helpful summary and critique of Barr’s argument in Fundamentalism and Evangelicals, ch. 2. King James Only adherents, then, do not so much criticize the practice of textual criticism, which most often plays a central role in their arguments for the superiority of the King James, as they criticize the destructive influence upon it of modern presuppositions and techniques.
but that evidence is in turn interpreted in a way which is intended to support the original presupposition.

To the chagrin of many of their critics, most KJV-Only advocates happily admit that they are proceeding under just such a theological presupposition.\textsuperscript{16} They locate the error besetting modern textual criticism in the fact that it does not make such a claim and instead argues for taking a neutral position in relation to the text, treating it as any other ancient work. Faithful evangelical Christians who accept the absolute authority of the Bible cannot proceed in such a neutral fashion, however, as they would have to ignore God’s promises to preserve his word – promises given in that word itself. Critical neutrality is thus ruled out as an unchristian way of interpreting the textual history of the Bible.\textsuperscript{17}

For Paul Brown, founding pastor of Stonemill Baptist Church and one of the lead instructors at Stonemill’s KJV-Only Bible institute, whether or not one ultimately accepts the King James as the only, truly Christian Bible hinges on whether or not one accepts the Bible as absolutely authoritative. Paul began our conversation with an account of his conversion and then quickly proceeded to stress the importance of maintaining an unwavering faith in what the King James says concerning God’s revelation and promises. Instead of reviewing the critical arguments, Paul notably began by insisting upon the

\textsuperscript{16} Even Wilbur Pickering, whose \textit{The Identity of the New Testament Text} D. A. Carson describes as one of the most convincing defenses of King James Onlyism, cannot outright deny the role this theological presupposition plays in his attempt “to let the evidence tell its own story,” despite his eagerness to escape the critiques of circularity labeled against earlier proponents, most prominently Hills. Pickering, \textit{The Identity of the New Testament Text}, 153. Wallace, following Bart Ehrman, likewise argues, convincingly in my opinion, that Zane Hodges generally exhibits the same theological presuppositions in his defense of the Majority Text. Wallace, “Inspiration, Preservation, and New Testament Textual Criticism,” 95-6.

\textsuperscript{17} Hills, for instance, argues that the problem with modern textual criticism goes back to the late seventeenth century when deists and unbelievers decided, for apologetic reasons, to weigh each religion starting on neutral ground and using only “the light of reason.” Textual critics had a decision to make: Do they continue practicing such criticism in a specifically Christian key, or do they join these “deists and unbelievers” on “neutral ground”? They chose the latter. Hills, \textit{The King James Version Defended}, 83-4.
importance of faith for the Christian life. His usage of faith in this regard, however, denotes a rather straightforward acceptance of the Bible’s testimony about itself and its own preservation. Or, in his words after referencing Romans 10:17, this faith involves “taking what the Bible says and believing it is true.”

The rhetoric shaping Paul’s account of when he came to believe in the providential preservation of the King James reflects that of a religious conversion. Sparking his belief in the KJV as God’s perfect word was an encounter with Psalm 12:6-7, the movement’s banner text:

The words of the Lord are pure words:
As silver tried in a furnace of earth, purified seven times.
Thou shalt keep them, O Lord,
Thou shalt preserve them from this generation for ever.

Paul: I may not know where it is at the time that I read this, but I say to myself, “Got to be somewhere.” If he said that he would preserve them, then they’re somewhere. Then all I can say is, “Lord, you show me where they are. I want the words.” “The” is a definite article that [implies] “one and only.” It’s got to be “one and only.” I know all of the…I know all of the comebacks: “Well, how can he do it in this language, how can he do it in that?” Hey, listen: He messed up the languages all back there in the Book of Genesis. He’s got no problem straightening them out anytime he wants! It’s just a matter of believing God can do what God wants to do the way God wants to do it, and if you’re not looking for the truth, you’ll mess your mind up. You got to be careful with God. He’ll mess you up just as fast as he’ll straighten you out. The Bible says, “Seek and ye shall find.” What’s the antithesis? What’s the opposite?

Jason: Don’t seek and you…

Paul: …will not find. He’ll make absolutely sure you won’t. He’ll blind you like a bat. You’re dealing with a God…who knows what you want, and he’ll give you want you want. Seek and you will find. The opposite is just as true.

For Paul, to claim to have faith in the internal evidence of scripture means to trust that God can and will do precisely what he says. He will not only inspire the Bible; he will
preserve it for all generations, and that means, most importantly, for us today. The inherent circularity of this argument was never an issue for Paul. If God says he will do something, then by definition he will do it. To question God’s ability or resolve is to question God himself – a foolhardy notion indeed and yet one, as Paul never failed to point out, typical of today’s evangelicals and liberals alike. The root of the matter is thus whether or not one thinks God is a liar.\textsuperscript{18}

In Stonemill’s arguments for the preservation of the “one and only” word in the King James, this insistence upon a presuppositional faith became the distinguishing factor between a “KJV-man” and all who deny that the King James is God’s divinely preserved word. Despite the critical arguments and the remarkably detailed charts examining the differences between versions, the authority of the King James rests not in the \textit{Textus Receptus} or Majority Text, but, as Samuel Gipp explains, in the “power and promise of God to preserve His Word.”\textsuperscript{19}

It is important to note here the shape this argument for the preservation of the King James takes. Because God is perfect, his revelation must likewise be perfect. This is a classic argument for biblical inerrancy, one which King James Onlyism applies directly and solely to a particular English translation. To claim that the King James is God’s perfect word then is to claim it cannot change.\textsuperscript{20} To add or subtract from it, to argue that we need something more or something different than what is found in it, is to argue...

\textsuperscript{18} Again we can find this point clearly expressed by Hills: “I cast myself therefore on that which is most real, namely God Himself. I take God and Jesus Christ His Son as the starting point of all my thinking…Today we also can be victorious through faith if we doubt not, if we take God and His revelation of Himself in holy Scripture as the starting point of all our thinking. In science, in philosophy, in New Testament textual criticism, and in every other field of intellectual endeavor, our thinking must differ from the thinking of unbelievers. We must begin with God.” Hills, \textit{The King James Version Defended}, 61. Emphasis in original.


\textsuperscript{20} Samuel C. Gipp, \textit{Gipp’s Understandable History of the Bible} (Mamitown, OH: Daystar, 2004), 14.
against its perfection and thus against God’s promise to provide humanity with salvation. Authority and perfection here represent two sides of the same coin. At Stonemill, Paul emphasized this particular connection with an appeal to 1 Peter 1:23 and the incorruptible seed from which true Christians are born again. Because our first birth came from corruptible seed, we must be born again of the incorruptible seed and that, as the apostle says, “by the word of God.” If the word is not truly incorruptible, or if we today do not actually have that incorruptible, inerrant word in our hands but only in some lost autographs (and thus not at all), then we cannot truly be born again incorruptible. Furthermore, our salvation is uncertain and at risk, being based on an untrustworthy and flawed Bible. Hence, what is at stake in the doctrine of preservation is the eternal salvation of our souls – the most basic element of evangelical Christianity. Yet, the solid, static perfection of the KJV rescues us from this hopeless state by providing the cognitive and emotional assurance we need. With the King James Bible, we can be certain that our salvation is itself certain.

It might come as a shock, then, to hear Paul not only allow for but emphatically embrace the possibility of further revelation via future inspirations of the Holy Spirit. Such an allowance implies that a future translation, even in English, could be – to use Paul’s own words – “a little bit better than it was in the first century.” To hold to both the inerrancy and perfection of the Bible as well as the Spirit’s freedom to reveal more truth in the text itself – and not in the church’s or individual’s interpretation of the text – is a paradox threatening Stonemill’s entire project. And yet, it is this insistence upon the Spirit’s freedom to enhance the text in this way that enables Paul and Stonemill to claim that an English text is the perfect word of God over and above the Hebrew and Greek
autographs. The fact that the Spirit may choose to preserve a better – can we say, more perfect? – revelation of God in Spanish or French or Cantonese has no effect on the perfection of the English KJV.

That Stonemill fails to see this paradox, much less its gravity, testifies to what the KJV-only position does for the church as much as it threatens to undermine that same position. It is ironic that an unyielding consistency forces Stonemill Baptist into what appears to be a rather stark inconsistency. But, Paul’s insistence that the Spirit is free to do what he wants with his word – a pneumatology echoed by the congregation’s own celebration of the Spirit’s movement in the nitty-gritty of their daily lives – is a necessary consequence of the earlier assertion that God is both able and willing to preserve his word. To deny to the Spirit the ability to enhance the biblical text – to reveal a further, better truth in the biblical words themselves – is to deny once again God’s omnipotence and, by extension, what makes the King James Bible alone the final authority.²¹

To be fair, Stonemill’s position here stands near the radical fringe of the King James Only movement, and I have found no other pneumatological stance quite like Paul’s, though the “double inspiration” of Peter Ruckman, spokesman for the radical fringe, could conceivably allow for it.²² There is, however, a certain consistency

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²¹ Gipp, *The Answer Book*, 58. My experiences and conversations at Stonemill revealed a deep respect for the Spirit’s movement among the congregants, both during the worship service and within the individual’s everyday life. When asked about the “aliveness” of the congregation at Stonemill, Paul made direct and immediate reference to the Spirit: “They’re responding with their emotions, but the Holy Spirit inside says it’s true. This is something you need to see and understand. That’s what’s so good about it. It’s alive. And, the reason it’s alive is that book – the living word of God.” The juxtaposition here of the freedom of the Spirit and the Bible is quite fascinating for it reads more like a description of a Pentecostal church than a fundamentalist Baptist one which outright rejects the former’s “signs and wonders.” But, it has been recognized for some time that fundamentalism strongly exhibits both pietist and rationalist strains. Where Pentecostalism and the more “Reformed” fundamentalism differ is in how they go about integrating these two strains, with fundamentalism subsuming its pietism under its rationalism and Pentecostalism doing the opposite. For an enlightening reading of the history of evangelicalism which highlights these two strains within fundamentalism, see Molly Worthen’s *Apostles of Reason*.

exhibited by Paul and Stonemill here with regard to the freedom and omnipotence of the Spirit that serves quite well to illustrate just how powerful, pervasive, and at times seemingly irrational King James Onlyism’s appeal to biblical authority can be.

Edward Hills’ retelling of the textual history of the New Testament is a case in point. In a fantastic expression of revisionist history, Hills interprets the history of the biblical text as falling into three distinct stages, the second corresponding to the sixteenth-century Latin Church and Desiderius Erasmus’ editing of what would later become the *Textus Receptus*.23 Here we find Hills arguing that God must have guided Erasmus to include in his edition those readings preserved not by the majority of Greek texts at the time but by the Latin Vulgate. The most remarkable of these involved the last few verses of the Book of Revelation which Erasmus, working from a manuscript missing its final leaf, translated backwards from Latin into Greek, thus creating a truly unique reading. Here, as with the so-called Johannine Comma (1 John 5:7) and other commonly disputed texts, Hills is forced to concoct an elaborate defense of the KJV.24

For instance, with regard to the differences found among the multiple editions of the *Textus Receptus*, Hills resorts to a tortured distinction between “providential” and

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23 Hills’ other two stages include, first, the initial fourteen hundred years of Christian history in which God worked through the Greek Byzantine church to preserve the aptly named Byzantine (or Majority) text; and second, the five hundred years since the Reformation which has seen the Holy Spirit leading faithful Protestants “to place and keep the stamp of His approval upon this God-guided printed text.” Hills, *The King James Version Defended*, 107.

24 Hills’ argument for the genuineness of 1 John 5:7 is instructive: “But whatever may have been the immediate cause, still, in the last analysis, it was not trickery which was responsible for the inclusion of the *Johannine comma* in the Textus Receptus but the usage of the Latin-speaking Church. It was this usage which made men feel that this reading ought to be included in the Greek text and eager to keep it there after its inclusion had been accomplished. Back of this usage, we may well believe, was the guiding providence of God, and therefore the *Johannine comma* ought to be retained as at least possibly genuine.” It should be noted that despite Hills’ apparent tentativeness on this point, we should not read too much into it, for his project in this section – and, one might argue, throughout the book – is to offer the Christian alternative to modern textual criticism. For Hills, all he needs to do is show that his interpretation of the textual history is a valid possibility, even if he must resort to conjecture to do so. Indeed, that is precisely the point: Hills’ trust that God has preserved his word transforms a mere possibility into a certainty. Ibid., 209-10.
“miraculous.” A perfect, difference-free textual tradition of the TR would require God to have worked miraculously, apart from any human participation. God chose, however, to preserve his word providentially and through human agents in history, which he did despite the inevitable mishaps that would occur. To be sure, Hills’ admittance that such imperfection and uncertainty exist within the history of the biblical text is quickly remedied. Faced with the question of which edition of the TR to follow as God’s preserved word for today, Hills resorts to a sanctifying of the contingencies of history:

Which text do we follow? The answer to this question is easy. We are guided by the common faith. Hence we favor that form of the Textus Receptus upon which more than any other God, working providentially, has placed the stamp of His approval, namely, the King James Version, or, more precisely, the Greek text underlying the King James Version.25

Here we see clearly the implications of taking providential preservation as an all-determining presupposition. The divine inspiration and preservation of scripture demand that the textual evidence be interpreted to fit the promise of God that his people will always have access to his word.26 The consequence of such a move is that now the text’s history must be reverse-engineered from the King James, and so biblically faithful Christians are forced to allow the circumstances of later history to determine how they interpret every preceding historical moment.27

25 Ibid., 223.
26 “Thus there are two methods of New Testament textual criticism, the consistently Christian method and the naturalistic method. These two methods deal with the same materials, the same Greek manuscripts, and the same translations and biblical quotations, but they interpret these materials differently. The consistently Christian method interprets the materials of New Testament textual criticism in accordance with the doctrines of the divine inspiration and providential preservation of the Scriptures. The naturalistic method interprets these same materials in accordance with its own doctrine that the New Testament is nothing more than a human book.” Ibid., 3. Emphasis in original.
27 Hills provides three principles that appear to serve as a functional definition of providential preservation and are meant to guide the Christian in her reconstruction of the history of the biblical text: “First, many trustworthy copies of the original New Testament manuscripts were produced by faithful scribes. Second, these trustworthy copies were read and recopied by true believers down through the centuries. Third, untrustworthy copies were not so generally read or so frequently recopied.” Ibid., 106.
Those within the movement believe that it is precisely in such a theologically informed interpretation of the textual history that we can find certainty. If the Bible were to be found only in readings long lost and only recently discovered, as modern critics claim, then our faith “would be always wavering.” “We could never be sure,” Hills warns us, “that a dealer would not soon appear with something new from somewhere.” Fortunately, God has not left us in such a lurch. He did not preserve his text in this “secret way,” but publicly in the Textus Receptus and the King James. On these texts, King James Onlyism assures us, we can be truly certain.\textsuperscript{28}

**Battling Subjectivism**

Presuppositionalism in American evangelicalism has come under significant critical analysis in recent years. Molly Worthen notes that evangelicals “talk so much of ‘the Christian worldview’ because they believe in it – but also because it is a powerful rhetorical strategy. It curtails debate, justifies hardline politics, and discourages sympathetic voters from entertaining thoughts of moderation or compromise.”\textsuperscript{29} Uninflected, presuppositionalism recognizes no objective facts, and yet, evangelicals insist that this does not deny the possibility of absolute truth. Evangelical presuppositionalism is as such a far cry from extreme perspectivalism. In fact, evangelicals reject any notion that might imply that an individual is his or her own authority. They insist instead that the Bible alone, as the objective revelation of the eternal God, must provide the presuppositions that color our lives. This would include in

\textsuperscript{28} Ibid., 130.
\textsuperscript{29} Worthen, *Apostles of Reason*, 261.
the case of King James Onlyism not only the very methods we use to interpret scripture but also the way we tell the story of the preservation of the text itself.

Cornelius Van Til, the foremost proponent of evangelical presuppositional apologetics in the twentieth century, did not shy away from addressing what he perceived to be the false presupposition and, on that account, the challenge to God’s authority in his word:

> When man became a sinner he made of himself instead of God the ultimate or final reference point. And it is precisely this presupposition, as it controls without exception all forms of non-Christian philosophy, that must be brought into question. If this presupposition is left unquestioned in any field all the facts and arguments presented to the unbeliever will be made over by him according to his pattern.30

Matthew Tabor of Kiefaber Community Baptist Church put the same point this way: “One of the things I believe: Man’s word versus God’s word. Do we take God’s word at his word and believe it? Or, do we want to start looking at God’s word and try to compare it? […] Does God’s word have to pass the test of man?” For nineteenth and twentieth-century evangelicals, the terms humanism, subjectivism, and modernism were often synonymous with making ourselves this “final reference point,” with making God’s word subject to human words. Each of these labels was used then to communicate the same basic belief – that one trusts himself above the Bible.

For Paul Brown and Stonemill Baptist Church, the problem with modern textual criticism is that it is based on a methodology of skepticism, one that seeks to explain everything through “natural experience” and not the word of God.31 Zane Hodges, long

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31 Paul Brown: “[Modern textual critics] are basing all of what they believe on a philosophy called naturalism. In other words, everything can be explained from the natural experience.” Or, consider the explanation given by Matthew Tabor: “[We] are trying to use man’s ideas of understanding certain
time professor at Dallas Theological Seminary and one of the more respected proponents of the Majority Text, offers a similar analysis:

[Confidence] in modern critical Greek texts depends ultimately on one’s confidence in contemporary scholarly judgment. It should be clear, however, that when the whole problem of textual criticism is reduced to a series of arguments about the relative merits of this reading over against that reading, we have reached an area where personal opinion – and even personal bias – can easily determine one’s decision…In short, the knowledge possessed by modern textual critics about scribes and manuscripts is so ambiguous that it can, without difficulty, be used to reach almost any conclusion.\(^\text{32}\)

The result is that modern textual criticism and thus our modern Bibles are shot through with “speculation and uncertainty.”\(^\text{33}\) To add but one more example, Edward Hills, whose presuppositionalism we have already surveyed and whose influence on King James Onlyism has been incalculable, must spend two chapters recounting the sad rise of “unbelief” and “modernism” before he can enter headlong into a discussion of authentically Christian textual criticism.\(^\text{34}\) For King James Onlyism, then, all this talk about discovering the true text only serves to raise the great specter of subjectivism with its ensuing uncertainty.

The path to such uncertainty is usually described by King James Only advocates as being quite subtle, as seeping into one’s Bible reading through supposed attempts at academic honesty and transparency. It is along these lines that Paul Brown complains

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\(^{33}\) Alfred Martin, “A Critical Examination of the Westcott-Hort Textual Theory,” in *Which Bible?*, ed. David Otis Fuller, 5th ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Grand Rapids International Publications, 1975), 160. Martin will go even further, claiming that modern textual criticism actually moves beyond arguing that we cannot be certain about the truth to arguing that truth is itself relative. “The great difficulty in New Testament textual criticism today, which makes it impossible for Bible-believing Christians to be sanguine about the results of present research, is the almost universally held view among critics of the relative nature of truth. Textual criticism has become more and more subjective since Westcott and Hort opened the door of subjectivism wide.” Ibid., 166.

\(^{34}\) Hills, *The King James Version Defended*, 29-86.
about the brackets often used to set off allegedly inauthentic passages in certain modern translations: “As soon as you put brackets on it, the person looks at it and says, ‘I wonder if that can be better?’ You have instituted confusion right from the start!” This confusion creates a vacuum of authority. By offering multiple readings of certain verses and casting doubt on entire sections of scripture, modern translations suggest not only that God has failed to preserve his word but that God’s truth is subject to our own decision-making – a situation evident in any attempt to purchase a new Bible. “Since there’s [a] plurality of all of these Bibles, then you become your own god, and deep down in the heart of every man is that desire. Satan has set up a system so you can just revel in it. You can pick out what you want and what you don’t want, and you can call the shots. That’s dangerous…That’s death in the pot.”

For Stonemill Baptist and Lowes Fellowship, uncertainty and subjectivism have become common fare in American Christianity, and yet, they see such uncertainty and subjectivism as typical of history and humanity in general. This is a theme believed to

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35 One of the pamphlets handed out at Lowes Baptist Fellowship illustrates this point vividly. On the front cover, a cartoonish figure feverishly cuts out of the King James Bible words which, we can only assume, he finds offensive or simply unbelievable. That this illustration so strikingly reflects representations of Thomas Jefferson’s act of slicing entire verses and passages out of the Bible highlights the similarity of the two programs in the mind of KJV-Only adherents. That is, both higher and lower criticism stem from the Enlightenment’s worshipping of human reason. Terry Watkins, *New International PerVersion* (Pinson, AL: Dial-the-Truth, nd). That greater evangelicalism has failed to realize this and its implications for Christian faith is the driving force behind much of the work of Theodore Letis. See, esp., his “B. B. Warfield, Common-Sense Philosophy and Biblical Criticism,” *American Presbyterians* 69 (Fall 1991): 175-90.

36 The more moderate Kiefaber Community Church hesitated to draw such strong judgments, insisting that the doctrine of the priesthood of all believers suggests claims and accusations of this nature are inappropriate for Christians. Displaying an irenicism and ecumenism rare among KJV-Only advocates, David Brothers emphasized that he tries not to judge others’ motives, preferring instead to accept that they have honestly weighed the evidence even if they have come to a conclusion different from his own. “I believe people can be sincere in their beliefs and differ from mine, and I don’t believe that they’re necessarily anti-God or anti-the Bible or whatever. They’ve looked at the research and they’ve done their own, and they’ve come to that position and that’s fine. I can accept that and go on.” In our conversations together, David clearly struggled with the label “King James Onlyism,” though he did not want to disclaim it either. It is worth noting that of all those interviewed, David alone asked to read through the final report of the research. He was particularly concerned that he and Kiefaber not be unfairly lumped with other,
run all the way back to the Garden when Satan deceived Adam and Eve into thinking God to be a liar and humans the true masters of their souls:

Jason: …[What] would you say are the impetuses behind the translation debate?

George: Money. You can only sell so many King James Bibles…I believe it’s Bible publishers who are trying to market a Bible and so they put a copyright on it, and they make another Bible and make some changes and advertise it as true and reliable and easier to read, easier to understand…I believe it’s satanic. Satan is a deceiver. “Yea hath God said,” back in Genesis. The very first thing he wanted to do was cause Eve to doubt what God really said. If you can tear down the Bible, then every man becomes a god unto himself, and that’s what humanism is all about. Men proclaiming, “My way. I do my own thing. My way is as right as your way. You have your belief and I have my belief, but we’re all going to make it to the same…place…” And, that’s the kind of humanism and humanistic thinking [I’m talking about].

Here the battle for the KJV is simply one more expression of that same struggle being fought for millennia between God and the Devil, biblical authority and human pride.

What mainline Protestants originally understood as faithfulness to the true history behind the biblical text, KJV-Only adherents understand as, at best, a sad faithlessness and, at worst, a conspiratorial attempt at deception. As Peter Thuesen notes, evangelicalism’s adoption of inerrancy as its rallying cry against the intellectual and social turmoil of the early twentieth-century was driven by a desperate attempt to maintain some semblance of a lost religious, moral, and intellectual authority uncorrupted by modernity’s love affair with the pseudo-science of liberal historical criticism. From the perspective of today’s advocates of King James Onlyism, the use of modern textual criticism not only failed to find that kernel of objective historical truth lying behind the

more radical King James Only churches. It is not surprising, then, that David openly favored the works of Edward Hills and Wilbur Pickering as opposed to those of the more radical Gail Riplinger or Peter Ruckman.

37 Thuesen, In Discordance with the Scriptures, 41-66.
biblical text, it also failed to find any consensus at all – a truly “objective” fact made plain by the plethora of disagreements among modern translators and the plurality of new translations they produced. In other words, the movement’s proponents understand modern textual criticism’s attempt at historical objectivity to be a thinly veiled, rampant exercise in subjectivism, the result of which can be only confusion and uncertainty.

It is this fear of uncertainty, of perpetual doubt, that undergirds our three KJV-Only churches’ insistence that the Bible is the final authority in all matters of faith and practice, and it is this fear that drives their arguments for the inerrancy of the King James. Yet, if we expand our scope to include the larger evangelical world, we see this same critique of subjectivism and its resultant uncertainty coloring the general evangelical debate over the inerrancy of the Bible. The lone difference is that whereas KJV-Onlyism directs its attack at modern textual criticism, greater evangelicalism has seen fit only to critique higher criticism and the historical-critical method, leaving “lower” textual criticism relatively free of such charges.

J. I. Packer, who in the last chapter introduced us to the certainty available if we simply trust that God has spoken authoritatively and inerrantly in scripture, explains subjectivism as the conviction that “the final authority for my faith and life is the verdict of my reason, conscience or religious sentiment.” Moreover, Packer explicitly links this subjectivism to the higher criticism of nineteenth and twentieth-century Protestant liberalism.38 Those who follow such a path “treat the question of the truth and authority

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38 Packer, “Fundamentalism” and the Word of God, 50. The “Exposition on the Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy” lists four “un- and anti-biblical” principles or worldviews – agnosticism, rationalism, idealism (i.e., immanentism), and existentialism – that, when allowed to “seep into men’s theologies at presuppositional level,” replace biblical authority with that of human reason. Each of these worldviews leads to a general skepticism about foundational Christian beliefs, not the least being the authority of scripture itself. For a copy of the statement and its exposition, see the conference proceedings of the Council on Biblical Inerrancy (1978) found in Geisler, Inerrancy, 493-502.
of Scripture, which God has closed, as if it were still open; they assume the right and competence of the Christian student to decide for himself how much of the Bible’s teaching should be received and authoritative.”

The only legitimate Christian response to subjectivism, explains Packer, is to take a stance of reverential humility toward scripture:

Christian believers, who acknowledge the authority of Christ as a Teacher in other matters, ought equally to acknowledge it in their approach to the Bible; they should receive Scripture as He did, accepting its claim to be divinely inspired and true and studying it as such.

Here Packer makes a moral claim which is difficult to dispute. He suggests that the reason people reject the truth of scripture and thus fail to enjoy its certainty is because they do not have the requisite moral character.

Whether he has full-blown liberals or lapsed evangelicals in mind, Packer’s general target is a higher historical criticism that set the agenda for much of nineteenth- and twentieth-century biblical scholarship. Yet, when we compare his critique with that offered by King James Only advocates against modern textual criticism, their arguments, while directed against different targets, are clearly cut from the same cloth. That King James Onlyism, a movement within American evangelicalism, shares the same concerns, presuppositional methodology, and often the very same rhetoric as Packer and other...

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39 Packer, “Fundamentalism” and the Word of God, 140.

40 “It follows that the Christian must approach the study of Scripture in humble dependence on the Holy Spirit, sure that he can learn from it nothing of spiritual significance unless he is taught of God. Confidence in one’s own powers of discernment is an effective barrier to spiritual understanding. The self-confidence of nineteenth-century critical scholarship was reflected in its slogan that the Bible must be read like any other book; but the Bible is more than a merely human book, and understanding it involves more than appreciating its merely human characteristics.” Ibid., 112.

41 Ibid., 141. Again and again we see Packer label this same critique in the direction of higher criticism: “Will we let ourselves be guided by a Bible received as inspired and therefore wholly true (for God is not the author of untruths), or will we strike out, against our Lord and his most authoritative representatives, on a line of our own? If we do, we have already resolved in principle to be led not by the Bible as given, but by the Bible as we edit and reduce it, and we are likely to be found before long scaling down its mysteries (e.g., incarnation and atonement) and relativizing its absolutes (e.g., in sexual ethics) in the light of our own divergent ideas.” Packer, Beyond the Battle for the Bible, 18-9.
leaders of the Battle for the Bible should come as no surprise. The substitution of human reason for biblical authority is the clear enemy for both.\(^{42}\)

If we were to highlight a difference between the two groups, it would lie in how they go about securing certainty in the face of what each one views as the illegitimate encroachment of modern forms of criticism. One final illustration will serve to make this particularly clear. In the commotion following the publication of the Revised Standard Version in 1952, evangelicals across the board threw up their arms in horror at what the translators of the Revised Standard Version thought to be a simple case of translational propriety. The issue surrounded the translation of the Hebrew word * almah * in Isaiah 7:14, which the King James had for centuries read as “virgin,” with its traditional christological implications. However, following a precedent stretching as far back as Luther and supported by solid linguistic evidence, the RSV translated * almah * as “young woman,” and thereby forced evangelicals like Carl McIntire to burn the new Bible as heretical.\(^{43}\)

\(^{42}\) For instance, compare the following two quotes, first from Packer and then from Hills (commenting on the work of John William Burgon, the nineteenth-century “dean” of the argument for the authenticity of the Byzantine text-type): “Evangelicals dissent from ‘critical orthodoxy’ not because they are wilfully ignorant of its conclusions, but because they are acutely conscious of the illegitimacy of its method. They seek to be obedient to God’s will by reforming biblical criticism according to His Word; they advocate a Christian critique of critical method; for they are sure that criticism should be of a piece with faith, not wedded to axioms which represent a lapse into unbelief.” Packer, “Fundamentalism” and the Word of God, 142. “We see here the fundamental difference between Burgon’s approach to the problem of the New Testament text and that adopted by his contemporaries, especially Westcott and Hort. In matters of textual criticism, at least, these latter scholars followed a Naturalistic method. They took particular pride in handling the text of the New Testament just as they would the text of any other ancient book…Burgon, on the other hand, followed a consistently Christian method of New Testament textual criticism. He believed that the New Testament had been divinely inspired and providentially preserved, and when he came to the study of the New Testament text, he did not for one instant lay this faith aside. On the contrary, he regarded the Divine inspiration and providential preservation of the New Testament as two fundamental facts which must be taken into account in the interpretation of the details of New Testament textual criticism, two basic verities which make the textual criticism of the New Testament different from the textual criticism of any other book.” Edward Hills, “The Magnificent Burgon,” in Which Bible?, ed. David Otis Fuller, 5th ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Grand Rapids International Publications, 1975), 101-2.

\(^{43}\) For a detailed telling of the RSV controversy and evangelicalism’s various responses, see Thuesen, In Discordance with the Scriptures.
The issue, most notably, was not textual but theological – the Hebrew of Isaiah 7:14 is certain – yet evangelicals as a whole rejected the change as an attempt to cast doubts on the inspiration and authority of the Bible, particularly Matthew 1:23, which quotes Isaiah 7:14 using the Greek Septuagint’s *parthenos*, or “virgin.” Some evangelicals went even further, charging the translators of the RSV with intentionally undermining the doctrine of the virgin birth. The latter has become a particularly common cry within King James Only circles, but the point here is that while King James Only adherents and their evangelical cousins agreed that the RSV had seriously mishandled the Bible, the two groups sought to remedy the situation in remarkably different ways.

Never questioning the legitimacy of modern textual criticism or the need for modern translations of the Bible, the majority of evangelicals claimed that the RSV translation committee had failed to take into account the unique theological character of the biblical text. In the Gospel of Matthew, the Holy Spirit had seen fit to “translate” Isaiah 7:14 as “virgin;” hence, the doctrine of inerrancy demanded that this must be the correct translation of the original Hebrew as well. Otherwise, God and the Bible would both be inconsistent, their infallibility and authority broken. Reeling from the translation committee’s insistence that such theological considerations not be allowed to determine the translation of the biblical text, these evangelicals moved to produce a brand new translation – the New International Version – which would take such considerations into account and thereby protect Christian orthodoxy.

As we have seen, another group of evangelicals rejected altogether any attempt at making a new translation, choosing instead to defend the orthodox Bible they already
had. What united the two evangelical groups was a shared concern to protect those traditional doctrines thought threatened by the RSV, a concern – it must be stressed – said to be seated not in linguistic evidence or even in the interpretation of individual texts, but in one’s general acceptance of the Bible’s authority.

In his anthropological study of Creekside Baptist Church, Brian Malley argues that evangelicals have inherited certain defined patterns of belief including specific doctrines which they then attribute to the Bible. The direction of this attribution is important: “The tradition presents the text as an object for hermeneutic activity, but the goal of that hermeneutic activity is not so much to establish the meaning of the text as to establish transitivity between the text and beliefs.”

According to Malley, then, evangelicals actually attribute meaning to the text instead of deriving meaning from it, despite their claims to the contrary. In evangelical lingo, their exegesis is in reality eisegesis.

Evangelicals’ reaction to the controversy over the Revised Standard Version supports Malley’s argument. The RSV was said to be heterodox in those places where the new version prompted a different interpretation from that traditionally assigned to the passage in question, even if the general doctrine or belief was affirmed elsewhere in the same Bible (e.g., the RSV maintained the “virgin” reading in Matthew 1:23). In other words, evangelicals together criticized the RSV because its apparent meaning did not match up with their preconception about what it should mean – that is, the RSV stood in

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45 If this is true, then evangelicals – KJV-Only or otherwise – are not really biclists at all, at least not in the term’s typical usage as referring to Christians who are continuously shaped and formed by the Bible alone. The direction of influence in large measure appears to be exactly the reverse.
conflict with their inherited interpretive tradition.\textsuperscript{46} For a community defined by its insistence upon biblical authority and letting God speak, it is surprising how much effort has gone into defining what the Bible is supposed to mean and what God is supposed to say.

**A Clash of Cultures**

If subjectivism is the enemy of biblical authority and Christianity in general, it would seem that King James Only advocates and their evangelical cousins exist on the same spectrum. Each group simply draws the orthodoxy line at a different place. For instance, the great Princeton theologian Benjamin B. Warfield welcomed reinterpretations of Genesis 1 along evolutionist lines, though he had no patience for similar doubts about the historical validity of the resurrection. On account of his open stance toward Genesis 1 – and despite his staunch defense of biblical authority and inerrancy – many young earth creationists today have accused Warfield of being a wolf in sheep’s clothing, one whose orthodoxy in a few areas has served only to make his embrace of subjectivism that much more insidious. The same can and has been said about Warfield by King James Only advocates concerning his embrace of modern textual criticism. Though he has done much

\textsuperscript{46} King James Onlyism has found such logic to be particularly effective at keeping its adherents on board, though it does not seem to have been as successful at using it as a witnessing tool. In recent years, the New International Version has taken the brunt of this criticism, probably because of its popularity among American evangelicals who share so much in common with their KJV-Only cousins. Hence, the NIV not only threatens the King James as being the lone orthodox Bible, it also tempts present King James Only adherents away from the movement. Lowes Baptist Fellowship distributed one of the more fantastic displays of this threat, a short pamphlet cleverly titled *New International PerVersion*, which made no argument as to the providential preservation of the King James but instead stated matter-of-factly that the NIV satanically perverts many of the doctrines faithfully proclaimed in the KJV, including the deity of Christ, the virgin birth, the “blood atonement,” and the very personality of Jesus Christ (i.e., the NIV putatively equates Jesus with Lucifer, or Satan). Watkins, *New International PerVersion*. 84
to support biblical authority, they argue, he is notoriously inconsistent in his rejection of subjectivism in the Christian life.⁴⁷

The metaphor of a spectrum suggests that King James Only advocates and their evangelical cousins are struggling with the same issue, what Grant Wacker described over three decades ago as our increasing historical consciousness.⁴⁸ Evangelicals of whatever stripe have for over two centuries now sought to escape the implications of historical consciousness on scripture. The appeal to a providentially preserved Bible, one that we can personally touch with our hands and know to be eternally true, is just such an attempt to answer this question. Greater evangelicalism’s appeal to the inerrant autographs, though possibly less consistent, is another. It would seem that the reason why these two positions remain strong among their respective constituencies in the face of liberalism’s wholehearted embrace of historical consciousness lies in the fact that evangelicals and liberals tend to play by different sets of rules, what we may call “core values.”

In his Four Cultures of the West, John O’Malley argues that the history of Western Christianity betrays a number of discursive traditions driven by substantially different values that in turn grant to each culture distinctive rules for discussion and expression. The first of these cultures, what O’Malley labels the “prophetic,” is

⁴⁷ See especially the work of Theodore Letis. For Letis, both modern higher and lower (textual) criticism are wholly dependent upon the subjectivities of human reason. For the relevant source, see above (nt. 35).
⁴⁸ To be more precise, the question concerns how we might go about coping with the modern turn to historical consciousness: “Rather the dynamite that ultimately exploded the entire edifice was the assumption that knowledge of divine things, like knowledge of ordinary things, must be found squarely within the historical process or not at all. The contrast to the assumption undergirding conservative Protestantism could not have been sharper. Conservatives typically claimed that some parts of God’s self-revelation escaped the grip of history. For them, knowledge of divine things was imposed upon history, mediated by human authors to be sure, but uncontaminated by the context in which it was received.” Grant Wacker, “The Demise of Biblical Civilization,” in The Bible in America: Essays in Cultural History, eds. Nathan Hatch and Mark Noll (New York, NY: Oxford, 1982), 127. This is a point we will address more fully in the next chapter.
characterized by an indomitable insistence upon commitment and purity. It is a decidedly uncompromising culture built upon black and white dichotomies and inviolable first principles – a culture that would rather maintain an apparent absurdity than hand over the farm. This is the culture of King James Onlyism and much of today’s evangelicalism, both of which value as much as anything a certainty that what they know to be true is really true.

Often opposed to the prophetic is the “academic” or “professional” culture. Here the unending search for that elusive truth is all defining. The academic culture values pure rationality and the “close examination of particulars that lead to precise distinctions formulated in sharply defined concepts,” which then lead to further and further questions – the end goal being a coherent system, yet one always under revision. Modern textual criticism most closely resembles this culture.

It is important to note that no pure expression of either of these cultures exists. Every actual manifestation of one is at least partially colored by another. For instance, both classic fundamentalism and today’s evangelicalism have utilized rational argumentation, at times even glorying in their professed reasonableness. However, and this is the crucial point, such argumentation serves not as a core value but as a means of support for those values. The relentless, questioning rationality of the academic culture is foreign to its prophetic cousin, which will gladly “tweak” or even discard such rationality when it ceases to support the latter’s core values. (Recall Hills’ distinction between miracle and preservation or evangelicalism’s insistence that in translation – but not necessarily in textual criticism – theology must be given a say.) Hence, the general

50 Ibid., 12.
ineffectiveness of the critique of King James Onlyism to this point can be explained profitably as a failure to play by the same rules. What past opponents of the KJV-Only position failed to realize was that their heavily reasoned arguments, by appealing solely to the intellect, never attacked their opponent’s core concerns. The same could be said for much of the criticism directed at greater evangelicalism’s appeal to biblical inerrancy.

We might be tempted then to throw up our hands at the apparent futility of such debates, but that would be rash and unnecessary. If anything, this look into King James Onlyism reminds us that behind these often bizarre claims and questionable arguments stand normal folk who are affected like the rest of us on any number of levels. The fear of doubt is as much psychological and emotional as it is intellectual, and so while appealing to the King James may provide a temporary salve for the pains caused by a growing historical consciousness, this fear will continue to color the faith of those within the movement, even as the debate itself continues to do so.

Historian David O’Brien has noted that it is in the very nature of modern society to doubt: “We learn from the Enlightenment that, in the modern context, belief is always accompanied by doubt, by questions about its truth that are there from the start.”51 Indeed, it is not doubt but dogmatism that makes faith and belief impossible. This is a far cry from evangelicalism’s insistence that certainty is both desirable and possible. It would then appear that the faith professed by many evangelicals and their King James Only cousins is an odd type of faith, one far removed from the traditional understanding as trust in the face of a lack of rational certainty. Like Christ’s disciple Thomas, what they desire is not faith but proof – a proof, as we will see in the next chapter, secured in the promised objectivity of a static historical past.

CHAPTER 3
WRINKLING TIME

“Now, don’t worry, my pet,” Mrs. Whatsit said cheerfully. “We took a time wrinkle as well as a space wrinkle. It’s very easy to do if you just know how.”

Madeleine L’Engle, A Wrinkle in Time

For a moment, time itself had seemed almost infinitely thin.

Daniel Rodgers, Age of Fracture

F. A. Molony, in the 1937 edition of the Journal of the Transactions of the Victoria Institute (now Faith and Thought), permits no nuance in stating the danger he sees in historical criticism’s questioning of the historicity of the biblical narratives: “If the book of Jonah is history, it is part of the evidence for the most important truth imaginable, namely that the Almighty God seeks to bring men to repentance and will pardon those who truly repent. But if the book is not historical, then it is only the opinion of some singularly broadminded Jew that God ought to pardon even Gentiles if they truly repent.”

What is it that so strictly ties the truth and significance of Jonah to its

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2 Molony was responding to a paper given by D. E. Hart-Davies for the Victoria Institute. The paper, with responses, was published as “The Book of Jonah in the Light of Assyrian Archaeology,” Journal of the Transactions of the Victoria Institute 69 (1937), 229-49. For Molony’s response, see pp. 246-7. See also Leslie C. Allen, The Books of Joel, Obadiah, Jonah and Micah (Grand Rapids, MI: 1976),
narrative’s status as historical fact? Why in the absence of such factuality could the story of Jonah offer only opinion and not truth, particularly when the stated message of the book is *not* the communication of that factuality, but instead knowledge of God’s moral character? Why, in other words, should historical fact – as opposed to inspired fiction – have a monopoly on the communication of scriptural truth?

The Apologetic of Historicity

Molony’s concern was not new. The debate about whether fiction could bear the weight of truth, particularly divine truth, finds its modern genesis over two centuries earlier in what John Dewey deemed modernity’s “quest for certainty.” It was a time when “uncertainty had become unacceptable,” when a dying humanism’s tolerance – if not encouragement – of ambiguity took the blame for the seemingly unstoppable montage of religio-political conflicts. It was in the midst of such cultural and political upheaval that Descartes offered his philosophical program with the intent to prioritize mathematical proof and a rationality “grounded on abstract, universal, timeless concepts,” though one that, in the words of Stephen Toulmin, devalued “the oral, the particular, the local, the timely, and the concrete.” While Cartesian philosophy would later suffer charges of

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179. Another respondent, George Brewer, would offer a conclusion similar to Molony’s. If Jonah were merely allegory, then it “would at once lose its actual value.” Hart-Davies’ paper itself presents a classic example of what is referred to below as “critical anti-criticism.”

3 Dewey, *The Quest for Certainty*, 6. Dewey’s summary description is worth quoting: “The quest for certainty is a quest for a peace which is assured, an object which is unqualified by risk and the shadow of fear which action casts. For it is not uncertainty *per se* which men dislike, but the fact that uncertainty involves us in peril of evils. Uncertainty that affected only the detail of consequences to be experienced provided they had a warrant of being enjoyable would have no sting. It would bring the zest of adventure and the spice of variety. Quest for complete certainty can be fulfilled in pure knowing alone. Such is the verdict of our most enduring philosophic tradition.” Ibid., 8. It goes without saying that references to uncertainty in this chapter and in the entire dissertation, for that matter, are of the perilous variety.

4 Stephen Toulmin, *Cosmopolis: The Hidden Agenda of Modernity* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1990), 55, 75. No doubt at the forefront of such concern was the seemingly interminable Thirty Years War (1618-48).
skepticism similar to those it advanced against the sixteenth-century humanists, at the
time it offered a way of escaping from the uncertainty and pluralism overtaking early
modern Europe.

That such a philosophical milieu should provide a rich bed for the growth of
skepticism with regard to religious tradition and biblical meaning should not be
surprising, however ironic it may at first appear. In a way similar to Descartes’ attempt to
certify his knowledge by first denying it, so biblical critics in the early modern period
sought to get behind the biblical text to the historical circumstances which gave it birth
and from there reason their way to the actual meaning of the Bible as a historically and
theologically contextualized book.\(^5\) We need not rehearse here the rise and evolution of
biblical criticism in any detail – others have done so quite ably\(^6\) – but instead highlight
one significant development in early modern reflections on historicity, biblical or
otherwise, which will prove particularly influential on late twentieth-century evangelical
hermeneutics.

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\(^5\) As Michael Legaspi has argued persuasively, early modern biblical criticism did not always
reflect the emphasis of later German historical criticism upon historicity and historicization. New
humanists like Johann Michaelis found as much in the aesthetics of biblical poetry as in discoveries of the
tru история behind the biblical text to support their attempts to produce a politically neutral and thus iricnic
biblical text. What connects these two broad forms of biblical criticism, however, is their shared interest in
providing a theologically and confessionally neutral Bible. Michael Legaspi, The Death of Scripture and

\(^6\) The list is legion. A good introductory text, though intentionally confessional, is Roy Harrisville
and Walter Sundberg, The Bible in Modern Culture: Baruch Spinoza to Brevard Childs, 2nd ed. (Grand
Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2002). Much more expansive is Henning Reventlow’s four-volume History of
Biblical Interpretation, trans. Leo Purdue (Atlanta, GA: Society of Biblical Literature, 2009-10). Also
significant, particularly in the study of changing views of biblical narrative, is Hans Frei, The Eclipse of
Biblical Narrative: A Study in Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century Hermeneutics (New Haven, CT: Yale
University Press, 1974). Most general introductions to the historical-critical method also tell the story of its
genesis and development. Though now dated, Edgar Krentz’s The Historical-Critical Method
(Philadelphia, PA: Fortress, 1975) is still useful as a latter 20th-century barometer of the seemingly
perennial debate over the method’s validity. David R. Law’s more recent The Historical-Critical Method:
relative success, to defend the method against more recent attacks across the theological spectrum.
The early modern period witnessed a general obsession with factuality, especially with regard to the writing of history. As early as the 1560s, Jean Bodin could describe history as “a true narration of things,” “the image of truth, and, as it were, a record of events which is placed in the clearest public view for the decision of all.” A century and a half later, Swiss theologian and biblical scholar Jean Le Clerc would offer similar sentiments in a discussion of the differences between ancient and modern histories:

Nothing is so entertaining and instructive as History, when it is well written; and on the contrary, nothing more infamous and hurtful, when it is not written as it ought to be: that is to say, when it delivers Lies instead of Truth, nay even when it disguises it. The former supplies us with what we want in Experience, which is always shut up in narrow bounds, by faithfully relating all that happened before us, by which we may reap a great Benefit, as if we had actually seen them…[The] latter instructs us in nothing, because it reports things otherwise than they fell out.  

As the figure of Le Clerc suggests, the study of the Bible did not escape this general insistence upon the accurate recovery and reporting of facts, nor its corollary disparagement of non-fact. It became a common assumption among nearly all early-modern interpreters of the Bible – the skeptics as well as the traditionalists – that should the biblical narratives acquit themselves well according to the emerging canons of historical writing, then those narratives should be trusted as authentic accounts of past events. Of course, the reverse was also true: should the biblical narratives not measure up, then we can be sure that what the Bible presents is not credible fact but deceptive – and thus morally insignificant, if not questionable – fiction. The authority of the Bible – or at least of its traditional interpretation – depended, therefore, on the critic’s ability to

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prove typically via the amassing of empirical evidence that the genre of a certain narrative was more akin to modern history writing than to any of the inventive genres, such as fable, legend, or heroic saga.\(^9\)

We have seen in the thoughts of F. A. Molony of the Victoria Institute how this sharp distinction between fact and fiction and its role in biblical criticism continued to shape the mentality of certain biblical commentators well into the early twentieth century. That it had spread across the Atlantic as early as the seventeenth century is a key thesis of recent studies of Jonathan Edwards and Cotton Mather.\(^{10}\)

One example from the latter will make plain how this fact-fiction dichotomy could and did translate into genuine attempts to read scripture in engagement with a rising biblical criticism. As Jan Stievermann has shown in reference to Mather’s massive Biblia Americana, the third volume of which has only recently been released, the colonial church father demonstrates a remarkably broad engagement with many of Europe’s seventeenth- and eighteenth-century biblical critics and their conservative interlocutors. For instance, Mather’s layers of annotation on Isaiah 7:14 – “Therefore the Lord himself shall give you a sign; Behold, a virgin shall conceive, and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel” – engage with critical claims, such as those expressed by the deist Anthony Collins in his Discourse of the Grounds and Reasons of the Christian Religion (1724), that the traditional christological prophecy could have but one sense, that is, its obvious historical sense, and therefore could not refer to Matthew’s virgin birth. Though originally granting with William Lowth (Commentary on the Prophets, 1714-25) that the


\(^{10}\) Besides Robert Brown’s work on Edwards (op. cit.), see the volume of essays on Mather’s previously unpublished Biblia Americana. Reiner Smolinski and Jan Stievermann, eds., Cotton Mather and Biblia Americana – America’s First Bible Commentary: Essays in Reappraisal (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2010).
passage has multiple senses of prophetic fulfillment, Mather ultimately sides with the “hyper-literal” approach taken by William Whiston in his Accomplishment of Scripture Prophecies (1708). Here Whiston, apparently accepting the assumption of critics like Collins that Isaiah 7:14 can only have one genuine historical referent, argues that while it is true that the verse bears only one sense, it is the christological. Isaiah 7:14 thus stands apart from the following two verses. These refer not to a future child of Ahaz but to Isaiah’s son, Shearjashub. Matthew, as far as we know, is the first to see the true historical meaning of Isaiah’s prophecy in v. 14, and hence, only for the evangelist do the facts of the case finally become apparent. 11

For Mather, then, the truth of the Bible became increasingly tied to its historical veracity, even in instances of prophetic fulfillment. Moreover, on account of their now established historicity, the latter could serve as apologetic evidence for traditional claims to biblical authority. The take away from all of this is that the development of Mather’s interpretation of Isaiah 7:14 reveals a growing concern to make the truth of the biblical account dependent upon its historical accuracy, not its theological usage, per se, as appeals to any plenary sense must ultimately argue, based as they are on the divine as well as the historical (i.e., authorial) intent. 12

While it should not be all that surprising that such a black-white mentality about credible fact and incredible fiction colors much twentieth-century evangelical scholarship on the Bible, a significant shift in American religious life in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries forced a hardening of this dichotomy into a polemical apologetic

defining much of evangelical engagement with modern biblical criticism. As we have seen, during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, traditionalist scholars like Mather came to adopt many of the same critical assumptions and not a few of the same methods as their non-traditionalist opponents. The latter, likewise, were not above using theological modes of explanation when it suited their purposes. By the late 1800s, however, critical thinking concerning the Bible – especially among American evangelicals – came to be equated almost strictly with religious skepticism and phenomenological naturalism. To think “critically” about the Bible meant that the biblical critic was “exempt from a deference to any controlling religious or theological perspective” and thus free to search out the truth wherever it might lead.13

For many American evangelicals during the age of Darwin, such uninhibited freedom came increasingly to be seen as religiously and culturally destructive, especially with regard to the uptick – and, not unimportantly, much more extensive publicizing – of the new German higher, or historical, criticism. As Mark Noll explains, here we had “a science that relativized traditional dogma, rather than confirmed it.”14 It was not simply that the new historical criticism consciously employed evolutionary theories about the development of religion, but that this criticism came to challenge from a literary perspective precisely those passages which organic evolution and an increasing historical consciousness had already been challenging for at least a generation. A growing segment of evangelicals felt, quite understandably, that much of what had been a solid and certain bulwark against such challenges was now eroding away at the hands of an intellectually and socially pervasive Darwinism. Even those scholars who sought to engage historical

13 Brown, Jonathan Edwards and the Bible, 98.
critics while defending traditional interpretations found themselves “confronting a concatenated series of high-order intellectual assertions” which served more to alienate than to convince.\footnote{Ibid., 189.} When it came to the Bible, then, we might say that while historical criticism imbibed much of the growing historical consciousness about the heavily conditioned nature of texts, evangelicals simply did not – the result of which was the formation of a vast epistemological gulf that in large measure still exists today.\footnote{Again, Noll is instructive: “Historical consciousness of this sort had revolutionary implications when applied to Scripture. The Bible might retain its status as a revered document, but only because it was a unique expression of religious experience. The Bible might remain a book in which to hear the voice of God, but those who accepted the new views thought they were hearing it within history rather than from the outside.” Ibid., 13.}

Hence, although the dynamics of the critical study of the Bible had changed, evangelicalism’s black-white equation of truth with historical veracity remained intact. If anything, early modernity’s sharp distinction between objective fact and subjective fiction became ossified in the evangelical mind to the point that the polemical defense of traditional positions became the mode of evangelical intellectual engagement with scripture. Edward Young’s Introduction to the Old Testament, which survived as a textbook for much of the postwar period, stands as a particularly vivid example of this apologetic mentality. Young, a longtime professor at Westminster Theological Seminary, prefaced his introduction with the claim that he will only consider those questions “which are most fundamental” to the study of the Old Testament. Providing a correct answer to these questions, he goes on, is of “overwhelming importance to the well-being of the Church of Jesus Christ today.”\footnote{Edward J. Young, An Introduction to the Old Testament, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1960), 5.} Yet the questions Young finds so fundamental are those that explicitly address the negative claims of modern historical criticism, particularly source, form, and redaction criticism. Young’s approach here characterizes what Mark
Noll has labeled “critical anti-criticism.” It understands academic biblical research to be primarily “a way of protecting Scripture” against those “erroneous critical opinions” which the faithful scholar must rebut. An evangelical student learning from this introductory text might get the impression that to study the Old Testament simply entails refuting historical critical conclusions, often by rejecting their very assumptions. The apologetic mentality so well exhibited here in Young’s *Introduction* would only intensify during the 1960s and ‘70s when Americans experienced a period of cultural flux that once again challenged traditional interpretations of the Bible.

Like F. A. Molony a generation earlier, evangelical commentaries on the Book of Jonah during the postwar period provide a telling expression of this apologetic mentality and its fact-fiction dichotomy. For instance, take the curious, if not counter-intuitive, tendency to amass natural evidences in an effort to provide empirical space for the supernatural. Anatomical analyses of various Mediterranean whales and fish discovered to have a gullet large enough to swallow a man whole are found piled on top of accounts of sailors said to have actually survived such an event. We might call this mere curiosity, but the amount and depth of detail accompanying these evidences suggests otherwise. Can a human, we are led to wonder, survive the heat inside a sperm whale’s stomach? Such heat only ranges from 104-108°F, hardly more than a hot summer day in Dallas. But, what about the great fish’s gastric juices? Though they will surely hurt, we should

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18 Noll, *Between Faith and Criticism*, 156. Young ultimately fails to encourage readers to engage in something like the christological creativity that Noll would later call for as a remedy for this apologetic mentality. See Mark Noll, *Jesus Christ and the Life of the Mind* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2011), esp. Ch. 7.

19 We might also note the intense interest among evangelicals to visit Israel and other biblical locations for intertwined geographical and historical reasons. At a more expressly academic level, the interest in archaeological discoveries and investigations – especially attempts to prove biblical locations and events such as Jericho and its collapse – often reflects evangelicals’ intense apologetic concern to confirm or at least open the space for and hence the possibility, if not probability, of the historical factuality of the biblical texts and thus their truthfulness as a whole.
not expect them to kill our poor sailor, since they do not burn through the fish’s own living stomach lining. But, even if he could not survive these elements, might we not expect a canny sailor to circumnavigate the throat and take refuge in an air sac of sorts?20

The same piling up of evidences often characterizes discussions of the great vine – probably a castor-bean, we are told21 – that God grew up to give Jonah shade during his post-prophetic pout. What is truly remarkable about these apologetic forays is not so much that they occur but that they come coupled with a seemingly ubiquitous insistence that we do not actually need naturalistic explanations precisely because Jonah portrays the events as miraculous. But, if this is indeed the case, what should we make of their common inclusion in commentaries and introductions directed at pastors and popular audiences?

Edward Davis’ own “Whale of a Tale” suggests an answer. In 1991, Davis recounted his cross-Atlantic search for the original account of James Bartley, whose trip into the belly of a sperm whale and back out again – alive, of course – had become something of an apologetic standard in evangelical reflections and commentaries on Jonah (including that of James Montgomery Boice, who has the eminent distinction of having chaired the International Council on Biblical Inerrancy throughout its ten-year career).22 What Davis discovered during his search was a maze of hearsay, blended

22 Among later twentieth-century evangelical commentaries on Jonah, the Bartley story has had influential play beyond Boice’s commentary. In the Bible Knowledge Commentary, John D. Hannah’s entry on the Book of Jonah references one of the key early conveyors of the story – A. J. Wilson’s October 1927 Princeton Theological Review article, “Sign of the Prophet Jonah and Its Modern Confirmations” – as well as George F. Howe’s generation-later “Jonah and the Great Fish” (Biblical Research Monthly [January
newspaper reports, and apparently one financially lucrative fable.\textsuperscript{23} That is not to say that those who preached (and continue to preach) the Bartley legend were simple troubadours seeking a dime. Their own stories suggest a more noble purpose. As Davis explains, they “wanted more than anything else to give people reasons to believe, to strengthen their faith in the gospel by strengthening their faith in the literal words of the Bible, to debunk the claims of atheistic scientists and apostate theologians.”\textsuperscript{24} Or, as the inerrantist Boice rather understatedly assures us, giving evidence for the miracle of Jonah and the whale demonstrates for skeptics that “the situation is not so unbelievable as they, perhaps without much thought or evidence, conceived that it was.”\textsuperscript{25} And so, by the end of Davis’ tale, one conclusion about those early twentieth-century evangelicals whose faith seemed to hang on such an apologetic becomes quite inescapable: they deeply wanted to believe that Bartley was swallowed alive by a whale…and that Jonah was, too.

That over the past few generations so much interest in the Book of Jonah has continued to center on evidences for its miracles, to the neglect of the story’s theological teaching, is itself a symptom and sign of this apologetic mentality we have been tracing. Evangelicals have shown remarkable interest in Jonah’s story for reasons beyond its didacticism and, for that matter, even beyond its general historicity. In an age that can


\textsuperscript{24} Davis, “A Whale of a Tale,” n.p.

\textsuperscript{25} Boice, \textit{The Minor Prophets}, 1:228.
count the civil rights movement, the rise of feminism, a sexual revolution, and multiple wars on its resume – not to mention a new spectrum of critical attitudes toward scripture – the Bible is seen by many as a book still under siege. In this context, the story of Jonah and his whale is not just a tale about God’s generous mercy and sovereign will; it is ripest proof of the Bible’s truthfulness and of its authority over our lives. If the miraculous in Jonah can pass the test of historical and scientific plausibility, then evangelicals can lay claim to it as yet another patch of solid ground upon which to stand against the onslaught of attacks on their Bible and way of life. As Davis discerned about early twentieth-century evangelicals, Bartley and his trip into the belly of a whale became “for the anxious apologist an almost heroic figure, living proof of the veracity of scripture against the onslaught of the scientists and the higher critics.”

26 We might say that, if John Dewey is right that “in a world of hazards” we are “compelled to seek for security,” then today many have found such security in the true and certain facts of Jonah and the whale.

27

The Hermeneutic of Historicity

What was a shared apologetic assumption at the beginning of the century would solidify into official hermeneutical logic during the postwar period. Francis Schaeffer, building on over a decade of mental shaping at L’Abri, provided in The God Who Is There (1968) the paradigm for evangelical reflection on western culture and philosophy at the time. Schaeffer read Kierkegaard’s infinite qualitative distinction as giving the parameters for a complete epistemological program with regard to the religious and moral life. By defining God as the wholly transcendent other and setting him in contradistinction to

26 Ibid.
creation as such, Kierkegaard plowed a deep trench between religious knowledge and reason, crossable only by an irrational “leap of faith.” Knowledge of God became de-rationalized, relegated to a distinct realm of human experience and emotion, and considered “infallible” only because reason could not question it. For Schaeffer, Kierkegaard’s epistemological program had little room for the traditional understanding of objective divine revelation with its genuine historical incarnation and rational propositional content.28

While Kierkegaard faced the brunt of Schaeffer’s critique, Karl Barth took the blame for introducing to twentieth-century historic Protestantism this dichotomy between faith and reason. “All the new theology,” Schaeffer warns us, “is nothing more than a faith contrary to rationality, deprived of content and incapable of communication. You can bear ‘witness’ to it but you cannot discuss it.”29 Neoorthodoxy, he charged, simply continued the subjectivist liberal tradition stretching back to Schleiermacher. For that epistemological tradition, a young protégé of Schaeffer’s explained, religious symbols and beliefs are “in no way subject to verification or falsification, and their content is not fixed. The subject who has faith simply loads these symbols with the meaning he chooses in accord with the secular mood of his day.”30 Here truth is relative, grounded not in objective historical fact but subjective human feeling.


30 Clark Pinnock, Set Forth Your Case: An Examination of Christianity’s Credentials (Chicago, IL: Moody, 1967), 25.
Across the board, evangelicals during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries typically equated historical criticism with such rampant subjectivity. This is the classic Protestant complaint against Roman Catholic traditionalism rehashed. From the evangelical point of view, historical-critical methodology – like sixteenth-century appeals to unwritten apostolic tradition – celebrated the triumph of human reason (or “rationalism”) over biblical authority. Albert Schweitzer’s judgment that previous critical approaches to the historical Jesus simply mirrored the critics’ own ideals became an evangelical maxim. “A humanistic, anthropocentric critical method,” claimed John Warwick Montgomery in 1978, “reveals a humanistic, anthropocentric Jesus.” The historical-critical method “by its very nature generates unwarranted doubt concerning the objective reliability of the biblical records, and doubtful biblical records,” Montgomery concluded, “necessarily mean a doubtful Christology.”

Until relatively recently, Montgomery’s anti-critical position was the norm within evangelicalism, echoed by many who would play a significant role in the Battle for the Bible. For instance, as early as 1915, W. H. T. Dau, writing for the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod’s *Theological Quarterly*, had damned historical criticism as the source of views that “destroy both the causative and the normative authority of the Bible, and

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31 So Schaeffer, who equates rationalism with “humanism”: “Humanism in the inclusive sense is the system whereby man, beginning absolutely by himself, tries rationally to build out from himself, having only man as his integration point, to find all knowledge, meaning and value. Again, the word rationalism, which means the same as humanism in the wider sense, should not be confused with the word rational. Rational means that the things which are about us are not contrary to reason, or, to put it another way, man’s aspiration of reason is valid. And so the Judaistic-Christian position is rational, but it is the very antithesis of rationalism.” Schaeffer, *The God Who Is There*, 17.


render it useless – except in a secondary manner – for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness.”

A generation later during the Missouri Synod’s conservative resurgence in the 1970s, Robert Preus would likewise insist that at the heart of historical criticism lay a pervasive antisupernaturalism opposed to historic Christianity. It was on that account fundamentally unsuitable as a hermeneutical tool. Harold Lindsell would offer a similar conclusion in his 1976 firestorm of a book, The Battle for the Bible: “The presuppositions of this methodology…tear at the heart of Scripture,” and they have but one end – the denial of biblical historicity.

What set these postwar evangelicals apart from earlier critics of historical criticism was that they were now facing friendly fire. Even before the end of World War II, certain pockets of conservative-leaning academics had sought to rehabilitate various historical critical techniques for their own work on the Bible, much of which surrounded the New Testament Gospels. Ned B. Stonehouse (1902-62), then at the breakaway Westminster Theological Seminary, employed such techniques in his 1944 commentary on the first two Gospels, suggesting to some that critical methods might be fundamentally neutral and technically separable from the secular presuppositions which had driven earlier critics to their antisupernatural and antihistoricist conclusions. Stonehouse would serve as a model for later evangelicals who continued to struggle with historical discrepancies between the Gospels. In particular, redaction criticism – which examines

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how and why the biblical authors chose and shaped their sources – promised not only to open up fresh explanations of such differences but also to provide helpful insights into the authors’ own theological and pastoral concerns.

Intricate attempts at harmonization had for years served as evangelicals’ *modus operandi* when handling discrepancies between the Synoptic Gospels. If the Gospels give us a record of the life and sayings of Jesus Christ, then in the end they must be telling us the same story. History is singular, after all, and so any discrepancies are merely apparent, not real. Much of the energy spent in evangelical studies on the Gospels in the second half of the twentieth century focused on offering reasonable explanations for these difficulties, with intimidating volumes like Gleason Archer’s *Encyclopedia of Bible Difficulties* dedicated explicitly to this end.37

Harmonizing explanations often proved rather simple. Jesus gave not one, but two great sermons – one on a mountaintop (Matthew 5:1) and another on a plain (Luke 6:17).38 Luke does not contradict Matthew when he tells us that Judas fell headlong, burst open in the middle, and had all his guts gush out (Acts 1:18). The two evangelists simply provide different aspects of Judas’ death. He hung himself, as Matthew 27:5 tells us, and then fell out of the noose and onto the ground where he burst open. Whatever the case, we are told that the Gospels do not offer truly different accounts of the history of Jesus and his followers.

Some attempts at harmonizing the Gospels, however, proved more incredible, with Harold Lindsell’s rather famous suggestion that Peter denied Christ not three but six

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38 Ibid., 366.
times being only one of the more egregious examples. When forced to admit that many of these attempts bordered on obscurantism, the incredulous were instructed, always in the interest of preserving historicity, to hold such problems in suspension until new evidence or genius could provide an adequate solution. When a particular harmonization passed beyond “reasonable limits,” John Warwick Montgomery again advised, “the interpreter must leave the problem open rather than, by assuming error, impugn the absolute truthfulness of God.” But for a number of evangelicals, this practice often did more harm than good. More than a few discrepancies simply could not remain in suspension indefinitely. They begged for a different kind of solution – one not restricted to a strict historicist harmonization but one that instead granted to the evangelists room to stretch their own theological muscles.

After all, many evangelicals on both sides could agree that historicity did not require the evangelists to maintain a strict chronological account of Jesus’ life. For instance, even the staunch historicist Gleason Archer admits that Matthew tended to employ a logical – not a chronological – sequence of events. “Once a theme has been broached,” he explains, “Matthew prefers to carry it through to its completion.” While few in the late 1970s argued that historical records, even those intended to be little more than serial accounts, perfectly represent the precise order, scope, and size of the actual events they recount, rarely did they regard this as anywhere close to a distortion of those events. Most typically construed such a necessary process in the historian’s task to be “simple reduction by selection,” as Hayden White points out in his 1975 article,

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“Historicism, History, and the Figurative Imagination.” And, yet, such a construal of the process has proven, according to White, to be more blissfully naïve than accurate:

The most obvious manner of distortion is the departure from the chronological order of the events’ original occurrence, so as to disclose their “true” or “latent” meanings. Here, of course, we must confront the conventional, but never fully analyzed, distinction between the “mere” chronicle and the history properly so-called. Everyone grants that the historian must go beyond the serial organization of events to the determination of their coherency as a structure and assign different functional values to the individual events and the classes of events to which they appear to belong. This task is usually conceived, however, as that of “finding” the story or stories that are supposed to lie embedded within the welter of facts reported in the record or the diachronic series of events as arranged in the chronicle. Actually, however, nothing could be farther from the truth of the matter…What is involved here is a [subjective] fashioning of a framework within which to place events, of different magnitude and complexity, in order to permit their encodation as elements of different story-types.42

Intentionally non-chronological renderings like that provided by Matthew would seem, then, to distort their base events all the more. That the subjectivity required by such historiographical decisions flew under most evangelicals’ radar should not be all that surprising. They were hardly the only ones who failed to grasp the extent to which the historian’s imagination colored the narration of any event. Evangelicals’ attraction to the Bible’s perspicuity, however, made conceding the unavoidability of interpretation all that more difficult. And at least in the case of conservatives like Archer, allowing the evangelists to exercise some freedom with regard to the chronology of events seemed unavoidable; often the text itself would simply welcome no other explanation.

Trouble began to brew, however, when some evangelical biblical scholars started to stretch the meaning of historicity still further. The Journal of the Evangelical

42 The original article was published in History and Theory 14, no. 4 (December 1975): 48-67. The quotes above are taken from its republication in White’s Tropics of Discourse: Essays in Cultural Criticism (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins, 1978), 111. Emphasis in original.
Theological Society and the society’s annual meetings carried much of the ensuing debate, picking up steam in the mid-1970s when Grant Osborne offered in the journal’s 1976 Spring edition a redaction critical study of Matthew 28:16-20 with the hope that it might provide a “better understanding of the evangelist’s theology and a deeper insight into the meaning of the passage.” Specifically, Osborne argued that redaction criticism can explain helpfully and without infringing upon inerrancy how the trinitarian formula of v. 19 – found nowhere else in the New Testament and widely believed to be taken from later church tradition – could both originate with Jesus and reflect the evangelist’s own theological agenda. Osborne claimed that inerrancy does not demand that Matthew provide Jesus’ actual words spoken on such and such an occasion (ipsissima verba), but only his meaning or “voice” (ipsissima vox). And, yet, this does not mean the evangelist freely composed material which he then tried to pass off as historical, but instead provided under the inspiration of the Spirit “the true meaning of Jesus’ message for his own day.” “Relevancy,” Osborne concluded in what would become a pivotal point, here “triumphed over verbal exactness.”

As we saw with Ned Stonehouse above, Osborne was hardly the first to suggest that historical critical methods were not inherently destructive to a high view of scripture. William L. Lane of Gordon Divinity School in Wenham, Massachusetts, had argued as much to the same evangelical audience nearly a decade earlier. The early 1970s, however, brought a surge of more conservative denunciations of historical criticism’s

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44 Ibid.
45 Ibid., 84.
poisonous methods,\(^\text{47}\) fresh with fodder from contemporary denominational debates surrounding the role and interpretation of scripture in the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod and the Southern Baptist Convention, each of which would experience a resurgence of fundamentalism over the next few decades.\(^\text{48}\)

Osborne thus tossed his rehabilitation of redaction criticism onto an already lit fire, no doubt knowing that it would act like gasoline. In particular, he had the bad luck of having to compete with Lindsell’s *The Battle for the Bible*, also published in 1976, though to a much larger – and much less generous and theologically sophisticated – audience. Lindsell, at the time the editor of evangelicalism’s flagship magazine, *Christianity Today*, urged his readers in no uncertain terms “to contend earnestly for the faith once delivered to the saints” against the naturalism inherent in historical critical methodology. It was just such criticism, he insisted, that lay at the root of the evangelical apostasy then firing the Missouri Lutherans’ and Southern Baptists’ denominational infighting (though the latter’s waters had only begun to boil) and Fuller Seminary’s own rejection of biblical inerrancy. In his final appeal, Lindsell charged the faithful to resist any temptation to overlook the abandonment of inerrancy and the acceptance of historical criticism as minor issues unrelated to the heart of evangelical belief. He called them instead “to take whatever action is needed” to protect their sons and daughters, even

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\(^{48}\) The respective histories of these denominational battles are themselves battlegrounds. Among the many accounts of the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod battles taking place at this time, see Mary Todd’s *Authority Vested: A Story of Identity and Change in the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2000) and, especially, James C. Burkee, *Power, Politics, and the Missouri-Synod: A Conflict that Changed American Christianity* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2011). Even more numerous are those histories detailing the conservative resurgence in the Southern Baptist Convention. Two of the best are Nancy Ammerman, *Baptist Battles: Social Change and Religious Conflict in the Southern Baptist Convention* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers, 1990) and Barry Hankins, *Uneasy in Babylon: Southern Baptist Conservatives and American Culture* (Tuscaloosa, AL: University of Alabama Press, 2002).
those “generations unborn,” from the apostasy that always followed such concessions to liberalism.\textsuperscript{49} Hence Lindsell, like so many before him, believed historical criticism to be dangerously incompatible with Christian orthodoxy. They are “deadly enemies that are antithetical,” he warned with utmost seriousness. Neither can “be reconciled without the destruction of one or the other.”\textsuperscript{50} Not surprisingly then, Osborne’s attempt to canonize a method that many, if not most, understood to be the root cause of the present crisis in conservative American Christianity would meet stout resistance.

Leading the pack against Osborne was the indefatigable John Warwick Montgomery. In two essays, “The Fuzzification of Biblical Inerrancy”\textsuperscript{51} and “Why Has God Incarnate Suddenly Become Mythical,”\textsuperscript{52} Montgomery accused Osborne of once again opening the door to that destructive subjectivism of the New Theology (i.e., Barthian and Bultmannian neoorthodoxy). Redaction criticism leaves “the objective life and words of Jesus in darkness and obscurity, since one can never be sure when the text is representing Jesus Himself and when it is merely reflecting the diverse faith-experiences of early Christian communities.” Such criticism places in doubt the “objectively veridical portrait” of Jesus upon which the high christology of the ancient ecumenical creeds rely, thus opening the door “to all manner of subjectivistic reformulations of the person and work of Jesus Christ.”\textsuperscript{53} Even Osborne’s attempt to provide a measure of objective certainty by claiming that the evangelists’ redactions are safe because they are inspired ultimately fails, according to Montgomery. Justifications

\textsuperscript{49}Lindsell, \textit{The Battle for the Bible}, 210.
\textsuperscript{50}Ibid., 82.
\textsuperscript{52}Montgomery, “Why Has God Incarnate Suddenly Become Mythical?” 57-65.
\textsuperscript{53}Ibid., 63.
of that sort are themselves subjective and can be used to prop up all sorts of beliefs about Christ, such as those dreamt up in John Hick’s *The Myth of God Incarnate*.54

In defending his position, Osborne insisted that he never argued that the evangelists created episodes out of whole cloth. On the contrary, the Gospel writers sought in their interpretations “to bring out the true meaning of the event or saying for their readers.” When they did adapt the traditions that came to them, they “never altered the saying or event out of keeping with the original occurrences.”55 Osborne denied any radical distinction between an inspired biblical author’s theological interpretation or redaction and the historical event. The evangelists saw the events of Jesus’ life as vehicles of truth that they then adapted to their specific audiences. Whatever those redactions the substance of the evangelists’ theology remained firmly seated in the objective historical events of Jesus’ life and sayings.56 “Each portrait,” Osborne explained in a later article, “is completely true to the original historical event, yet each evangelist has been inspired to provide a different portrayal of the significance of Jesus’ life.”57 This definition of biblical truth in terms of correspondence with historical fact in the end led Osborne to presuppose historicity in his interpretation of the Gospels, though he claimed to do so simply as a result of “painstaking research” into the nature of the evangelists’ task.58

54 Ibid., 65.
56 Ibid., 316.
58 Osborne, “The Evangelical and Redaction Criticism,” 319. “The major a priori for the evangelical, of course, is that whatever source-critical theory we utilize we understand that both tradition and redaction are ultimately based on the original event. Too much has been written on this issue to repeat it here. Suffice it to say that nonevangelical (e.g. Barbour and Hooker) as well as evangelical scholars are suspicious of the radical disjunction between history and theology among many practitioners. There is no
While it is plain that a significant difference of opinion existed concerning just how much modification of a historical event was acceptable, both sides could agree on the fundamental assumption for a truly evangelical view of scripture – an evangelist’s theology must be substantively tied to an objective historical event. Free creation of material was ruled out of bounds, unbecoming of a writer of the Gospel. An analogy can be drawn here between evangelicalism’s grammatical-historical hermeneutic – which, as we saw in the case of J. I. Packer and the International Council on Biblical Inerrancy, was also being reevaluated in light of the Battle for the Bible – and what was understood to be the Gospel writers’ own method for interpreting the historical events of Jesus’ life.

The grammatical-historical method delineates two distinct stages in the interpretive process: exegesis and application. Exegesis is understood to be an (ideally) objective discipline that attempts to discover what a biblical passage meant in its historical and cultural setting. Application then takes up what exegesis finds and applies it to the interpreter’s own situation in life – determining, in that sense, what the passage means today. It is important to remember that what makes an application true is its fidelity to the passage’s original historical meaning, which is most commonly equated with the author’s intention – that is, the meaning he (or, in very rare instances, she) intended to convey. Any application out of keeping with that original meaning would forfeit its authority as scriptural truth, being simply a product of the interpreter’s own

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necessity to drive a wedge between the authenticity of tradition and redaction, and we dare not do so if we wish to maintain a high view of scripture.” Osborne, “Round Four,” 405-6.

59 See, in particular, the affirmations and denials of the Council’s “Chicago Statement on Biblical Hermeneutics,” as well as the collection of papers from the ICBI’s 1982 meeting in Chicago. Both can be found in the meeting’s proceedings, Earl Radmacher and Robert Preus, eds., *Hermeneutics, Inerrancy, and the Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1984).

60 What most evangelical biblical scholars leave subsumed under exegesis – that is, the synthesizing of exegesis’ findings in biblical, systematic, and (sometimes) historical theology – Packer’s tripartite delineation of exegesis, synthesis, and application simply foregrounds. See Chapter 1, pp. 39-40.
imagination. It would appear that both Osborne and Montgomery read the evangelists as governed by rules similar to those delineated by the grammatical-historical method that binds modern evangelical biblical scholars. Whatever the case, the Bible’s evangelists and today’s interpreters are understood to be working with the same material (history), the same interpretive tools (contextual analysis), and for the same end (the extraction of historical fact).

The excommunication of Robert Gundry from the Evangelical Theological Society in 1983 can be seen then as capping off the process by which biblical historicity gained its monopoly on truth in evangelical hermeneutics. Gundry’s story finds its climax in the winter of that year when, on the heels of a landslide vote (116 - 41) taken nine stories up the Dallas skyline, the ETS asked him to resign.\textsuperscript{61} Despite Gundry’s protestations to the contrary, one large cohort within the society – led by evangelical firebrand Norman Geisler, then at Dallas Seminary – charged him with denying biblical inerrancy in practice. For Geisler and friends, Gundry’s recent commentary on Matthew was evidence of the Westmont professor’s failure to uphold the society’s singular doctrinal basis, that “The Bible alone, and the Bible in its entirety, is the Word of God written and is therefore inerrant in the autographs.”\textsuperscript{62} At issue in Gundry’s \textit{Matthew} was his use of historical critical methods to claim that the evangelist had for theological

\begin{footnotes}
\item[62] This doctrinal basis continues to be published on the copyright page of each edition of the society’s quarterly journal, though in 1990 the ETS added a statement delineating the society’s affirmation of the Trinity (“God is a Trinity, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, each an uncreated person, one in essence, equal in power and glory”). See, for example, Ronald Youngblood, ed., \textit{Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society} 26, no. 1 (March 1983): 2. The trinitarian addition first appears in the March 1991 edition of the journal (\textit{JETS} 34, no. 1). Though the ETS has consistently voted, even in discussions directly precipitated by the Gundry affair, against any further elaboration of biblical inerrancy in its doctrinal statement, the society’s website refers prospective members interested in “the intent and meaning of the reference to biblical inerrancy” to the ICBI’s Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy. “Membership Requirements,” \textit{The Evangelical Theological Society}, <http://www.etsjets.org/about/membership_requirements> (April 6, 2015).
\end{footnotes}
reasons fundamentally altered certain historical events and sayings in the life of Jesus. For the society, such a claim meant Gundry was accusing Matthew of committing egregious errors of historical fact. And, it got him kicked out.

The actual charge against Gundry is important here. Roger Nicole, one of the society’s founding fathers, motioned for Gundry’s resignation barring a confession of having “erred in his detraction from the historical trustworthiness” of Matthew’s Gospel. Gundry might have seen this coming. Earlier that evening, the society had voted to reject any position claiming that a scriptural author “materially altered and embellished historical tradition or departed from the actual events.”63 In neither of these motions did the specific terminology of biblical inerrancy arise, yet both were understood to be protecting it. Somehow a doctrine concerned with the general truthfulness and trustworthiness of scripture had become invested with a specific way of interpreting the Gospel narratives. The debate over the meaning of inerrancy would see other attempts to invest it with particular doctrines supposedly demanded by an inerrant Bible, but none has gained among evangelicals the universal credence enjoyed by the Bible’s historicity.

Fueled by a redaction critical analysis of the insertion of Mattheanisms (or words/phrases especially favored by Matthew) into the dominical tradition and in comparison with contemporary midrash and haggadah, Gundry concluded that Matthew occasionally edited the historical tradition in such a way as to create new, unhistorical events in the life of Jesus.64 In chapter two alone, Matthew is said to have transformed the Jewish shepherds’ visitation at night (Lk 2:8-20) into the Gentile magi’s attention to the

star (Mt 2:1-12), reshaped the holy family’s journey to Jerusalem (Lk 2:22) into their flight to Egypt (Mt 2:13-15), and to have simply fabricated Herod’s Slaughter of the Innocents (2:16-18) in order to make it parallel Pharaoh’s slaughtering of male babies in Exodus 1 and thereby further the Mosaic typology of the preceding flight episode.65

Gundry admits that some of his conclusions look heterodox at first, but insists that the way Matthew uses his sources strongly suggests that he is doing something quite different than traditionally assumed. Matthew did not intend a straightforward record of the life and sayings of Jesus. Instead, he writes “to keep persecution of the church from stymieing evangelism”66 by treating us “to history mixed with elements that cannot be called historical in a modern sense.”67 When the evangelist tells us that Jesus “said” or “did” something, this “need not always mean that in [actual objective] history Jesus said or did what follows, but sometimes may mean that in the account at least partly constructed by Matthew himself Jesus said or did what follows.”68 Such “history mixed with nonhistory” carries “its own kind of truth alongside historical truth”69 and its own claim to inspiration as part of the canon of Christian scripture.70 Gundry thus instructs his fellow evangelicals that they must broaden their “understanding of ‘happened’ as well as of ‘fulfilled’ when reading that such-and-such happened” if they intend to approach the text honestly and on its own terms.71

Appeals to authorial intent have a long pedigree in evangelical biblical studies, and Gundry stakes his claim here. However, though fundamentally a matter of

65 Ibid., 26-37.
66 Ibid., 9.
67 Ibid., 623.
68 Ibid., 630.
69 Ibid., 631.
70 Ibid., 640.
71 Ibid., 37.
interpretation and not inspiration, Gundry’s allowance for the free creation of nonhistorical material in the mode of Jewish midrash proved too much for the ETS and greater evangelicalism to swallow. The truth of the Gospels had become tied too closely to their historicity. As Douglas Moo, one of Gundry’s more generous critics, explains, the free creation of events simply runs counter to the nature of Christian faith, particularly the incarnation. It is, then, unlikely that Matthew “would closely resemble Jewish midrashic work in his treatment of the area that most strongly differentiated Christianity from mainline first-century Judaism: the significance of the space-and-time facticity of historical events.”

Norman Geisler would be even more direct and, at the same time, more revealing of evangelicals’ underlying concern. If Matthew “can create myths about Jesus’ life that are not true, then he can also create sayings of Jesus that Jesus never said. If this were the case,” Geisler warns, “then we would be left with no assurance as to the truth of what Jesus actually did or said.” Gundry, by denying Matthew’s full historicity, had severed the Gospel’s tether to truth. No longer could a reader be certain whether an episode in the life of Jesus was historical fact or unhistorical fiction, truth or lie.

72 Gundry himself makes this plain: “If Matthew’s gospel contains midrash and haggadah, what does it mean to call it inspired, authoritative, infallible, inerrant? If we protect the Bible by regarding historical difficulties as inspired midrash and haggadah rather than as errors, does not inspiration fail to guarantee historicity? Does not inspiration lose its value? By itself, inspiration does fail to guarantee historicity. But we [by using redaction criticism] have taken nothing from the doctrine of inspiration. We have only revised our understanding of what certain passages in the Bible were meant to say…[In] and of itself the question whether midrash and haggadah are to be found in Matthew is a question of hermeneutics, not a question of biblical authority.” Ibid., 637.


Wrinkles in Time

By so tying the truth of the Gospels to historical fact, evangelicals effectively recast a question about interpretation into one about inspiration. If the biblical author’s theology must always have its root in an actual historical event, then it is not the divine inspiration of the Gospels that makes them true. Inspiration only confirms their accuracy as relatively strict recordings (Montgomery) or theological adaptations (Osborne) of the events of Jesus’ life. Their truth character, we might say, is to be found in the historical events themselves, and not in the God who inspires scripture or its writers. While it is true that, as the very events of God in Jesus Christ, God must surely still be considered as involved, the point remains that this is a different kind of inspiration than what is usually meant by the term, and certainly by what evangelicals mean by plenary verbal inspiration.

The point that plenary and verbal make is that the biblical words themselves (in Hebrew, Aramaic, or Greek) are to be seen as God-given. Men were not left to articulate information about, and interpretations of, God’s ways with men apart from His superintending providence. On the contrary, the Lord who gave the Word also gave the words.75

According to this standard definition of inspiration, the writers of scripture do not provide us their subjective interpretations of God and the Christ-event; on the contrary, they give us the very unadulterated, uninflected words of God himself. But in actual evangelical interpretive practice, the emphasis on the historicity of the Gospels has the unforeseen effect of moving the locus of truth away from the “word of God written” and restricting it to the actual words and actions of God in history. This is not to say that God’s historical acts are not in a certain sense also inspired and hence truth-bearing, but that such a view of inspiration is much too restrictive of both scripture and its authors, human and divine.

Ernest Sandeen, reflecting on the twin doctrines of inspiration and inerrancy promoted by the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Princeton theologians Charles Hodge and Benjamin Warfield, describes evangelicalism’s tendency to equate biblical truth with historical fact as a consequence of an “inability to understand history.”76 “So the Bible contains the truths,” Hodge explained in what would become his oft-cited description of the Bible as a storehouse of divine facts, “which the theologian has to collect, authenticate, arrange, and exhibit in their internal relation to each other.”77 For Hodge, the task of theology simply consists of drawing out via proper exegesis scripture’s divinely revealed propositional truths in order that the Christian can have a clear and organized conception of God’s will and the way of salvation.

Reading Hodge on theological method leaves one with the curious suspicion that should the theologian be successful in her task, the Bible in its canonical form would no longer be necessary. In light of this, Sandeen’s critique hits the mark:

[The historian] must...do more than discover lost documents, rehabilitate maligned men, and resurrect lost causes. He must also understand the extent to which the past is irrecoverable. [Benjamin B.] Warfield saw the relevance of the Scriptures and thanks history for ordering its contents correctly. But he missed the paradox in historical method: that events cannot be seen only as undeniably relevant; they must also be seen as irremediably removed. This is only another way of saying that the Princeton scholars thought of theology from above, from God’s point of view, and used the past as though it shared God’s attributes and was in no way tarnished by time or fashioned by the cosmos. The valiant struggle which they put up against the higher [historical] criticism was intended to deny that conclusion and to retain the data of their scientific theology, like Democritus’ atoms, indissoluble and indestructible.78

76 Sandeen, The Roots of Fundamentalism, 122.
77 Charles Hodge, Systematic Theology (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1975), 1-2.
78 Sandeen, The Roots of Fundamentalism, 122-3. Sandeen argues that the Princeton Theology fell into the methodological error described by Whitehead as the “fallacy of misplaced concreteness.” Ibid., 117. I suspect that certain inerrantist theologians might respond that Sandeen has not respected the disciplinary distinction between theology and history. A theologian is not a historian and vice versa. Such a response, however, only serves further to make plain the methodological problem before us – that history
Curtis Freeman, writing nearly half a century later and about evangelical theology today, makes the same point in his incisive observation that without the trinitarian lens provided by the Councils of Nicaea and Constantinople, consistent “Bible-alone” Christians could only hope to be unitarian:

[Evangelicals] do not seem to understand that they have a stake in the patristic tradition that unmasks the hermeneutical naïveté of readers who think that they can leapfrog from the primitive Christianity of the Bible to the contemporary situation with relative ease. Evangelicals would do well to explore the implications of the fact that the basic core of apostolic doctrine was preserved and passed on in the postapostolic era through the writings of the church fathers and that this apostolic tradition may be retrieved by carefully reading the patristic sources...The orthodox trinitarian and christological doctrines, to which evangelicals are committed, were not derived by the exegesis of Scripture alone but by reading Scripture through the lens of the rule and the creeds.79

This ahistorical approach to scripture is intimately tied to the explicit individualization of evangelical ecclesiology during this period. Evangelicalism’s defense of orthodox Christianity against Catholic sacramentalism and Pentecostal charismatic experience had the unfortunate consequence of restricting its own conception of the Holy Spirit and the church to an ill-defined notion of biblical illumination. The “personality” of the Spirit became so restricted to this individualistic biblicism that any alternative or even fuller conception of the Spirit as a force or activity within the historical body of believers as a whole failed to gain traction in evangelical theology. The reason for this should now be quite predictable. Any consideration that God may act forthright in the tradition (or “Tradition”) of the Church, being a fundamentally and essentially social or communal

and theology, nature and grace, letter and spirit, cannot be so neatly separated that we can then view as insignificant, if not outright disallow, any communication between them.

79 Freeman, Contesting Catholicity, 112. Though Freeman’s focus lies predominantly on Baptists, whom he considers more or less “closet” unitarians, we have in Oneness Pentecostalism an open and explicit example of such unitarianism caused by a radically consistent appeal to sola scriptura.
event, or simply in the tradition of scriptural interpretation handed down through history was rejected as tantamount to placing human reason over and above scriptural revelation.

Even Robert Gundry, foreseeing the accusation that his allowance for the evangelists’ creative freedom would open the door to all sorts of claims of future, non-canonical revelation and so throw wide the flood gates of subjectivism, argued that while our “[appreciation] of development in tradition must increase, the authority of tradition must evaporate beyond the limits of the biblical canon.” A proper view of inspiration should restrict the Spirit’s authority-imbuing work to the Bible, according to Gundry. Roman Catholic “traditionalism” errs when it grants to postcanonical developments the same level of authority granted to the scriptures themselves. Such traditionalism “dilutes the very idea of a biblical canon” as its authority “[dissolves] in the ocean of ecclesiastical tradition.”

Though Gundry sought to expand inspiration to include those early traditions that ultimately became canonized in Christian scripture, such as Matthew’s creative interpretations of the Christ event, he drew the line at the closing of the canon in order to protect against what he understood to be the inescapable relativism of postcanonical tradition. Like his fellow evangelicals in the Evangelical Theological Society and the International Council on Biblical Inerrancy, Gundry continued to approach the Bible under the illusion that its meaning was readily at hand, a content waiting to be discovered and grasped by those readers who could discern the correct genre of the text and, on that account, the author’s original (i.e., historical) intent.

This tendency to perceive culturally authoritative texts as “in no way tarnished by time” (Sandeen) and so to treat their interpretation as a game of historical “leapfrog” (Freeman) has been colorfully described by Daniel Rodgers as a “flirtation with

80 Gundry, Matthew, 627, 624.
timelessness,” of attempting to create “wrinkles in time” by which the past is folded into the present, allowing us thereby to sidestep all the complexities of history that separate past from present.81

Here history did not unfold step by step, organizing the chaotic patterns of causation and change, explaining the past’s continuous, irreversible pressure on the present. In this alternative vein, the boundary between past and present virtually dissolved. History’s massive social processes disappeared. One traveled between past, present, and future in the momentary blink of the imagination, through a wrinkle in time.82

Though evangelicals’ emphasis on the biblical author’s original intent is never far from view, Rodgers’ primary focus centers on the application of such an ahistorical hermeneutic to the Constitution of the United States. Constitutional “originalism,” as it has become known, both mirrored evangelicalism’s appeal to the original “authorial intent” of the biblical text and paralleled its late twentieth-century reinvigoration and renewal. The debate over originalism’s influence on the nation’s highest court spiked during the early to mid-1980s, when evangelicals too began to reevaluate their grammatical-historical hermeneutic in light of the Battle for the Bible and a growing consciousness of their own historicity. There would seem to be little coincidence in this parallel rise of conservative hermeneutical theories, both driven as they were by concerns to protect traditional cultural norms then coming under increasing attack.83

82 Ibid., 222-3.
83 The remarkable similarity between evangelicalism’s grammatical-historical hermeneutic and political conservatism’s originalist hermeneutic has drawn significant attention over the past decade, often and unsurprisingly in light of the rise of the Christian Right and its joining hands with the GOP. See, in particular, Jaroslav Pelikan, *Interpreting the Bible and the Constitution* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2004). On the general rise of a politically relevant Christian Right, see Susan F. Harding, *The Book of Jerry Falwell: Fundamentalist Language and Politics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton, 2000). For one of the better recent works on the consolidation of the Christian Right and the Republican Party, see Daniel K. Williams, *God’s Own Party: The Making of the Christian Right* (New York, NY: Oxford, 2010). One of the most explicit lived expressions of this joint religious and political conservatism can be found in David Barton’s *Wallbuilders* organization. Barton has hitched constitutional originalism to American evangelicalism so intimately that more than a few within evangelicalism’s own ranks have protested
In one of the great ironies in the history of modern hermeneutics, the attempt by constitutional originalists and inerrantist evangelicals to wrinkle time “tapped not a desire to go back to any actual past but a desire to escape altogether from time’s slipperiness – to locate a trap door through which one could reach beyond history and find a simpler place outside of it.” Evangelicals’ concern to link biblical truth to historical fact masked a hidden fear of history’s impermanence, a fear matched only by many of those same evangelicals’ fear of biological evolution – what we might call the “impermanence” of the human species. To escape from time’s “slipperiness,” as Rodgers would have it, was to escape from the subjectivistic quagmire both inerrantists and originalists associated with a historically and culturally contingent legal or moral code, whether that be America’s Constitution or Christianity’s Bible. By slipping effortlessly and instantly across time to the moment when these texts’ authors embedded their original intent, originalists and inerrantists imagined they could capture, in the words of Jack Rakove, “a particular set of pristine meanings, uncorrupted by interpretation, [that] was somehow

against its patently ideological historicism and its blurring of the lines between church and state. See Stephens and Giberson, The Anointed, ch. 2.

Rodgers, Age of Fracture, 241.

For a fascinating look at how contemporary evangelicals’ battle against Darwinian evolution dovetails with their hermeneutical concern to escape history, see Trollinger and Trollinger, Righting America at the Creation Museum; Stephens and Giberson, The Anointed, esp. chapters 1-2. The same basic critique is made – though more implicitly – by Noll, Jesus Christ and the Life of the Mind, esp. chapters 5-7.

Rodgers, Age of Fracture, 241. That this ahistoricity is an American, if not a modern, problem that stretches beyond Protestant evangelicalism can be seen in contemporary American Catholic battles over the meaning and significance of Vatican II and its documents. Writing in the midst of the historiographical battle for Vatican II, Joseph A. Komonchak labels a critique against his “conservative” opponents’ emphasis on the “letter” of the conciliar texts and in doing so mirrors much of the debate over biblical inerrancy. He argues that the attempt to define the council strictly in terms of its documents – often even apart from their immediate context – is effectively to remove them, and thus the council, from history. What drives this attempt is the quintessentially modern fear of subjectivity, which translates all too often into a fear of the twentieth-century historical project as an exercise in relativism. This fear causes one to lock down any source of authority, to separate it from all human influence – in other words, to free grace from nature. Joseph A. Komonchak, “Vatican II as an ‘Event,’” in Vatican II: Did Anything Happen, ed. David Schultenover (New York, NY: Bloomsbury, 2007), 38. For an example of the conservative position that Komonchak has in mind, see the volume of essays edited by Matthew Lamb and Matthew Levering, Vatican II: Renewal within Tradition (New York, NY: Oxford, 2008).
locked into the text...at the moment of its adoption.” It would be more accurate, Rakove judges wryly, to describe such a wrinkling of time as displaying “fidelity through history,” not “fidelity to history.”

That post-World War II evangelicals did indeed operate with a view of history as a shallow ditch – one easy to cross, as Mrs. Whatsit casually explained to the heroine Meg in Madeleine L’Engle’s beloved *A Wrinkle in Time*, “if you just know how” – is expressed quite vividly in their substitution of the image of a hermeneutical “spiral” for Hans-Georg Gadamer’s more famous “circle.” Following Martin Heidegger, Gadamer offered the hermeneutical circle as a model of the continual discursive activity enjoyed by both reader and text. The text, Gadamer explains in his monumental *Truth and Method*, should not be understood as an “object” supposedly under scrutiny by an uninvolved, disinterested, and therefore objective reader. On the contrary, “The true historical object is not an object at all, but the unity of the [reader] and [text].” In one of his most enduring images, Gadamer describes true understanding as a “fusion of horizons,” where a text’s range of vision or possible meaning engages in continual interplay with the reader’s own horizon via a dynamic dialogue of mutual questioning.

Gadamer draws out the implications of this fusion of horizons upon our definition of textual meaning in a statement that well encapsulates what evangelicals find so troublesome about the hermeneutical circle:

> Every age has to understand a transmitted text *in its own way*, for the text belongs to the whole tradition whose content interests the age and in

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88 L’Engle, *A Wrinkle in Time*, 82. Though he does not draw an explicit connection to L’Engle, Rodgers’ use of the concept “wrinkles in time” is clearly indebted to her book.
90 For Gadamer’s main explanation of the concept of a horizon and the fusion of horizons in understanding, see ibid., 301-5.
which it seeks to understand itself. The real meaning of a text, as it speaks to the interpreter, does not depend on the contingencies of the author and his original audience. It certainly is not identical with them, for it is always co-determined also by the historical situation of the interpreter and hence by the totality of the objective course of history…Not just occasionally but always, the meaning of a text goes beyond its author. That is why understanding is not merely a reproductive but always productive activity as well.\textsuperscript{91}

The influence of the “totality of the objective course of history” upon the reader is what Gadamer has in mind when he explains that in understanding we are already affected – or, as above, already determined (and hence “effected”) – by history.

To be conscious of history’s formative and determinative effect upon reader and text is to be conscious of the flow and development of tradition in which both reader and text share. “Real historical thinking,” Gadamer stresses, “must take account of its own historicity.”\textsuperscript{92} Indeed, recognizing the historicity of our own historical thinking is the phenomenological motivation driving Gadamer’s entire hermeneutical project.

If we are trying to understand a historical phenomenon from the historical distance that is characteristic of our hermeneutical situation, we are always already affected by history. It determines in advance both what seems to us worth inquiring about and what will appear as an object of investigation, and we more or less forget half of what is really there – in fact, we miss the whole truth of the phenomenon – when we take its immediate appearance as the whole truth.\textsuperscript{93}

It is because reader and text are joined by a shared, communal history – more specifically, because they are both finite moments situated in and defined by that history – that understanding is even possible.

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{91} Ibid., 296. Emphasis mine. \\
\textsuperscript{92} Ibid., 299. Emphasis in original. Gadamer continues: “Only then will it cease to chase the phantom of a historical object of progressive research, and learn to view the object as the counterpart of itself and hence understand both. The true historical object is not an object at all, but the unity of the one and the other [i.e., Gadamer’s fusion of horizons], a relationship that constitutes both the reality of history and the reality of historical understanding. A hermeneutics adequate to the subject matter would have to demonstrate the reality and efficacy of history within understanding itself. I shall refer to this as ‘history of effect.’ Understanding is, essentially, a historically effected event.” \\
\textsuperscript{93} Ibid., 300.}
In fact history does not belong to us; we belong to it. Long before we understand ourselves through the process of self-examination, we understand ourselves in a self-evident way in the family, society, and state in which we live. The focus of subjectivity is a distorting mirror. The self-awareness of the individual is only a flickering in the closed circuits of historical life. *That is why the prejudices of the individual, far more than his judgments, constitute the historical reality of his being.*

We are historical beings who, no matter how much we might try, cannot escape the fact that we are bound to each other in history’s flow.

It is here in his emphasis on our inescapable sociality that Gadamer redeems tradition for hermeneutics. We are not simple, unconnected, and uninvolved individuals standing alone, above, and apart from other people and texts which we can on that account investigate as unattached observers. It is our very location in a communal tradition that defines us as individuals, shaping and determining our thinking and understanding. We are, in this sense, inherently *traditioned.*

*[The] self-criticism of historical consciousness leads finally to recognizing historical movement not only in events but also in understanding itself. *Understanding is to be thought of less as a subjective act than as participating in an event of tradition,* a process of transmission in which past and present are constantly mediated.*

It is characteristic of the Enlightenment and modern scientific scholarship, however, to be diametrically opposed to tradition and hence to the fact of historical effect. “What makes modern scholarship scientific,” Gadamer explains with an eye on historical criticism, “is precisely the fact that it objectifies tradition and methodically eliminates the influence of the interpreter and his time on understanding.”

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*94* Ibid., 278. Emphasis in original. Again: “But understanding it will always involve *more* than merely historically reconstructing the past ‘world’ to which the work belongs. Our understanding will always retain the consciousness that we too belong to that world, and correlatively, that the work too belongs to our world.” Ibid., 290. Emphasis in original.

*95* Ibid., 291. Emphasis in original.

*96* Ibid., 329.
objectify experience [so] that it no longer contains any historical element” that historical hermeneutics should look for guidance. It is instead to art.  

Understanding has more to do with feeling than with methodical execution; it is “immediate, sympathetic, and congenital.”

As we saw earlier in the case of J. I. Packer, evangelicals in the early 1980s struggled with the comprehensiveness of history’s effect upon human understanding as described here by Gadamer – a comprehensiveness he claimed demanded recognition and acceptance if any hermeneutic was to reflect reality accurately. Evangelicals, however, entered the late twentieth-century still hindered by a dedication to a modernist foundationalist epistemology and a conception of scripture as a storehouse of true propositional statements. They thereby sought to weaken, if not counter, the relativistic implications for biblical hermeneutics that were said to spring from a full-fledged historically effected consciousness.

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97 Ibid., 342.
98 Ibid., 190.
99 As I argued in Chapter 1, Packer’s affirmation of the personal character of revelation and his rejection of a personal-propositional dichotomy fails to free him from this charge. See pp. 49ff. Grant Osborne, a moderating evangelical like Packer, put forward a similar conception of divine revelation: “The Bible, seen as a revelatory communication from God… provides the objective data for judging [metaphysical] truth claims.” Again: “While the language of the Bible is indeed the speech-act, the central speech-act is assertion, which entails reference to facts about this world and God’s relation to it. If the autonomy thesis applies, no referential dimension and no set of assertions call for belief. Belief in the Bible demands that Scripture makes assertions and that they are true.” That Osborne presents a problematic understanding of Christian belief here is a focus of Chapter 5. For now, we are interested in Osborne’s conception of the nature and function of the Bible as a storehouse of true statements (propositions) about reality, which as we saw above necessarily includes statements of historical fact and not creative narrative. Grant Osborne, The Hermeneutical Spiral: A Comprehensive Introduction to Biblical Interpretation (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1991), 405, 408.

Moreover, that Osborne’s hermeneutical method is shaped by a foundationalist epistemology can be seen in the metaphors he uses to describe the role of historical and literary context in biblical interpretation: “The historical and logical contexts provide the scaffolding upon which we can build the in-depth meaning of a passage. Without a strong scaffolding, the edifice of interpretation is bound to collapse…The information we gather from [secondary sources that provide relevant historical and literary information] is not final truth but rather becomes a blueprint, a basic plan that we can alter later when the edifice of interpretation is actually being erected.” Ibid., 20-1.
On account of its inherent indefiniteness, the metaphor of a circle was thus quickly rejected as unsuitable, even misleading. Instead of promising objective, eternal truths, Gadamer’s circle invited into biblical interpretation a dangerous and uncontrollable subjectivism. Packer, on the heels of the ICBI’s 1982 summit on hermeneutics, condemned the circle metaphor – at least as it was developed by Gadamer and his conceptual brethren in theology, Gerhard Ebeling and Ernst Fuchs100 – as simply the logical result of Friedrich Schleiermacher’s experiential-expressivist theological program.101

Fuchs really has left us to sink in the swamps of subjectivist subjectivity, with no available criteria of truth and value at all for the language-events that came our way.

The new hermeneutic is in truth the end of the Schleiermacherian road. Its denial of the reality of revealed truth, linked with its rejection of the subject-object frame of reference for knowledge of God through Scripture, produces a state of affairs beyond which there is nowhere to go. Logically, the new hermeneutic is relativism; philosophically, it is irrationalism; psychologically, it is freedom to follow unfettered religious fancy; theologically, it is unitarianism; religiously, it is uncontrolled individualistic mysticism; structurally, it is all these things not by accident but of necessity. We leave it, and move on.102

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Packer and evangelicalism did move on, though as we will see in our last chapter they could never truly leave it. Instead of the image of a hermeneutical circle, they offered the spiral, with Grant Osborne providing the textbook that would make the image stick. Now in its second edition, Osborne’s *The Hermeneutical Spiral* takes, as we might expect from our earlier survey of his moderating positions, a relatively chastened approach to evangelical hermeneutics, especially with regard to his general appreciation for Gadamer’s insights into the role of the reader’s presuppositions in interpretation. “The simple fact,” Osborne tells us, “is that all of us read a text on the basis of our own background and proclivities.”\textsuperscript{103} But, despite such admissions, Osborne and the many evangelical pastors, teachers, undergraduates, and seminarians who cut their teeth on his interpretive method and others like it continue to imagine the goal of biblical hermeneutics to be the discovery of scripture’s “absolute” and “univocal” truths via the enlistment of a proper, repeatable method. Since these truths come “couchéd” and “encased” in the “human languages and cultures of the ancient Hebrews and Greeks,” they require a science that can successfully peel back those contextual husks, uncovering the now decontextualized and dehistoricized “kernels” of truth lying underneath.\textsuperscript{104}

\textsuperscript{103} He continues: “It is not only impossible but dangerous to put our knowledge and theological tradition aside as we study a biblical text. That very knowledge provides categories for understanding the text itself. At the same time, however, these traditions have potential for controlling the text and determining its meaning. This constitutes reader-response interpretation – meaning produced by the reader rather than by the text…The point I wish to argue is not whether this is ever the case; any observer has to admit that it is usually so. But I do challenge whether this must or even should be the case.” Osborne, *The Hermeneutical Spiral*, 367. Emphasis in original.

\textsuperscript{104} Osborne, *The Hermeneutical Spiral*, 7, 13 (Fig. 0.2). That Osborne curiously appropriates the well-known vocabulary of the early twentieth-century Protestant liberal Adolf von Harnack is telling of the modernist and historicist assumptions Osborne shares with the latter’s project (despite the fact that his immediate source for the kernel image appears to be the translational theory of Eugene Nida and Charles Tabor as advanced in *The Theory and Practice of Translation* [Leiden: Brill, 1974]). Evangelicals may accuse liberal historical critics of subjectivism and the abuse of the biblical authors’ intended meaning in those critics’ attempts to get “behind” the text, but evangelicalism’s grammatical-historical method itself appears little different. The text, as it stands, is something that needs to be understood only to be discarded. It is the husk that hides the choice kernel of divine truth. That Osborne appropriates the language of
Modeled on the spiral, Osborne’s definitive shaping of evangelicalism’s grammatical-historical hermeneutic offered just such a scientific method—one that imparts, in the words of two of his conceptual heirs, a confidence that “we can pull the actual truth out of a text and not just develop an arbitrary, fanciful, or incorrect interpretation.”

In their bestselling undergraduate textbook, *Grasping God’s Word*, Scott Duvall and Danny Hays refer to these kernels as the “universal theological teachings” and “principles” hidden within the Bible’s original concrete expressions and stories. To uncover these teachings, readers must carefully excise those historical concretions—that is, the historical and literary contexts that give shape and character to the literal sense of the text—as well as the presuppositions (Duvall and Hays call them “preunderstandings”) we inevitably bring into any interpretation. Whereas in Gadamer’s hermeneutic the contextual and presuppositional horizons of reader and text are said to fuse in the construction of meaning, evangelicalism’s grammatical-historical method is premised on discovering these contexts and presuppositions so that they can be bracketed off and then systematically eliminated should they prove distortive of the text’s original meaning (i.e., its authorial intent).

“kernel” is only symptomatic of a methodical process and goal ironically similar to that developed and maintained by evangelicalism’s liberal cousins. Both are drinking from the same modernist well in an attempt to quench the same modernist desire for certainty.

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106 Ibid., 23.
107 Ibid., 85. In the first edition of *Grasping God’s Word*, Duvall and Hays distinguish between “preunderstandings,” which need to be challenged and removed if they are shown to distort the text’s true meaning, and “presuppositions,” which are those theological beliefs—such as plenary-verbal inspiration and biblical inerrancy—that determine how we approach the Bible and construct our method of interpretation. In the third edition, the term “presuppositions” is replaced by the less confusing designation “foundational beliefs.” J. Scott Duvall and J. Daniel Hays, *Grasping God’s Word: A Hands-On Approach to Reading, Interpreting, and Applying the Bible*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2012), 145.
108 Osborne is overly confident that we can identify these presuppositions: “Presuppositions can be external (philosophical or theological starting points) or internal (personality, pressure to publish) but must be recognized and taken into account when studying the text. My basic point is that they can be identified.
Hence when evangelicals like Duvall and Hays borrow the language of a fusion of horizons, they do so in a weakened, pasteurized sense. We can see this clearly in Osborne, who often relegates the fusion of horizons to the final stage of the interpretive process (i.e., application) which takes up the objective and eternal meaning of the text discovered by exegesis and seeks to apply it to the contemporary situation.

The original author had a certain audience in mind, and the text addresses itself to these implied readers. The real reader, by uniting with this textual configuration, can contextualize the text to discover the significance of the text’s message for today…Thereby the intended meaning of the text (the historical aspect) and the multiple significances of the text for today (the contemporary aspect) are fused in the act of interpretation.109

Here the fusion happens after the meaning of the text is discovered, and so any occasion of subjectivity that may enter into the interpretive process can be diagnosed as the consequence of an error in contemporary application, not exegesis, thus preserving the objectivity (and inerrancy) of the presumably uncovered literal and historical meaning.

Osborne insists that the hermeneutical spiral maintain an element of circularity as the reader progresses along it through exegesis, biblical theology, historical theology, systematics, and finally homiletics. Each step can be said to circle back upon those before it, testing them and at times providing the “mental framework” that enabled their original performance. We must view these steps, Osborne therefore insists, as “inseparable and

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When prejudices become subconscious and are taken for granted, the interpreter never examines them and they become the major hermeneutical tool, determining the meaning of the text. While this often happens and does indeed obfuscate the possibility of discovering the original meaning of a text, this is not a necessary occurrence.” But, can we really know or discover all of our presuppositions? How would we even know that we have when we do? And, if we have “subconscious” presuppositions, how are we to discover these in the first place? It would appear that Osborne understands divine revelation as demanding that our presuppositions be wholly discoverable, not to mention bracketable, and because revelation demands it, then it must be possible. But, this is putting the cart before the horse. Osborne, The Hermeneutical Spiral, 412. Emphasis in original.

109 Ibid., 414. Again: “The ‘horizon’ of the listeners must be fused with the ‘horizon’ of the text in true expository preaching…The preacher must ask how the biblical writer would have applied the theological truths of the passage if he were addressing them to the modern congregation.” Ibid., 12.
“I am not going round and round a closed circle that can never detect the true meaning,” Osborne explains, “but am spiraling nearer and nearer to the text’s intended meaning as I refine my hypotheses and allow the text to continue to challenge and correct those alternative interpretations.” Despite all the effort to ascribe circularity to biblical hermeneutics, however, it is clear that Osborne visualizes the spiral as centered on that universally objective theological principle. Once discovered by exegesis, that principle can then be taken up by homiletics and applied to particular situations today.

In contrast with Gadamer’s circle, evangelicals consider the spiral as better able to capture the process of methodically eliminating the presuppositions or contexts that the reader and text bring to interpretation. And yet, while it may promise to provide eternal theological principles that can be reapplied in any and every time and situation, the necessary linearity of the hermeneutical spiral does not simply revise – much less save –

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110 Ibid., 267.
111 Ibid., 269-70.
112 Ibid., 6.
113 Moreover, a person’s preaching can be considered true and biblically faithful only if it is firmly grounded on the objective theological principles discovered by exegesis. In evangelicalism’s grammatical-historical hermeneutic, where “biblically faithful” is made the single criterion of Christian truth, any failure to discover what the Bible truly meant in the past will result in a failure to preach what the Bible truly means for today.
Gadamer’s original circle by fortifying its walls against the threat of subjectivism. By demanding that the process of understanding result in the discovery of universal principles hidden in the biblical text, evangelicals’ hermeneutical spiral escapes the heart of Gadamer’s project and what he took to be the necessary consequences of a full-fledged consciousness of history’s inescapable and unbracketable effect upon us and our understanding of historical texts, including those bearing the marks of divine revelation. Osborne clearly struggles with the deep implications of this historicity of ours – a fact he acknowledges and which shows up in the humility and tentativeness of his overall rhetoric. Nevertheless, in order to assuage the tension it raises when placed alongside his desire for certainty, he predictably turns to a method that promises scientific objectivity. In this, his solution is quite similar to that offered, as we saw in our first chapter, by J. I. Packer around the same time.

Gadamer’s decision to keep Heidegger’s original metaphor of a circle, however, was quite appropriate. The hermeneutical circle rightly expresses our continual passage through time, our own historicity and with it our own traditionedness. Our understanding of the text – including the questions we bring to it and the questions it brings to us – does not have an endpoint, as if our historical conditionedness was something affecting us prior to our reading of the text and not during and after our reading or as if we did not actually exist as beings on our own continuous march through history. For Gadamer, we can never simply read a text under the illusion that once we have understood it then we have exhausted it. True understanding does not mean that a text ceases to say anything new, to ask any further questions of us, or that we cease to return the favor.
In the hermeneutical circle, meaning is not to be equated with a static point, as the endpoint of a spiral or the central axis of a helix would suggest. Meaning is made in the very back-and-forth between dialogue partners. To conceive of hermeneutics as a circle affects then how we understand the discovery of a text’s meaning in relation to the gaining of knowledge. This is paradigmatically the case with our knowledge of God. Here lies the staying power of Barth’s assertion that the divine Word is fundamentally a person, not a text or proposition or simple historical fact. To know a person – to understand what a person *means* (not in his or her speech but in that person’s very living self) – is a quite different thing than to know two plus two equals four or even that my daughter loves buttermilk pie.

Of course, “personal” meaning or knowledge of this sort includes factual propositions. For example, Sara is my wife. This is a true fact and gives us knowledge of Sara. But, significantly, what it does not give us is *Sara*. While the fact that Sara is my wife colors who Sara is and thus what it means to know her, she is more than a proposition, even more than an infinite aggregate of propositions. So it is with the revelation of the person of God. This assumes that the nature of the Bible and biblical revelation is quite different from that which evangelicals imagine it to be. The revelation of God is not housed in the text as some static deposit of knowledge waiting to be read and thereby known. The revelation of God – and here we should also say, of the Bible – is, on the contrary, the means by which God makes himself meaningful to us. In the circle of hermeneutical discourse in which we continually engage even today, God reveals his very person.

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114 Nor should we even equate it with the epicenter of a circle.
It would seem that we are never done with the text, and the text is never done with us. Nor can or should we pretend to be able to achieve certainty about the text’s meaning. With explicit regard to Christian hermeneutics, we can never reach the divine mind with its eternal, ahistorical knowledge, although we can and do escape evangelicalism’s reduction of scripture to a body of facts that needs only to be systematized before being discarded.¹¹⁵ As no endpoint exists on a circle, so we can never exhaust divine revelation. Nor, as participants on that hermeneutical circle, is the Christian life ever seen as complete. We might then echo Irenaeus of Lyon and other early church fathers who describe the Christian life as a continual, even everlasting, process by which we are always approaching but never reaching the divine – always being transformed more into God’s image but never becoming fully identified with him. This is a story of historical becoming, however, not one of ahistorical (or “eternal”) being.

The image of a spiral presents a quite different picture of both the process and goal of biblical hermeneutics. It illustrates the attempt to wrinkle time, to treat it as “infinitely thin”¹¹⁶ and so to slip across the ages via a concatenated series of experiments intended to decontextualize and then recontextualize the Bible’s truth claims in order to obtain meanings we can trust as God’s true commands for our lives. A spiral has a set trajectory; it is always moving to an endpoint where the meaning of the text is both obtainable because it is located in a fixed and redeemable past and stable because it is discoverable by means of a method intentionally designed to remove the interpreting

¹¹⁵ If there remains any doubt that evangelicals today, like Charles Hodge a century ago, continue to conceive of the Bible as a storehouse of facts, we need only look to Osborne’s description of the role of biblical theology in hermeneutics: “[Biblical] theology collates the results of exegesis and provides the data for the systematic theologian to contextualize in developing theological dogma for the church today.” Osborne, The Hermeneutical Spiral, 263.
¹¹⁶ Rodgers, Age of Fracture, 254.
subject from the equation. For evangelical inerrantists, the reader moves ever closer to the true, timeless meaning of the text as the hermeneutical method steadily chips away at her presuppositions and the passage’s contexts. In her progress down (or up, so Packer and Osborne\textsuperscript{117}) the spiral in evangelicalism’s bloodless rendition of Gadamer’s fusion of horizons, it is suggested that the attainment of the text’s original, singular meaning always remains theoretically possible, if not increasingly probable. Even if the spiral is practically asymptotic, as more historically conscious evangelicals like Osborne and Packer occasionally imply, it is so only until the eschaton and the end of history when time – with all its complexities and shifts – evaporates before the onslaught of eternity.

Here we can see how the substitution of the spiral image for Gadamer’s circle comes to reject his fundamental insight, that we are historical beings who never cease to be such. Evangelical hermeneutics assumes we can escape tradition and our own place within it.\textsuperscript{118} Biblical revelation is closed, sealed off from the accretions of change, location, and time. At the point in which we step onto evangelicalism’s hermeneutical spiral, our course is set with all the questions to be worked through both for and against. We have entered into an ahistorical maze through which we must push, our sights firmly set on the timeless, objectively true meaning at the end.

\textsuperscript{117} Osborne, \textit{The Hermeneutical Spiral}, 14. Packer specifically speaks of moving up the hermeneutical spiral toward “more precise and profound understanding.” Packer, “Infallible Scripture and the Role of Hermeneutics,” 348. This inversion of a more natural (i.e., gravitational) conception of one’s movement down a spiral would seem to reflect an attempt to conceive of biblical hermeneutics as reaching up into the heights of the divine mind. It is an odd image, but one that is again telling of where the hermeneutical spiral attempts to take us: out of space and time into the ether of eternal, universal truth.

\textsuperscript{118} Gadamer would say that this attempt to escape history amounts to an attempt to escape our very selves, precisely what history and the communal tradition have formed us to be. “If the philologist or critic understands the given text – i.e., understands himself in the text in the way we have said – the historian too understands the great text of world history he has himself discovered, in which every text handed down to us is but a fragment of meaning, one letter, as it were, and he understands himself in this great text.” Historically effected consciousness, for Gadamer, is recognizing that in reading a text we are at the same time looking at ourselves, at our own history and tradition – in other words, what makes us to be us.

Hence, as in evangelicalism’s doctrine of inspiration, so in its science of interpretation: the Holy Spirit remains locked in the first century. Evangelicals insist that a truly biblical hermeneutic must make space for the Spirit’s illumination of biblical truth, but the point remains that this is only an elucidation of what that Spirit once said in a text of an irredeemably bygone era.\textsuperscript{119} A frozen text such as this, however, is a stable text, one which promises the pristine, obtainable, and fixed knowledge that evangelicals find so attractive.

\textbf{Gateway to Wisdom}

Biblical inerrancy – like its sister doctrine, inspiration – is at heart a belief about how God has chosen to work in the world; it is a question about the relationship between nature and grace, the natural and the supernatural. Evangelicals have sought to place the Bible and its divinely revealed propositional truths outside of nature and time where they are safe from the accretions of temporality. Christian hermeneutics, in aiming to discover these truths, is thereby understood to be an attempt to discern and grasp the mind of God in its eternality, thus seeming to bypass the very means by which God has actually chosen to reveal himself – that is, in history. But if the revelation of God in Christ and in scripture only come to us as genuine historical events revealed to historical human beings – if the eternal God has indeed become time-bound in the incarnation of the Son – then our knowledge of God is inescapably historical. This has significant implications for

\textsuperscript{119} This point was given extensive treatment in Chapter 1 with explicit reference to the thought of J. I. Packer. That the same point can be said to apply in large measure throughout evangelicalism, consider the distinction made between inspiration and illumination given by Duvall and Hays: “Since the Spirit inspired Scripture in the first place, we should not expect him to contradict himself when he illuminates it. This means, for example, that we should not allow personal experience, religious tradition, or community consensus to stand above the Spirit-inspired Word of God. The Spirit does not add new meaning to the biblical text; instead, he helps believers understand and apply the meaning that is already there.” Duvall and Hays, \textit{Grasping God’s Word}, 197.
Christian theology as a discipline, not the least of which is that, in having a firmly historical subject (i.e., revelation, Christ, and, by extension, the church, etc.) and actors (i.e., theologians themselves and the church, once again), theology cannot escape its own historicity. Like all of us time-bound creatures, theology is by its very nature as a historical discipline *traditioned*.

That the Battle for the Bible is in a significant sense a consequence of evangelicals’ continual struggle with their own historicity or traditionedness is the topic of Chapter 5. But, before we turn that page, it will prove helpful to ask how American evangelicals came to be shaped epistemologically and theologically in such a way that they could consciously elide history and their own historicity, with the result that today the voice of God has become dependent upon a static, objective, once-spoken-in-the-past word.

Andrew Louth, after advancing a Gadamerian critique of historical criticism’s fascination with a methodology indebted to the natural sciences, offers in his *Discerning the Mystery* a more historically conscious and theologically attractive conception of revelation as the active participation of God in the spatiotemporal world. Drawing on a wealth of ancient patristic sources, including the Latin church father Augustine, Louth counsels us to understand divine revelation as an action that is both an invitation to and the means by which we engage with the divine. Characteristic of patristic theology is a description of revelation’s purpose as our conformation to the divine mystery that is the trinitarian God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. But the mystery here is not one to be solved as some sort of problem; neither is it one answered as some sort of cosmic or moral question. Rather, the mystery is to be engaged, experienced, even participated in as the
one “who gives himself to us in love in the Incarnation of the Son.”

The Bible for Louth is on this account less a compendium of propositional knowledge, much less explicit rules needing nuanced application, but the medium by which Christians are continually shaped into images of the divine Word himself by the very God who acts in and through scripture. “The heart of Christianity,” Louth argues over and against modern, individualistic expressions of sola scriptura, “is the mystery of Christ, and the Scriptures are important as they unfold to us that mystery, and not in and for themselves.”

This is a genuinely incarnational view of scripture and God’s self-revelation in history.

To reappropriate this incarnational view of scripture, Louth tells us, we must restore the allegorical sense of interpretation that so heavily characterized patristic exegesis. Allegory for the fathers “was not a superfluous, stylistic habit, something we can fairly easily lop off from the trunk of Patristic theology. Rather, it is bound up with their whole understanding of tradition as the tacit dimension of the Christian life.” The fathers treasured the allegorical sense as “a way of glimpsing the living depths of tradition from the perspective of the letter [or literal sense] of the Scriptures.”

Against an evangelical hermeneutic that approaches the allegorical sense as intentionally rejecting the literal, historical meaning of scripture, allegory for the fathers was not “a movement away from history, but…a movement into history, into the significance of the sacred events that are the object of our faith.” While the literal sense provides “what we are to believe, to believe in” – that is, specifically, “in a God who meets us in history, becomes

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121 Ibid., 102. Louth specifically criticizes the tradition of sola scriptura for leading the majority of modern Protestants “away from the traditional devotion to Scripture as the Word of God which we find par excellence in the Fathers. Scripture is being understood as an arsenal and not as a treasury.” What Louth has in mind here is what we described a number of times above with regard to the Princeton theologian Charles Hodge who conceived of scripture as a “storehouse of facts.” Ibid., 101.
122 Ibid., 96.
man in Jesus of Nazareth” – the allegorical seeks to understand the divine mystery presented by the literal. In doing so, it desires to know the God who once met us in history and now continues to meet us in the scriptures as we time and again witness to them, their history, and their continuing tradition.¹²³

Jesus, in one of the more significant passages advanced in discussions of biblical inspiration, attempts to comfort some of his disciples who had only recently heard of his impending departure. He speaks of a coming “Spirit of Truth” who will guide them “into all truth” (John 16:13). The image here is not so much that of remembrance or discovery of certain propositions but of the Spirit leading (the Greek is ὁδός, “road” or “path”) the disciples to the font of wisdom, Truth himself. Even if we are to grant that Jesus is speaking of the inspiration of the Bible here, scripture takes on the characteristic of a gateway to Wisdom by which we become wise as we participate in and with the God who is that Wisdom. This, of course, puts forward a sacramental imagination of which evangelicals have traditionally been quite wary, seeing in it a type of magical ex opere operato. That fear, however, has more to do with the Enlightenment’s enthroning of human reason or rationality (sophia) over wisdom (phronesis). It is this all-determining legacy of the Enlightenment that betrays inerrancy and evangelicalism – particularly what we have called “orthodox rationalism” – as quintessentially modern. But, like biblical wisdom literature itself, phronesis hardly provides the clear and certain answer or propositional objectivity so much desired by evangelicals. As we will see in the next chapter, this becomes most apparent in Princeton Seminary’s fundamental reorienting of Scottish Common Sense Realism, especially in its “definitive” Reidian form. Instead of providing the epistemological certainty and foundation for hermeneutical objectivity said

¹²³ Ibid., 117-8. Emphasis in original.
to be available in Common Sense Realism, Thomas Reid redirects the epistemological question away from a quest for certainty toward achieving that understanding so necessary for living well – that is, toward wisdom.
CHAPTER 4
PENETRATING DARKNESS

Wise men now agree, or ought to agree in this, that there is but one way to the knowledge of nature’s works; the way of observation and experiment.

Thomas Reid, An Inquiry into the Human Mind

[The] man who makes the best use he can of the faculties which God has given him, without thinking them more perfect than they really are, may have all the belief that is necessary in the conduct of life, and all that is necessary to his acceptance with his Maker.

Thomas Reid, Essays on the Intellectual Powers

Princeton Seminary’s nineteenth-century appropriation of Scottish Common Sense Realism is commonly interpreted as an attempt to protect traditional Reformed systems of belief, most notably the Westminster Catechism. As Theodore Dwight Bozeman, following the trajectory of historians Sydney Ahlstrom and George Marsden, has argued, antebellum America became enamored with the inductive method of Francis Bacon, especially as it was so admirably employed by Isaac Newton. Princeton theologians Archibald Alexander, Charles Hodge, and Benjamin B. Warfield (including their lesser

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confrères) embraced Baconian induction as the preferred – because they understood it to be inherently less speculative – method for discovering truth, natural or supernatural (that is, biblical). In antebellum America in particular, this Baconianism came helpfully coupled with the reigning Anglo-Saxon (and, to a lesser degree, French) epistemology of the day, Common Sense Realism, which provided the evidence with which induction would organize and thus discover truth.

The Scottish philosophy of common sense delineated two intimately connected “senses” of truth: epistemological and moral. The former was concerned primarily with the five senses of smelling, hearing, touching, tasting, and seeing, as well as with our perception of the external world by means of these senses. The latter focused on divinely endowed first principles of right human conduct – the “golden rule,” for example. Nineteenth-century Princeton understood such epistemological and moral evidence as providing the fundamental facts upon which all human knowledge was and would be built. Induction was specifically employed to manage this gathering and organizing of perceptions while also protecting them from subjective influences, particularly from those fanciful and untrustworthy tools of deduction: thesis and hypothesis. As such, Baconianism – when coupled with a “commonsensical” trust in first principles, sensory and moral – guaranteed the certainty of human knowledge and right conduct over against an encroaching theological and ethical romanticism, evidenced as it was most poignantly in New England’s Transcendentalism.

It is my contention in this chapter that Princeton’s appropriation of Common Sense in the former’s attempt to procure epistemological certainty fails to take into account two key elements of the epistemological thought of Thomas Reid (1710-1796),
the eighteenth-century preacher-philosopher and critic of David Hume (1711-1776) whose name has become synonymous with the Scottish philosophy. Reid’s epistemological humility – most evident in his admission of a “darkness” we are not humanly capable of penetrating – when coupled with the practical trajectory of his thought as ending in human action, indicates that his philosophy of common sense is, all things considered, a far cry from that highly optimistic mechanism for achieving certainty later proffered by theologians at Princeton. Reid’s philosophy simply does not deliver the certainty they seek. In fact, Reid is not even after certainty to begin with, and to stake one’s claim to such certainty on the merit of Common Sense Realism – at least in its original Reidian form – is to misunderstand the heart of his philosophy.

This leaves us with an obvious question, one as pertinent to the history of philosophy as it is to theology: If Reid is not after certainty, what is he after? He is rightfully called the anti-skeptic, but not in the same sense as we might call Descartes or Locke, whose logic the “hard” Hume revealed to be self-defeating. On the contrary, Reid proposes that common sense refuses even to grant Humean skepticism a place at the table. If nothing else, common sense lays an impossible burden of proof upon the skeptic, who can never for any significant period of time act in full-fledged accordance with her skepticism. Instead, what an epistemology understood in terms of Reidian common sense does is instruct us not toward acquiring, in any Cartesian-like fashion, a certainty in

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2 This reference to a “hard” Hume is borrowed from Wallace Matson, whose *A New History of Philosophy* allows the complex and often (disturbingly!) inconsistent nature of its personalities to paint a refreshingly realistic and historically contextualized story of the development of Western epistemology. Matson presents Hume in just such two-faced glory. What on the one hand the pragmatically minded “soft” Hume grants in his affirmation of the necessity of trusting our senses in the everyday, the utterly skeptical “hard” Hume takes away with his outright denial of any knowledge of the external. It is interesting here to note that, whether Matson realized it or not, the inconsistency he hits on with his hard and soft Humes lies at the heart of Reid’s appeal to common sense. In fact, this soft/hard distinction well summarizes Reid’s own interpretation of all the idealist epistemologists from Descartes to Hume. Wallace I. Matson, *A New History of Philosophy: Modern* (San Diego, CA: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1987), 353.
opposition to skepticism but an understanding of the inescapable epistemological limits all humans face and, in honest acceptance of these limits, how best then to live.\textsuperscript{3} That is, epistemology shows us the path to wisdom. In this reading of Reid, the fool, not the skeptic, is the enemy. Moreover, such an interpretation finds its genesis in the reasons Reid provides for initially rejecting Humean skepticism and in the very structure of his published lecture notes. That is, the movement of Reid’s argument from our intellectual powers to our moral acts defines epistemology not in terms of a quest for certainty but, rather, in what we might call an attempt to achieve right understanding.

\textbf{The Science of Evangelical Theology}

In their discussions of the Princetonians' appropriation of Common Sense, George Marsden and Mark Noll caution against any attempt to find direct or explicit use of particular principles or personalities of the Scottish philosophy. They instead stress that methodological and other fundamental patterns of thought within early Princeton subtly mirrored those found in Common Sense Realism. Or, in the least, Princeton utilized numerous elements of what Thomas Reid, Dugald Stewart (1753-1828), and others made respectable and readily available.\textsuperscript{4} Marsden and Noll's caution here highlights an

\textsuperscript{3} As we will see, one of Reid’s more profound insights is his qualified acceptance of the role skepticism plays in human knowing. In fact, his system can itself be seen as promoting a nuanced form of skepticism, not of the Humean variety, of course, but of Stanley Cavell’s Montaigne who grants that he may be in error and thus the need to continue the conversation. Thanks to Brad Kallenberg for his helpful clarification of this point. See, e.g., Stanley Cavell, \textit{The Claim of Reason: Wittgenstein, Skepticism, Morality, and Tragedy} (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1979).

\textsuperscript{4} This is especially the case with Noll, who warns that anyone scouring the works of these early Princeton theologians for any discussion of particular nuances in Reid and others will be sorely disappointed. Instead, Scottish Common Sense provided “broader habits of mind or reassuring conventions of thought” for a developing American theology. Yet, as we will see, it was in this particular lack of attention to details – especially in the thought of Reid – that Princeton missed what might have provided a number of helpful qualifications to their rendition of the Scottish philosophy. Mark Noll, “Common Sense Traditions and American Evangelical Thought,” \textit{American Quarterly} 37, no. 2 (Summer 1985): 216-38; George Marsden, “Fundamentalism as an American Phenomenon, A Comparison with English
important point: nineteenth-century Princeton did not just adopt wholesale the Scottish philosophy. Alexander, Hodge, and Warfield instead found in Common Sense Realism a ready-made epistemological and methodological structure upon which they could graft their own nuanced theological apologetic, adapting the Scottish philosophy to their needs and at times misinterpreting it along the way. Notwithstanding these misinterpretations, Scottish Realism gave the Princeton theology significant weight and clout which would last in a more or less singular form for nearly a century, as well as for a good seventy-five years after that in highly inflected and less consistent forms during the rise of postwar evangelicalism and its debates over biblical inerrancy. In short, antebellum Princeton made an attenuated version of Scottish Common Sense Realism its handmaiden – and she continues to pay dividends.

Noll delineates three of those fundamental patterns of thought that antebellum America borrowed from the Common Sense tradition – that is, its epistemological, ethical, and methodological emphases. The first and third are of prime importance for our discussion of the Princeton theology, with the latter taking the lead. In fact, Scottish Common Sense, especially in its Reidian form, can be profitably read as strict inductivism’s challenge to the reigning deductive epistemology.

The requisite illustrations are not hard to find. Not two pages into Reid’s first major work, *An Inquiry into the Human Mind* (1764), we find him proclaiming the accuracy and authority of induction over the often fanciful conjectures of deduction:

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6 Reid, *An Inquiry into the Human Mind*, op. cit. Hereinafter, IHM. For ease of reference to other editions, I have included Reid’s section numbers along with the page numbers to the Brookes edition.
Wise men now agree, or ought to agree in this, that there is but one way to
the knowledge of nature’s works; the way of observation and experiment.
By our constitution, we have a strong propensity to trace particular facts
and observations to general rules, and to apply such general rules to
account for other effects, or to direct us in the production of them. This
procedure of the understanding is familiar to every human creature in the
common affairs of life, and it is the only one by which any real discovery
in philosophy can be made…

All our curious theories of the formation of the earth, of the
generation of animals, of the origin of natural and moral evil, so far as
they go beyond a just induction from facts, are vanity and folly, no less
than the vortices of Des Cartes, or the Archæus of Paracelsus. (IHM I, i [B
11-2])

That wise men “ought” to agree that induction is the only valid method available to
natural philosophers is an important qualification for Reid, who consistently decries the
speciousness of the regnant philosophy of the mind ranging from Descartes to Hume. To
assert that knowledge is defined as only immediate familiarity with ideas or images in the
mind and not with external reality itself is to make oneself like “the Indian philosopher,
who, to account for the support of the earth, contrived the hypothesis of a huge elephant,
and to support the elephant, a huge tortoise.” Reid then goes on to explain, “Every theory
in philosophy, which is built on pure conjecture, is an elephant; and every theory that is
supported partly by fact, and partly by conjecture, is like Nebuchadnezzar’s image,
whose feet were partly of iron, and partly of clay” (IHM VI, xix [B 163]). The simile is
left unfinished, but it is clear what happens to the philosopher’s conjecture of mixed iron
and clay: the rock of empirical evidence “cut out by God” crushes those hypotheses

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Citations of Reid’s *Essays on the Intellectual Powers of Man* (hereinafter, EIP) and *Essays on the Active
Powers of the Human Mind* (Cambridge, MA: MIT, 1969) (hereinafter, EAP) will also include dual
references.

7 Reid has in mind here what has since been deemed enumerative induction in which “one amasses
all the favourable particular instances of a generalisation, and notes the absence of counter-instances. It is
to be contrasted with eliminative or variative induction in which one tests the reliability of a generalisation
by testing it under varying experimental conditions.” Peter Anstey, “Thomas Reid and the Justification of
dreamt up on such deductive whims, revealing them for the speculative theories that they are.⁸

Like the theologians at Princeton who in the next century would claim to be his intellectual heirs, Reid gives credit to Francis Bacon (1561-1626) for laying down the definitive rules of induction. Moreover, Isaac Newton (1642-1727) clearly stands out as Reid’s hero in terms of the best exhibition of Baconian induction, with the former’s *Principia* and *Optics* making numerous appearances throughout Reid’s *Inquiry* and later *Essays*.⁹ Theodore Dwight Bozeman, whose *Protestants in an Age of Science* has done much to draw the connection between the Princetonians and Scottish Common Sense, goes so far as to call Reid and Stewart “the effectual root of the Baconian Philosophy.”¹⁰

So pervasive was the nineteenth- and twentieth-century notion that induction is the only valid method for scientific investigation that we today tend to read that popularity back into previous centuries, ignoring the still common tendency toward deductive investigation and argumentation that colored much of the early modern period and was still influential during the Darwinian turn. A more accurate understanding of this general shift from deduction to induction instead highlights an important reason for that move – a reason hardly concealed in the Scottish realists’ disdain for the speculation they saw inherent in the development of theses and hypotheses. This central concern, to borrow again from Bozeman, centered on the idea of restraint: “It was precisely the empirical ‘severity’ of the method of induction which disjoined empirical truth from

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⁸ Reid’s allusion is to Daniel 2 and the interpretation of King Nebuchadnezzar’s dream of the statue of five kingdoms which God crushed with a rock cut by his own hands. A more detailed discussion of Reid’s critique of epistemological idealism is provided below.

⁹ Reid’s *Essays on the Intellectual Powers* was first published in 1785 with its companion, *Essays on the Active Powers*, coming three years later.

‘inventive’ fallacy and thereby generated reliability in scientific knowledge.”¹¹ Whatever optimism the Scottish philosophers relayed through their appeal to common sense, it came heavily qualified by this increasingly conservative restraint, a restraint located in the inductive method itself. Reid goes so far as to argue not only that there are limits to what we can theorize about the evidence, but that there are also limits on what we as humans are capable even of knowing. Such restraint is central to his critique of the reigning epistemology of the day. Under Reid’s interpretation, that idealism, defined by him as the hypothesis that we have genuine knowledge only of mental ideas and not of anything external to us,¹² stems from no other evidence than what its philosophers’ minds could dream up.¹³ In their desire to discover every link in the causal chain that constituted human knowing, these philosophers resorted to subjective flights of fancy.¹⁴

¹¹ Ibid., 18-9.
¹² Though Reid recognizes that similar ancient theories of knowledge differ in important ways, this does not stop him from drawing a rather straight line from Plato to Hume (with only a slight detour beginning with Descartes). Consider Reid’s defense of his endeavors in the “Dedication” to the Inquiry: “For my own satisfaction, I entered into a serious examination of the principles upon which this sceptical system is built; and was not a little surprised to find, that it leans with its whole weight upon a hypothesis, which is ancient indeed, and hath been very generally received by philosophers, but of which I could find no solid proof. The hypothesis I mean is, That nothing is perceived but what is in the mind which perceives it: That we do not really perceive things that are external, but only certain images and pictures of them imprinted upon the mind, which are called impressions and ideas” (IHM “Dedication” [B 4]). Emphasis in original. See also IHM VII [B 205]. Whenever Reid refers to the “ideal system,” “theory of ideas,” or “Way of Ideas,” it is this definition of idealism that he has in mind. Being a historical account, I follow Reid’s usage throughout this chapter.
¹³ This is especially the case for Descartes, Locke, and Hume, but Reid, to the chagrin of many today, more often than not includes Berkeley in this number. Take, for instance, one of Reid’s many concise and often oversimplified explanations of the historical trajectory of the ideal system (titled, significantly, “The system of all these authors is the same, and leads to scepticism”): “Des Cartes no sooner began to dig in this mine [i.e., into the “first principles of human nature”], than scepticism was ready to break in upon him. He did what he could to shut it out. Malebranche and Locke, who dug deeper, found the difficulty of keeping out this enemy still to increase; but they labored honestly in the design. Then Berkeley, who carried on the work, despairing of securing all, bethought himself of an expedient: By giving up the material world, which he thought might be spared without loss, and even with advantage, he hoped by an impregnable partition to secure the world of spirits. But, alas! the Treatise of human nature [sic] wantonly sapped the foundation of this partition, and drowned all in one universal deluge.

“[These facts, which are undeniable, do indeed give reason to apprehend, that Des Cartes’s system of the human understanding, which I shall beg leave to call the ideal system…” (IHM I, vii [B 23]). Cf. IHM VII [B212-3, 217]. Emphasis in original.
In one sense, the Princetonians would embrace the Scottish realists’ rejection of this type of subjectivism, claiming concern only with what is objectively provable and thus true. But, in the Princeton theologians’ own search for certainty in relation to biblical interpretation – where they employed the bulk of what they borrowed from the Scottish philosophy – they would often neglect precisely that requisite restraint exemplified by Reid. Consider Bozeman’s account of this neglect:

[The] inductive conception of theology underwrote with peculiar efficacy the stringent biblical literalism characteristic of the Old School. Churchmen drilled to think of Scripture as an objective display of revelation understandably were pleased with the privileged treatment accorded “given” data in the Baconian Philosophy. The Old School was predictably charmed with the logic by which a text could be equated with a rose and a star in the broad field of nature. And further, if the inductive philosophy was a systematic method of enforcing “the great Baconian principle, that…we are…simply to take facts as we find them, as the ground of every inference,” then the immediate authority of Scripture in its obvious meanings was delightfully enhanced.15

By ridding oneself of all deductive speculation and only granting the available evidence a voice, biblical interpreters thought they could extract the truth of scripture without any interference from their own subjectivity. The Princetonians often present the biblical evidence as characterized by such perspicuity along these lines. In this way, the biblical

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14 One example Reid provides is particularly suited to the present discussion concerning his description of deduction as overly speculative. Here Reid lifts up for censure a conjecture provided by Sir Isaac Newton, the champion of Baconian induction himself, in which the latter suggests in his *Optics* that the two halves of a picture of one object are carried via the left and right optic nerves to the “sensorium” [i.e., the brain] where those two halves are recombined. Reid’s response is typical of his critique of idealism: “What reason have we to believe, that pictures of objects are at all carried to the sensorium, either by the optic nerves, or by any other nerves? Is it not possible, that this great philosopher, as well as many of a lower form [Descartes? Hume?], having been led into this opinion at first by education, may have continued in it, because he never thought of calling it in question?” Reid concludes in rather extreme fashion: “[But] when we compare [a philosopher’s hypothesis] with the observations of anatomists which contradict it, we are naturally led to this reflection, That if we trust to the conjectures of men of the greatest genius in the operations of nature, we have only the chance of going wrong in an ingenious manner” (IHM VI, xix [B 165-6]).

text is seen to speak for itself; we need merely to be passive observers of its truth.\textsuperscript{16} Hence, what began in eighteenth-century Scotland as a conservative restriction on what we can know and how we can know it was subsequently transformed under the auspices of Princeton Seminary into an overly optimistic defense of our ability to know the truth of scripture with unassailable certainty.\textsuperscript{17}

It has been well established by historians of American religion that the Princeton theology offered a defense of what it claimed was traditional, biblical Christianity by appealing to the truth of the inerrant scriptures and our ability to achieve certain knowledge of that truth by means of a literal reading of the text.\textsuperscript{18} One illustration of this

\textsuperscript{16} However, it is important to note that the Princeton theologians hardly suggested that biblical perspicuity meant that understanding the truth of scripture was easy. Hence the classic definition of systematic theology given by Charles Hodge in 1872: “The Bible is no more a system of theology, than nature is a system of chemistry or of mechanics. We find in nature the facts which the chemist or the mechanical philosopher has to examine, and from them to ascertain the laws by which they are determined. So the Bible contains the truths which the theologian has to collect, authenticate, arrange, and exhibit in their internal relation to each other. This constitutes the difference between biblical and systematic theology. The office of the former is to ascertain and state the facts of Scripture. The office of the latter is to take those facts, determine their relation to each other and to other cognate truths, as well as to vindicate them and show their harmony and consistency. This is not an easy task, or one of slight importance.” Charles Hodge, \textit{Systematic Theology} (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1975), 1-2.

\textsuperscript{17} While affirmations of biblical perspicuity are common in Princeton’s discussion of biblical inerrancy, they are not as common elsewhere. Both Charles Hodge and Benjamin Warfield, for example, believed it hermeneutically proper to allow the conclusions of natural science to influence one’s interpretation of scripture. For example, neither found it out of bounds to accommodate the biblical account of creation to the scientific discovery of facts. Clearly, then, texts such as Genesis 1 did not just “read themselves off the page.” Unfortunately, how Hodge and Warfield handled this tension between a general belief in the perspicuity of the Bible and the appropriateness of interpreting scripture in light of changing conceptions of the world is less clear. A number of later inerrantists, beginning during the late 1910s and continuing throughout the postwar period, would handle it by taking a stricter stance on the influence of such changes – especially those arising from new scientific “theories” – on biblical interpretation. In other words, they came to reject the Princetonians’ accommodating position. For a fascinating discussion of this movement within evangelical hermeneutics, see David Livingstone’s \textit{Darwin’s Forgotten Defenders: The Encounter Between Evangelical Theology and Evolutionary Thought} (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1987), especially chs. 4-5.

\textsuperscript{18} Though once rather sparse, the relevant literature is now legion. A fine starting place would be the early article by Ernest Sandeen, “The Princeton Theology: One Source of Biblical Literalism in American Protestantism,” \textit{Church History} 31, no. 3 (September 1962): 307-21. The term “literal,” when used in discussions of biblical hermeneutics, is rather slippery. By it the Princeton theologians most often mean that the biblical author should be taken at his or her word. “Literal” is here set up against any reading of scripture that goes beyond what the biblical author intended. It is worth noting that such a hermeneutic – i.e., the grammatical-historical method – allows for a large range of genre and metaphor. This is the understanding of “literal” held, as we have seen, by both J. I. Packer and Grant Osborne. Occasionally,
epistemological optimism should suffice to evidence the contrast between Reid and those later theologians at Princeton. In a review of Herman Bavinck’s *The Certainty of Faith* (1903), Benjamin B. Warfield (1851-1921), Princeton’s theological powerhouse and its principal definer of biblical inerrancy, criticizes the Dutch theologian’s presuppositional apologetic. Unlike Bavinck who held that the apologetic enterprise presupposes and grows out of a Christian’s faith as she encounters opposition in the world, Warfield argued strongly that one comes to believe in the truths of Christianity on account of their inherent reasonableness – a reasonableness which the apologetic enterprise was tasked with providing clearly and definitively. Apologetics, in Warfield’s perspective, becomes then the science of obtaining and presenting evidence with the intent of leading anyone in her right mind to assent to the truth of that evidence. As Warfield explains in typical militaristic language,

> In the face of the world, with its opposing points of view and its tremendous energy of thought and incredible fertility in attack and defense, Christianity must think through and organize its, not defense merely, but assault. It has been placed in the world to reason its way to the dominion of the world. And it is by reasoning its way that it has come to its kingship. By reasoning it will gather to itself all its own. And by reasoning it will put its enemies under its feet. ¹⁹

This debate between two Reformed brethren who were otherwise generally of like mind centered on the definition of faith itself. For Warfield, Christian faith or conviction is cut from the same cloth as all other human knowledge. Both faith and knowledge, he

however, the Princeton theologians use “literal” as shorthand for the perspicuity of scripture – i.e., the message of the Bible is so clear that anyone who reads it can understand it correctly and, presumably, without much effort. It is, therefore, not uncommon to hear the term “common sense” bandied about in such a discussion. Hence, while we can speak of a literal *interpretation* when the term bears the first sense, to do so with the other is impossible.

stresses from a position noticeably beholden to a thoroughly inductive and empirical method, rest on sufficient, universal, and objective evidence. The only difference is the kind of evidence upon which each rests. Whereas knowledge is based on sight, faith is based on testimony. Yet, in terms of objective certainty, this distinction means very little to Warfield. He insists that we can obtain through faith practically the same type of certainty as that through knowledge, for while any conviction – whether of faith or knowledge – requires an element of trust, neither the certainty of faith nor the certainty of knowledge is the product of faith or knowledge itself but of each one’s respective evidence.

The whole question of a “certainty of faith” turns, therefore, simply on the question whether testimony is adapted to produce conviction in the human mind, and is capable of producing a conviction which is clear and firm – a firma certaque persuasio. If we judge that it is, we shall have no choice but to range alongside of the various forms of “certainty of knowledge,” whether resting on sense-perception, immediate intuition, or rational demonstration, a “certainty of faith” also, resting on convincing testimony.20

In light of this, we should have little difficulty noticing where Warfield’s doctrine of biblical inerrancy fits into his science of “Apologetics.” The primary source of the evidence by which Christian conviction is produced is the Bible, whose testimony, being God’s own revelation, is necessarily without error. As such, the biblical testimony fits the requirements for obtaining certainty of faith. It is “really adequate to the establishment of fact.”21 What results is a tendency in the Princeton theology, stretching as Noll reminds us all the way back to Archibald Alexander, to see the world – including, most notably,

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20 Ibid.
21 Ibid., 307.
the Bible – simply as a storehouse of facts open and available to anyone who would look for them with a mind free from prejudice and speculation.22

The subtle consequence of this wedding of Baconian induction to theology and the biblical testimony upon the nature of religious faith is striking. Christian belief comes more closely to resemble verifiable scientific knowledge rather than any personal trust or sense of conviction. Evangelism and moral instruction likewise mirror the method and evidence-gathering of the natural sciences, thus leading to the implication – fortunately confined more to Princeton’s theological abstractions than to their actual outworking in the lives of religious practitioners – that a genuine and vibrant Christianity consists merely in the accumulation of facts and the piecewise assent to rational propositions.23

Faith, in this sense, is only another name for knowledge gained via a correct reading of the biblical witness, while certainty describes the truthfulness of the object or proposition to be known. To speak of having a “certainty of faith,” then, is not to speak of a subjective condition of the knower but to speak of the ability of the object or proposition to convince. Such certainty is more commonly referred to today as justified or total certainty, and it is this type of certainty that the Princetonians ultimately identify with effective religious belief.

Thomas Reid, however, suggests that there is a good number of truths that cannot be known with objective certainty, much less with the precision and surety of mathematical and geometrical proofs. But, this does not mean that we cannot have

23 Bozeman, Protestants in an Age of Science, 170-1. Bozeman is careful to note that this heavy intellectualizing of what it means to have faith tended to be tempered on the ground. “Old Schoolers knew that Christian theology could not live by science alone. Religious knowledge finally must be ratified by the inner testimony of the Spirit; it must be enlivened by ‘internal evidence’; it must be felt….But it was inevitable that theologians who saw no impropriety in the application of inductive method to Scripture should tend to conceive faith as a state of sensory gnosis, as a primarily cognitive relation to the objective content of Scripture.” Emphasis in original.
genuine knowledge; nor does it mean that we cannot act upon that knowledge with any sort of conviction. We must, Reid contends, trust in the reliability of this non-demonstrative knowledge nonetheless, because otherwise we risk being socially and ethically paralyzed. Unlike the Princetonians’ conception of faith which suggests that biblical knowledge is an end in itself (or, at least, that such knowledge procures the desired end immediately and apart from any further action of the knower), Reid argues that we desire knowledge first and foremost in order to act. Moreover, even though we cannot but rarely know with demonstrative certainty – and then only in specifically defined realms of knowledge, such as mathematics – the practical requirement that we act demands that we trust our perceiving faculties in order to live and, much more so, to live well.

The Pessimism of Thomas Reid
Princeton’s epistemological optimism concerning our ability to gain the theological knowledge by which we might achieve a certainty of faith goes beyond what Reid allows in his more general philosophy of knowledge, even his understanding of the scope and potential of the inductive method. By paying closer attention to Reid’s own “pessimism” in these regards, we can highlight not only the difficulty he finds with achieving epistemological certainty, but also the reasons he gives for why humans should seek knowledge in the first place. We are more, Reid might say, than simple thinking persons curled up nice and tight in our armchairs. We think in order to act.

Reid’s epistemology warrants the label “pessimistic” for two reasons: First, evident throughout his writings is a remarkable appreciation for the contingency of both
human reason and perception. We are not flawless or perspective-less knowers, and the world we inhabit (including our very bodies) and in which we acquire knowledge is rarely, if ever, conducive to perfect perception. In other words, despite the conviction with which we know something, there is always the chance that we could be misled or even flat-out wrong. We need only glance at the historical record to realize that we should hold our assertions with a fair amount of humility.

If this first “subjective” line of pessimism stems from a humble acknowledgement of the human condition, Reid’s second centers on the object of knowledge itself. Simply stated, there are some facts that are unknowable. Yet, even this unknowability Reid assigns to the human makeup. We cannot know some things because we are constitutionally unable to know them. Such “hidden” knowledge exists beyond our God-given human capabilities to know it. Throughout his *Inquiry* and *Essays*, Reid refers to this epistemological lack as “the darkness,” and together with the general humility he prescribes, the acceptance of such impenetrable darkness stands at the center of his critique of idealism and, in turn, his definition of common sense.24

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24 To my knowledge, Reid makes little to no distinction between the “human makeup” prior to and after the corruption sin is believed to exert upon our will, reason, etc. The closest he comes to any discussion about corrupted and uncorrupted human nature appears restricted to three occasions within the *Inquiry* and both *Essays*, and only one of these is directly concerned with perception in general. The other two are located in discussions about the “animal” instinct we all share (EAP III, v [MIT 165]) and about the virtues (“Every virtuous action agrees with the uncorrupted principles of human nature”) (EAP V, i [MIT 364]). Where Reid does allude to the corruption of human nature as it relates to perception, his concern is not actually with corrupted aspects of the human makeup but with “the uncorrupted primary instincts of nature” by which the philosophically untrained trust that their senses do indeed provide them with knowledge of the external world and not mere images in the mind (EIP II, xiv [B 179]). Reid, then, does not have in mind our corrupted human nature when discussing our inability to know certain things (i.e., our “darkness”). Neither does he explain our imperfect perception and reasoning as a result of a corruption due to sin. Rather, his emphasis on epistemological humility appears to be a consequence of both his personality and his reading of history. That so many of the brightest minds in Western philosophy have chased the error of idealism for so long is evidence that more often than not we just do not know what we are talking about.
As explained below, Reid’s argument in his *Inquiry* and *Essays* is fundamentally a response to Hume’s idealism and the denial of moral certainty to which it leads. That idealist argument, as Reid interprets it, can be helpfully expressed in propositional linear form (see fig. 1).

**Fig. 1**  
**Hume’s Idealist Argument Denying Moral Certainty**

- P₀ Human beings can comprehend that we know, what we know, and how it is (in principle) that our minds come to know.
- P₁ Every instance of knowing (or perceiving) comes from immediate contact of the mind with a sense impression.
- P₂ Ideas are pictures in the mind. [Locke]
- P₃ The sense organs are impinged upon by external objects. [Newton]
- P₄ The light, effluvia, tactile sensations, etc. affecting the sense organs cause ideas.
- P₅ Knowledge applies to my ideas, which I know directly (i.e., immediately).
- P₆ There is no moral property that can be detected by the moral faculty – a faculty which we do not even have.
- P₇ Moral properties are properties of ideas-in-the-mind (*not* of external objects) – i.e., moral properties are a function of the knowing subject.

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C₁ \(\therefore\) We cannot know for certain if the image in our mind accurately reflects external reality.

C₂ \(\therefore\) We can have no objective moral knowledge (i.e., there is no moral certainty).

Unable to accept Hume’s denial of moral certainty (C₂) and yet also unable to reject his logic, Reid seeks to rethink the very premises of Hume’s argument. In doing so, Reid focuses his attention on Hume’s theory that every instance of perception comes from immediate contact with the thing known (P₁) – a theory Reid believes lacks the requisite evidence. But, if Reid finally hopes to protect moral certainty with any conviction, he must go one step further. He must either offer an alternative to P₁ or deny the assumption upon which P₁ is built (i.e., P₀). He chooses to deny P₀, asserting that there are just some
causes we are constitutionally unable to know. Consequently, Reid maintains the possibility of achieving moral certainty (see fig. 2).

![Reid's Rebuttal](image)

\[
\begin{align*}
P_{R1} & \vdash \sim P_0 \\
P_{R2} & \vdash \sim P_1 \\
\hline \\
C_R & \vdash \sim C_2
\end{align*}
\]

**Moral Uncertainty Is Unacceptable**

Reid considered the primary significance of his epistemological forays to be his critique of the “Way of Ideas,” one of his more common labels for that general epistemological trajectory stretching from Descartes to Hume.\(^\text{25}\) Though briefly an idealist himself, Reid experienced a change of heart after reading Hume’s *Treatise on Human Nature* (1739-40). Forced to grant Hume’s reasoning, Reid had no choice but “to call in question the principles upon which it was founded, or to admit the conclusion,” which consisted, as he saw it, not only in utter skepticism but in the denial of any consistent – as opposed to relative – morality. According to Reid, if “all belief be laid aside,” as Hume’s logic demanded, then “piety, patriotism, friendship, parental affection, and private virtue, would appear as ridiculous as knight-errantry” (IHM “Dedication” [B 3-4]). If we have no belief or knowledge of anything external to us, then all moral action – which assumes a necessary relation to the external – would be restricted to the confines of the individual

mind. Virtue and vice would then become utterly relative. Reid’s confrontation with Hume’s indubitable reasoning and its consequences for moral action struck him off-guard. He could not imagine any consistent, moral, clear-thinking person consciously holding such an amoral philosophy, at least outside of the solitude provided by mere moments of philosophical revelry, but this was exactly what the ideal system proposed we must do.

So great is Reid’s bewildered abhorrence at Hume’s undeniable conclusion that the former absolves Bishop George Berkeley (1685-1753) – whom Reid, legitimately or not, never fails to include in the Way of Ideas – of any willful error in this regard. Berkeley, Reid assures us,

surely did not duly consider, that it is by means of the material world that we have any correspondence with thinking beings, or any knowledge of their existence, and that by depriving us of the material world, he deprived us at the same time of family, friends, country, and every human creature; of every object of affection, esteem or concern, except ourselves.

The good Bishop surely never intended this. He was too warm a friend, too zealous a patriot, and too good a Christian, to be capable of such a thought. He was not aware of the consequences of his system, and therefore they ought not to be imputed to him; but we must impute them to the system itself. It stifles every generous and social principle. (EIP VI, v [B 477])

There is more here to Reid’s willingness to absolve Berkeley than simple affection for the bishop or even a vain attempt to assuage his own sense of guilt. As we will see, one of Reid’s favorite arguments consists of pointing out the hypocritical character of skeptical idealists such as the “hard” Hume. They do not practice what they preach, and this suggests to Reid that they do not – because they cannot – truly doubt the existence of an external world perceived via their senses. Reid thus implies, should these idealist
philosophers recognize their own hypocrisy, that they would decry such idealism as absurd, even as Reid himself did.

What Reid finds so objectionable in Hume’s conclusion is his denial of the existence of any genuine moral quality in human actions. If we have knowledge only of ideas in the mind and not of external objects or actions, then moral judgment likewise consists only of these psychologically-isolated ideas. This, for Reid, makes for no real judgment but only subjective feeling. Reid has in mind here the section of the Treatise in which Hume asks whether morality can be validly referred to as an object of reason (III, 1, i). Hume’s conclusion is that it cannot:

[The moral sense of approbation or disapprobation] lies in yourself, not in the object. So that when you pronounce any action or character to be vicious, you mean nothing, but that from the constitution of your nature you have a feeling or sentiment of blame from the contemplation of it. Vice and virtue, therefore, may be compar’d to sounds, colours, heat and cold, which, according to modern philosophy, are not qualities in objects, but perceptions in the mind.26

For Reid, Hume’s denial here of any rationality to moral judgment results in an arbitrary, even anarchic, morality, dependent as that judgment is solely upon the structure of each individual human mind – in other words, upon one’s subjective whim:

If what we call moral judgment be no real judgment, but merely a feeling, it follows, that the principles of morals, which we have been taught to consider as an immutable law to all intelligent beings, have no other foundation but an arbitrary structure and fabric in the constitution of the human mind: so that, by a change in our structure, what is immoral might become moral, virtue might be turned into vice, and vice into virtue. And beings of a different structure, according to the variety of their feelings, may have different, nay opposite measures of moral good and evil. (EAP V, vii [MIT 480]; emphasis in original)27

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27 Considering the centrality of this moral issue for Reid’s critique of idealism, it is important to note that this chapter of Reid’s Essays on the Active Powers was the publication of a much earlier paper given to an influential reading group during Reid’s years as a professor at Aberdeen, prior even to the publication of the Inquiry in 1764. Struggles with the moral implications of idealism thus appear to have
This same eschewal of relativistic subjectivism, mirroring as it does inductivism’s general denouncement of speculation, highlights what Reid understands to be the practical – and thus crucial – goal of human knowing: right human action. The overarching trajectory of his two *Essays*, originally intended to be one large volume, showcases this point. Human knowledge, acquired via the senses and digested by reason, supplies the material and the logic by which humans make and act upon moral judgments. If this knowledge has no legitimate connection to the objects of sense with which we supposedly interact and upon which we form such moral judgments, then these judgments are nothing but arbitrary decisions of the human will. Right and wrong, as defined within such an epistemology, become mere fabrications of multitudinous subjectivities, and we are left without any actual knowledge concerning how to act, nor any reason why we *should* act in the first place.

*Idealism’s Analogy to Immediate Causation is Without Evidence*

Driven by this concern to protect moral and social action, Reid’s rejection of the Way of Ideas focuses on what he deems an unsubstantiated and unnecessary assumption about causation concerning how we come to know. Reid argues that philosophers in their attempt to solve the mind-body problem take a wrong turn when they assume that all sensory knowledge comes via the impression of images or ideas upon the mind, what S. A. Grave calls “the principle of cognitive contact.”

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made upon them by contiguous bodies; so the mind is made to think and to perceive by some impression made upon it, or some impulse given to it by contiguous objects” (EIP II, iv [B 88]). Thus by analogy to cause and effect among bodies, idealists understand the perception of external objects as consisting in the mediation of those objects by mental images which are located in the brain. Reid, therefore, interprets the Way of Ideas as suggesting that these images somehow impress themselves upon the mind, making cognitive contact with it “immediately,” with the result that we perceive actual external objects only “mediately” – that is, through the mediation of their respective images (EIP II, iv [B 90]).

Hence, according to the logic laid out by Hume, we do not really perceive the external object at all, only its mental image. We know only an idea, and this idea may or may not be an accurate representation of anything external to us. We are left then to wonder about the dependability of our knowing faculties. Do they actually inform us of what we, commonsensically of course, think they inform us? The Way of Ideas, that philosophy originally intended by Descartes to deliver us from skepticism, leads, in Reid’s interpretation of Hume, only deeper into skepticism’s trenches (EIP VI, iii [B 446]). This, Reid suggests, should have been expected. Philosophers, in their natural yet inexhaustible desire to know the cause of perception, sought to explain the interworking of the mind and body by rash recourse to an analogy drawn from the interaction of two or

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29 In other words, Reid understands idealism to be arguing for three participants in perception: the subject, the object, and the mental image (or, in illustration, the human mind, the physical apple, and the mental baseball card image of that apple). The mental image, according to the principle of cognitive contact, is the only thing in immediate contact with the perceiving subject. That image thus serves in a mediating position to the human mind. That is, the mental baseball card mediates knowledge of the physical apple. What this suggests to Reid (in agreement with the skeptic) is that we only truly know that mental image, not the actual external object, and so we are always open to the skeptical question concerning whether what we perceive is what is actually external to us. We may think we see an apple before us, but how do we know that it is not really an elephant?
more bodies. Such analogical reasoning, while useful alongside more direct evidence, is notoriously weak, and it only gets weaker when the objects compared are so unalike as mind and body (EIP I, iv [B 54]).

Unfortunately, as Reid sees it, the idealists have provided no such direct evidence to support the adoption of the principle of cognitive contact, nor have they offered any good reason to accept the principle on its own merit. “It is a fundamental principle of the ideal system,” Reid informs us,

That every object of thought must be an impression, or an idea, that is, a faint copy of some preceding impression. This is a principle so commonly received, that [Hume], although his whole system is built upon it, never offers the least proof of it. It is upon this principle, as a fixed point, that he erects his metaphysical engines, to overturn heaven and earth, body and spirit. And indeed, in my apprehension, it is altogether sufficient for the purpose. For if impressions and ideas are the only objects of thought, then heaven and earth, body and spirit, and every thing you please, must signify only impressions and ideas, or they must be words without any meaning.

It seems, therefore, that this notion, however strange, is closely connected with the received doctrine of ideas, and we must either admit the conclusion, or call in question the premises. (IHM II, vi [B 33])

The analogy standing at the foundation of the Way of Ideas is, in other words, purely speculative. It is a prime example of how the deductive method, dependent as it is upon the formation of unsubstantiated theories, can err. Neither Descartes nor any other

30 Reid’s appeal here to an abuse of language echoes a similar complaint he raises against the idealists, one which helps illuminate what he will come to call common sense. In a moment of charitableness, Reid wonders whether he could be misreading the situation. Does his interpretation of ideas and impressions in this literalistic sense do justice to what is intended? Could the use of “idea” and “impression” in the fashion common to the Way of Ideas not instead be a case of miscommunication in which the idealists have deluded themselves into thinking that they have discovered something about human knowing which, in reality, few (if any) of the vulgar masses have actually doubted? Reid concludes that even if he is misinterpreting the idealist philosophy, the fault remains with the idealists whose use of language is both presumptuous and misleading. The burden of proof lies then on the philosophers, for they are swimming against the entire stream of common sense. (See IHM II, viii [B39]; EIP I, v [B 56])

31 Reid does not take this accusation lightly. He responds to all the arguments given in support of the principle of cognitive contact with which he is familiar and concludes even still that the principle is baseless. “Thus I have considered every argument I have found advanced to prove the existence of ideas, or images of external, in the mind. And if no better arguments can be found, I cannot help thinking, that the
idealist philosopher provides evidential proof that perception works analogously to what we know about immediate causation between two bodies. Barring a discovery which proves that the mind does perceive in this way, the analogy must be scrapped and a different answer to the question of how we come to know via the senses drafted in its place – one, Reid insists, that does fit what evidence we do have.

*We Cannot Know How Our Minds Come to Know*

The answer Reid has in mind, however, is a surprising one for he does not offer another solution to the problem, one which would replace the idealist hypothesis that what we know are only ideas in the mind. Instead, he argues that the very attempt to know how knowledge in the mind is achieved via sensory perception is a dead end – or, at least, a dark abyss. While we all share “an eager desire to find out connection in things” (IHM II, ix [B 41]), philosophers have pushed the concept of causation beyond the human means of discovery. Not only has the Way of Ideas employed a remarkably misleading analogy to drive its theory of human cognition, in doing so that philosophy has sought to answer a question which we are constitutionally incapable of answering.

Throughout his works we find Reid returning to this point. As with the natural sciences, so with the science of the mind: The quest to discover efficient causes always takes the same course according to the proper application of inductive methods. From the evidence given by particulars, we reason to those general phenomena and natural laws which best explain the evidence. Reid views this process, however, as an infinite regress – our line of discoveries will continue until we reach the ultimate cause, God. But, there

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whole history of philosophy has never furnished an instance of an opinion so unanimously entertained by Philosophers upon so slight grounds” (EIP II, xiv [B 183-4]).
are plenty of steps along the way which we are not able to take, plenty of causes we are not capable of inducing. Consequently, Reid instructs us, “[When] we have arrived at the most general phænomena we can reach, there we must stop” (IHM VI, xiii [132]).

For Reid, this humility about what science can discover bespeaks a necessary frame of mind for any careful scientist who seeks truth above conjecture, a frame of mind not surprisingly missing from the philosophers of idealism who attempt the impossible, that is, to explain fully the causes behind perception.

[In] the operations of the mind, as well as in those of bodies, we must often be satisfied with knowing, that certain things are connected, and invariably follow one another, without being able to discover the chain that goes between them. It is to such connections that we give the name of laws of nature; and when we say that one thing produces another by a law of nature, this signifies no more, but that one thing, which we call in popular language the cause, is constantly and invariably followed by another, which we call the effect; and that we know not how they are connected. (IHM VI, xii [121-2]; emphasis in original)

As mentioned above, this inability to know how the mind perceives external objects beyond what we can explain at the simple anatomical level Reid chalks up to how we are made. More precisely, the question about perception raised by the Way of Ideas is a question about why we were made the way we are. This Reid deems fundamentally a question of divine purpose, the answer to which humans, being God’s creatures, are not entitled. Only in light of this appeal to the mystery of the divine will can we then understand what Reid means by his otherwise obtuse, yet often repeated, insistence that

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32 Reid’s favorite example is the law of gravitation: “If it is asked, Why such a body gravitates towards the earth? all the answer that can be given is, Because all bodies gravitate towards the earth. This is resolving a particular phænomenon into a general one. If it should again be asked, Why do all bodies gravitate towards the earth? we can give no other solution of this phænomenon, but that all bodies whatsoever gravitate towards each other. This is resolving a general phænomenon into a more general one. If it should be asked, Why all bodies gravitate to one another? we cannot tell; but if we could tell, it could only be by resolving this universal gravitation of bodies into some other phænomenon still more general, and of which the gravitation of all bodies is a particular instance. The most general phænomena we can reach, are what we call laws of nature” (IHM VI, xiii [132]; emphasis in original).
there is no good (natural) reason why ears do not see or noses hear or eyes taste. Our senses respond to stimuli in the fashion that they do precisely because God made them that way. He could easily have made our eyes taste, should he have desired to do so, but he did not, and that is the extent of the logic of his design to which we are privy (IHM VI, xxi [176]).

The constructive argument Reid makes here is, to borrow from Nicholas Wolterstorff, a metaphilosophical one. Reid does not provide an alternative, though parallel, solution to how we come to perceive and thus to know; he instead recasts the bounds and goals of the philosophical enterprise, including, most notably, the laying out of that first principle or law of nature which grants and determines all philosophical thinking.

It is...a law of our nature, that we perceive not external objects, unless certain impressions be made by the object upon the organ, and by means of the organ upon the nerves and brain. But of the nature of those impressions we are perfectly ignorant; and though they are conjoined with perception by the will of our Maker, yet it does not appear that they have any necessary connection with it in their own nature, far less that they can be the proper efficient cause of it. We perceive, because God has given us the power of perceiving, and not because we have impressions from objects. We perceive nothing without those impressions, because our Maker has limited and circumscribed our powers of perception, by such

Though Reid appears to favor the idea that there does indeed lie in God’s will some reasonable connection between our sense organs and what they actually sense, he is willing to grant that the connection could be arbitrary. “Experience teaches us, that certain impressions upon the body are constantly followed by certain sensations of the mind; and that, on the other hand, certain determinations of the mind are constantly followed by certain motions in the body: but we see not the chain that ties these things together. Who knows but their connection may be arbitrary, and owing to the will of our maker? Perhaps the same sensations might have been connected with other impressions, or other bodily organs. Perhaps we might have been so made, as to taste with our fingers, to smell with our ears, and to hear by the nose. Perhaps we might have been so made, as to have all the sensations and perceptions which we have, without any impression made upon our bodily organs at all” (IHM VI, xxi [176]). Not only do we not know how the collection of sound waves in the ear causes sensation in the mind, we are not capable of such knowledge. What is more, there may not even be any knowledge to know besides what we can say about divine design, that God just made it that way.

laws of Nature as to his wisdom seemed meet, and such as suited our rank in his creation. (EIP II, iv [B 95])

Reid thus rejects the “spirit of modern philosophy” which grants no first principles but “that the thoughts and operations of our own minds, of which we are conscious, are self-evidently true.” If this alone is our starting point, then we are doomed to suffer an inescapable skepticism. “I endeavored to show,” Reid summarizes, “that if it be not admitted as a first principle, that our faculties are not fallacious, nothing else can be admitted” (EIP VI, vii [B 516]).

For Reid, whom we have seen finds Hume’s argument sound and its conclusion frightening, only one solution remains if we are to grant idealism’s logic and not its consequences: We must admit as a first principle the trustworthiness of our senses. Reid acknowledges, of course, that being a first principle, this trustworthiness is impossible to prove demonstrably (EIP VI, vii [B 516]), but that does not mean that we have no support for it. In fact, we have what can be seen as historically one of the strongest reasons for trusting in our senses – that all of us, from the idealist skeptic to the unlearned infant, do indeed trust in them. This is the common, ageless sense of all humankind.

If there are certain principles, as I think there are, which the constitution of our nature leads us to believe, and which we are under a necessity to take for granted in the common concerns of life, without being able to give a reason for them; these are what we call the principles of common sense; and what is manifestly contrary to them, is what we call absurd. (IHM II, vi [B 33])

However, we should not mistake these principles of common sense for the kind of first principles upon which we reason to further knowledge (IHM V, vii [B 72]). The principles of common sense instead provide the “background and substratum” for our

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35 By “necessity” Reid means both a practical or psychological necessity as well as a logical necessity, expressed pointedly in his belief that our doubting of such principles requires that we already assume them.
beliefs, not their basis. This notion of “taking for granted,” therefore, lies at the heart of what Reid means by common sense. It is that prerequisite trust we place in our senses without which we cannot interact with others or our environment.

*We Must Accept the Darkness and Trust Our Senses*

We have already heard Reid refer to those principles of common sense which we take for granted as impossible to prove. Reid goes on to define first principles in general, of which the principles of common sense are a kind, as being

no sooner understood than they are believed. The judgment follows the apprehension of them necessarily, and both are equally the work of nature, and the result of our original powers. There is no searching for evidence, no weighing of arguments; the proposition is not deduced or inferred from another; it has the light of truth in itself, and has no occasion to borrow it from another. (EIP VI, iv [B 452-3])

It is, in fact, the nature of first principles to be “self-evident,” and Reid can think of nobody who denies them, at least not in actual practice. So, why does Reid dedicate such an extensive amount of time, particularly in his *Essays on the Intellectual Powers*, to a discussion of the precise nature of first principles, their acceptance in everyday life as well as in contemporary philosophy, and their intimate connection to common sense? Why the remedial lesson about principles that nobody, Reid thinks, actually denies?

Because those beholden to the Way of Ideas actually do claim to deny them – or at least they claim to deny those principles of common sense which Reid argues make all life and thinking possible. This, at least, is what Reid argues idealists do with their

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36 Ibid., 226. This entire chapter in Wolterstorff’s commentary on Reid is a helpful guide through what the former legitimately calls not only a “confusing” but a “confused” discussion of common sense. Reid often vacillates between describing the principles of common sense as those first principles shared by all humanity and describing them as “what we all do and must take for granted in our lives in the everyday.” Ibid., 225. Wolterstorff argues rather convincingly that the latter, with its focus on trusting our senses, takes priority and thus determines how we should interpret (or, rather, qualify) the former.

37 See Essay VI of EIP, especially Chapters ii-viii.
skeptical approach to our faculties of sense and their dependability for providing knowledge of externals.

The intention of Nature in the powers which we call the external senses, is evident. They are intended to give us that information of external objects which the supreme Being saw to be proper for us in our present state; and they give to all mankind the information necessary for life, without reasoning, without any art or investigation on our part.

The most uninstructed peasant has as distinct a conception, and as firm a belief of the immediate object of his senses, as the greatest Philosopher; and with this he rests satisfied, giving himself no concern how he came by this conception and belief. But the Philosopher is impatient to know how his conception of external objects, and his belief of their existence, is produced. This, I am afraid, is hid in impenetrable darkness. But where there is no knowledge, there is the more room for conjecture; and of this Philosophers have always been very liberal. (EIP II, xx [B 226])

Darkness. Impenetrable darkness. It is not that we trust our faculties of sense out of a lazy ignorance or even as a preliminary to future discovery. Nor is it grounded in a hope that we might be able to reason, in some Cartesian fashion, to the dependability of our senses. “Nothing appears more evident to our reason,” Reid confesses, “than that there must be an efficient cause of every change that happens in nature. But when I attempt to comprehend the manner in which an efficient cause operates, either upon body or upon mind, there is a darkness which my faculties are not able to penetrate” (EAP I, vii [MIT 52]).

We trust because we cannot fully explain how perception works. But, more than that, we trust because we have no other choice in life. If we are to live, to think, to judge, to interact, we must take for granted that our senses speak the truth. After all, God gave us these faculties, and if he gave them to deceive us, there is nothing we can do about it.

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38 Reid points out that the idealist distrust in the senses is itself the result of an arbitrary decision. Why choose to doubt the senses? Why not doubt our reasoning faculty or even consciousness itself? “Thus the faculties of consciousness, of memory, of external sense, and of reason, are all equally the gifts of Nature. No good reason can be assigned for receiving the testimony of one of them, which is not equal force with regard to the others. The greatest Sceptics admit the testimony of consciousness, and allow, that what it testifies is to be held as a first principle. If therefore they reject the immediate testimony of sense, or of memory, they are guilty of an inconsistency” (EIP VI, iv [B 463]). Cf. IHM I, iii [B 17]; EIP VI, v [B 470-1, 480-3]).
(IHM V, vii [B 72]). How, even, would we know that he did? We would not know, precisely because we cannot know. There is “a deep and dark gulf,” Reid says, that separates the mind from the body – a chasm “which our understanding cannot pass” (IHM VI, xxi [B 176]).

In modern epistemology’s quest for the certainty of knowledge, the idealists sought to penetrate this darkness in search of some explanatory theory that what they perceived with their senses was not a figment of their own imaginations or an illusion implanted in their minds. What they found, however, was a profound mystery, which even the most sophisticated theory about mental impressions and ideas could not explain with any sort of evidential proof.39 It is thus no surprise that an empiricist like Hume could come along and knock down the house of cards that was the idealist quest for certainty. What began as an attempt to reason oneself out of skepticism’s grasp ironically resulted in a tragic collapse back into its arms.

By way of conclusion, let us return to Reid’s understanding of inductive reasoning, which – not surprisingly – is also a clear avenue into his own discussion of certainty, and see how it meshes with his notion of epistemological darkness. Despite Reid’s often-staunch defense of the certain knowledge inductive reasoning provides over and against the conjectures of philosophers, he does not believe inductive reasoning to be infallible. On the contrary, he argues that because the facts of induction are only reduced to general rules, we cannot prove them with demonstrative certainty – that is, with the certainty of proofs deduced from necessary premises. “It is possible,” Reid acknowledges, “that, after many experiments made with care, our expectation may be frustrated in a succeeding one, by the variation of some circumstance that has not, or

39 I am borrowing the description of “mystery” from Wolterstorff, Thomas Reid, 213-4.
perhaps could not be observed” (EIP VI, iv [B 455-6]). Induction consequently provides us “only that kind of evidence which Philosophers call probable” (EIP VII, iii [B 562]). Peter Anstey, on this account, deems Reid an early inductive fallibilist who, while a critic of the “hard” Hume, often resonates with his softer side, even (surprisingly!) on the key issue of inductive reasoning.\(^\text{40}\)

That being said, however, Reid’s inductive fallibilism does not lead him to conclude that there is no certainty to be had, if we define the evidentiary proof providing such certainty in terms of what is thereby needed for responsible action. In other words, what Reid argues for is a \textit{certainty of practice}, as opposed to speculative or total certainty. Practical certainty here speaks to that proof which is needed in order to act with conviction. Take, for instance, the following telling statement by Reid:

[The] man who makes the best use he can of the faculties which God has given him, without thinking them more perfect than they really are, may have all the belief that is necessary in the conduct of life, and all that is necessary to his acceptance with his Maker. (EIP VII, iv [B 563-4])\(^\text{41}\)

Here again Reid makes implicit reference to our epistemological darkness, which he immediately follows with an emphasis on our general fallibility as reasoning beings:

\(^{40}\) Anstey, “Thomas Reid and the Justification of Induction,” 80.

\(^{41}\) As noted above, however, the evidence leading to such certainty will be probable, not demonstrative, though for Reid this distinction does not make that evidence or reasoning any less certain. In her \textit{Scepticism and Reasonable Doubt}, Jamie Ferreira argues that Reid can claim that practical certainty is not only irresistible but also legitimate because he views cumulative evidence to be convergent rather than merely additive, a point expressed in his illustration of multiple strands of a thin fiber twisted together: “The rope has strength more than sufficient to bear the stress laid upon it, though no one of the filaments of which it is composed would be sufficient for that purpose” (EIP VII, iii [B 556]). For Ferreira, Reid here establishes a third category between demonstration and probability, one that does provide a certainty equal in effect to demonstration but that is ultimately of a different kind of reasoning altogether. It is a kind of reasoning that is best defined in terms of what Ferreira calls “a critical threshold”: “When the critical threshold is reached…doubt vanishes. Belief has degrees, confidence grows – the explosive material gets hotter and the rope gets stronger. But at the point at which ‘all doubt vanishes’ the assurance can be equal, and…the claim that it is ‘absurd’ to doubt is a claim that the evidence of demonstration is surplus and cannot be the standard with respect to which other cases are judged to ‘lack’ something they should have. It is a claim, therefore, that the legitimacy of that assurance can be equal.” M. Jaime Ferreira, \textit{Scepticism and Reasonable Doubt: The British Naturalist Tradition in Wilkins, Hume, Reid and Newman} (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986), 70-7.
It is granted then, that human judgments ought always to be formed with an humble sense of our fallibility in judging. This is all that can be inferred by the rules of logic from our being fallible. And if this be all that is meant by our knowledge degenerating into probability, I know no person of a different opinion. (EIP VII, iv [B 564])

The humility and recognition of our natural limitations on display here is strikingly at odds with the highly optimistic role assigned to reason by B. B. Warfield in our earlier discussion of Christian apologetics and the Princeton theology. There I argued that the Princetonians appropriated an attenuated form of Common Sense Realism in an attempt to procure a philosophy of knowledge with which they could claim that biblical propositions communicate divinely revealed truth in a form that is discoverable by scientific (i.e., inductive) methods and thus susceptible to the same rules and claims of certainty applied to all other scientific evidence. This attempt, however, appears to betray a crucial assumption shared by the Princetonians and the idealists, one that Reid denies outright: the assumption that human reason has no barrier to what it can come to know (i.e., our earlier P₀).

Reid’s notion of our epistemological darkness and the central role it plays in his philosophy thus give the lie to Princeton’s appropriation of the Scottish philosophy. Reidian Common Sense was incapable of providing the type of certainty which Warfield and earlier Princetonians sought. They proceed from two incompatible assumptions that ultimately lead to two quite different conclusions. Reid declined to offer a system that would attack skepticism head-on and thereby seek to provide a rationale for achieving certainty of knowledge (and “of faith”) in the face of the skeptic’s (or “liberal’s”) doubt concerning the source of knowledge and the means of attaining it. He instead undermined skepticism as a valid position itself with an insistence that we must trust what our senses
tell us about the external world. This he did on account of his recognition that not only do we all already do so, but that we cannot help but do so. We cannot, at least not for any reasonable amount of time, *not* trust our senses, and this because to do so would be to deny not only all reasonable action but also the necessity of any action whatsoever. We would, in other words, become solipsistic monads, unconscious and uncaring of the necessary affairs of life. To locate the goal of philosophy not in the defeat of skepticism, as both the Way of Ideas and the Princetonians did, but in the gaining and acceptance of that knowledge necessary for practical action, takes the focus off of obtaining certainty and places it on achieving that understanding necessary for living well. But, that is a place quite different from that for which the Scottish philosophy was appropriated by nineteenth- and twentieth-century American evangelicalism. It is also a way of looking at the world that, by way of contrast, helps us to understand why evangelicals have fought so hard against a rising consciousness of their own inescapable historicity.
CHAPTER 5
GAINING CONSCIOUSNESS

A theology based on religious experience is subjectivity posing as Christianity. Both the older Liberalism and the newer existential theologies are basically pietistic, experience theologies. Their concern is with man’s self-understanding and current situation in life, not with the objective biblical message.

Clark Pinnock, Biblical Revelation (1971)

Sooner or later we will have to join modern experience.

Clark Pinnock, “Evangelical Theologians Facing the Future” (1998)\(^1\)

When those charged with leading American evangelicalism beyond its perilous “fork in the road” – as Jay Grimstead, executive director of the still fledgling International Council on Biblical Inerrancy, put it in an early call to arms\(^2\) – took stock of the religious landscape in the late 1970s, they troubled over the curious “metamorphosis” of certain theologians once thought stalwart defenders of the faith. Clark Pinnock, a Canadian Baptist from Toronto, was one of those troubling cases.\(^3\)


\(^3\) “Input Sheet Responses,” Records of the International Council on Biblical Inerrancy, Box 2, “Statement of Purpose: Final Draft,” Archives, Dallas Theological Seminary. The question was originally
Fresh out of doctoral work, Pinnock was brought to New Orleans Baptist Seminary in 1965 to shore up defenses against what he judged to be the single cause of “the pitiful theological anarchy in our time,” an infectious theological modernism then threatening to make inroads into the Southern Baptist Convention.\(^4\) Harold Lindsell, in a review of Pinnock’s first major work on the scripture doctrine, *Biblical Revelation* (1971), called it “one of the most important contributions to the discussion of inerrancy in this century.” By it Pinnock proved that inerrantists could marshal a “literate, scholarly, and provocative” case.\(^5\) When Lindsell only a few years down the road sounded the trumpets calling the faithful to do battle for the Bible, he was sure he could count on young Clark to prove a staunch ally.\(^6\) And, as if to boost his status as conservative evangelicalism’s new poster boy, Pinnock spent not a few summers during the sixties sitting at the feet of Francis Schaeffer, soaking in the guru’s captivating blend of broad-brush history and culturally relevant apologetics. *Set Forth Your Case* (1967), Pinnock’s

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\(^4\) Clark Pinnock, *A New Reformation: A Challenge to Southern Baptists* (Tigerville, SC: Jewel Books, 1968), 6. In this series of talks given at the 1968 Southern Baptist Preachers Conference in Houston, Pinnock challenged all present to curb the jettisoning of biblical authority within their churches and centers of education. This was hardly Pinnock’s first foray into the emerging battles for the Bible, however. For instance, two years earlier he gave the Tyndale lectures at Cambridge in which he offered a defense of biblical infallibility firmly entrenched in the Reformed scholasticism of Old School Princeton. The lectures were subsequently published as *A Defense of Biblical Infallibility* (Philadelphia, PA: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1967).

\(^5\) Harold Lindsell, “New Brief for Inerrancy,” *Christianity Today* 16, no. 5 (Dec 3, 1971): 22-3. Of course, Pinnock’s early inerrantist orthodoxy can be illustrated from the opposite direction. In another review of *Biblical Revelation*, Dallas Roark criticizes Pinnock’s reduction of the inerrancy debate and all of modern theology to an either/or binary, is disturbed by a string of slanderous, self-serving generalizations, and wonders if Pinnock had actually read Bultmann’s *Theology of the New Testament* or Kierkegaard’s *Philosophical Fragments*. In contrast to Lindsell, Roark concludes that *Biblical Revelation* is simply Old Princeton’s doctrine warmed-over and therefore of limited use. Dallas M. Roark, “Review of *Biblical Revelation*,” *Southwestern Journal of Theology* 15, no. 1 (Fall 1972): 105-6.

own early work in empiricist apologetics, was not only singularly dedicated to Schaeffer, but in many ways an unapologetic rehashing of what he had learned at L’Abri.\(^7\)

In short, Clark Pinnock was everything conservative evangelicals could have hoped for in the turbulent sixties and seventies. He had studied New Testament, the queen of the evangelical theological sciences, at the University of Manchester under the direction of F. F. Bruce, a topflight scholar who had already in those early years gained the respect of American evangelicals for his faithful defense of the Bible. At Manchester, Pinnock wrote a dissertation, not insignificantly, on the Holy Spirit in the letters of Paul. There he defended the apostle against nineteenth- and twentieth-century attempts to read him primarily as a product of his historical and cultural milieu, and not of the Hebrew scriptures themselves or the risen messiah whom they promised and whom Paul had personally witnessed.\(^8\) Here was a bright and passionate intellectual who had proven himself capable and willing to take up the charge to defend a beleaguered evangelicalism against the onslaughts of secularism and relativism, and for nearly a decade he did so quite ably and energetically.\(^9\) But, even in those early years, Pinnock showed signs that

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\(^7\) Pinnock, *Set Forth Your Case*, op. cit. From theme to structure to borrowed token phrases, *Set Forth Your Case* reads like an early script for Schaeffer’s *Escape from Reason* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1968) and *The God Who Is There: Speaking Historic Christianity into the Twentieth Century* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1968).


he had already begun to grow uneasy with this scriptural militancy, indebted as it was to a cold rationalism he would eventually find suffocating.

And so, Pinnock came to find himself throughout the seventies slowly drifting away from the very people and principles he once sought to protect. In place of his past Princetonian brand of inerrancy and the efforts of old allies like Lindsell, Pinnock began to offer a simpler kind of biblicism, one that seeks, as he would put it much later, “not to force the Bible onto a Procrustean bed of extra-scriptural assumptions about authority and perfection but to let it speak as it wants to.” Pinnock’s was a pilgrimage reflected in his eventual movement away from conservative institutions of higher learning. By the time he arrived at Ontario’s McMaster Divinity College in 1977, having paused along the way at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School in Deerfield, Illinois, and the University of British Columbia’s Regent College, Pinnock’s hometown school had long been tarred as a liberal Baptist institution, a stigma of which he was not unaware.

Though Pinnock always insisted on his evangelical orthodoxy, seeing himself as something of an outsider at McMaster, there was no downplaying how far he had moved on any number of evangelical theological touchstones, not the least being inerrancy. His new simpler biblicism continued to trust the Bible “without reservation, letting it teach

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11 Soon after his tenure in New Orleans, Pinnock moved north in 1969 to Trinity where he enjoyed five remarkably productive years before heading west to Regent in 1974. For a detailed though highly theologically focused account of Pinnock’s academic career, see Barry L. Callen, Clark H. Pinnock: Journey Toward Renewal (Nappanee, IN: Evangel, 2000), esp. 41-85.

12 See Pinnock’s “The Modernist Impulse at McMaster University, 1887-1927,” in Baptists in Canada: Search for Identity Amidst Diversity, ed. Jarold K. Zeman (Burlington, Ontario: G. R. Welch, 1980). As evident in this essay, which took a critical stance toward McMaster’s “modernist impulse,” Pinnock was something of the token evangelical at the school. This was a badge he seemed determined, though not necessarily happy, to own. See, for instance, his inaugural lecture at McMaster, later published in Christianity Today as “An Evangelical Theology: Conservative and Contemporary,” Christianity Today (January 5, 1979): 23-9.
and shape us,”¹³ but it was less concerned with hard rational foundations than with encouraging a vibrant spirituality focused on presenting the grand story of God’s saving love.¹⁴ To many within the evangelical establishment, such a pious softening was tantamount to giving up the faith, and not a few wondered how Pinnock had started down this proverbial “slippery slope” and how far he would go. He was considered one of those “lapsed” evangelicals who are mourned as sad consequences of either “too much” or “the wrong sort of” education (usually of the historical-critical variety), and whose nightmarish stories are told to warn the curious and naïve against the all too real temptations of academia, liberalism, and postmodernism. This, no doubt, was one of the reasons the ICBI wanted to investigate his metamorphosis from champion of inerrancy to purveyor of peace at the cost of truth.

Pinnock was an enigma. Reflecting in the late 1980s on his beloved professor’s about-face, Paige Patterson, onetime president of the Southern Baptist Convention and now of its seminary in Fort Worth, could only describe him as a wishy-washy bundle of contradictions who had “forsaken the prophetic pulpit of Luther for the indecisive desk of Erasmus and the certainty of Paul for the vacillation of the Athenians who must always ‘hear some new thing.’”¹⁵ Adrian Rogers, the famed preacher at Bellevue Baptist Church in Memphis and captain of the fundamentalist takeover of the SBC during the 1970s and ’80s, simply called Pinnock’s theological odyssey “curious” and “sad.”¹⁶ Even as late as the turn of the century, one could still hear the same bewildered complaint. Timothy

George, reflecting for *Christianity Today* in 1998 on the future of evangelical theology, chastised Pinnock for treating the discipline like a Wednesday night potluck where innovation and the playing out of quixotic fancies were the name of the game.¹⁷ And yet, while the precise reason for his various capitulations remained a mystery, Pinnock’s basic error was well known. As Patterson put it in 1987, Pinnock had given up the eternal truth of the gospel for the false promise of a fickle peace. It was a weak-kneed concession Pinnock himself had pilloried as a young duck, and now he found those old complaints thrown back in his face.¹⁸

This is not to say that no attempts have been made to explain Pinnock’s theological and cultural pilgrimage. In fact, lying behind all of these criticisms from the right is a general agreement that Pinnock took the liberal – or, more accurately, neoorthodox – bait. The real question was not what Pinnock had done, but why he had done it. What led, if not enabled, him to change his mind so drastically? What was his impetus, his inspiration, his problem? To put it quite plainly, why would a smart, pious,

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¹⁷ Timothy George, “A Theology to Die For,” *Christianity Today* 42, no. 2 (February 9, 1998), 49. Interestingly, George took a softer hand to Pinnock only two years later, when the former praised this “theological maverick” (as even Pinnock had describe himself on occasion) for his “willingness to question and re-examine one’s theology,” drawing comparisons to Luther, Zwingli, Cranmer, and Barth. That being said, George made certain to emphasize that sometimes there can be too much of a good thing, and in Pinnock’s case, believed his willingness to change had in the end proven detrimental and so warranted more accurate comparisons to the chameleonic John Smyth and the archliberal Friedrich Schleiermacher. Of course, George held out hope that, unlike Smyth and Schleiermacher, Pinnock would see the error of his ways and return home. Timothy George, “Foreword,” in *Reconstructing Theology: A Critical Assessment of the Theology of Clark Pinnock*, eds. Tony Gray and Christopher Sinkinson (Waynesboro, GA: Paternoster, 2000), viii.

¹⁸ Patterson, “RESPONSE,” 86. Patterson offered this diagnosis in response to a talk on inerrancy that Pinnock gave to Southern Baptists in 1987. The elder statesman had offered the same warning to largely the same audience twenty years earlier: “Peace and tranquility are wonderful blessings in a church. It is difficult to accomplish things for God without them. But peace at any price is not good. Peace that involves us in compromise is sinful.” Pinnock, *A New Reformation*, 3.
and comfortable – not to mention rationally certain – inerrantist trade all of that in for, as the same Adrian Rogers from above put it, “a mess of existential pottage”?¹⁹

Ray Roennfeldt divides the various attempts to answer this question and so understand Pinnock’s pilgrimage into three broad categories. They focus either, but not necessarily exclusively, on his psychological state, his reexamination of the biblical evidence, or the natural development of his earlier positions.²⁰ For instance, with regard to the psychological, it is sometimes suggested that Pinnock bore a predilection to such inconstancy²¹ or a nervous, irresponsible energy that caused him to publish “too quickly a debatable viewpoint without developing a fully adequate basis for that position.”²² Often these psychological explanations came coupled with attempts to trace Pinnock’s pilgrimage along some sort of theological trajectory, with more or less success.

One such trajectory highlights Pinnock’s own admission to having been surprised on occasion by the biblical text. Time and again we hear him claiming that when he did manage to approach scripture honestly, open to what it had to say and not what some theological grid forced it to say, then the text would often lend itself to an interpretation different from what he had thought previously. We might say that this looks more like a “do-over” than a trajectory. Whatever the case, this is how Pinnock himself describes his movement away from a strict inerrantist position to a much more flexible one in his 1984 alternative to the Chicago Statement, *The Scripture Principle*. In taking another look at

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¹⁹ Rogers, “RESPONSE,” 104.
²¹ This is effectively Patterson’s conclusion above. Patterson, “RESPONSE,” 93.
the biblical evidence, he simply did not see how it could support some of his earlier positions nor, needless to say, some of those of the ICBI.\textsuperscript{23}

Rex Koivisto argues, however, that at the core of Pinnock’s reexamination of the evidence lies an important constancy which suggests his shift might better be explained not in terms of a radical reversal but of a natural development driven by a more fundamental principle. At issue, Koivisto explains, is Pinnock’s emphasis on the biblical author’s intention.\textsuperscript{24} When Pinnock changes his interpretation of a text, even radically, he does so out of a concern to let the author’s meaning stand on its own. Koivisto is on firm ground here. Throughout his career, Pinnock relentlessly pursued what he called “the scripture principle.” At its most basic, the scripture principle could be equated with evangelicalism’s insistence upon biblical authority, but for Pinnock, such authority would prove literally meaningless if we did not know (or knew falsely) what the biblical author had intended to say. Koivisto cites an early example of this important qualification. In Pinnock’s 1966 Tyndale Lectures, he restricted the “field of infallibility” to “the intended assertions of Scripture understood in an ordinary grammatical exegesis of the text.”\textsuperscript{25}

Twenty years later and well into his theological pilgrimage, Pinnock again defined the scripture principle in relation to authorial intent, though this time with explicit regard to biblical inerrancy:

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\textsuperscript{25} Pinnock, A Defense of Biblical Infallibility, 13. See also Koivisto, “Clark Pinnock and Inerrancy,” 149.
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Inerrancy simply means that the Bible can be trusted in what it teaches and affirms. The inerrant truth of a parable is of course parabolic, and the inerrant truth of a fable is fabulous. If Matthew gives us some fictional midrash, then it is inerrant according to the demands of this genre. All this means is that inerrancy is relative to the intention of the text.\textsuperscript{26}

It is not a stretch to say that throughout his career Pinnock’s consistent and most basic complaint – whether against strict inerrancy, soteriological exclusivism, the restriction of charismatic gifts, or classical theism – could be summed up in his appeal to the biblical author’s intent.\textsuperscript{27} Pinnock’s willingness to reexamine the biblical evidence was thus driven by a more fundamental respect for what the Bible intended to say. It would then appear more accurate, as Pinnock himself maintains, to think of his theological positions as having “evolved,” not “reversed.”\textsuperscript{28}

Even so, Roennfeldt believes that there is a yet more accurate and helpful explanation of Pinnock’s pilgrimage along the lines that he experienced a gradual paradigm shift from a hard, rationalistic Calvinism during his early years to a soft, pietistic Arminianism beginning around 1971.\textsuperscript{29} This is a line taken up by Pinnock

\textsuperscript{26} Pinnock, The Scripture Principle, 78.
\textsuperscript{27} That this is indeed the case, at least with regard to inerrancy, can be seen in the previous quote’s not too subtle jab at the Evangelical Theological Society’s ousting of Robert Gundry for his interpretation of Matthew as midrashic.
\textsuperscript{29} Roennfeldt, Clark H. Pinnock on Biblical Authority, 349-61. The paradigm shift interpretation of Pinnock’s pilgrimage does significant work for Barry Callen, whose biography of Pinnock often reads like a political position piece carving out space under the evangelical umbrella for Wesleyans and other Arminian or similarly pietistic groups. (See Callen, Clark H. Pinnock, op. cit.) This is not to say that Pinnock would disapprove. Much of his own work within the Evangelical Theological Society as well as the wider evangelical world (e.g., in the Reformed/Calvinist dominated Christianity Today) had a similarly political motive. See, for instance, Clark Pinnock and Grant Osborne, “A Truce Proposal for the Tongues Controversy,” Christianity Today 16, no. 1 (October 8, 1971): 6-9; “Opening the Church to the Charismatic Dimension,” Christianity Today (June 12, 1981): 16; Flame of Love: A Theology of the Holy Spirit (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1996); “Evangelical Theology in Progress,” in Introduction to Christian Theology: Contemporary North American Perspectives, ed. Roger Badham (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1998), 75-88; “Evangelical Theologians Facing the Future,” 7-28. Pinnock’s political concerns were made explicit in the two works on Arminianism which he edited: Grace Unlimited (Minneapolis, MN: Bethany, 1975) and The Grace of God, the Will of Man: A Case for Arminianism (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1989). Much of his defense of open theism is similarly a plea to open up the evangelical
himself in the context of predestination in his 1989 essay “From Augustine to Arminius: A Pilgrimage in Theology”:

Obviously what is happening here is a paradigm shift in my biblical hermeneutics. I am in the process of learning to read the Bible from a new point of view, one that I believe is more truly evangelical and less rationalistic. Looking at it from the vantage point of God’s universal salvific will and of significant human freedom, I find that many new verses leap up from the page, while many old familiar ones take on new meaning. In the past I would slip into my reading of the Bible dark assumptions about the nature of God’s decrees and intentions. What a relief to be done with them!

Each of the above explanations of Pinnock’s theological vacillation (besides the psychological) can find some warrant here. The notion that he took a fresh look at the biblical evidence plays right alongside his desire to discern the author’s intent more accurately, while the evolution of his thought is here plainly connected to classical Arminian theology. That being said, we still have not answered the original question: Why? Even if Pinnock returned to the Bible each day earnestly in search of its authors’ intended meanings, what made him decide his original interpretation was wrong to begin with? What would ever lead him to question his tradition, to read the text differently? What, in other words, forced him to shift to a new hermeneutical paradigm, especially considering his failure to see its parallels in another evangelical tradition?

The answer? He had an experience.


30 Pinnock, “From Augustine to Arminius,” 21.
31 This is particularly clear in Pinnock’s note at this point, where he argues that had John Piper (in his The Justification of God: An Exegetical and Theological Study of Romans 9:1-23) taken care to read beyond Romans 9 and so include what Paul had to say in chapters 10-11, the former would have had to give up his “vigorous efforts to prove these dark assumptions are actually scriptural.” Pinnock, “From Augustine to Arminius,” 29 (nt. 10).
Experiencing God

One evening after church in 1967, only two years into his New Orleans post, the young Pinnock received an invitation to attend a prayer fellowship in a neighbor’s home. As Clark tells it, he and his wife, Dorothy, joined a dozen fellow church members around nine o’clock over coffee:

As the meeting began, it was obvious that God was very real and much loved by these people. Each of them would refer to things God had done for them that week, and express their hope for answers to prayer in the coming few days. These people were alive unto God, as Paul says. When we got down to praying for one another and for specific items of need, the time flew by. People were eager to pray and expressed great joy and faith in the presence of the Lord.  

Clark experienced that night the presence and power of the Holy Spirit. Here was a charismatic encounter with God of such undeniable potency that it would not only infuse and empower his spiritual life, it would likewise mold his reflection on scripture, religion, and reality in ways untold at the time:

I was touched by God that night. I glimpsed the dimension of the Spirit which the New Testament describes but is so often absent in churches today. The Bible came alive to me in this and in other respects. Being a Christian became an exciting adventure instead of a drag. I was filled with the Spirit.  

The immediate effects of this experience upon Pinnock’s thought were explicit and not very surprising. Though in important ways still a strict rationalist and inerrantist, he began in a number of early articles for Christianity Today to reconsider the traditional Reformed position on the cessation of charismatic gifts then popularized by Benjamin B.  

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32 Clark Pinnock, Three Keys to Spiritual Renewal (Minneapolis, MN: Bethany Fellowship, 1985), 51.
33 Ibid. Pinnock would point to this and other similar experiences as theologically significant as well as life-changing. See, for instance, Clark Pinnock, “Holy Spirit as a Distinct Person in the Godhead,” in Spirit and Renewal, ed. Mark Wilson (Sheffield, England: Sheffield, 1994), 38; Pinnock, Flame of Love, 240.
Warfield’s *Miracles: Yesterday and Today*. In “A Truce Proposal for the Tongues Controversy” and “The New Pentecostalism: Reflections by a Well-Wisher,” Pinnock, while admitting their susceptibility to abuse, lamented Reformed evangelicalism’s rejection of Pentecostalism’s more exuberant charismatic gifts, especially glossolalia, and called for a healing of the divide between the two groups. Later down the road, he would even go so far as to proclaim charismatic Christianity’s rediscovery of God’s outpoured Spirit the “[most] important event in modern church history.”

Less obvious at first, though immeasurably more significant in the long run, Pinnock’s experience of the dynamic life of the Spirit that night was such that he could neither bracket it out of his later interpretations of scripture nor ignore it in the evaluation and reconstruction of his theology. As a singular event, though one which reminded him of John Wesley’s own Aldersgate experience, it proved most valuable as a door for his growing appreciation of the nature and role of experience itself in the development of all human thought – an appreciation which would only be strengthened by a second life-changing event that same year.

Originally hired by New Orleans to teach New Testament, Clark found himself promoted in the fall of 1967 to Associate Professor of Theology. Barry Callen describes

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34 Warfield’s book, originally published in 1918 as *Counterfeit Miracles*, argued that the charismatic gifts attested to in the Book of Acts and certain New Testament letters – such as speaking in tongues, ecstatic prophecy, etc. – were “part of the credentials of the Apostles as the authoritative agents of God in founding the church,” and were thereby restricted to the first century. Benjamin B. Warfield, *Counterfeit Miracles* (New York, NY: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1918), 6. Eerdmans (Grand Rapids, MI) republished the book in 1953 as *Miracles: Yesterday and Today, Real and Counterfeit*.


37 Callen, *Clark H. Pinnock*, 78.
the transition as both academically fitting and politically prudent: “There was a need in that academic department, he had a growing desire to work in both theology and apologetics, and the seminary president thought that Pinnock’s potential threat to the liberalizing trends would be increased if he functioned primarily in the theological field.” Pinnock later admitted in an interview with Callen that he found the new position attractive because he believed theology held the vital distinction of being the place where “faith encounters today’s world.” He was not wrong.

Like his charismatic experience, Pinnock’s disciplinary shift to theology would have decisive consequences for his theological pilgrimage, for to encounter the world – to open oneself up to its claims about human nature, experience, and knowledge – is to be forced into a decision. Would he embrace the hold his daily experience already had upon him and so think in light of it? Or would he deny its impact upon human reasoning, especially theological reasoning, and actively pursue what his own experience of the world told him was inconsistent with reality? To the utter bewilderment of many at the time, he chose the former path, and so throughout the next three decades Pinnock came to grant an increasing amount of space within his theological imagination to concrete experience, especially of that historical consciousness which so heavily marks the modern mind.

Historical consciousness is grown (and grown into) more than it is learned. It is likewise more or less socially developed and inhabited than individually discovered and

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38 Clark Pinnock, Interview with Barry Callen, April 18, 1998, cited in Callen, Clark H. Pinnock, 49. Pinnock experienced a third life-changing event in 1967, the birth of his only child, Sarah. He rarely mentions Sarah or his wife, Dorothy, in print and does not (oddly enough) appear to attribute much of his intellectual pilgrimage to their influence. Barry Callen’s intellectual biography of Pinnock is likewise largely mute on Pinnock’s family life, outside the influence of his parents and grandparents on his childhood faith. See Callen, Clark H. Pinnock, 15-39. Concerning the year 1967, specifically, Callen mentions that Pinnock also suffered a detached retina, leaving him blind in one eye. It was a wild year! Ibid., 77.
accepted. Conscious awareness of our own inescapable location in time and space arises then as much through vulnerable encounters with other people and places, cultures and times, perspectives and beliefs, as it does through explicit philosophical analysis. This is simply to say we do not become conscious of our own historicity by reading textbooks on modern philosophy or anthropology. Rather, in a way analogous to Thomas Kuhn’s scientific revolutions, we inhabit a thought world in the midst of a paradigm shift, where past perspectives and patterns of thinking stand in fluid tension alongside those of the future. Though he would come to understand and embrace it quite fully, the rise of Clark Pinnock’s own historical consciousness was no different. It was a slow-moving and often wrenching experience that could not help but result in those tensions and inconsistencies which so often troubled and continue to trouble the evangelical world.

For a number of years, including not a few books and articles, Pinnock’s charismatic experience late that night in 1967 appears to have had little influence on his theological thought, at least with regard to any actual methodological changes. In his Tyndale Lectures, given the year before, Pinnock had stressed the fundamental importance of taking *sola scriptura* as evangelicalism’s foundational principle. When liberalism proposed tradition, reason, and experience as alternative sources of revelation and spiritual (as well as much historical and scientific) truth, these alternatives came to be seen, in no less of terms, as false gods. On this account, the problem troubling modern theology was understood by Pinnock to be essentially epistemological. Whether by liberal historical critics or neoorthodox fideists, the Bible’s status as the sole source of Christian history, ethics, and doctrine was under attack from all sides. The question Pinnock set before his audience of Cambridge evangelicals was therefore quite
straightforward: “Is the Scripture a reliable teacher of revealed truth or not?” Or, as he would put it four years later, “What is the principium theologiae which measures and authenticates the subject matter for theology and preaching?” Indeed, upon the answer to that question Pinnock said to hang even “the fate of historic Biblical Christianity.”

To cast doubt upon scripture’s truthfulness and singular authority was for the early Pinnock not just foolish – it was “criminal.”

As we have seen underscored so many times already, the problem of modern theology was, in a word, the problem of subjectivism. “To move off from the pages of Scripture,” Pinnock told readers of the journal Bibliotheca Sacra in 1967, “is to enter into the wastelands of our own subjectivity.” While classical liberal scholars of the historical-critical variety were obvious targets for postwar evangelicals, neoorthodox theologians like Karl Barth and Rudolf Bultmann were all the more dangerous because they were all the more subtle. With Francis Schaeffer, who located the demise of historic Christianity in the existentialist gambit to isolate religious knowledge (and faith) from reason, Pinnock decries the abandonment of historical evidences for establishing the truth of Christianity.

In another article for Bibliotheca Sacra, published in 1971 along with Biblical Revelation, his major early treatise on inerrancy, Pinnock identifies the cause behind Bultmann’s demythologization of the Bible as his acceptance of “naturalistic science,” or

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44 See Pinnock’s *Set Forth Your Case*, esp. Ch. 8: “The Inadequacy of Experience Alone,” 69-76. On the subtle undermining brilliance of neoorthodoxy, see ibid., 28: “Classical liberalism was a dangerous but easily detectable foe of historic Christianity, but the new theology is a slippery customer and has managed to come up with a closer counterfeit of the gospel. On that account it is more dangerous.”
the presupposition (as Pinnock puts it) that “reality is a closed continuum of natural cause and effect which excludes the possibility of the transcendent.”\textsuperscript{45} This is a curious accusation in light of the claim that Bultmann actually does make. In his late “Is Exegesis Without Presuppositions Possible?” (1957), which Pinnock cites, Bultmann defines the science of history a bit differently. He does indeed argue that historical science presupposes “a closed continuum of effects,” but as this does not rule out free human decision, neither does it rule out \textit{a priori} supernatural occurrences in history. What the presupposition of a closed continuum does do, however, is restrict the science of history – \textit{as a science} – to what can be historically demonstrated. While it can perceive that people have believed a particular act in history to have had a supernatural origin, it is beyond the bounds of historical science to demonstrate this belief to be true. And yet, Bultmann adds in a crucial clarification, historical science

may not assert that such a faith is an illusion and that God has not acted in history. But it itself as science cannot perceive such an act and reckon on the basis of it; it can only leave every man free to determine whether he wants to see an act of God in a historical event that it itself understands in terms of that event’s immanent historical causes.\textsuperscript{46}

To allow supernatural (or “ahistorical”) interference into history is to undermine the historical project at its root – that is, as \textit{historical}. Naturalism is, indeed, a presupposition of historical science but not because its practitioners are necessarily atheists or deists, which is what evangelicals like the early Pinnock often thought must be the case. Historical science is naturalistic because it must be to function with any sense of consistency, even of “objectivity.” At issue here is the difference between metaphysical

naturalism and methodological naturalism. In rejecting Bultmann’s fundamental point that historical science must presuppose a continuum of cause and effect, Pinnock spoke for the vast majority of evangelicals at the time who sought to collapse two fundamentally opposed concepts in their reading of the Bible, historical cause and effect and ahistorical divine action. In other words, they wanted historical biblical research to demonstrate that something ahistorical happened, that the natural process of cause and effect was broken in this particular instance. This is something Bultmann argues (correctly) historical science simply cannot do.

This is not to say, as Bultmann makes equally clear, that the supernatural does not and cannot act within history or that miracles did not and do not really happen. It is only to say that historical science cannot investigate such cases if it is going to remain historical science. On the other hand (though this is to go beyond what Bultmann does explicitly say), historical science can raise the question of whether or not positing a supernatural cause presents a more plausible explanation of a particular phenomenon – for instance, the resurrection of Jesus Christ. But, historical science can only get us that far; it cannot then proceed to argue that it was indeed a supernatural event, that Jesus did indeed rise from the dead. Such claims are the arena and prerogative of faith, which does work with both the historical and the ahistorical (or supernatural). Sometimes the wholly natural and historical explanation of a particular phenomenon may be less plausible for any number of reasons than the supernatural explanation. But, to claim that one’s defense of the historicity of the resurrection is a wholly historical (and thus “rational,” in this reduced sense) defense and not thereby a step of faith – as most evangelical apologetic arguments to this end effectively argue – is to claim more than historical science can
provide. Moreover, and more important, it is to ignore what we are actually called to do as people of faith.

It is for this reason that Bultmann goes on to argue that the biblical documents must first be interpreted historically if we are afterward to interpret them as “affirmations of faith and proclamation.”\footnote{Ibid., 292.} Otherwise, it is believers who would become mired in a sea of relativism where cause and effect are thrown out the window. In other words, anyone can posit any (or every) effect to be the result of an ahistorical or supernatural cause, but that does not make it true, much less historical fact. This is the disciplinary struggle all providentialist historians face. Historians, when acting in their capacity as such, simply cannot function as supernaturalists and remain true historians. But, this does not mean that they cannot afterward proceed to act in a different capacity, now as theologians and persons of faith. It also does not mean that their turn away from the strict historical enterprise to theology means that they have left reality or that they now place the resurrection outside of history, as evangelicals have all too often concluded must be the case. It only means that historians recognize what the confines of the historical enterprise actually are.

All of this addresses the question of what about Christianity can be convincingly defended and how. At heart an apologist, Pinnock – along with the great bulk of postwar evangelicals – wanted desperately to be able to argue to the historicity of supernatural acts via (however ironically) naturalistic, historical means.\footnote{Besides Schaeffer’s litany of works in this area, see the immensely popular books on evangelical apologetics by Josh McDowell. E.g., Josh McDowell, \textit{More than a Carpenter} (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House, 2005) and \textit{New Evidence that Demands a Verdict} (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 1999). Though evidentialist apologetics continues to be the most popular brand among evangelicals, others have been offered and appear to be gaining traction within the younger generations who, for reasons similar to those that were at work in Clark Pinnock, place less stock in strict rationalist and empiricist}
could do this then they could thereby demonstrate that Jesus did really rise from the dead and, in turn, be certain that their faith was firmly grounded on objective evidence. It is then little surprise that throughout his early years Pinnock defined faith as “a resting of the heart in the sufficiency of the evidences” and defended Christianity as “essentially a religion of factual belief.”

In short, Pinnock’s primary concern at this time was to secure scripture as a body of objective knowledge in the form of historical fact. Whatever their usefulness otherwise, if any one of tradition, reason, or experience threatened the validity of a perceived historical fact of scripture, it was thereby rejected on the grounds that it sought to depose biblical authority for the sake of human subjective desire. “There is ultimately only one evasion,” Pinnock reasoned. “[It] stems from a disinclination to submit to Scripture as the Word of God.” Moreover, to sacrifice the Bible as objective, historical fact upon the altar of human autonomy and pride meant to forfeit all hope for certainty and so toss the church into an abyss of relativistic doubt. Of the three, however, experience received particularly harsh treatment, burdened as it was by a close argumentation and more in experience, story, and aesthetic fit. See, for instance, the collection of essays edited by Andrew Davison, Imaginative Apologetics: Theology, Philosophy, and the Catholic Tradition (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2011).


Pinnock, Biblical Revelation, 163. Emphasis in original.

Ibid., 228-9. Pinnock minces no words here: “A theology subject to no objective controls may be altered and adopted at will to suit the taste. At its deepest level, objective certainty is sacrificed for the sake of personal divinity. The human ego occupies the throne of the deposed divine oracle.” Ibid., 113.
association with existentialist subjectivism. “A theology based on religious experience is subjectivity posing as Christianity,” Pinnock protested in 1971, echoing J. Gresham Machen’s sharp distinction between Christianity and liberalism made nearly half a century earlier. “Both the older Liberalism and the newer existential theologies,” Pinnock would continue, “are basically pietistic, experience theologies. Their concern is with man’s self-understanding and current situation in life, not with the objective biblical message.”

Needless to say, when Pinnock outlined in these early years the sources used in theological construction, he clearly relegated experience, tradition, and reason to a secondary status under the Bible. While these “instruments” might prove helpful when used correctly, they could at best serve in a “ministerial,” not “magisterial,” capacity. Over and against various subjectivistic “multiple-source” theories of theological construction, Pinnock argued for a single-source theory centered on biblical revelation alone.

None of these three candidates – reason, tradition or experience – separately or together is capable of supplying reliable revelation data for Christian theology…These are not sources at all, and the attempt to develop a ‘calculus’ for handling several together will not succeed. The simple fact of the matter is that none of these deserves our unquestioned obedience. Only Scripture possesses final authority.

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52 The rhetorical connection drawn by many evangelicals between general experience and the specialized discussion of religious experience in existentialist circles made any discussion of the former’s play in theological thought an uphill battle, despite significant differences in the two uses. See, e.g., Pinnock, *Set Forth Your Case*, 75: “The bitter fruit of this trend toward faith in faith is the irrelevance of all history and truth. Empty tomb, ransom, hell, judgment, infallibility, Jonah, virgin birth – all can be safely jettisoned as nonessential baggage which have little to do with religious experience.” Emphasis in original.  
53 Pinnock, *Biblical Revelation*, 131. See J. Gresham Machen, *Christianity and Liberalism*, New Ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2009). Machen first published *Christianity and Liberalism* in 1923 after the battle for Princeton Seminary forced him and other conservative Presbyterians to form Westminster Seminary in Philadelphia and then to withdraw from what was at the time the Northern Presbyterian Church (or PCUSA).  
55 Ibid., 133.
A single-source theory such as this was alone thought capable of protecting inerrancy’s treasured distinction between objective text and reading subject. The leading evangelical historicist of the time, John Warwick Montgomery, had earlier diagnosed the problem of modern theology – and so of any Christian philosophy of history – as the failure to maintain the proper hermeneutical distinction between reader and text. “Relativistic, solipsistic consequences are not accidental when one attempts to transcend the subject-object distinction; they are inevitable.”\textsuperscript{56} For Montgomery, even Gadamer’s “ontological turn” fell prey to such relativism.\textsuperscript{57}

Pinnock offered precisely the same complaint against neoorthodoxy and the New Hermeneutic, where “the actual message of Scripture is sacrificed to what modern man can experience today.”\textsuperscript{58} The clear implication of a hermeneutical circle, focused as it was on the importance of the reader’s own historical location, was the dissolution of the subject-object distinction and so the loss of all objective truth.\textsuperscript{59} In its place, Pinnock offered a common sense hermeneutic that blended a concern for the Bible’s historical and cultural context with a perspicuity of meaning protected by an appeal to the analogy of scripture. This effort “to discern the truth of each particular scripture in the light of the whole Scripture, regardless of what extrabiblical fact or idea may be bearing upon the text,” was the true hermeneutical circle.\textsuperscript{60} To suppose then that an infallible Bible requires an infallible interpreter was quite pretentious and could only result in an infinite

\textsuperscript{57} Ibid., 233.
\textsuperscript{58} Pinnock, Biblical Revelation, 220.
\textsuperscript{59} Ibid., 125. See also ibid., 218. Pinnock even goes so far as to include the John Henry Newman of An Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine as one for whom “Truth is never fixed, and its direction cannot be plotted.” Ibid., 126.
\textsuperscript{60} Ibid., 210. Pinnock appeals here to the Westminster Confession (Ch. 1, Art. IX) for support. See also ibid., 98.
regress anyway. Scripture’s coherency, based as it was on the eternal immutability of a
God who cannot lie, solved this problem for us.\(^{61}\) Hence, against the historical
consciousness adopted in twentieth-century existentialist hermeneutics, Pinnock
remained confident that a truly objective interpretation of scripture could be had, if only
we follow the proper “exegetical-synthetic” method.\(^{62}\)

**Struggling with History**

In light of his explicit and insistent rejection of the shape historical consciousness took in
Bultmann and existentialist hermeneutics in general, it is not a little shocking to hear
Pinnock on any number of occasions during these same early years admit to the cultural
relativity of all human knowledge and the historically conditioned nature of religion in
general. Though he took note in 1967 of the “widespread pessimism about man’s ability
to transcend his own finite situation or presuppositions and arrive at objective findings,”
Pinnock considered it at the time a “current historical heresy” sadly and cowardly
swallowed by “a raft of Christian apologists.”\(^{63}\) But, by 1971 at the latest, something had
forced him to reevaluate this hard line, for by then he confidently acknowledged there to

\(^{61}\) Ibid., 129.

\(^{62}\) Ibid., 133. Emphasis in original. At this stage in Pinnock’s pilgrimage, he echoes much of what
J. I. Packer put forward during the same time (see Chapter 1 above) and so likewise differs little from Old
School Princeton’s take on the matter, as the following excerpt highlights: “Theology is charged with the
organization of the results of exegetical science, a methodical elaboration of the truth of divine revelation
deposited in Scripture…Theology is the inductive science which catalogs, interprets and relates the
revealed data. Just as natural science is the technical expression of the data discovered in nature, theology is
the expression of the truths of divine revelation…Theology renders explicit in orderly doctrines the truth
implicit in the Word of God. It expresses logically the truths which are set forth chronologically in the
Bible.” Ibid., 134.

\(^{63}\) Pinnock, *Set Forth Your Case*, 134, 81.
be “no possible way for finite man in the process of historical becoming to gain an absolute perspective upon his life.”

Pinnock’s notes from this period show a spate of influences in the direction of historical consciousness. Along with the obvious culprits in Dilthey, Collingwood, Beard, and Morton White, Pinnock also cites J. M. Bochenski’s *Contemporary European Philosophy* and Gordon Kaufman’s *Relativism, Knowledge, and Faith*. But by far the most influential figure along these lines was the theologian Langdon Gilkey, whose works conspicuously dot Pinnock’s own throughout his career. Gilkey’s *Naming the Whirlwind*, which Pinnock affectionately called “[one] of the most illuminating analyses of the nature of modern theology,” seems to have served him as both coach and sparring partner, depending on the time of day.

From Gilkey and these other sources, Pinnock absorbed a strong dose of historiographical and philosophical reeducation as well as the theological space to make sense of his own charismatic experience of a dynamically active God. He could appreciate Gilkey’s description of the modern mind as “dominated by a radical adherence

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64 Pinnock, *Biblical Revelation*, 130.
65 Not unexpectedly, Pinnock appears to have come to the subject as a curious outsider. The great majority of his sources, when they are not primarily theological appropriations of current trends in historiography and the philosophy of history, consist of popular anthologies and broad histories. Pinnock cites Hans Meyerhoff’s *The Philosophy of History in Our Time* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1959) and Bochenski (Berkeley, CA: University of California, 1956) to this effect.
67 Clark Pinnock, “Prospects for Systematic Theology,” in *Toward a Theology for the Future*, eds. David Wells and Clark Pinnock (Carol Stream, IL: Creation House, 1971), 121. In *Tracking the Maze*, published in 1990, Pinnock notes his great indebtedness to *Naming the Whirlwind*, which by that time had been on the shelf for over two decades. (See Clark Pinnock, *Tracking the Maze: Finding Our Way Through Modern Theology from an Evangelical Perspective* (San Francisco, CA: Harper & Row, 1990), 140.) Though the two *Whirlwind* books stand out, Pinnock appears to have read the bulk of Gilkey’s major works, including his early *Shantung Compound* (New York, NY: Harper & Row, 1966). As these things go, he was for Pinnock a theologian’s theologian.
to, or confinement in, the immediate and the concrete,“68 especially as his growing pietism directed his focus away from the abstract rationalism which so colored evangelicalism’s debates over inerrancy, and he no longer balked at the relativistic claim that “all that is is pinioned within the flux of passage or of history.”69 Most importantly, however, Pinnock would come by the mid-1990s to conceive of God as intimately involved in the historical process and subject in some sense to the contingency and transience of time and space. This was a truly (though not absolutely) immanent God in the process of historical becoming – a God best described as a person in dynamic, even internal and essential, relations, not as the pure, static, and in many ways utterly transcendent being of classical theism.70

Even so, despite these powerful influences on his thought, Pinnock could not give up outright the subject-object distinction he had inherited from J. W. Montgomery and the Reformed scholasticism of Princeton. Devising various ways of holding together these two competing elements – that is, acceptance of our inescapable location in history and an insistence that in the Bible we have readily discoverable objective knowledge – in a reasonable tension would prove the primary task for much of Pinnock’s long career.

At this early stage, he found a ready solution in the brand of cultural apologetics he had inherited from Schaeffer and, to an extent, from C. S. Lewis. Scripture, as the

69 Ibid., 48. To give but one illustration of this, Pinnock offers the same idea in its negative form: “[Finite] man cannot rise above his position in the flow of history and gain a perspective over the whole of reality.” Pinnock, “Prospects for Systematic Theology,” 103-4.
70 Gilkey describes the influence modern historical consciousness had upon Western theism well: “[This emphasis on becoming, on transience and change] has, along with the notion of internal relations, made the concept of changeless, self-sufficient being virtually meaningless to our age; and since at least Hegel almost every contemporary theology consequently exhibits a view of deity as essentially dynamic, in relations, and so in process, rather than as essentially unrelated and static. Perhaps even more important, it has focused attention on patterns of development and process in time rather than on the eternally recurrent structures of existence.” Gilkey, Naming the Whirlwind, 55.
argument went, did not deny human finitude and relativity, that all of us are not only stuck in history’s flow but doomed to die in it. “Human knowledge is culturally bound and conditioned,” Pinnock proclaimed, no doubt with a slight grin. What experience teaches us about knowledge, reality, and our place in the world is correct; but this only raises to the boiling point our need for a singularly objective word “from outside.”

Gilkey may have laid out the problem of modern theology more profoundly than Schaeffer ever could, but the former’s “liberal quest to locate a dwelling place for the deity within man’s capacity for self-understanding” and not in biblical revelation was far less appealing. If the problem is that we cannot escape our own historicity, then we need something from outside time and space altogether, something that can break in and deliver us from this maddening and nihilistic relativism.

Live Now, Brother, a 1972 apologetic tract dedicated to this problem, put it this way: “How is man to arrive at ultimate truth from his finite perspective within the human situation?” The answer, of course, is that he cannot. What is needed is the revelation of Jesus Christ, who thanks to his incarnation in history now “tips us off to the nature of ultimate reality.” The Bible and Christianity, in other words, escape the relativistic ravages of space and time thanks to their origin outside of it in the mind of God.

If the scriptural revelation were just another man-made religion, it would be characterized by ‘historicality’ at every point; as it is, it makes an explicit claim not to be. The finality of Jesus Christ and the inspiration of Scripture provide an Archimedian point in the flux of the human situation against which the flow of history may be measured and evaluated.

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74 Pinnock, Biblical Revelation, 128. Emphasis in original.
Through this bit of selective hearing, Pinnock reveals just how far down the rabbit hole he has gone, which in the whole scheme of things, is not very far at all. While he grants that we are enmeshed in time and space, he does not appear to allow this fact to affect how we interpret texts, at least not the Bible. Hence he can state as fact scripture’s perspicuity, the needlessness of an infallible interpreter (such as a magisterium) for obtaining epistemic certainty, and the scientific objectivity of hermeneutics while at the same time assuming human historicity because he has defined biblical revelation in a way that detaches it from history altogether. In the end, history as the cause of our relativity has become the very enemy of God and the evil from which we must be saved. History, in other words, has become sin.

Over the course of the 1970s and stretching into the ’80s, Pinnock would come to soften this remarkably negative portrait of historical existence. He began to imagine time and space not as some relativistic wasteland which we need to escape but as the living fields of God’s own dynamic action and creative love. Most importantly, he ceased describing divine revelation simply as a “Word from Outside” – which tended to reduce the humanity of scripture to a triviality – and instead increasingly came to speak of it as a word of testimony spoken by God’s people in the dynamic power of the Holy Spirit.

Much of this change can be traced to Pinnock’s growing sensitivity toward the “debilitating and disgusting” effects the Battle for the Bible was having within the evangelical community itself, as well as the “justly blackened” reputation it was gaining from outsiders. That his own reexamination of the biblical phenomena forced him to

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75 Clark Pinnock, “Evangelicals and Inerrancy: The Current Debate,” *Theology Today* 35, no. 1 (April 1978): 68–9. His reflection on the battle, which was then only in its infancy, is worth quoting more fully: “For my part I find the specter of evangelical (or any other Christian) polarization disturbing and sad. Attack on the church from without can produce a brave and heroic response, but dissension within is
adopt a more chastened approach with regard to how dogmatically he held certain theological positions, positions which often placed him on the defensive in the battle itself, seems only to have heightened this sensitivity. By the mid-1970s, Pinnock had come out as a vocal free-will Arminian only then to go on the offensive in pushing for greater recognition and appreciation of this theologically underrepresented wing of evangelicalism. Along these lines, he styled his first foray into the fight, a 1975 compilation of essays aptly named *Grace Unlimited*, as controversial on the account that it opposed “a powerful effort in Protestant orthodoxy to limit the gospel and to cast a dark shadow over its universal availability and intention.” 76 While he never put it this way, Pinnock was engaging here in his own “Battle for the Bible,” though one that traced back its first shots long before nineteenth-century debates over inerrancy. 77 It was a battle, however, over what he understood to be two legitimate lines of interpretation where the only appeals to biblical authority came as pleas to honestly reexamine the text. In this way it differed from the inerrancy debates, which he increasingly saw as attempting to legislate particular interpretations of scripture for the entire evangelical community and so as setting up a hermeneutically loaded doctrine of biblical errorlessness as the litmus test for authentic evangelical orthodoxy.

In agreeing to contribute a chapter to what was for all intents and purposes moderate evangelicalism’s rejoinder to Lindsell’s *Battle for the Bible*, Pinnock cast his

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76 Clark Pinnock, ed. *Grace Unlimited* (Minneapolis, MN: Bethany Fellowship, 1975), 12.
77 Whether one points to the Remonstrance Articles of 1610 or the dispute between Augustine and Pelagius in the fifth century, the “Calvinism vs. Arminianism” debate predates the battles over biblical inerrancy by centuries, at least as discussions within orthodoxy.
lot against strict inerrancy and the ICBI. For that 1977 volume, he identified the primary theological issue underlying the question of biblical authority as “the need to maintain with equal force both the humanity and the divinity of the word of Scripture.” It was an issue, he said, too often ignored or mishandled in the present debate, but it was central to “tracking the maze” – as he would put it in a later work – through the fears and concerns about biblical authority and interpretation. The struggle inerrantists faced was due in large part to what they inherited from the Reformed scholasticism of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Princeton, whose controlling logic exaggerated the Bible’s absolute perfection and obscured its genuine humanity.

Pinnock thus offered in *The Scripture Principle*, published not long after the ICBI met in 1982 to hammer out its own statement on biblical hermeneutics, a fresh look at the nature of scripture as both “the word of God and the word of man.” It is not insignificant that his attempt to rethink Christian revelation and biblical inspiration focused on the dynamic presence and activity of God’s Spirit within the community of faith. The point matched his growing historical consciousness while it also reflected and extended his efforts to open up evangelicalism to a new appreciation of Pentecostalism with its attention to the renewal of charismatic gifts and present-day experiences of the Spirit. Pinnock had grown frustrated with inerrancy’s unbalanced emphasis on

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79 See Pinnock, *Tracking the Maze*, ix.
82 “I suggest that we think of inspiration in broader terms than is customary – less as a punctilinear enlightenment of a few elect persons and more as a long-term divine activity operating within the whole history of revelation.” Pinnock, *The Scripture Principle*, 64.
83 Only a year after he came out with *The Scripture Principle*, Pinnock would publish his first book-length treatment on the spiritual renewal of evangelicalism. There he would invite a more rationally
rationalist proofs because they tended to “shift the focus away from the power of God in the Scriptures and onto our ability to rationally comprehend these matters.”

Evangelicals’ obsession with defining and protecting inerrancy had the unfortunate consequence of actually quenching the Spirit of God, not only in their anemic view of biblical inspiration but also in their general inattention to the Spirit’s role in illumination.

Pinnock had been stressing for some time prior to writing *The Scripture Principle*, as he did throughout it, that God did not simply speak in the apostles and prophets and then leave the scene, as if he was some quasi-deistic god uninvolved in the world today. Rather, he continues through his Spirit to work in the community of Christians, inspiring and leading them to seek his will afresh.

Pinnock’s emphasis here on the dynamic activity of the Holy Spirit throughout history led him to dedicate much more space in *The Scripture Principle* to the development of dogma than he had in 1971, where the topic was raised only to attack it for having jettisoned doctrine as “a fixed deposit of unchangeable concepts.” But by 1984, doctrinal development had become a concept he found warranted by the biblical phenomena itself, particularly Jesus’ and the New Testament authors’ interpretation of the Old Testament. An honest reading of the second testament would admit that its oriented evangelicalism to appreciate and eagerly await the present movement of the Spirit by being “more consistent in believing the full dimensions of the gospel they profess. They have to stop grieving and quenching the spirit they profess to believe in...[People] are becoming more aware of the fact that New Testament religion was profoundly experiential and not just a doctrinal affair. The power of the Spirit is a hallmark of messianic faith.” Pinnock, *Three Keys to Spiritual Renewal*, 38. Pinnock’s campaign for charismatic Christianity would assume its most emphatic and mature shape in his 1996 systematic theology, *Flame of Love*, which took the present dynamic activity of the Spirit as its guiding motif.

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85 Pinnock, *Biblical Revelation*, 163. In an article for *Christianity Today* from January 1979, Pinnock argued that it was wrong of conservatives “to live in fear of modernity and in neglect of the contemporary situation of modern man as if God were no longer active in it and a sensitive response to contemporary modes of thought and feeling were no longer possible.” Pinnock, “An Evangelical Theology,” 90. The genesis of this article dates back to 1977 when Pinnock gave his inaugural lecture at McMaster.
authors operated under the expectation that the Spirit would furnish fresh revelation and possibly new scriptures altogether. Pinnock draws a scathing analogy between the Gospels’ Pharisees and today’s inerrantists, both of whom he says view their respective scriptures as “immutable” objects and so are blind to “the possibility of a fulfillment that might transcend it.” Jesus, on the other hand, can simultaneously uphold the status of the Torah as originally authoritative and yet deny its present authority as God’s word for today. Unlike his opponents, Jesus “recognized a covenant relativity in relation to certain texts and thus shocked some of his hearers, who had no room for such a limitation.”

While Christians today do not enjoy the unique status that gave Jesus and his apostles the authority to declare certain parts of the Hebrew Scriptures valid or not, Pinnock assures us that it is proper to interpret the biblical text with the same christological hermeneutic that they used. We, too, “look forward to greater light and direction.” This implies, Pinnock admits, that the meaning of the biblical text is not necessarily static – it can change given new and different contexts:

The key point to learn is this: the Word of God is not to be found simply by staring at the text of the Bible or by searching one’s own religious consciousness, but in the interaction between the two, from the coming together of revelation past and revelation present…In saying this, we are simply confessing our faith in the Spirit as alive and active in bringing out from the Bible the ever-relevant Word of the Lord.

If this sounds reminiscent of Gadamer’s fusion of horizons, we should not be surprised. Pinnock cites appreciatively Paul Ricoeur’s explanation that, once written,
texts take on a life of their own. On this account, there exists “a certain elusiveness in interpretation such that the reader may not presume to be in full control of the text and its meaning. Inescapably, there is a degree of uncertainty and tacitness involved with a written text…Various interpretive options always exist, forcing the reader to engage in a dialogue with the text and with God.” Pinnock compares the Bible to works of art which “open up a field of interpretive possibilities and allow for ongoing reflection and discovery.” For someone who has consistently stressed the unequaled importance of discovering the author’s original intent, to admit that such intent is not only undiscoverable but no longer even a property of the text signals a fundamental shift in his understanding of the nature of the Bible.

It is a wonder Pinnock did not receive harsher criticisms from the inerrantist camp for such radical claims. His acceptance of much that modern phenomenologists like Ricoeur have argued concerning the nature of texts and their interpretation certainly stands at odds with anything classical evangelicalism or the ICBI had up to then viewed as orthodox. But, Pinnock’s specific and explicit rejection of authorial intent is frankly

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91 See, for instance, Paul Ricoeur, *Interpretation Theory: Discourse and the Surplus of Meaning* (Fort Worth, TX: Texas Christian University, 1976), 29-30: “With written discourse, however, the author’s intention and the meaning of the text cease to coincide. This dissociation of the verbal meaning of the text and the mental intention of the author gives to the concept of inscription its decisive significance, beyond the mere fixation of previous oral discourse. Inscription becomes synonymous with the semantic autonomy of the text, which results from the disconnection of the mental intention of the author from the verbal meaning of the text, of what the author meant and what the text means. The text’s career escapes the finite horizon lived by its author. What the text means now matters more than what the author meant when he wrote it.”

92 Pinnock, *The Scripture Principle*, 188.

93 Ibid., 192.


95 Even Grant Osborne, whom we have seen was one of the more moderate evangelical inerrantists during this time, locates Ricoeur closer to the hermeneutical pole that favors the centrality of the reader in interpretation, more so (it seems) than even Gadamer. Whether Gadamer or Ricoeur, however, the basic
staggering. As Grant Osborne later discerned, this was the heart of the phenomenological
and deconstructionist turn in hermeneutics, and Pinnock now accepted it as true!\textsuperscript{96}

There would seem, however, to be two reasons why Pinnock did not receive the
type and amount of criticism we might expect. First, he did not give up on the idea of
authorial intent altogether; he simply stretched it to include the entire canon. To speak of
the intent of the biblical text was to speak of it as one individual unit; the Bible told the
great, coherent story of God’s gracious action to redeem humanity.\textsuperscript{97} Though more
explicit in his later writings, Pinnock here locates biblical authority in the God to whom
the text witnesses and not in the biblical text itself. “The Scriptures bear witness to Christ
and derive their authority for Christians from that fact.”\textsuperscript{98} Though by no means novel,
Pinnock’s turn away from the propositionalism of Old Princeton and inerrancy to a more
personal and narratival revelation witnessed to by a canon of texts was a pivotal turning
point in his theological pilgrimage and could only have far-reaching effects upon his
biblical hermeneutic.\textsuperscript{99} For now, though, what saved Pinnock was his clear insistence that
the Bible, even if somehow not the biblical authors themselves, remained authoritative.

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\textsuperscript{96} In other words, Pinnock came to admit the “intentional fallacy” and thus turned his back on the
stream of hermeneutical theory stemming from Emanuel Hirsch and immensely influential upon late
twentieth-century evangelical hermeneutics. See Osborne, \textit{The Hermeneutical Spiral}, 393.

\textsuperscript{97} Pinnock, \textit{The Scripture Principle}, 176.

\textsuperscript{98} Ibid., 39. Again: “The Bible is a witness, although the primary one, to the revelation of God in
the face of Jesus Christ. Christology, not Bibliology, occupies center stage in Christianity…Holy Scripture
is an important part of the picture but not the whole. It is one of the forms of the Word of God through
which the light reaches us. But what a wonderful gift it is! A durable and objective record of the burden of
divine revelation, engendered by the Spirit, and given to bring us to the saving knowledge of God.” That
Pinnock continues to use the language of objectivity in \textit{The Scripture Principle} highlights the same tension
between his rising historical consciousness and his insistence upon the subject-object distinction that we
have been tracing. Ibid., 16.

\textsuperscript{99} Pinnock owes much of his thinking in this regard to the canonical criticism of Brevard Childs.
The second reason why criticism of *The Scripture Principle* was more subdued than we might expect is more analytical in nature. Pinnock simply did not put forward a hermeneutic that was much different from the grammatical-historical method delineated by the ICBI two years earlier in Chicago. On the one hand, he could make any number of eyebrow-raising claims. For instance, he argued that all revelation had not ceased with the closing of the canon, as was commonly maintained, but that the scriptures themselves “occasion fresh events of revelation.” Because of this the Bible should be considered a true sacrament through which the Spirit brings the reader into a genuine living encounter with Jesus Christ.100 Pinnock also went beyond normal considerations of the plenary sense to claim that we today might legitimately discern multiple senses of the text: “The possibilities of meaning are not limited to the original intent of the text, although that is the anchor of interpretation, but can arise from the interaction of the Spirit and the Word.”101 Indeed, it is possible for a single text to have many meanings, and to think that it cannot is a “modern ‘scientific’ prejudice” inconsistent with both Christian experience and the biblical witness. Also a product of this “scientific” mindset was evangelicalism’s aversion to a premodern, precritical exegesis which, Pinnock claimed, had repeatedly proven “far more likely to grasp the rich fullness of the Bible’s message” than the dry, mechanical methods now used.102

Even at a methodological level, Pinnock stretched the bounds of typical evangelical credibility by admitting a deeper sense of the indissoluble historical conditionedness of both text and reader than we have yet seen from him:

100 Pinnock, *The Scripture Principle*, 164.
101 Ibid., 163.
102 Ibid., 192-3.
Modern consciousness tells us that any statement will be conditioned by its historical context and will share the biases and limitations of that time. There is no definitive culture. Every community is in continuity with every other one in the flux and change of human development. Every utterance – including those of the Bible, it is natural for modern persons to think – will be part of the time-bound, transient human situation, part of a network of fallible, human meanings.

And as if to dissuade us from thinking he would once again simply exempt the Bible from the effects of its historical and cultural location, Pinnock quickly admits that such an escape hatch “strains credibility.” Needless to say, an inerrantist bent on obtaining rational certainty would hardly find Pinnock’s new solution for the problem of historical consciousness appealing, dependent as it was on trusting past experience: “[In] spite of all the background noise that is present the truth about God’s saving plan is effectively stated. This has been our Christian experience, and it is the promise of God to keep his church in the truth.” A Christian’s trust in the Bible lies not in the impeccable logic of deductive argument but in the experience of God’s saving power through scripture, and to desire more certainty than this is to ask more of the Bible than it claims even for itself.

On the other hand, alongside these evangelically unorthodox and occasionally radical claims, Pinnock laid out a variety of traditional arguments, often as attempts to soften and explain the former. For instance, in the very same paragraph where he contends that biblical meaning is not limited to the original intent of the text, Pinnock speaks of the Spirit as one who helps us “to receive [scripture] as the Word of God and to understand what it means for our time.” And as if to distinguish the original meaning discovered by exegesis from its significance for us today, Pinnock then explains that the

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103 Ibid., 91. Again: “We read the text with certain beliefs already in our minds, whether cultural or theological, and these certainly affect how we evaluate what we find.” Ibid., 170.
104 Ibid., 99.
105 Ibid., 60.
Spirit simply “activates the information in [scripture] so that it becomes an effective communication from God.” Here the sharp subject-object distinction is preserved while the Spirit’s work is relegated to a stage in the interpretive process after the discovery of the original meaning of the text. There is little to distinguish this from contemporary evangelical descriptions of how interpreters should go about applying the Bible’s previously discovered objective truths, a task most considered the last stage in the hermeneutical process after the real work of exegesis had already been done.

When at the end of *The Scripture Principle* Pinnock finally fleshes out his biblical hermeneutic, we can only wonder about what sort of proposal he has in mind. As it happens, his earlier emphasis on the dynamic activity of the Spirit in the giving and receiving of a developing revelation mysteriously drops out of the picture, having been replaced by an interpretive method not far removed from that then being offered by J. I. Packer. Though Pinnock fancies thinking of his hermeneutic as “an art rather than a science or technique” and as an acquired skill that “cannot be reduced to a set of rules,” he proceeds along lines remarkably similar to what we have already seen with regard to Packer (Chapter 1) and Grant Osborne (Chapter 3), even describing his method as a spiral. “We do not reach the goal of the original sense all at once in a single move,” Pinnock tiredly explains, “but through repeated approaches and by spiraling in on the target.” What happened, we might legitimately ask, to Ricoeur and the false goal of discovering the author’s intent? He, too, has left the scene while we carefully and self-

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106 Ibid., 163.
107 The similarity is intentional. Pinnock cites as representative of evangelical hermeneutics Packer’s chapter for *Scripture and Truth* – which, while not an official product of the ICBI, served the same function and employed many of the same people (including both editors). See Packer, “Infallible Scripture and the Role of Hermeneutics,” 325-56. Pinnock’s citation is found in *The Scripture Principle*, 238.
critically spiral closer and closer to that theoretically obtainable original meaning, which it is our primary task to discover.¹⁰⁸ This is not to say that the work will be easy: “Getting at the original meaning is harder than we used to think, and it calls for greater effort. We have to work at transcending our historical situation and struggle to hear the Word of God in the text.”¹⁰⁹ In other words, we can escape our own historicity and the presuppositions it forces into our interpretations, it seems, if we only work harder and longer.

When the Spirit does enter into the picture, it is where we might expect it, relegated to the realm of present application. In continuity with his earlier period, Pinnock explains that the subject-object “duality of Word and Spirit” must be maintained. “The Word supplies the message of God, while the Spirit inclines us to attend to its truth, so that the Word can become effective and relevant in ourselves.” However, this is easier said than done. “The secret is to interpret the Spirit’s work as primarily referential, as witnessing to Jesus Christ and opening our hearts to the gospel. It is an inner work in us that brings about the personal recognition and appropriation of the truth for ourselves in our situation.”¹¹⁰

Ironically, Pinnock closes his chapter on biblical interpretation by criticizing traditional evangelical hermeneutics for neglecting the presence and role of the Holy Spirit in the process, but apart from some scattered untraditional ways of describing

¹⁰⁸ “The primary task must be to understand what is being said there. What did the writer intend the readers to understand? What was God’s Word to them? This question needs to be answered before we inquire about its significance for us. We must [not] allow a ‘fusion of horizons’ to distort what the Bible is saying and turn it into an instrument of manipulation. Let the text be understood faithfully before it is applied creatively…Seek ye first the original meaning, and all these relevant applications will be added unto you!” Pinnock, The Scripture Principle, 204.
¹⁰⁹ Ibid., 208.
¹¹⁰ Ibid., 200.
things, his own effort hardly escapes the same critique. In fact, Henry Holloman’s early criticism that *The Scripture Principle* blurs traditional distinctions between the concepts of revelation, inspiration, illumination, and application is quite understandable, as is his confusion over whether Pinnock means to speak of new extrabiblical revelations or simply harmless applications of the one long-completed revelation recorded in the Bible. Faced with the competing pressures of a lingering desire for objective biblical meaning and a growing historical consciousness, he offered a doctrine of scripture that, in its palpable tensions and ambiguities, evidenced both.

Over the next decade and a half, Pinnock would experience two developments in his thought that would help push him beyond this impasse and toward a more consistent adoption of historical consciousness and its implications. The first can be discussed rather quickly and involves his growing interest in narrative theology and the nature of revelation as story. In *Tracking the Maze*, written in 1990 as a sort of postconservative alternative to David Tracy’s *Blessed Rage for Order* (1975) and George Lindbeck’s *The Nature of Doctrine* (1984), Pinnock lays out his mature genealogy of the modern theological landscape and offers a constructive proposal focused on what he calls the gospel as “eucatastrophe.” The essence of Christianity,” Pinnock explains, “is the epic story of salvation that centers upon its chief character, the risen and exalted Lord, Jesus Christ.”

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111 Ibid., 214.


Its essence is not law, dogma, theory, not even experience. It is a news cast, the best news the world has ever heard, the epic comedy with the happy ending... It is the overarching story of salvation that renders the character of God for us... People have found their meaning within this story, within this interpretive scheme of narrated promise, from time immemorial. The truth for Christians lies in this narrative.\textsuperscript{114}

Divine revelation communicates an event, God’s saving action in history; it is not primarily a vehicle for abstract theological truths or theistic proofs. As such, it is not essentially propositional.\textsuperscript{115} Instead, as the communication of God’s story with and within creation, the Bible “creates a universe of meaning we inhabit by faith.” We are shaped by it. “It gives us our grammar, our language, our discourse, and our framework.”\textsuperscript{116} We enter into this story, into the flow of its narrative and so push it forward, giving the story new meaning in new contexts.

For Pinnock, that divine revelation took the form of a story is fitting. Narrative mirrors the shape of historical life itself; we do not live in a series of distinct, linear propositions but in a dynamic world of integrated personal relationships.

We are drawn to the primacy of narrative in theology, not only because the Bible requires it as it does, but because human beings require it, as creatures whose nature is to find personal meaning in narratives. Stories are what give shape and meaning to all our lives. When people ask us to explain a concern that we have, we tell them a story. Stories are what tend to precipitate change and transformation in our experience, in a way that dogma and law simply cannot.\textsuperscript{117}

God, in a word, knew what he was doing when he gave us a story.

\textsuperscript{114} Pinnock, \textit{Tracking the Maze}, 154-5.
\textsuperscript{115} Like Lindbeck, Pinnock will argue that propositional doctrines are second order language that reflects on the primary language of the narrative. Ibid., 182-5.
\textsuperscript{116} Ibid., 159.
\textsuperscript{117} Ibid., 165.
Here Pinnock finally sloughs off the “shackles of old Princeton” – as he would later put it\textsuperscript{118} – and departs from Hodge’s “storehouse” theology. In doing so, he is understandably led to offer a definition of faith quite different from what we saw in his earlier days as a convinced evidentialistic apologist. No longer is faith intellectual acceptance of the sufficiency of some evidence; it is instead “the human response to the narrated promise of God.”\textsuperscript{119}

The second development in Pinnock’s thought is more extensive. We have spoken at times of his critique of the classical view of God, though we have not as yet given it significant treatment. The reason is plain. Not until the late 1980s, after the Battle for the Bible had largely run its course and inerrancy had all but settled in as evangelicalism’s defining principle, did Pinnock find time or space to engage in a more headlong campaign against classical theism. His efforts had been largely directed elsewhere.\textsuperscript{120}

To be sure, there were hints of an uneasiness with classical theism in earlier years. In the article “The Need for a Scriptural, and Therefore a Neo-Classical Theism,” written

\textsuperscript{118} Pinnock, “Evangelical Theology in Progress,” 79.
\textsuperscript{119} Pinnock, Tracking the Maze, 155. That Pinnock’s turn to narrative theology had a significant impact on his apologetics can be seen in his mid-1990s appraisal of C. S. Lewis: “I believe Lewis is more effective when he appeals to the imagination than to reason. The debate of 1948 and the later experience of his wife’s death made him aware of the limitations of rational argumentation when it comes to faith. His appeal to the imagination avoids these pitfalls and is in the end more effective. The lesson I draw from this is that it is wiser to dwell upon the narrative proclamation rather than the nitty gritty questions of historical criticism or philosophical refinement. Lewis was dragged into seeing this and we should accept it.” Clark Pinnock, “Assessing the Apologetics of C. S. Lewis,” Canadian C. S. Lewis Journal 87 (May 1995): 19. Emphasis in original.
\textsuperscript{120} That the ICBI effectively closed shop in 1987 and the fundamentalist takeover of the SBC was virtually complete by 1990 is constitutive of this winding down. This is not to say, of course, that Pinnock quit publishing in the area of biblical inerrancy and interpretation or that he did no work on Christian theism prior to this time. Nor is it to say that the inerrancy issue itself ceased to matter and no more skirmishes would be fought. It is simply to say that the war of attrition had been won for the conservatives, especially in the major denominations and most of evangelicalism’s signal institutions. The focus shifted away from debating about how to define inerrancy and establish it as a controlling article of faith to quarreling over what could legitimately be said to be within the interpretive bounds of an inerrant Bible. This meant that future battles would be fought in the trenches of particularly hot topics – for example, women in ministry, homosexuality, and, as in the case of Clark Pinnock, alternative views of God. Much of the content was the same, but the scope had narrowed.
for *Perspectives on Evangelical Theology* in 1979, Pinnock had already begun to question the legitimacy of God’s supposed atemporality and immutability.

The negative notion of timelessness is just not rich enough to handle the requirements that future events be truly contingent, and not in name only, and that a temporal dimension be recognized within the life and being of God himself. God’s eternity according to the Bible refers to his everlasting existence without beginning and without end, but does not teach a simultaneity of past, present, and future in God all at once.\(^{121}\)

The biblical portrait of God is said to present a dynamic personal agent who lives and acts within history, relates to people in recognizably contingent ways, and as such changes and even shares in the sufferings of his people. By adopting as the lens through which they read the Bible a Greek philosophical definition of God as one who is simple, timeless, and immutable, a being of pure action, Christians have for centuries obscured the witness of the scriptures, even ascribing to God dark and immoral actions, such as orchestrating humanity’s fall into sin.\(^{122}\) “The dynamic ontology of the Bible clashes inevitably with the static ontology of the Greek thinkers, so that when the two visions of reality are brought together, biblical teaching becomes warped and twisted and the resultant synthesis doctrinally objectionable.”\(^{123}\) Pinnock had introduced such language about God as early as 1975 in his chapter for *Grace Unlimited*, but in 1979 it came to take on a more properly theological angle.

It is likewise clear that by the late 1970s Pinnock had become rather enamored with process philosophy. He cites appreciatively the work of Charles Hartshorne, both directly and indirectly, and finds considerable value in the concept of “becoming” when


\(^{123}\) Pinnock, “The Need for a Scriptural, and Therefore a Neo-Classic Theism,” 41. Emphasis in original.
applied to the divine nature. This early flirtation with modern philosophical conceptions of God, influenced as they were by the general rise in historical consciousness, would evolve by the mid-1980s into a genuine give and take affair – with Pinnock doing most of the taking. In his chapter for *Predestination and Free Will* (1986) and then again in his contribution to *Process Theology* (1987), Pinnock advanced his first extended argument for what would become the bête noir of the next decade’s debates over “open theism,” or the theory that the future for God is genuinely open and undetermined, even with regard to his own knowledge of future events. It was to many friends and foes alike his biggest capitulation to modern conceptions of history and reality, one that threatened more than anything else to place him outside the bounds of evangelicalism. For our purposes, however, the most salient point in all of this is the shape the nature of God and the character of the divine-human relationship took in Pinnock’s developing theology of God’s openness. Here Pinnock, with his newfound

124 See ibid., 41-2.
126 To deny that God has exhaustive foreknowledge of all future decisions and events, including his own, was for Pinnock the most logical conclusion one could draw from the biblical phenomena and human experience. Both assume that history is at least in part contingent upon the decisions of free agents and that all things are relative to or conditioned by each other to a certain, though genuine, extent. “We cannot think of history as the shadow of a timeless eternity or as the temporal unfolding of a blueprint of the divine decisions. Rather,” Pinnock explains, “history is the theatre where new situations are encountered and fresh decisions are made, the scene of divine and human creativity.” (Pinnock, “Between Classical and Process Theism,” 323.) In other words, we experience the world of the Bible and the world in which we live as the arenas of the dynamic and free activities of God and humans in intimate, dependent relationships. But, to allow for a world with such genuine freedom – that is, with significantly free agents – God had to limit his own freedom and power. Furthermore, as a participant with creatures in time, this means that God had to limit his own knowledge of the future. “If the creature has been given the ability to decide how some things will turn out, then it cannot be known infallibly ahead of time how they will turn out. It implies that the future is really open and not available to exhaustive foreknowledge even on the part of God.” (Pinnock, “God Limits His Knowledge,” 150.) Pinnock here moves beyond classical Arminian conceptions of divine foreknowledge, which granted God exhaustive but not determinative knowledge of all future events, and it was such a move that many took to be unorthodox.
emphasis on narrative theology also in hand, would discover a way toward a more consistent and coherent doctrine of scripture.

Pinnock’s mature view on the God-world relationship betrays an undeniable correlation to modern philosophical conceptions of history and reality, a characteristic he readily admits.127 In Most Moved Mover (2001), its most detailed and developed expression, God is described as both affecting and being affected by the world. He is “integrated” into space and time.128 Moreover, the incarnation of the Son is not something radically new or foreign to the nature of the trinitarian God, but a particular manifestation of his inherently temporal (and spatial129) being. “God is inside not outside time. He is involved in the thick of, and is not above, the flow of history.”130 As a personal being in a world full of other personal beings, God exists in a dynamic and intimate relationship with his creatures. Though his power is “incomparable,” he never uses it for “self-enhancement” but only “for the good of the partner.”131 God is love and exists as a trinitarian communion of persons in dynamic loving relationship.132 On this account, love is the most fundamental aspect of God’s nature and always defines his relationship with the world.133 His transcendence is in this way made immanent in “the

127 For example, see his “Between Classical and Process Theism,” 316-7, where he admits specific indebtedness to process philosophy. For his part, Pinnock always denied being a process theist, arguing that he, unlike process theism, maintained God’s ontological independence from the world and claimed only that God willingly limited his freedom, power, and knowledge in creating it. See, e.g., Pinnock, “God Limits His Knowledge,” 147.

128 Pinnock, Most Moved Mover, 32.

129 Pinnock is cautious here, but he appreciates the ways divine embodiedness might help explain certain perennial theological problems, such as divine passibility, omniscience, and the temptation to think within a spirit-matter dualism. Pinnock, Most Moved Mover, 81.

130 Ibid., 32-3.

131 Ibid., 35.


133 See Pinnock, Most Moved Mover, 45, where love is the divine cause lying behind creation and the granting of human libertarian freedom. This emphasis on love as the first principle of God’s action is the driving theme of both Unbounded Love and Pinnock’s systematic theology, Flame of Love. The latter
patterns, processes, and events of the world.”

God has genuine, mutually influential interaction with his creatures, who are free to respond in any number of ways. Human desires and actions therefore contribute – whether positively or negatively – to the will and action of God as he brings about his plan for the world. History, on this account, is “the combined result of what God and creatures do.”

A world like this, full of dynamic relationships like these, is necessarily risky. God, for instance, took a profound risk in allowing for genuine human freedom, limiting his power over the world and his knowledge of future contingents. This is to be expected, of course, for history itself is “a drama with profound risks and enormous dynamics.” Hence, “Real drama, real interactions and real learning are possible because history is not scripted and freedom is not illusory.” But, God is not the only risk-taker. The contingency of history is a two-way street. One of the most profound insights of open theism is its attention to an inherent risk in the divine-human relationship itself, a risk intimately shared by both parties. God took a significant risk in creating a world of free human actors, and these same humans take an equally significant risk in following his lead – though they, at least, have his promises and know his track record.

also makes social trinitarianism – a relational ontology that describes God as “a community of love and mutuality” – the starting principle of its theological system. Pinnock, *Flame of Love*, 29.


135 Ibid., 59. Pinnock liked to point out that the open view of God, including the denial of exhaustive foreknowledge, better fits how we actually live and act in the world, including in our relationship with God. We pray because we are convinced God hears us and will take our concerns into account. We perform certain religious or moral actions because we believe that these please God and so impact him, sometimes even drawing a gracious response from him. Even apart from the divine-human relationship, we go about our daily lives planning and engaging in actions, expecting that in doing these things we are participating in something meaningful, something that will have an impact on us as well as others. Pinnock is simply saying that God does the same, though with much more wisdom and power to see his will through to completion. See ibid., 153-78.

136 Ibid., 35-6. The risk motif is a common feature of openness theologies, and Pinnock was hardly the first to find it a crucial theological point and powerful rhetorical tool. See, especially, John Sanders, *The God Who Risks: A Theology of Providence* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1998).

137 Pinnock, *Most Moved Mover*, 52.
Here is the point. In his reflections on the dual nature of this risk, Pinnock discovered a crucial component missing from his earlier conceptions of biblical revelation and interpretation – trust. A risk-taking God implies a risk-taking faith. If God does not take absolute control nor know the future exhaustively, then trusting him to heal the world and so to save humanity is truly risky. To call God a risk-taker is to say we are, too.

**A Hermeneutic of Trajectory**

In a pair of articles written for the *Wesleyan Theological Journal*, Pinnock, working from out of this dynamic view of the divine-human relationship and his newly fleshed out narrative theology, argued for a new hermeneutic shaped around the notion of a trajectory of meaning. In “Evangelical Theologians Facing the Future,” originally his 1997 address to the Wesleyan Theological Society, Pinnock paints both modern liberalism and inerrancy’s Reformed scholasticism as products of the Enlightenment with its “ideals of rational certainty and unshakable foundations.” Among the conservatives, this is said to have led to an overemphasis on the propositional character of revelation and scripture and to a downplaying of the historical location of both reader and text. These emphases further bequeathed to evangelicalism an unhealthy obsession with discovering the presumably objective and unconditioned meaning of past revelation, ignoring the importance of “intelligibility, relevance, and innovation.” Inerrantists are naturally suspicious, fearful of voicing any “new ideas which might possibly be ‘worldly,’ merely

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139 Ibid., 14.
human ideas.” On this account, the movement has traditionally shied away from recognizing the primacy of narrative in scripture. “A unique vehicle of truth, it is neglected by the rational-propositional method because it is too open-ended.” This neglect, however, has caused evangelicals either to miss or paste over the immense richness, mystery, and multidimensionality of God’s self-revelation in scripture.

What evangelicals need to pay attention to, Pinnock tells us in his follow-up article, “Biblical Texts – Past and Future Meanings,” is the trajectory upon which the story of God’s salvation has set us. The typical evangelical language of “application” simply does not capture the type of contextualization demanded by the hermeneutical task. Through scripture, God must be allowed to engage our experience and our context, “to challenge our very being and impact our world.” This means that we cannot remain content with the authorial intent or past meaning of a text. We must instead “cultivate an eye and an ear, not only for the meanings of human authors in their various historical settings, but also for the directions and trajectories that belong to the flow of God’s historical redemptive project.” Pinnock goes on to explain that we do not do this from some serene, disinterested position located outside the flow of that divine history, but from within the very midst of it. We too are part of the story. “We want to avoid,” he

140 Ibid., 29. Pinnock locates the context of much of this fear in evangelicalism’s past encounters with an overbearing and equally destructive liberalism. The “specter of liberalism…has made us suspicious of new suggestions and even grumpy and mean-spirited at times. A new idea often gets greeted with fear-filled phrases like: ‘This is a dangerous trend’ or ‘Does this cross over the line?’ We seem to have lost the ability to believe that in some respects theology might actually move closer to the truth in our day.” Ibid., 22.

141 Ibid., 15.

142 Clark Pinnock, “Biblical Texts – Past and Future Meanings,” Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society 43, no. 1 (March 2000): 72. This is a slightly revised version of his earlier article for the Wesleyan Theological Society. See Clark Pinnock, “Biblical Texts: Past and Future Meanings,” Wesleyan Theological Journal 34, no. 2 (Fall 1999): 136-51. It is a testament to how enduring the pull of our intellectual formation and our earlier conceptions of reality are that Pinnock can still lapse into the language of authorial intent this late in the game. As we will see, Pinnock’s reference here to the “meanings of human authors” is effectively a misnomer.
warns, “being like the scribes of Jesus’ day who studied the text carefully but were blind to the ways in which its message was being worked out in their own generation.”

They were Scriptural positivists, as it were, in relation to the past meanings of texts. They were not sensitive to the fact that the reason we engage the narratives of Scripture is not just to refresh our memories but also because the history of salvation of which they speak is not finished and we anticipate greater actualizations of the promises of God.143

We are like participants in a Shakespearian five-act play, Pinnock tells us using a favorite image borrowed from N. T. Wright, who have lost the script of the final act and must now improvise an ending, one that remains faithful to the earlier acts yet does not fail to move the story forward creatively and with an eye always on the direction of the Holy Spirit.144

That Christian hermeneutics should function in terms of a trajectory of meaning is not, in one sense, an especially novel idea. It is more or less how biblical interpretation has always worked, though our attention has rarely been drawn to it and we have more often than not explained the peculiarities of past interpretive moves along other, presumably more orthodox, lines. In his 1997 address, Pinnock pointed to earlier theological debates over slavery, women in ministry, and the salvation of the unevangelized as examples of the larger community of faith “digging deeper into the flow of Scripture, tuning one’s ears to the Spirit, and opening the heart wider to the ways

143 Ibid., 73.
144 Ibid. See also Clark Pinnock and Robert Brow, Unbounded Love: A Good News Theology for the 21st Century (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1994), 164. N. T. Wright, whose popularity as a theological pacesetter for American evangelicalism has grown immensely over the past decade and a half, proposes the image of a five-act play in (among numerous other places now) The New Testament and the People of God (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 1992), 139-41. His description of our improvisation of the fifth act is helpful: “A good fifth act will show a proper final development, not merely a repetition, of what went before. Nevertheless, there will be a rightness, a fittingness, about certain actions and speeches, about certain final moves in the drama, which will in one sense be self-authenticating, and in another gain authentication from their coherence with, their making sense of, the ‘authoritative’ previous text.” Ibid., 141.
of God among us now.”  

As participants in God’s own story we partner with his Spirit as he leads the world and its people into a fuller divine communion. We are therefore scripturally and liturgically shaped people, made wise by attention to the actions of God and his people in history, and called to act according to this inherited wisdom.

The question of biblical authority finds itself radically reimagined when viewed in terms of this “hermeneutic of trajectory.” In particular, it takes on an explicitly moral character. To be faithful to the Bible and its God is to live in a way that can be said to fit its story. “The central authority of the Bible resides in its witness to God’s world-transforming revelational activity culminating in him, and it is its character as story that opens the text to future meanings.” Earlier in *Tracking the Maze*, Pinnock had made the same point using the language of heresy and orthodoxy. We will understand heresy best, he reasoned, when we view it not as the rejection of certain biblically or logically derived doctrines, but as “something that ruins the story.” Orthodoxy, on the other hand, should be defined as that which “keeps the story alive and devises new ways of telling it.” This is an expressly dynamic view of biblical authority. “When we appeal to the authority of the Bible, we place ourselves within the world of the text and have to imaginatively improvise (as it were) the themes that we hear.” Needless to say, theology becomes here a never-ending task; it is constantly seeking to retell the story in new historical and cultural contexts. “Though the faith is once delivered, the Church has

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146 “The Spirit helps us to shape our lives in obedience [sic] to the gospel as we confront new circumstances. The ethical direction is clear from the moral vision of the gospel, but not all the applications of the vision. Living within a world shaped by the Jesus’ [sic] story, the community of faith wrestles with challenges of understanding and enactment. How we respond in the obedience of faith is not a function of written instructions only, but also of a Spirit-discerned and empowered conformity to Jesus Christ.” Ibid., 18.
not grasped its significance completely – nor will she until the end of time. We are on the interpretive road, not at the end of the journey, and we pray to the Lord for ever more fruitful meaning.”

Pinnock admits that there is a significant measure of uncertainty inherent in all of this. Depending on the Spirit to guide us into new meanings not necessarily identical with the old is risky. Notably absent in Pinnock’s discussion of a trajectory of meaning is any indication, as in The Scripture Principle, that the primary task of hermeneutics is to discover the authorial intent hidden deep in the text. His objective safety net is gone. In fact, Pinnock even speaks of the need to keep open the “revelatory activity of God” so that the “process of ever fresh interpretation can go on.” He likewise insists that our main focus should be on the contextual and correlational side of things as distinct from the intent of the author. Instead of a hermeneutical spiral directed toward a static endpoint, Pinnock here offers a hermeneutic of openness, even a genuine hermeneutical circle in which Spirit, reader, and text (and ultimately community) engage in continual dialogue and discernment.

There are, of course, safeguards against any runaway relativism, as Pinnock explains in Flame of Love (1996). The scriptural text itself places its own restrictions on interpretation. As the inspired record of revelation, the Bible “enjoys a privileged position” and indicates “the boundaries of our habitation.” But equally important is the church, including its past tradition and its present community, for it is in the church past

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151 Ibid., 76.
152 Ibid., 75. Pinnock came to favor the term “engagement” rather than correlation, though it would seem to have as much as anything else to do with his growing emphasis on revelation as personal rather than propositional. See Pinnock, “Theological Method,” 207.
153 Pinnock, Flame of Love, 229.
and present that the Spirit works to bring about God’s purposes in the world. Pinnock can therefore speak comfortably of an inspiration of text and reader. “Past inspiration secures Scripture, and present inspiration empowers readers.”¹⁵⁴ To ignore the first is to fall into heresy; to ignore the second is to promote a dead orthodoxy. The development of doctrine is thus ecclesial, charismatic, and mystical; as such, it demands on our part a certain measure of humility and trust:

We trust the Spirit to help us continue in truth. Our hope lies in the mystery of the Spirit, who is present in the church. Formal criteria and offices can help protect us but do not guarantee anything. They are gifts of God, not substitutes for the Spirit. Let every Christian think and act as a responsible person and seek truth within the communion of saints.¹⁵⁵

**Risking an Open Future**

At the Evangelical Theological Society’s annual meeting in November 2003, a record number of theologians and pastors – at the time, thoroughly exercised over the question of open theism’s compatibility with inerrancy – voted by a measure of 432 to 212 not to remove Clark Pinnock from membership in the society he had served for more than three decades. With regard to John Sanders, a fellow open theist, the outcome was less encouraging: 388 for removal, 231 against. Needing a two-thirds majority, Sanders avoided expulsion by a mere three tenths of a percent – or less than two votes.¹⁵⁶ Bruce Ware called the result “chastening.”¹⁵⁷

¹⁵⁴ Ibid., 230.
¹⁵⁵ Ibid., 235.
¹⁵⁶ “Reports Relating to the Fifty-Fifth Annual Meeting of the Society,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 47, no. 1 (March 2004): 167, 171. The total attendance for the conference was nearly 2400, at that time a record. Obviously, the amount of actual voting members was less.
The issue before the ETS that year was said to be strictly whether or not Pinnock and Sanders had violated biblical inerrancy as detailed in the society’s doctrinal statement. The vote was ostensibly then not about open theism’s hermeneutical soundness. But, as with the Robert Gundry affair twenty years earlier, the real issue had always been this. The focus had always concerned the interpretation of specific biblical texts. When a group of charter members first joined a few others to raise the question of open theism’s compatibility with inerrancy at the society’s gathering in 2000, the denial of God’s exhaustive foreknowledge was their explicit concern. The ETS executive committee even went so far as to put out a statement affirming the traditional view of classical theism, that God did indeed have “complete, accurate and infallible knowledge of all events past, present and future including all future decisions and actions of free moral agents.”

At the next year’s meeting, the ETS as a whole voted the resolution into its bylaws with a seventy percent majority – a clear statement of its stance on the matter. However, in an interesting and important move, those present attempted to distance the vote, focused as it was on affirming the society’s position on God’s omniscience, from any stated connection with inerrancy. Considering their explicit concern for biblical inerrancy (per the society’s doctrinal statement) and the concentration of that year’s debate on the compatibility of inerrancy with open theism’s view of divine omniscience, the meaningfulness of such a distinction is puzzling. The repeated insistence that inerrancy be kept separate from hermeneutics and what the text actually means may have

its political benefits, but it effectively amounts to willful ignorance, even self-delusion, to proceed as if taking a particular interpretive position does not presume an equally particular stance on inerrancy. Even Bruce Ware, the chosen representative of the classical theist side in the debate, had argued a mere day before the vote that “divine exhaustive foreknowledge is essential to upholding God’s character and even the inerrancy of Scripture itself.”\(^{160}\) As we have seen, inerrancy cannot help but come coupled with hermeneutical assumptions of this kind.

With regard to that point, the problem with denying God’s exhaustive foreknowledge – according to Ware, whose talk that year was subsequently published in the society’s journal and followed by responses from Clark Pinnock, John Sanders, and Gregory Boyd – surrounds the implications it has on the character, purposes, and work of God, the accuracy and dependability of scripture, the truth and assurance of salvation, and the practice of the Christian life.\(^{161}\) There exists a harmony among these in Ware’s telling, one that points to their common origin in a more fundamental desire for certainty. The God of open theism can neither know the future nor control it. Not knowing precisely how things will turn out, he cannot offer good, much less perfect, advice, nor can he even be said to make the right decisions himself. Not being able to control the future, if only because he gives so much space and freedom to human decisions, he cannot insure that his plans will be accomplished. They are “intrinsically and

\(^{160}\) Ibid., 183. See Bruce Ware, “Defining Evangelicalism’s Boundaries Theologically: Is Open Theism Evangelical?” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 45, no. 2 (June 2002): 193-212.

\(^{161}\) Ware, “Defining Evangelicalism’s Boundaries Theologically,” 195.
unavoidably fallible and faulty.”162 And, because God cannot know the future, we are left wondering about our own contingency. Is our very existence left to chance?163

A God who does not know the future is a God who cannot make good on his promises, whether that a certain minor prophecy will be fulfilled as stated164 or whether the redemption of the world and our personal salvation will be completed.165 Moreover, this is a God who inevitably falls into lies, which seriously implicates any revelation of his as something not to be trusted.166 In the end, what we have is a God in whose counsel for living we cannot trust, in whose deliverance from evil we cannot hope, and on whose promises of salvation we cannot stand – all because God is said not to have a certain knowledge of all future events and decisions.167 If God’s foreknowledge is not certain, then why should we trust him?

In the Prologue, I offered Daniel Webster Whittle’s classic hymn, “I Know Whom I Have Believed,” as an alternative to the type of faith that trusts in the rational certainties provided by an inerrant Bible with its catalog of true propositions. Whittle’s hymn speaks instead of a faith that trusts in the very faithfulness of Christ himself, and this in spite of – even because of – the manifold uncertainties of life. The refrain is worth repeating here:

_But I know Whom I have believed,_
_And am persuaded that He is able_
_To keep that which I’ve committed_
_Unto Him against that day._168

But, if Bruce Ware is correct, then it would seem that what persuades us that God is actually able “to keep that which I’ve committed” is not his character as an all-powerful,

162 Ibid., 198. See also ibid., 202.
163 Ibid., 196.
164 Ibid., 202.
165 Explicitly ibid., 206, but this is the general theme throughout pp. 203-208.
166 Ibid., 203.
167 Ibid., 208-9.
168 Whittle, “I Know Whom I Have Believed,” no. 527.
good, loving, and merciful God. Nor is it even, should we grant the point, that God has exhaustive foreknowledge. No, what Ware suggests actually persuades us is our own presumed knowledge that the future is settled, objective, historical fact. Whether divinely determined or “simply” foreknown, it does not matter; the future is a foregone conclusion. As Ware says himself, “If even God cannot now know the outcome of his purposes with free creatures, we certainly cannot be sure whether those plans and purposes will prevail.”

Pinnock understood this, but he responded to the risk entailed quite differently:

In the area of the doctrine of God, there are fears to overcome. Besides the standard evangelical fear of theological change that comes from the liberal trauma, there is the fear involved in the area of trust. Little trust is needed if God is a metaphysical iceberg, but a good deal is needed if there is a living God. One of the attractions of classical theism is its view of history as all sewed up, but it is not an attraction we should be encouraging. God calls us to follow him on a pilgrimage into the open future.

Contingency. Relativity. Temporality. Autonomy. Gilkey had given Pinnock a vocabulary for what his own experience had taught him: that history is awash with various and innumerable uncertainties and that risk is an inescapable part of daily life. No wonder modern theology, at least in the twentieth century, suffered from an acute case of nihilistic fervor. A young Clark faced with these concerns had found hope in certain

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169 Ware, “Defining Evangelicalism’s Boundaries Theologically,” 209.
170 Pinnock, “Evangelical Theologians Facing the Future,” 28. Pinnock had made a similar diagnosis much earlier, then with regard to evangelical uneasiness with a dynamic Spirit and the return of charismatic Christianity: “I suspect that the greatest hindrance to renewal in this area is our fear of the unknown. We worry about what other people will think of us. We worry about what God might do if we were radically open to him. We want to have things under control and hence we worry about situations in which the agenda is left open for the Spirit to lead and move. If fear is our problem, we had better deal with it directly. If the Holy Spirit is in, blueprints are out. If we want him to lead us, we must stop giving all the directions to ourselves. There has to be a letting go. There has to be openness and expectancy in the presence of the Spirit who is free to act when and where he wills.” Pinnock, Three Keys to Spiritual Renewal, 46. Pinnock explained in The Scripture Principle that the main reason he argued for strict inerrancy in his early years was because he wanted it to be true. “I claimed that the Bible taught total inerrancy because I hoped that it did – I wanted it to.” Pinnock, The Scripture Principle, 58.
171 Gilkey, Naming the Whirlwind, 40-58.
knowledge given miraculously and objectively via a “word from outside.” The older Pinnock, chastened by experience and enlivened by the Spirit, looked elsewhere – still to scripture but also through it and alongside it, toward a dynamic communion with the Spirit and the saints. Here was a hope that embraced the risk of an open future of creative possibility, guided by a living God active in the warp and woof of history.

In 1995, a forum on open theism held in the pages of Christianity Today asked whether God had indeed been held hostage by philosophy. It was a question that could cut both ways. Pinnock, of course, argued that classical theism had been hijacked by Hellenistic conceptions of God as actus purus. His opponents returned the favor, decrying his appropriation of modern philosophical thought, especially in the form of process theology. Pinnock never denied this accusation. He instead celebrated the fact that modern historical consciousness helped cut through the hold Hellenistic philosophy had on Christian theology and lead it back to belief in a personal dynamic God active in history. “Sooner or later,” Pinnock prodded his fellow evangelicals, “we will have to join modern experience…Theism cannot continue to do its work against the horizon of ancient metaphysics.”

Pinnock’s pilgrimage had brought him to a point where he could no longer deny the critical role experience played in the theological task. No longer were tradition, reason, and experience mere tools used to better understand scripture. True, one could

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172 The language here is also Gilkey’s. For example, “Consequently time and history have replaced the eternal order of nature as the loci of human significance, and modern man has become above all conscious of his ‘historicity,’ of his openness to the future, of the creative possibilities of his freedom, and so of the importance of the category of hope for the historical future.” Ibid., 56.


175 Pinnock, “Evangelical Theologians Facing the Future,” 27. The order of the quote has been rearranged.
legitimately speak of the Bible as being the “sole infallible norm,” but all four functioned as equals in their cooperative attempt to understand and communicate divine revelation.\textsuperscript{176} \textit{Sola scriptura}, as traditionally understood, had collapsed under the weight of historical consciousness. It had been exposed as a modern objectivist’s ruse – a clever, rationalistic fiction – and we had best be done with it.\textsuperscript{177}

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\textsuperscript{176} Pinnock, \textit{Tracking the Maze}, 71-2.
\textsuperscript{177} Pinnock, “Theological Method,” 204-5. Pinnock had suggested as much as early as \textit{The Scripture Principle}: “Slogans aside, the Bible is not ‘sola’ among the factors that influence us. No one can leap over twenty centuries and grasp the text uninfluenced by the understanding of previous generations. Radical biblicism is a delusion. Very often it is the cloak for absolutizing the theology of the last century.” Pinnock, \textit{The Scripture Principle}, 217. By the late 1990s, Pinnock could thus point to two distinct camps within evangelicalism, each taking shape, it would seem, during the Battle for the Bible. One group he referred to as “simple biblicists;” the other he called “philosophical biblicists.” The distinction between them roughly corresponded to that between postmodernists and modernists. “In a day when many think that the objectivity ideal is impossible,” Pinnock explained, “philosophical biblicists hold to it.” Pinnock, “Theological Method,” 203.
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If we cannot trust the Church to have understood Jesus, then we have lost Jesus: and the resources of modern scholarship will not help us to find him.

Andrew Louth, Discerning the Mystery

On the sixteenth of August 2010, the day after Clark Pinnock died, Al Mohler offered a fitting eulogy for his fellow Baptist, coming as it did from the general of the fundamentalist takeover at Louisville’s Southern Seminary and one of the gatekeepers of today’s Reformed evangelicalism. Though he never mentioned Pinnock by name, focusing instead on the figures of Peter Enns and Kenton Sparks, the timing could not have been more perfect. Sparks and Enns had both recently argued for similar incarnational approaches to the doctrine of scripture, each passionately calling evangelicals to a more honest – and less comfortable – understanding of the nature and function of the Bible.

Recalling an essay written by Jim Packer twenty years earlier, Mohler describes twenty-first century evangelicalism as “entering a new phase in the battle over the Bible’s truthfulness and authority.” The war had not ended; it had hardly even quieted down. “As

1 Louth, Discerning the Mystery, 93.
a matter of fact,” Mohler tells us, “there seems to be a renewed effort to forge an evangelical identity apart from the claim that the Bible is totally truthful and without error.” The difference is that today’s “new evangelical revisionists” are more honest; they outright admit that the Bible errs and advise fellow evangelicals to accept this as a necessary consequence of a historical text given to a historical people.  

Mohler is not alone in his efforts to keep *sola scriptura* and biblical inerrancy at the top of evangelicalism’s and authentic Christianity’s agenda. The Evangelical Theological Society dedicated its annual meeting in 2013 to the question, asking what the society’s relationship with inerrancy should be now that the twenty-first century has entered full swing. Of the three plenary addresses given that November, only one suggested that the term might have outworn its usefulness, and it came from the lone historian in the group, which by now should hardly be surprising. As it happens, that a disciplinary divide – particularly a fascination with abstract philosophical rationalizations rather than concrete historical complexities – can make sense of much of the debate over inerrancy was made decisively clear in another of the plenary addresses that year.  

In his review of the recent literature on inerrancy, D. A. Carson – Research Professor of New Testament at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School – offered a bewildering and yet typical assessment of Christian Smith’s *The Bible Made Impossible*,

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3 Mohler, “The Inerrancy of Scripture.”

4 Ben Witherington III, “The Truth Will Out: An Historian’s Perspective on the Inerrancy Controversy,” (paper presented at the 65th annual meeting for the Evangelical Theological Society, Baltimore, Maryland, November 19-21, 2013). Witherington made this point explicitly during the subsequent roundtable discussion with Don Carson and John Frame, the other two plenary speakers. Carson is a New Testament scholar, Frame a systematic theologian and apologist. That Witherington questioned the usefulness and general propriety of the term does not mean that he sought to abandon the concept altogether. He suggested returning to the more general designations of the Bible as trustworthy and true, which offer greater space for questioning whether or not the biblical authors might have had a different definition of error than most moderns do. That being said, Witherington continued to be adamant about the primary importance of discerning the authorial intent of the text; he simply thought the term inerrancy had become so convoluted as to be a hindrance rather than help here.
claiming that it simply proves that Smith makes a much better sociologist than he does a theologian.\(^5\) While Carson mentioned little else about the book or Smith in general, the reasoning behind such a critique seems plain. Christian Smith and Don Carson have two widely different conceptions of what makes a doctrine viable.

A sociologist by trade, Smith judges such claims according to their acceptance and effectiveness within the believing community. While he does not deny that biblical inerrancy and similar doctrines should be intellectually respectable, their actual viability depends upon their meaningfulness and application in the life of the church and its people. Their practical uselessness and meaninglessness should, according to Smith, in turn force us to question their intellectual coherency. Carson, though certainly not unconcerned about the practical viability of Christian doctrine, does not grant as much importance to its usefulness in the life of the church. The doctrine of biblical inerrancy can be intellectually coherent without being practically useful or meaningful (at least, he might say, for the time being). In fact, intellectual coherency has its own meaningfulness, despite any apparent failure of application. The focus lies on whether a doctrine is believed, not on the change it works (or fails to work) in the community and its people.

The difference here is actually more than just disciplinary. Don Carson and Christian Smith disagree fundamentally about the function of scripture in theological reflection, and this difference is nowhere more evident than in Carson’s critique of The Bible Made Impossible. Consider first Smith’s own assessment of the appeal to sola scriptura and biblical inerrancy in light of evangelicalism’s diversity of interpretations:

Even among presumably well-intentioned readers – including many evangelical biblicists – the Bible, after their very best efforts to understand it, says and teaches very different things about most significant topics. My suggestion is that it becomes beside the point to assert a text to be solely authoritative or inerrant, for instance, when, lo and behold, it gives rise to a host of many divergent teachings on important matters.\textsuperscript{6}

Here Smith suggests that, on the ground, inerrancy does not do what it is supposed to do. Affirmations of biblical inerrancy, intended as they typically are to procure an objective certainty that what God tells us in the Bible is true and authoritative, are effectively rendered meaningless precisely because we cannot agree on what, indeed, it is that God is actually trying to tell us. If inerrancy is a claim about scriptural meaning and not just about biblical words – and inerrantists do claim this – then the doctrine is undermined, as noted in the Prologue, by the undeniable fact of our “pervasive interpretive pluralism.”

God’s revelation of himself and his will in the Bible may be inerrant and thus absolutely authoritative, but that does nothing for us if we do not know the actual meaning of the content of that revelation.

What Smith has placed his finger on here is the concrete application of the doctrine of inerrancy within the church – certainly within its preaching and teaching, but most pointedly in its communal and social life. The viability of a doctrine such as this is proven or disproven by the work it does in everyday life. This is particularly pertinent with regard to inerrancy, which arose out of a perceived need to combat what many understood to be the doubting, if not outright abandoning, of traditional social and ethical norms. Inerrancy’s understood purpose was particularly practical, and it was in this purpose that it most evidently failed. The failure of inerrancy to work effectively in concrete application within the church leads Smith to question the viability of the

\textsuperscript{6} Smith, \textit{The Bible Made Impossible}, x-xi.
doctrine as a theological construct in general. It is this reciprocal move that Professor Carson found illegitimate. He did not deny Smith’s sociological claims; he only suggested that they had little, if any, effect upon the viability of the inerrancy doctrine.

As an intellectual enterprise dealing with abstract propositional truths discovered in a frozen text, evangelical theology has little room for considerations drawn from human experience. Indeed, the pervasiveness of interpretive pluralism in evangelicalism and much more so in Christianity at-large only serves to reinforce inerrantists’ insistence that we are suffering from a comprehensive abandonment of biblical authority. As we have seen, this has been one of the major struggles of the Battle for the Bible, what evangelical rhetoric has consistently referred to as the incursion of subjective human desire. When the desire for certainty and the fear of losing it become the driving force of a hermeneutical project bent on conserving traditional beliefs, it is simply too easy to write off alternative interpretations as the result of changing cultural trends or hidden personal motivations. While the history of modern Christianity has shown this critique to have some warrant, by sticking to their guns so doggedly evangelicals have masked – even to themselves – how indebted their own interpretations are to sources other than scripture.7

7 There is a tragic irony to this indebtedness. While it is not that uncommon to hear evangelicals expounding a platonic conception of reality, it is less common to hear them admitting it to be a presupposed philosophical grid for all of their thinking on scripture. What admissions we do receive come all too often coupled with flimsy claims that the Bible itself teaches a “platonic” conception of reality, which Plato either came to coincidently or simply learned from the writings of Moses. Besides, to admit that our entire grid for understanding reality, history, scripture, etc. is predicated on a particular philosophical construct requires that we either baptize that philosophy as itself inerrant or hold much more lightly any claims we make out of it. Otherwise, we are only building philosophical sand castles. They may look like actual castles made of stone and mortar, but they can never stand up to the high tide of lived reality. For a glimpse at how becoming conscious of the philosophical grids we hold affects the very questions we ask and the solutions we provide with regard to the struggles of historical life, see Richard Rorty’s perceptive and critically honest assessment of Allan Bloom’s The Closing of the American Mind, which appeals with remarkably evangelical resonances to the saving power of platonic philosophy. (“If we just get our philosophy right!” sounds a lot like “If we just get our Bible right!”) Richard Rorty, “That Old-Time
With this in mind, we should add that the Battle for the Bible reflects as much as anything the powerful tendency a desire for certainty has toward organizing our thoughts along black and white binaries. But the color of history is gray, and it gravitates toward complexity, not simplicity. It is no wonder evangelicals have persistently sought to escape history and so to free themselves from its apparent relativism, as we saw most vividly in the early Pinnock’s appeal to God’s “word from outside.” This, however, is to misunderstand what is meant by the complexities, even the relativities, of history.

Evangelicals all too commonly define “relativity” or “relativism” in terms of a rank, unmitigated human autonomy, something akin to the belief that we are the masters of our fates, the captains of our souls. But, even supposed arch-relativists Richard Rorty and Paul Ricoeur deny that relativism, whether in the hermeneutics of history or text, is ever so absolute. Unadulterated relativism, Rorty explains, is a constructed fiction located nowhere outside the heuristic confines of the lecture hall and the armchairs of nihilistic philosophers. Even today in the throes of postmodernism, no one is a thoroughgoing relativist, just like no one is a true solipsist.

Ricoeur agrees. When it comes to the interpretation of texts, he insists that while discovery of the authorial intent is a modern fiction, this does not mean that all interpretations are equal. The text does pose limits upon its interpretation, what he calls a “limited field of possible constructions.” “It is always possible,” he assures us, “to argue

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Philosophy,” *New Republic* 198, no. 14 (April 4, 1988): 28-33. If his title is any indication, Rorty found Bloom’s abstract philosophical remedy for the ills of late twentieth-century America to have parallels in contemporary evangelical thought.

8 Daniel Rodgers captures the binary well: “To stake one’s claims in certainties was to frame the alternative as an abyss of nothingness. Encounter with truth, on the one hand: the quicksands of relativism on the other.” Rodgers, *Age of Fracture*, 177.

9 I remember struggling as an evangelical teenager to appreciate William Ernest Henley’s “Invictus,” so seemingly drenched as it was in an anti-God, anti-Bible humanistic relativism.

for or against an interpretation, to confront interpretations, to arbitrate between them and to seek agreement, even if this agreement remains beyond our immediate reach.\footnote{Ricoeur, \textit{Interpretation Theory}, 79.} There is little simple or settled, much less certain, about locating the authority of an interpretation in the agreement of a living community in conversation, itself necessarily contingent and transient. But as servants of a historical church bound to a particular space and time, this is our task, and one which we cannot escape.

\section*{Losing Jesus}

\textquotedblleft The preachers and priests seem to have [God] so fenced up with doctrine that the poor old Father hardly has room to act anymore. Now that they’ve got the Bible safely interpreted, the last thing they ever want is for him to speak another word, or show his hand of power in this world.\textquotedblright\footnote{Orson Scott Card, \textit{Seventh Son} (New York, NY: Tor Books, 1987), 240.} Though addressed to a fictional America of magic and mystery, Orson Scott Card’s lament – we might even call it a complaint – echoes here a critique that is becoming more and more common among the West’s and our America’s best historians and theologians, what I referred to in the Prologue as the desacralization or disenchantment of our world.\footnote{This complaint has taken on various forms and is often summarized by expressing a perceived dichotomy: nature/grace, human/divine, letter/spirit, concrete/abstract, historical/eternal, “from below”/“from above,” to list a few. Much of this difference in nomenclature can be attributed to the primary discipline addressing the issue. Key works in the discussion include Henri de Lubac’s \textit{Mystery of the Supernatural} (New York, NY: Crossroad, 1998), Marcel Gauchet’s \textit{The Disenchantment of the World: A Political History of Religion} (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997), Charles Taylor’s \textit{Modern Social Imaginaries} (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004), and Brad Gregory’s more recent \textit{The Unintended Reformation: How a Religious Revolution Secularized Society} (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012).}

Recent scholarship has shown that while the logic of Old Princeton and the doctrine of scripture it bequeathed to evangelicalism may indeed be representative of, as
Ernest Sandeen says, the rationality of the eighteenth century, that desacralization began two centuries earlier in the reforms of Luther and Calvin. In a powerful image, Alister McGrath draws attention to the implications that the iconoclastic theology driving the whitewashing of Reformed churches had upon later American Christianity. Austere buildings such as these, with their “forbidding, frigid elegance,” have not only lost their meaningfulness for today but actually point “to an absent God, a God who does not speak, a God who cannot be experienced.”

What happened? Calvin certainly did not intend to disenchant the world, to restrict the activity of God so much that he, to repeat Card, has no room to act anymore. One answer, it would seem, is what the previous chapters have consistently shown to be evangelicals’ inordinate desire for certainty. Linked as it is to an equally modern fear of subjectivity, this desire drove evangelicals to lock down their Bible under the guise of a nebulous mantra, *sola scriptura*, and so to separate it from all human influence – in other words, to free grace from nature.

Andrew Louth noted during the height of the Battle for the Bible that Protestantism’s traditional aversion to the allegorical sense, driven by the assumption that allegory suffers from a fundamental subjectivism, is reinforced by a largely unexamined appeal to *sola scriptura*. The latter, as we have seen, has prospered under the presumptuous notion that the Bible contains objective truth readily available to those with the proper hermeneutical tools. With the weight of such assumptions bearing down upon it, allegory will likely never be seen as anything other than an attempt to evade the revelation of God by replacing it with more palatable human inventions. To the modern Protestant mind, the allegorical sense simply cannot shake the stigma of heretical

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14 Alister McGrath, *Christianity’s Dangerous Idea*, 308.
“Origenism.” In allegory, God is thought to disappear from revelation, his person and will replaced by the untrustworthy image of sinful humanity.

For Louth, the truth is precisely the opposite. “The principle of sola scriptura actually leads one away from the traditional devotion to Scripture as the Word of God…Scripture is being understood as an arsenal and not as a treasury…And such an understanding leads to a false and misleading notion of the nature of Christianity as a biblical religion.”15 Christianity is not fundamentally a religion of a book, even the book, but of the incarnate Jesus Christ – a God of flesh and blood, a living person in historical space and time. This is a God not tied up in, much less reduced to, the words of the Bible, like some sort of verbal figment constructed out of extractable propositions. There is more to a person than what we can know intellectually about him; not even acquaintances are simply concepts in our minds. Louth reminds us along these lines that the apostles were the friends and followers of Jesus who traveled with him across dusty Palestinian roads – they experienced his presence, heard his living voice, broke bread with him, and watched him die and rise again. “Indeed there is something about the words of Jesus…that makes us feel that what is being communicated is deeper than mere words, deeper than any mere message.”16

Historical critical methods, whether of their classical liberal or evangelical variety, cannot communicate such a living, breathing person. Only the dynamic presence of God himself speaking in the Holy Spirit through the living tradition of the Church can do this. To know the revealing God, we must therefore enter into this conversation; we must join in hermeneutical dialogue with Christ’s Spirit whose body is the Church and

15 Louth, Discerning the Mystery, 101.
16 Ibid., 92.
whose primary medium is scripture – the goal being not communication of objectively true propositions but communion with the very person of God himself. Such a hermeneutical circle is inescapably subjective, though no less real on that account. We trust the Spirit of God to speak to his people in the here and now, to make them wise unto salvation and the ways of God’s dynamic activity in the world today.

If we learned anything from our earlier excursus into Gadamer, it was that the subject-object distinction so treasured by evangelicalism does not hold. Our own experience betrays it as a modern fiction unconscious of the shape our understanding of texts and history takes across space and time. This means, of course, that our knowledge of God is itself historically effected – or, as we put it earlier, thoroughly traditioned – and on that account inescapably risky. After all, Paul’s “unorthodox” gospel to the Gentiles seemed good not only to the Spirit, but to the Jerusalem council as well (Acts 15:28). The church, in fellowship with that Spirit, bears a responsibility to interpret and communicate God’s revelation today. It is to the communion of saints then that we look if we want to find Jesus and to understand his ways. As Louth warned us, “If we cannot trust the Church to have understood Jesus then we have lost Jesus: and the resources of modern scholarship will not help us to find him.”17 In trying to grasp God’s word so tightly, he all too often slips through our fingers. The tragic irony of the Battle for the Bible is that in evangelicals’ attempt to gain rational certainty about Christ and his church, they often ended up losing him altogether.

17 Ibid., 93.


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