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What is Distinctive about "Evangelical" Scholarship?

by Donald A. Hagner

When one identifies oneself (or is identified by others) as an "evangelical" scholar, what distinctives are understood or implied by the designation? Is there, or should there be, anything that distinguishes evangelical scholarship from other biblical scholarship? Is being an evangelical compatible at all with being truly a scholar? In what ways, if any, will the methodology of the evangelical scholar differ from that of the non-evangelical scholar?

Everything in these questions hinges, of course, on the meaning given to the terms "evangelical" and "scholarship." Although it is difficult to define "evangelical" in advance of the discussion that follows, let me begin with what I understand the term to mean. Restricting myself to absolute essentials, I define an "evangelical" as one who (1) holds a high view of canonical Scripture as the inspired word of God, (2) believes that God can act and has acted in history, (3) affirms the Lordship of Christ and the centrality of his salvific work, and (4) believes in the importance of a personal experience of grace. For our question, the most imporant point is the first, one's view of Scripture. By "a high view of Scripture," a phrase that is deliberately vague, I intend to allow for differences ranging from a highly "nuanced" inerrancy (as in the Chicago Statement) on the right to an affirmation of the general trustworthiness of Scripture on the left; differences which, to my mind, must be allowed in any definition of "evangelical." Common to all evangelical views of Scripture, however, is the affirmation of the authority of Scripture, and the accompanying consciousness that the exegete stands *under* that authority, not over it. These four "non-negotiables" make up the *a priori* of the evangelical, the starting point from which he or she embarks on the challenging paths of scholarship.

But what about that word "scholarship"? Some things must be said about it before we will be able to see this question before us with full clarity. "Scholarship" as it is used here must entail the following: (1) an unrestricted openness to inquiry, (2) unprejudiced or impartial investigation of the data, and (3) the utilization of critical methodologies. Because these are so very important, some elaboration is called for at this point. By unrestricted openness to inquiry I mean simply that nothing is so sacrosanct that it is not open to examination or reexamination. This includes everything in Scripture, even our nonnegotiables and our *a prioris*, and certainly our statements of faith, which are, of course, valid only insofar as they are rooted in Scripture. As to the second point, we must attempt to be impartial in our investigations, our study of the data. We must for the time being step outside of our presuppositions, out of our own framework, and try to see the data with "neutral" eyes. This is, of course, an ideal, but it must be attempted if the quest for truth is to be authentic. And the requirement is a universal one, needed alike by our radical critical counterparts. As scholars, we must do our best to rid ourselves of all conscious prejudice in amassing evidence and drawing the conclusions of our research. Finally, the scholar must know and use the critical methodologies of the discipline. Special care is necessary here, of course, since methodologies are sometimes built upon or operate according to unjustifiable presuppositions. Sometimes the methodologies must be modified, or possibly even rejected—but if so, it must be on grounds that are persuasive in terms of scholarly pursuit of truth—i.e., in terms of the evidence—and not on the grounds of, or because of, an evangelical *a priori*. In short, where scholarship is concerned, the issue is *truth*, insofar as it can be ascertained by argumentation and not faith.

It is precisely the question of truth, however, that reminds us of our initial question about the evangelical and scholarship. Already in what has been said, the tension in which the evangelical scholar exists will have been felt. Because the Bible is the word of God given in the words of people, the scholar must be a man or woman open both to faith and science. The truth of Scripture, God's revealed truth, is correctly understood only through historical study. But what happens when Scripture says, or seems to say (!), one thing while my scholarly investigations say, or seem to say (!), another? What can we do when scholarship and faith conflict?

At least three options are possible: (1) We can bifurcate our world so that the results of our scholarship do not impinge on our evangelical beliefs. Although I have known some people who did this happily, for me such a two-level world is unacceptable. I, for one, must have a unified world view and I find it impossible to believe in something that I do not regard as true—i.e., as corresponding to, or congruent with, reality. (2) In the face of a conflict between our faith and our scholarship, we can, of course, sacrifice one to the other. That is, we can reject the findings of our study as unacceptable simply *because* they conflict with our faith. Or, we can reject our evangelical belief on a particular point simply because it is not compatible with our findings. Although the time may come when one of these options must be exercised, most of the time a third way is open. (3) We can work toward a synthesis by a fine-tuning of evangelical truth, on the one hand, or a reassessment of the data of our research, or its significance, on the other.

Openness to the supernatural does not entail automatic acceptance of every claim of a miracle in the Bible.

The evangelical scholar, in short, wants the best of both worlds. As a scholar one must treat the evidence with fairness and honesty; as an evangelical one seeks to be faithful to the evangelical tradition. This is the tension in which the evangelical scholar lives.

How then does the evangelical scholar go about this work? What will distinguish the evangelical scholar from the ordinary scholar? So far as actual procedure is concerned, there will be little if any difference, it seems to me. The same tools, the same methodologies, and, if not the same, at least a similar process of reasoning will be used. The distinctiveness of the evangelical approach will not be apparent as the evangelical scholar works on the minutiae, the nuts and bolts, of the scholarly enterprise. That distinctiveness lies in the *a priori* views held by the evangelical, and in two particular points that are the most pertinent here: the general trustworthiness of Scripture and an openness to transcendence. These are the *a priori* convictions that mainly account for the differences between the conclusions of evangelical scholars and radical-critical scholars who may be working with a common field of data. We shall have more to say about Scripture later, but here a few remarks on openness to transcendence are necessary.

It is just here, of course, that we encounter a serious problem. Can a scholar who studies history allow for the interruption of the supernatural into the sequence of cause and effect that otherwise—indeed, alone—makes history understandable? If God acts in history, are not those acts outside the reach of our critical methodologies and do

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they not confound historiography? Clearly the allowance of the supernatural in history has great consequences for the conclusions that are drawn concerning problems within the biblical literature. Several points must be made here. First, what is asked for is not an easy acceptance of transcendence, but merely an openness to it. What this plea resists is the cavalier, unjustified dismissal of the possibility of God's direct action in the historical process—a view that has been held by a very influential school of New Testament studies. Openness to the supernatural does not entail automatic acceptance of every claim of a miracle in the Bible. It means merely, and this is our second point, that such claims will be duly considered by being subject to the same tests as other material, e.g., eyewitness testimony, coherence, the author's apologetic motivations, *Tendenz* of the document. The third point is that the evangelical scholar does not appeal to the miraculous to solve a problem that is capable of other solutions. God's acting in history, the miraculous, where it is allowed, brings a new dimension to the study of Scripture—indeed, one that is fundamental to the story of the Bible—but does not demolish or invalidate the historico-critical method, although the latter must obviously be modified to some extent.

It is more helpful to the evangelical biblical scholar to proceed inductively to the nature of inspiration.

The distinctiveness of the evangelical scholar, then, emerges not so much in the process of study as in the drawing of conclusions. Even here, however, the evangelical will often be indistinguishable from the non-evangelical, except perhaps where a conclusion depends upon rejection or acceptance of the possibility of the supernatural. Mainly the difference will emerge when, as so often happens, data can be understood equally well in more than one way. In these instances the evangelical will choose the positive conclusions, i.e., those compatible with the trustworthiness of Scripture. The evangelical scholar will be a sympathetic interpreter of Scripture, giving Scripture the benefit of the doubt where possible. The evangelical scholar will not be an unsympathetic or hostile interpreter of Scripture. He or she will not, for example, pit one canonical writer against another unnecessarily, or press for contradictions within a single author, just as, it must quickly be added, one ought not be guilty of facile harmonizations, let alone a broad homogenizing that ignores the actual diversity of Scripture.

If we define the evangelical scholar as one who accepts the trustworthiness of the Scriptures, maintains an openness to the transcendent, and one who is a sympathetic interpreter, how predictable will the conclusions of such a person be? They will, of course, be predictable to a degree, but they will not and should not be so totally. For if every conclusion is governed by and flows out of one's *a priori* position, it may be questioned whether the data are really being given any serious consideration. This is why it is questionable whether any true scholarship is possible within a very rigid notion of inerrancy. The reason that the conclusions of the evangelical scholar are not necessarily predictable is that, as a scholar, one is committed to giving the evidence a full and fair hearing.

To my mind, given the range and complexity of the phenomena with which the biblical scholar must grapple, full predictability involves either an ignoring of the data or else a compromise of integrity. Integrity or honesty is of the greatest importance to the scholar, evangelical or otherwise. The evangelical scholar must be free to "call it the way he sees it." As a matter of conscience the evangelical scholar must strive to treat the data fairly, not to force the data, nor to impose an alien framework upon the data. The evangelical scholar must be at ease with conscience as to whether he or she too often construes the data to support an *a priori* conviction about the way things "should" or "must" be. As Van A. Harvey[1] has reminded us, the evangelical scholar must guard against an inconsistency wherein one continually emphasizes the historical evidence when it favors one's viewpoint, but disputes it when it goes against that viewpoint. The evangelical must similarly be on guard, as James Barr[2] warns, against a "maximal conservatism" that always reads the evidence in the most conservative way. (Also to be guarded against, however, is the opposite error of "maximal liberalism"—i.e., always reading the evidence in the most radical way.)

In the nature of biblical research, honesty will often necessarily cause the scholar to conclude, "I don't know." But if the evangelical scholar finds oneself pleading ignorance again and again in order to avoid a conclusion because it is incompatible with one's personal *a priori* view of Scripture, he or she may well begin to think about personal integrity. In this case to say "I don't know," rather than being a mark of humility, reveals an arrogance in insisting upon an *a priori* view in the face of a mounting pattern of evidence against it.

Without question, the evangelical scholar is in a difficult position when the Bible looks "wrong" in the light of investigations. As we have earlier said, one may engage in more scholarly work—but with integrity—to see if he or she has interpreted the evidence correctly, or one may modify one's understanding of what Scripture is actually saying. Here too honesty is called for. What the evangelical scholar cannot do is to twist the natural meaning of the text in order to avoid the problem. To be an evangelical *scholar,* therefore, necessitates an openness to the possibility of "error" on the part of the biblical authors.

And if the evangelical concludes that the biblical author is *probably* in error (which is the most that a proper humility allows), one must not become distraught. The scholar will at least know that one is being honest; better this than an easy acceptance of the ingenious contortions, however brilliant, of certain apologetes for inerrancy. In any event, many of the ostensible misstatements may well be the result of our applying improper or anachronistic standards of exactitude to Scripture, or holding an author responsible for items outside or only incidental to one's intention. Others will probably involve matters that are unimportant or unessential. I do not believe that whatever inaccuracies, cultural conditioning, or humanity may finally have to be admitted can assail the basic trustworthiness of Scripture. The fact that God reveals his Word through the words of human beings in specific historical contexts in no way hinders the divine inspiration and trustworthiness of that word in accomplishing its purpose.

This brings us back to our view of Scripture which, of course, remains the key issue for the evangelical and biblical scholarship. It seems important to say something here concerning the way in which we come to our understanding of what inspiration entails. Not uncommonly in conservative circles we hear the deductive approach to the nature of Scripture that begins with the affirmation "What God speaks is true." This in turn gives rise to the syllogism "God speaks in the Scriptures, therefore the Scriptures are true." In reality the syllogism is understood to mean "God speaks no error; God speaks in the Scriptures; therefore the Scriptures contain no errors." What seems to be overlooked in this deceptively simple syllogism is that God's Word in the Scriptures is not direct, but is mediated to us through the words of humans. Is not this the complicating factor that is ignored in the deductive definition of the nature of Scripture? The syllogism that focuses on inerrancy can lead to wrong expectations concerning what is to be found in Scripture, unless the word "error" is defined or nuanced so as to be compatible with both the data of Scripture and the intent of the authors.

It is more helpful to the evangelical biblical scholar to proceed inductively to the nature of inspiration. Here we begin with the affirmation that God has spoken in the Scriptures (and indeed with all the evangelical essentials mentioned at the beginning of this article) and then come to an understanding of the nature of inspiration inductively, controlled by the phenomena as well as the teaching of Scripture. The inductive approach is thus descriptive of what we actually have in Scripture, in contrast to the deductive approach which is *pre*scriptive, telling us what Scripture "must" be. The inductive approach is forced by its very nature to take the phenomena of Scripture seriously; the deductive approach, on the other hand,

[1] *The Historian and the Believer.* Macmillan, 1966; reprint ed., Westminster, 1981.
[2] *Fundamentalism.* Westminster, 1978.

when it encounters data that do not conform to the hypothesis, can—apparently as often as necessary—engage in artificial and forced harmonizations or plead ignorance. In short, the deductive approach is virtually unassailable: Scripture is inerrant whether the "problems" can be explained or not. The inductive approach, by contrast, involves a degree of "risk" precisely because it cannot afford the luxury of ignoring the phenomena of Scripture. But this is precisely what the scholar is all about, what the evangelical scholar must concern oneself with, attempting to hold to a unified world view in the conviction that the truth of Scripture need not fear the truth of scholarship.

To sum up, we may say the following. As evangelical scholars we are convinced that we can remain faithful, evangelical Christians without a sacrifice of the intellect. Both as scholars and Christians we are called to be persons of integrity, who deal with the evidence as honestly as we can. We must always be true to our conscience; and we cannot see things one way and say them to be another. We continue to learn to live in the tension between our commitment to the church and to scholarship. We must also continue to learn to live with the inevitable probabilities and complexities of scholarship. The true scholar knows how complicated reality is and thus will avoid simplistic solutions; he or she will learn to say both/and more often than either/or. And as evangelical scholars, we will, for example, learn to affirm both the unity *and* diversity of Scripture, infallibility *and* the phenomena of Scripture, normativity *and* cultural conditioning.

To be an evangelical scholar is a great responsibility, for which no one is fully or adequately equipped. The risk can be high and there are pitfalls to be avoided. But evangelical Christianity, if it is to remain credible and to survive in the decades that lie ahead, must produce and encourage a first-rate theological scholarship. And for these reasons, in turn, the evangelical scholar must go about one's work in an attitude of prayer and in dependence upon the Holy Spirit to guide one into all truth.

Reflections on the School of Process Theism

by Royce G. Gruenler

I can still remember my first excitement in reading Schubert Ogden's explosive *Christ Without Myth* in the early sixties and the promising challenges which seemed to be opened by his synthesis of Bultmann's radical demythologizing and Hartshorne's Process philosophizing. It all seemed like a breath of fresh air to a young teacher trained in evangelical and neo-orthodox schools, who was looking for some new excitement as well as practical aids for teaching in the liberal academic setting. It was largely through our discussion of this book that my long-time colleague Eugene Peters, well known in Process circles, decided to join our faculty, and it was largely through his expert knowledge of Alfred North Whitehead and Charles Hartshorne that I subsequently undertook a patient and appreciative study of their view on God and the world and came to incorporate them in my own thinking.

What fascinated me most of all was (I thought) their brilliant solution to the old problems of the one and the many and being and becoming, which classical Christian theology had handled in its own way but seemingly to God's advantage as absolutely sovereign and to man's disadvantage as ultimately determined. Here was a bold new stroke, a daring claim by sheer empirical evidence and rational argument that God must partake of two poles at once: he must be primordial, absolute and changeless on one polarity (else all would be flux and relativity), yet engaged in the flux and relativity of time and space (else he would be irrelevant). God was accordingly to be seen as dipolar or bipolar, both primordial and consequent, both absolute and relative.

Now of course biblical and classical Christianity has been saying that for centuries—God as ontological triunity is eternally perfect, complete and changeless, while incarnationally in Christ, God is subject to the vicissitudes of time and space. But, says Hartshorne, it is logically contradictory to claim on the one hand that God can be absolutely perfect in all respects and yet experience time, for to have all possibilities as perfectly realized actualities eternally would be to erase time, with its flow from what is possible to what by choice is made actual. And it would be to erase the freedom of the creature to choose and become, since he or she would be exhaustively known by God from all eternity.

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No, argued Whitehead and Hartshorne, we can no longer put up with this old Jewish–Christian–Islamic notion of God as the oriental despot who is absolute in all respects. Let us conceive of God differently, as absolute in *some* respects and not in others, and as relative in some respects and not in others. Let us assume that God is changeless in his mode of being or character and in his primordial aims, but dependent on the universe (or some universe or other during his everlasting procession) for the content of his experience. Let us say (said Hartshorne) that God is AR: *A*bsolute (A) in his mode of being, and *R*elative (R) in his actual existence. Or, alternatively, that God is ET: *E*ternal (E) in the abstract sense and *T*emporal (T) in the concrete. Or more exhaustively, that God is ECTKW: *E*ternal (E) in his mode, *C*onscious (C) in his experience of the world, *T*emporal (T) in his inseparability from procession; *K*nowing the world (K) and including the *W*orld (W) in his experience.

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This seemed to me an attractive improvement on the immobility and seeming frozenness of classical theism with its absolutely perfect and timeless deity. If one could not logically derive the relativity of God from his absoluteness (so argued Hartshorne), one could derive God's abstract character from his concrete temporality. Accordingly, while dipolar theism was proferred as a superior solution, it was necessary to give pride of place to R and T, since A and E respectively could be derived from them, but not the other way round (so went the argument). For a decade I applied this Process model to my biblical and theological studies, confident of its superiority and greater adequacy over the biblical-classical model. Of course it was necessary to make some adjustments. Biblical prophecy could no longer be taken at face value. While God might foresee and foretell with large brush strokes, fine detail could not be known even by him and must therefore be regarded as prophecy after the fact. Since salvation was no longer a radical matter of redemption from sin in the biblical sense, necessitating a divine-human Savior and the once-