

# Introduction

“If we have the Bible, why do we need theology?” That is, if Christian believers truly possess the written word of God in the biblical canon, why do they need *critical, contemporary, and constructive theologies* that go beyond the explicit wording of written revelation in Scripture? What value are creeds or confessions of faith, and what use are appeals to our traditions and spiritual forebears? Doesn’t an authoritative appeal to postcanonical doctrine call into question commonly held Christian convictions about biblical inspiration, clarity, and sufficiency?

For many in the broader ecumenical climate, these kinds of questions are bewildering, if not absurdly naïve. Those in the Roman Catholic, Anglo-Catholic, or Eastern Orthodox traditions may find the biblicist posture assumed in these types of questions unsettling because of their respective commitments to the longstanding tradition of the Church. Progressive and liberal Protestants who reject traditional views of biblical inspiration may regard the Bible as a remarkable literary collection that represents the best attempts of human authors to describe their distinctly Christian experiences of transcendence but by no means count it as the final word on faith and practice, especially in a pluralistic and post-critical culture. Questions about the necessity of constructive or systematic theology

may be atypical for the traditionalist and the progressive alike, but I encounter questions like these on a regular basis from students in my introductory theology courses and from laypeople in the churches where I serve.

I am an evangelical. Specifically, I belong to a particular brand of confessional evangelicalism shaped by historic Christianity, the Protestant Reformation, the Great Awakening, Baptist distinctives, and twentieth-century “neo-evangelicalism.” The term *evangelical* might give some readers caution or unease, but I embrace it as a central part of my identity and theological heritage. However, evangelical conviction can prompt particular challenges for how one understands the relationship between Scripture and theology, especially when addressing how the Bible relates to the historical phenomena of postcanonical doctrinal developments. This book is a positive examination of this theme—an apologia for the ongoing development of doctrine—written from a distinctly evangelical perspective.

The descriptor “evangelical” means different things for different hearers. It can take on theological, ecclesial, or sociological connotations. For some, “evangelical” is synonymous with American Christian fundamentalism. While “fundamentalism” can describe a historically significant American evangelical movement of the early twentieth century—a movement to which I am indebted in many ways—the term can also be used as a pejorative to describe a particular anti-intellectual and separatist mindset. Most evangelical theologians have gone to great lengths to distance themselves from this

perception.<sup>1</sup> It is my recommendation to refrain using this term unless describing those who apply the term to themselves.

For others, “evangelical” is associated with religiously motivated political activism, typically of the most politically and socially conservative variety. For many, evangelicals represent everything wrong with American religious culture: hackneyed conceptions of piety, judgmental attitudes, cultural and intellectual obtuseness, and high cholesterol from gorging themselves on Chick-fil-A sandwiches. Even among themselves, evangelicals disagree about how to define the term, as theologians, historians, churchmen, and sociologists within the broader tradition devote entire tomes to the question “What is an evangelical?” On occasion, these conversations deteriorate into ecclesial playground fracas over which evangelical group is the “most evangelical” or rousing rounds of “My favorite theologian could beat up your favorite theologian.” Those sorts of debates, though always entertaining and sometimes even worth having, are not my primary concern in this study.

When I use the term “evangelical,” I mean those who prioritize the proclamation of the gospel (good news, *euangelion*) of Jesus Christ.<sup>2</sup>

1. The formal distinction between early twentieth-century Christian fundamentalism and evangelicalism (or neo-evangelicalism) inaugurated with Carl F. H. Henry, *The Uneasy Conscience of Modern Fundamentalism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1947). Helpful histories of and introductions to American Christian fundamentalism include George M. Marsden, *Fundamentalism and American Culture*, rev. ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006); idem., *Understanding Fundamentalism and Evangelicalism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1990); Joel A. Carpenter, *Revive Us Again: The Reawakening of American Fundamentalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999); D. G. Hart, *That Old-Time Religion in Modern America: Evangelical Protestantism in the Twentieth Century* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 2003); and Richard J. Mouw, *The Smell of Sawdust: What Evangelicals Can Learn From Their Fundamentalist Heritage* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2000).
2. This definition takes its basic shape from the “Bebbington Quadrilateral” presented in David W. Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain: A History from the 1730s to the 1980s* (London: Routledge, 1989), 2–3 and other models found in Alister E. McGrath, *Evangelicalism and the Future of Christianity* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1995), 55–56; R. Albert Mohler, “Confessional Evangelicalism,” in *Four Views on the Spectrum of Evangelicalism*, ed. Andrew David Naselli and Collin Hansen (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2011), 68–96.

With historic Christianity, evangelicals insist that all human persons are sinners in need of salvation, and that this great salvation comes exclusively through repentance and personal faith in Christ and his *atoning work* on the cross. Evangelicals stress the need for *conversion*, the need for persons to turn from a life of displeasing a holy God to a life of being remade in Christ's likeness. With an inherited theological legacy from the Protestant Reformers, evangelicals deem *justification by faith* an essential tenet of their shared communion. Throughout their history, evangelicals have also stressed the importance of *activism*, of putting their belief in the gospel's transforming power into action. Evangelicals believe that God is in the business of redemption and reconciliation through Christ's atoning work on the cross and personal and social transformation through the *power and presence of the Holy Spirit*. Simply put, we have a share in the ministry of reconciliation as "ambassadors for Christ" through whom "God is making his appeal" (2 Cor. 5:20).

Most importantly for the present study, evangelicals uniformly embrace some variety of *biblicism*. This term, as we shall see, can have both positive and negative connotations depending on the type of "biblicism" utilized. Here, I am simply using the term in a general sense to describe an *unwavering commitment to the authority of the Bible* practiced by evangelicals. To say that Scripture is important for evangelicals is a serious case of understatement. A "high" view of Scripture is an essential identity marker and social marker for confessional evangelicalism. Evangelicals contend that the biblical canon is the written word of God and the supreme and unrivaled authority in matters of faith and practice. Yet there is a lot of confusion about what evangelicals mean by terms like *authority*, *sufficiency*, *inspiration*, *infallibility*, and *inerrancy*. There is also a lot of misunderstanding about how evangelicals read and interpret

Scripture. Throughout this book, I hope to clarify some of these issues for readers both inside and outside of evangelicalism, but a few preliminary remarks here might be helpful.

First, all evangelicals affirm the supreme authority of Scripture in faith and practice. We likewise agree on the material and formal sufficiency of Scripture. This doctrine (designated *sola scriptura* in the Protestant Reformation) does not mean that the Bible is the only tool in a theologian's belt or that it is a depository of all human knowledge. Clearly, as a collection of ancient Semitic literature devoted to religious instruction, the Bible was not intended to detail contemporary economic theory, the history of the Spanish-American War, neuroscience, or quantum mechanics. But evangelicals insist that the Bible contains the most important information that can possibly be known: all the revelatory "material" necessary for knowledge of salvation and a vibrant, personal relationship with God. Namely, the Bible gives its readers or hearers access to the gospel of Jesus Christ. With its histories, its precepts, its oracles, its songs and prayers, its sage advice, its letters, and its dreams and visions, Scripture supplies Christian believers with the overarching story that shapes their collective worldview: a story of creation, fall, covenant, redemption, and consummation. Evangelicals believe that the Bible is the principal means by which people can know and understand God's will for their lives.<sup>3</sup>

The evangelical commitment to biblical authority is not, as many of its critics often decry, "bibliolatry." We do not serve a "paper pope" or attribute to the inspired texts any kind of independent authority. Books cannot "possess" or "exercise" authority, nor can

3. Some evangelicals in the Reformed tradition take this one step further, embracing a form of *cessationism* that denies any and all revelation apart from the written word of God in Scripture. The divines of the Westminster Confession express an early form of this cessationism when they write that "those former ways of God's revealing His will unto His people [particularly prophecy] being now ceased" (The Westminster Confession of Faith, 1.1).

they “speak.” When the ink hits the page at Bible printing presses, no transubstantiation occurs; the letters do not take on magical qualities. Words and sentences are merely instruments, complex aggregates of spoken and written signs utilized by a speaker or author to address hearers or readers. The Bible does not “say” anything of its own accord. Such personification makes for strange syntax and even stranger doctrines of revelation. Rather, evangelicals, with the consensus of Christian believers for the past two millennia, recognize that *biblical authority is God’s authority*. The divinely inspired and human words of Scripture serve as the primary instrument or vehicle of divine authority in the world today.

Second, most American evangelicals, particularly in the strand of confessional evangelicalism to which I subscribe, affirm explicitly or affirm something akin to the plenary-verbal inspiration of Scripture. This theory is more about the *nature of Scripture* itself than it does the *process or mode of inspiration*: “all Scripture” is “inspired by God” (2 Tim. 3:16). Evangelicals ground their understanding of God’s mediated authority in Scripture in their idea that “the whole of Scripture and all its parts, down to the very words of the original, were given by divine inspiration.”<sup>4</sup> This does not mean, as some might erroneously assume, that evangelicals believe the Bible dropped out of heaven, inscribed on golden plates. Nor does this mean, as many of our fundamentalist brothers and sisters confidently assert, that the authors of Scripture were merely amanuenses or secretaries jotting down what God audibly told them (though there are specific occasions in prophetic literature where this appears to be the case). Rather, evangelicals assert that God utilized “the distinctive personalities and literary styles of the writers whom He had chosen and prepared” and deny “that God, in causing these writers to use the

4. International Council on Biblical Inerrancy, *The Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy* (1978), Article VI.

very words that He chose, overrode their personalities.”<sup>5</sup> Evangelicals reject a revelatory docetism that denies the human personalities, literary conventions, and life situations of biblical texts. We believe that the Bible, though verbally the written word of God, is concurrently and concursively a very human collection of writings, shaped by its time and place in history.<sup>6</sup> God providentially has inspired all of the human words of the Bible through various means and methods.

Advocates of the plenary-verbal theory recognize (1) the use of historically-bound human personalities and literary conventions to convey a perfect divine disclosure and (2) the sovereign, guiding hand of God working in and through the process to produce results that can truly be called the written word of God. As John Calvin (1509–1564) notes, the “hidden God” (*deus absconditus*) has spoken through human languages, personalities, and concepts.<sup>7</sup> Calvin further compares this revelatory act of self-abasement to the overly simplistic and nuanced way that young mothers and fathers talk to their babies (an image that this new parent finds particularly amusing).<sup>8</sup> This act of divine accommodation is not an accommodation to error, but rather a necessary revelatory accommodation to “bridge the gap if communicator and audience do not share the same language, the same culture or the same experiences.”<sup>9</sup>

Plenary-verbal theorists stress that the God who inspired these texts may have used different methods with different authors (e.g., audible speech or visions in prophetic literature, historical research

5. ICBI, *The Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy*, Article VIII.

6. J. I. Packer, “Fundamentalism” and the Word of God (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1958), 80–83.

7. John Calvin *Institutes of the Christian Religion* 1.13.1.

8. John Calvin *Commentary on Genesis* 1.16

9. John H. Walton and D. Brent Sandy, *The Lost World of Scripture: Ancient Literary Culture and Biblical Authority* (Grand Rapids, MI: InterVarsity, 2013), 43.

and testimony in the composition of the four Gospels and in Acts) but ultimately contend the final forms of biblical books are tantamount to the written word of God. Unlike those in theological streams influenced by neo-orthodoxy, most confessional evangelicals hold that the Bible is not merely a record of revelation but also the primary means of God's self-revelation today.<sup>10</sup> Yes, evangelicals believe that readers can experience the revelation of Christ in a subjective, personal sense when reading Scripture, but they also believe that the Bible is the primary location of revelation because it is an objective preservation of God's spoken and written word. The Bible is the unique locus of God's revelation because of the Spirit's work of inspiration.

On this point, some might object that grounding all Christian belief in a notion of biblical inspiration is circular reasoning, or a very subjective foundation at best. Belief in the plenary-verbal inspiration of the Bible is a common, if not essential, identity marker for many evangelical forms of biblicism, but belief in verbal inspiration is not the cornerstone on which all other evangelical beliefs rest. B. B. Warfield (1851–1921), one of the most important voices in framing the modern evangelical doctrine of plenary verbal inspiration, makes this point emphatically:

Let it not be said that thus we found the whole Christian system upon the doctrine of plenary inspiration. We found the whole Christian system on the doctrine of plenary inspiration as little as we found it upon the doctrine of angelic existences. Were there no such thing as inspiration, Christianity would be true, and all its essential doctrines would be credibly witnessed to us in the generally trustworthy reports of the teaching of our Lord and of His authoritative agents in founding the

10. As the 2000 revision of *Baptist Faith and Message* statement makes clear, the Bible is not merely a human record of revelation but a form of direct revelation as well. For an explanation and analysis of this revision, see Joseph D. Wooddell, "Article I: The Scriptures," in *Baptist Faith and Message 2000: Critical Issues in America's Largest Protestant Denomination*, ed. Douglas K. Blount and Joseph D. Wooddell (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2007), 4–6.

Church, preserved in the writings of the apostles and their first followers, and in the historical witness of the living Church. Inspiration is not the most fundamental of Christian doctrines, nor even the first thing we prove about the Scriptures. It is the last and crowning fact as to the Scriptures. These we first prove authentic, historically credible, generally trustworthy, before we prove them inspired. And the proof of their authenticity, credibility, general trustworthiness would give us a firm basis for Christianity prior to any knowledge on our part of inspiration, and indeed apart from the existence of inspiration.<sup>11</sup>

In other words, Warfield recognizes that even if we did not have a divinely inspired Bible, we could establish the general credibility of the Christian faith by testing the historical witnesses to Jesus in the Gospels and the early church. As Michael S. Horton observes, “The historical facts of creation and redemption would be true regardless of whether God chose to report them through inspired Scripture.”<sup>12</sup> The notion of inspiration attested to by biblical authors (e.g., 2 Tim. 3:16–17; 2 Pet. 2:21) and affirmed historically by the church simply gives greater assurance that God has spoken—and still speaks—to his people.

Finally, most self-identifying evangelicals, particularly within my strand of confessional evangelicalism, affirm a doctrine of biblical inerrancy. As evangelical theologian Millard Erickson defines it, inerrancy is the view that the “Bible, when correctly interpreted in light of the level to which culture and the means of communication had developed at the time it was written, and in view of the purposes for which it was given, is fully truthful in all that it affirms.”<sup>13</sup> Inerrancy is primarily a theological claim about the nature of Scripture deduced from belief in (1) the plenary-verbal inspiration

11. Benjamin Breckenridge Warfield, *The Inspiration and Authority of the Bible*, ed. Samuel G. Craig (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1948), 210.

12. Michael Horton, *The Christian Faith: A Systematic Theology for Pilgrims on the Way* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2011), 173.

13. Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1998), 259.

of the Bible and (2) the trustworthy character of God. Disagreement over inerrancy spurred much infighting among evangelical scholars in the latter half of the twentieth century, and while the number of vocal detractors of this doctrine within evangelicalism has diminished, some animated intramural discussions about the implications of this doctrine for biblical interpretation continue to the present day. Some evangelicals, especially among those voices outside of North America, express some concern about the modernistic implications of the term *inerrancy* but still hold to some *de facto* form of the doctrine.<sup>14</sup> By biblical inerrancy, I mean a commitment to the full *truthfulness* and *trustworthiness* of the word of God in what biblical authors affirm to be true.<sup>15</sup> This definition has both objective and subjective dimensions: objective in the sense that we affirm that biblical assertions correspond to reality and subjective in the sense that we subject ourselves to the divine guarantor of those assertions.

Despite popular claims to the contrary, the evangelical commitment to inerrancy does not mean that interpreters should read everything in the Bible in a wooden, literalistic fashion. The Bible is a treasure trove of metaphors, poems, songs, and figures of speech that can express truth without an absurd literalism.<sup>16</sup> Inerrantists can and should pay careful attention to the pluriform literary genres

14. See Michael F. Bird, "Inerrancy is Not Necessary for Evangelicalism Outside the USA," in *Five Views on Biblical Inerrancy*, ed. J. Merrick and Steven M. Garrett (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2013), 145–73.

15. As a member of the Evangelical Theological Society—a professional organization consisting of over four-thousand evangelical scholars, ministry professionals, and students—I subscribe in writing annually to its Doctrinal Basis, which states that the "Bible alone, and the Bible in its entirety, is the Word of God written and is therefore inerrant in the autographs." That is, the Bible is completely trustworthy in so far as the texts we have today correlate to the original, inspired autographs. With other ETS members, I affirm the definition of inerrancy described in *The Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy* (1978). See *Evangelical Theological Society Constitution* (as adopted Dec. 28, 1949, and amended in 1950, 1951, 1959, 1976, 1985, 1990, 2008), article 3.

16. Packer, "Fundamentalism" and the Word of God, 104; Carl F. H. Henry, *God, Revelation, and Authority*, vol. 4, *God Who Speaks and Shows—Fifteen Theses, Part Three* (Waco: Word, 1979), 201–02.

of Scripture in interpretation. While the whole of Scripture should not be read in a literalistic fashion, an affirmation of inerrancy does mean that everything the human authors of Scripture present as true is literally true. (Note the important distinction between made here between “truly literal” and “literally true.”) Furthermore, as evangelical New Testament scholar D. A. Carson observes, “Inerrancy does not mean that every conceivable sequence of linguistic data in the Bible must be susceptible to the term *inerrant*, only that no errant assertion occurs.”<sup>17</sup> Inerrancy has to do with the assertions biblical writers make, not every statement made in Scripture. For instance, biblical writers do not affirm the lies told by characters in narrative passages to be true, nor do they necessarily affirm the bad advice of Job’s friends. While biblical authors write within the culturally conditioned literary conventions of antiquity, they are faithful in their presentation of the world as they see it. The divinely inspired authors of Scripture were neither deceptive nor deceived in what they present as truth.<sup>18</sup>

Given these assumptions about the Bible, it might seem remarkable to some that I would argue for the *ongoing need to develop doctrine*, to *give new and creative expressions of ancient ideas*, and to *offer constructive solutions for contemporary settings*. But that is exactly what I intend to do with this book: write a defense of constructive theology and doctrinal development from within a confessional evangelical tradition and respective of evangelical biblicism. I do so with two distinct audiences in mind: evangelicals who are skeptical about the need for systematic and constructive formulations of Christian doctrine (those who would say things like “no creed but the Bible!”)

17. D. A. Carson, *Collected Writings on Scripture*, ed. Andrew David Naselli (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2010), 88.

18. See ICBI, *The Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy*, Article XII. The framers of *The Chicago Statement* describe the Bible as “from all falsehood, fraud, or deceit.”

and critics of evangelicalism who contend that historical developments of Christian doctrine embraced by evangelicals are fundamentally incompatible with first-century Christian origins and evangelical understandings of Scripture (those who would say that the earliest followers of Jesus did not espouse “traditional” Christian beliefs). My treatment of what has been called the “problem of doctrinal development” is explicitly hermeneutical, meaning I give considerable attention to the nature of interpretation in general and biblical interpretation in particular.

### **In Defense of Evangelical Biblicism**

The commitment to biblical authority, inspiration, inerrancy, and sufficiency espoused by evangelicals like myself is often thought to be incompatible with postcanonical doctrinal development, as sociologist Christian Smith (b. 1960) suggested in his recent work, *The Bible Made Impossible: Why Biblicism Is Not a Truly Evangelical Reading of Scripture* (2011). Smith argues, as the subtitle of his book makes clear, that evangelical biblicism is an incoherent and internally inconsistent theological and interpretive framework. After all, biblicists cannot claim Scripture as the sole authority for doctrine and practice and continue to utilize postcanonical doctrinal formulations such as the Trinity, biblical inerrancy, and the exclusivity of Christ, can they? In his argument for the internal incoherence of evangelical biblicism, Smith defines the “biblicism” of his critique with a list of ten assumptions allegedly held by its adherents:

1. Biblicists hold to *the plenary-verbal inspiration of the Bible*—the idea that the human words of Scripture are God’s words in written form. The logical inference of this belief is that the Bible is also *inerrant* or trustworthy in every aspect.

2. The Bible alone communicates God’s will for humanity.
3. Everything relevant to Christian doctrine and ethics is contained within the pages of Scripture.
4. Biblicists hold to the *perspicuity* of the Bible—the notion that the Bible is clear enough that any intelligent human being can rightly interpret its meaning.
5. Because the Bible is so clear, the best way to read it is to look for *literal, plain meaning*. This use of “commonsense hermeneutics” means that readers do not necessarily have to understand the specific cultural, historical, or literary background of a passage.
6. The Bible can be understood without any reference whatsoever to creeds, confessions, church traditions, or ecclesial authorities.
7. The canon of Scripture contains no genuine contradictions, and any apparent inconsistencies can be explained away.
8. The message of the Bible is universally applicable for all Christian believers in every era.
9. All the truths of the Bible can be discerned through an inductive reading strategy.
10. The Bible is a “handbook” for every present-day facet of living, including apparel, cooking, dating, dieting, finances, health, marriage, politics, sex, and science.<sup>19</sup>

Clearly, I affirm some of these propositions, but many of them, while reflective of some strands of popular or even folk evangelicalism, do not represent my views or the views of the broader evangelical movement. Smith recognizes that biblicists do not universally acknowledge all of these points and suggests that, despite points of difference, biblicists are united by a common appeal to statements about the nature of Scripture.<sup>20</sup> So, at least by Smith’s

19. Christian Smith, *The Bible Made Impossible: Why Biblicism Is Not a Truly Evangelical Reading of Scripture* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos, 2012), 4–5.

definition, my affirmation of biblical inspiration and biblical inerrancy would put me square in his definition of incoherent biblicism.

According to Smith, evangelical biblicists tend to ignore the reality of “pervasive interpretive pluralism,” the way in which biblical interpreters can present numerous options for understanding biblical texts.<sup>21</sup> He lists several examples of this phenomenon: disagreements about doctrine among like-minded evangelicals, the historic use of the Bible to support competing ethical viewpoints (e.g., pro-slavery and anti-slavery positions, just war and pacifist interpretations, etc.), and looking to the Bible in support of differing forms of church government.<sup>22</sup> He also accuses biblicists of ignoring certain teachings (e.g., the “holy kiss” in Rom. 16:16; 1 Cor. 16:20) and strange passages (e.g., Paul’s instruction about Cretan Jews in Titus 1:10–14), as well as arbitrarily labeling some biblical instructions as culturally relative ideas no longer relevant to contemporary audiences (e.g., Levitical law, Paul’s wine remedy in 1 Tim. 5:23).<sup>23</sup> Smith concludes that these patterns of interpretive pluralism and selective application in evangelical biblicism are at odds with its primary assumptions, namely notions of verbal inspiration, inerrancy, and perspicuity. Hence, he claims that evangelical biblicism is not only an untenable position but an “impossible” one.<sup>24</sup>

Many of these criticisms feel like potshots directed at a crude caricature of evangelical biblicism that I suspect many of my first-semester seminary students could answer with reasonable clarity, charity, and conviction. First, as evangelical systematic theologian Kevin J. Vanhoozer observes, we must be able to make a distinction

20. *Ibid.*, 5.

21. *Ibid.*, 16–17.

22. *Ibid.*, 27–42.

23. *Ibid.*, 68–74.

24. *Ibid.*, 26.

between *uncritical* or *naïve biblicism* and *critical* or *nuanced biblicism*.<sup>25</sup> Naïve biblicists are those whom Smith describes as giving little or no attention to the cultural, historical, and social specificity of individual biblical texts. The tendency to treat the Bible like a “handbook” or “instruction manual” for all aspects of contemporary life, from dating to dieting, is a hallmark of naïve or uncritical biblicism. One may expect to find this approach to Scripture in the “Christian Living” section of Barnes & Noble, but this is not generally the case in evangelical scholarship.

Critical biblicism, by contrast, entails an affirmation of biblical inspiration and inerrancy *without* resorting to the hermeneutical naiveté of uncritical biblicism. The critical biblicist strives to avoid the kind of biblical or revelatory docetism found in naïve biblicism that ignores the human, phenomenal, and historically-contingent aspects of Scripture. The critical biblicist likewise admits that the Bible does not explicitly address every imaginable issue in Christian life and interaction with culture because she sees the Bible for what it is: an ancient literary collection of religious texts. She recognizes that interpreters must, to the best of their ability, attempt to understand the social, historical, cultural, and literary contexts of biblical writings. A failure to do so can have disastrous consequences for biblical interpretation.

Critical biblicists affirm the general perspicuity of Scripture, but they also recognize varying degrees of hermeneutical diversity. With the doctors of the Westminster Confession of Faith (1646) critical biblicists recognize that “all things in Scripture are not alike plain in themselves, nor alike clear unto all.”<sup>26</sup> Interpretive pluralism is

25. See Kevin J. Vanhoozer, “May We Go Beyond What Is Written After All? The Pattern of Theological Authority and the Problem of Doctrinal Development,” in *But My Words Will Never Pass Away”: The Enduring Authority of the Christian Scriptures*, ed. D. A. Carson (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, forthcoming).

26. The Westminster Confession of Faith 1.7.

a reality that has been long acknowledged in the Reformation tradition, but it is not nearly as “pervasive” as Smith seems to think. In his review of Smith’s work, Bible scholar Craig Blomberg points out that evangelicals (and most within the broader, historic Christian tradition) universally agree about issues like the true humanity and divinity of Jesus, his bodily resurrection, human sinfulness, the character of God, and the basic content of the gospel.<sup>27</sup>

Yet Smith is right on several fronts. For some theological conservatives (particularly those within fundamentalism or quasi-fundamentalism), there is a lingering temptation to resort to a naïve or uncritical biblicism that conflates one’s interpretation of Scripture with the inspired text itself. Oftentimes these uncritical biblicists perceive disagreement with their understanding of a biblical text’s meaning as a rejection of biblical authority or trustworthiness. Sometimes you might hear the naïve biblicist argue like this: “If you don’t agree with my doctrine of eschatology, you must not believe the Word of God!” This response occurs because many uncritical biblicists neglect the *interpretive nature of theology*. Evangelicals do not claim the same kind of inspiration or inerrancy for their doctrines, which come about as a result of interpreting the inspired biblical texts. Most troubling for the problem at hand, some naïve biblicists tend to ignore or reject the need for postcanonical doctrinal development—the ongoing practice of articulating new doctrinal formulations that go beyond the explicit wording of Scripture. I agree with Smith that this kind of uncritical biblicism can pose significant problems for the evangelical theological enterprise.

27. Craig L. Blomberg, review of *The Bible Made Impossible: Why Biblicism is Not a Truly Evangelical Reading of Scripture*, by Christian Smith, *Review of Biblical Literature* (August 2012): 3–4; available at [http://www.bookreviews.org/pdf/8205\\_8969.pdf](http://www.bookreviews.org/pdf/8205_8969.pdf) (accessed May 17, 2013).

## In Defense of Developing Doctrine

An unexamined belief about the relationship between the Bible and belief is only one of the challenges evangelical theology faces. Naïve biblicists are not the only ones raising serious questions about the legitimacy of postcanonical doctrinal development. I did not grasp the significance of this issue for non-Christian skeptics until I was well into the initial research stage of this book and found myself sharing a meal with one of those famous, cultured despisers of religion. This celebrity scholar, author of multiple New York Times bestselling books, and frequent guest on *The Colbert Report* has gained much notoriety popularizing the idea that what we now know as “traditional” or “orthodox” Christianity constitutes a significant departure from its earlier, more primitive historical forms. During this dinner conversation, he inquired about my research project, and I told him that I was working with an issue that theologians traditionally call the “problem” of doctrinal development.

Because theology is not his primary field, I had to explain what I meant by the problem—that I was attempting to deal with the tension between the nature of doctrine purportedly grounded in closed biblical revelation and its frequently changing forms throughout history. His initial reaction was one of confusion: “You mean to tell me that a Southern Baptist would acknowledge that Christian doctrine has grown or developed in history?” For a moment, I was flustered (but not surprised) by his caricaturizing of everyone within my denomination as fideistic, world-denying fanatics. Upon further reflection, however, I began to suspect that he was advocating his own unique brand of world-denying fanaticism.

This scholar has made a career out of challenging traditional Christian beliefs by demonstrating their shifting verbal expression and conceptual reformulation at various stages of their historical

development: in the transition from oral traditions to biblical texts, in the scribal transmission of biblical texts, and in the later production of doctrines allegedly based on these biblical texts. He frequently makes assertions like “The author of Mark’s Gospel did not believe in the divinity of Jesus because he did not expressly say so” or “The formulation of trinitarian doctrine at Nicaea would have been impenetrable to the apostle Paul.” Much like a card-carrying fundamentalist smitten with modernistic reductionism, he assumes that Christian texts, doctrinal expressions, and concepts must be *verbally* or *conceptually identical* in order to retain their essential identity throughout time. Just like the uncritical biblicist, this type of historical skepticism suggests that we can’t go beyond the explicit wording and conceptual framework of the Bible and still be faithful to it. Because the doctrines of the Christian faith have developed over time, some scholars argue, orthodox Christianity is incapable of demonstrating continuity with the past—especially with the authors of the biblical canon. As I hope to demonstrate, this guiding assumption could not be further from the truth.

Christians believe God to be *constant* and *faithful*. As the prophets testify, “I, YHWH, do not change” (Mal. 3:6). In God, “the Father of lights . . . there is no variation, or shifting shadow” (James 1:17). Christ is the “same yesterday, today, and forever” (Heb. 13:8). The gospel proclaimed by the apostles provides a stable core for Christian identity that must be protected at all costs (Gal. 1:6–10). Christianity is in some sense unchanging, but in quite another sense, *it always changes*. It must do so in order to be what it is supposed to be. The essential message of the gospel does not change, but its forms of expression and particular implications do. The gospel of Christ presents us with a challenge to mature as individuals: God has called us to be *new* creatures (2 Cor. 5:17) and has called us into a process that *transforms* us into the likeness of Christ (Rom. 8:29). Christ may

not change but his followers are called to do so—to *grow* in their respective understandings of things of God (Phil. 1:9; Heb. 5:11-12) and in their love for one another (Eph. 4:16). God will ultimately make “all things new” (Rev. 21:5). This observation brings us to an important question: Should we not expect for the macrocosm (the received faith practiced throughout history) what we expect of the microcosm (the faith of an individual believer)? Should we not expect the people of God, the household of faith, or the body of Christ to grow in their collective understanding of the things of God?

Evangelicals have practical concerns tied up in the issue of doctrinal development. We are named for our commitment to the gospel message (*euangelion*). We take the risen Lord’s instruction to “make disciples of all nations” (Matt. 28:19) as serious marching orders for the church. But how exactly can we expect to relate the gospel of Christ to a constantly changing world apart from presenting it in new ways? How do we preach an ancient message to a contemporary audience on a weekly basis without a fresh means of articulation and delivery? Then the fear factor sets in. How do we know we haven’t gone too far in trying to be relevant? Can we be confident we haven’t exchanged our “eternal inheritance” (Heb. 9:15) for a meaningless tryst with the cultural *zeitgeist*? We live in the tension created by our desire to be faithful to the past horizon of the biblical text and a desire to communicate its divinely inspired, life-changing message to present horizons. The following study is an exploration of this tension, which I hope will serve as an apologetic for the evangelical theological task and the living Christian tradition.

### **Where We Are Going**

This book is an exploration of the so-called problem of doctrinal development from an evangelical perspective. The historical

development of doctrine may raise significant questions for many under the broader ecumenical tent, particularly when attempting to distinguish between distortions of and legitimate developments within the received tradition. The issue grows even more complicated for evangelicals who highlight the primacy of Scripture and who downplay the necessity of external authorities. In what way, if any, are doctrinal statements, confessions, and creeds binding on evangelicals? Perhaps more pressing: Is adherence to the sufficiency of Scripture compatible with the need for evangelical Christians to speak to contemporary crises and ethical quandaries unaddressed and unforeseen by the human authors of Scripture? The historical phenomenon of doctrine is more than *a* problem for evangelical theology; I dare say it is *the* problem of evangelical theology. Development is also more than an academic concern; it is a concern for Christian preaching, ministry, missions, and the proclamation of the gospel message—all things essential to the evangelicalism.

I begin this book by acquainting readers with basic issues in the problem of postcanonical doctrinal development and their importance for Christian theology, faith, and practice. I will also attempt to paint a big picture of contemporary hermeneutical theory and the theological interpretation of Scripture—two fields of academic inquiry that I suggest are particularly helpful in explaining the historical phenomenon of doctrinal development. I will argue that postcanonical doctrinal development, is for evangelicals, a historical phenomenon best explained through the tools of contemporary hermeneutical theory. In chapter 2, I will proceed by describing noteworthy Roman Catholic and Protestant models of doctrinal development, giving special attention to nineteenth- and twentieth-century advances in this area. Along the way, I will trace threads and influences common to the development of contemporary

hermeneutical theory and the problem of doctrinal development in the nineteenth century and the following century.

The analyses of the models of theological hermeneutics provided by Anthony Thiselton (b. 1937) and Kevin Vanhoozer in chapters 3 and 4 constitute the nucleus of this project. In each analysis, I will examine the selected works of the representative scholar in order to address the guiding questions. Critical evaluation follows each analysis, examining the strengths and weaknesses of each respective model. Whereas Thiselton's theological hermeneutic is primarily descriptive, Vanhoozer's is primarily normative.

Both scholars are also in a broad, emerging group of theologians and biblical scholars calling for *theological hermeneutics* and the *theological interpretation of Scripture* (TIS). Despite their shared interests and connection to the TIS movement, Thiselton and Vanhoozer also have considerably different influences and methodologies, making them choice interlocutors. Thiselton, professor emeritus of Christian theology at the University of Nottingham, is an Anglican New Testament scholar, hermeneutics specialist, and theologian. His sustained engagement with the works of Hans-Georg Gadamer, Martin Heidegger, and Ludwig Wittgenstein has resulted in a revolution of sorts in biblical and theological studies. Vanhoozer is a Presbyterian theologian (PCUSA) who presently serves as research professor of systematic theology at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School.<sup>28</sup> Throughout his corpus, Vanhoozer interacts with various influential continental and postmodern thinkers such as Paul Ricoeur, Jacques Derrida, Roland Gérard Barthes, Richard McKay Rorty, and Stanley Eugene Fish.

28. In addition to his three stints on the faculty of Trinity (1986–1990, 1998–2008, 2011–present), Vanhoozer has served as Blanchard Professor of Theology at Wheaton College and Graduate School (2008–2011) and senior lecturer in theology and religious studies at New College in the University of Edinburgh (1990–1998).

In chapters 5–7, I identify three central problems or questions for models of doctrinal development that I believe hermeneutical theory is in a privileged position to help answer: (1) the problem of authority, (2) the problem of reality depiction, and (3) the problem of continuity. While other questions are important for models of doctrinal development, these questions relate specifically to the use of Scripture in developing doctrine.

The question of authority in the problem of doctrinal development is in focus in chapter 5. Who or what is the arbiter of meaning in doctrinal formulation and development? This question has both theological and hermeneutical dimensions. Theologically, a model of doctrinal development must address the standards or channels by which doctrine is formed, modified, or amended. In contemporary hermeneutical theory, the term *authority* has come to represent the person or object responsible for producing meaning in the interpretive process. Who controls the meaning of texts? Is it the author, the autonomous text, the reading community, the isolated reader, or some combination thereof? How one answers these hermeneutical questions of authority will have considerable impact on how one answers the theological dimension of this problem.

We explore the question of reality depiction in doctrinal development in chapter 6. Once more, this problem has both theological and hermeneutical dimensions. If genuine doctrinal development or change is occurring, what does that say about the ability of doctrinal statements to depict reality, particularly those depicting a God who is, according to classical theism, immutable? The theologian must address how, if at all, doctrinal statements depict transcendent reality. When development or reformulation does occur, do these refined or modified doctrinal statements cease to correspond to reality, correspond more closely to reality, or does the reality to which they refer, namely God, change? Again,

hermeneutics and the philosophy of language can assist in addressing the theological issue.

Chapter 7 addresses the question of continuity or identity in doctrinal development. How does Christian doctrine maintain identity with the past throughout development and change? In other words, how do Christian doctrinal statements remain essentially Christian with progress and transformation? This chapter, in turn, will address how doctrines, despite their development and modification, can retain essential meaning in the hands of different faith communities in varying contexts.

The final chapter of this book presents general conclusions about how contemporary hermeneutical theory aids in answering key questions related to doctrinal development and offers practical suggestions for the ongoing Christian practice of doctrinal development. These suggestions are tentative and by no means comprehensive or exhaustive.

If the Bible and theology are closely intertwined, as evangelicals customarily argue, then it is important to evaluate how biblical interpretation leads to the formation of doctrine. Yet oftentimes practitioners of biblical hermeneutics overlook some of the “big picture” questions raised and addressed by hermeneutical philosophers: questions about the nature of texts, the role of readers, and the experience of interpretation. Contemporary hermeneutical theory has remarkable explanatory power over the historical development of all ideas and cultural traditions. In this book, I intend to extend these explanatory tools to Christian theology, *to explain the historical phenomenon of doctrinal development in hermeneutical terms*. In other words, hermeneutical theory provides a way of understanding the development of Christian doctrine in history. Insights from hermeneutical philosophy and the philosophy of language can aid theologians in constructing explanatory theses for particular

theological problems associated with the facts of doctrinal development, namely, questions related to textual authority, reality depiction, and theological identity. Hermeneutics can aide theologians in *describing* the nature and scope of Christian doctrine and in *prescribing* the ongoing practice of doctrinal development. This is an especially important endeavor for evangelical theology because evangelical theologians prioritize the interpretation of Scripture in the formulation and articulation of Christian belief and practice.

In the same way that philosophical hermeneutics is concerned with elucidating the nature of human understanding, this project in theological hermeneutics and doctrinal criticism seeks to explain the nature of theological understanding in doctrinal development. I am not concerned with creating a “how-to” book in theological method. Theology grounded in the truth of Scripture and relevant to contemporary concerns requires more than a paint-by-numbers reading of biblical texts. The theological task involves more *Spirit-led wisdom* than interpretive science. So, readers hoping to find a one-size-fits-all, systematic process for formulating doctrine will be sorely disappointed because no such step-by-step method is articulated here. Instead, I am primarily interested in addressing the tension between evangelical commitment to the biblical canon as the supreme, normative rule of Christian belief and the need for critical, constructive theology that addresses contemporary crises and needs.