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EDITORIAL

Subtle Ways to Abandon the Authority of Scripture in Our Lives

— D. A. Carson —

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Recently Eerdmans published *The Authority of the Christian Scriptures*.[1] It is a rather big book, with about thirty-five contributors, all of them experts in their fields. The hope and prayer that guided the project were that this volume of essays would be used by God to stabilize worldwide evangelicalism—and not only evangelicals, but all who hold to confessional Christianity. More recently, however, I have been pondering the fact that many Christians slide away from full confidence in the trustworthiness of Scripture for reasons that are not so much intellectual as broadly cultural. I am not now thinking of the college student brought up in a confessional home who goes to university and is for the first time confronted with informed and charming intellectuals whose reasoning calls into question the structure and fabric of his or her Christian belief. Clearly that student needs a lot more information; the period of doubt is often a rite of passage. No, in these jottings I'm reflecting on *subtle* ways in which we may reduce Scripture's authority *in our lives*—and the "we" refers to many Christians in the world, especially the Western world, and not least pastors and scholars. If they then introduce intellectual and cognitive objections to the authority of Scripture in order to bolster the move toward skepticism that they have already begun, a focus on such intellectual and cognitive objections, however necessary, is in danger of addressing symptoms without diagnosing the problem.

It might be useful to try to identify some of these subtle factors.

1. An Appeal to Selective Evidence

The most severe forms of this drift are well exemplified in the teaching and preaching of the HWPG—the health, wealth, and prosperity gospel. Link together some verses about God sending prosperity to the land with others that reflect on the significance of being a child of the King, and the case is made—provided, of course, that we ignore the many passages about taking up our cross, about suffering with Christ so that we may reign with him, about rejoicing because we are privileged to suffer for the name, and much more. These breaches are so egregious that they are easy to spot. What I'm thinking of now is something subtler: the simple refusal to talk about disputed matters in order to sidestep controversy in the local church. For the sake of peace, we offer anodyne treatments of hot topics (poverty, racism,

[1] D. A. Carson, ed., *The Authority of the Christian Scriptures* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2016). This editorial is a condensed version of a talk given to the Council of TGC in May, 2016.

homosexual marriage, distinctions between men and women) in the forlorn hope that some of these topics will eventually go away. The sad reality is that if we do not try to shape our thinking on such topics under the authority of Scripture, the result is that many of us will simply pick up the culture's thinking on them.

The best antidote is systematic expository preaching, for such preaching forces us to deal with texts as they come up. Topical preaching finds it easier to avoid the hard texts. Yet cultural blinders can easily afflict expositors, too. A Christian preacher I know in a major Muslim nation says he loves to preach evangelistically, especially around Christmas, from Matthew 1 and 2, because these chapters include no fewer than five reports of dreams and visions—and dreams and visions in the dominant culture of his country are commonly accorded great respect. When I have preached through Matthew 1 and 2, I have never focused on those five dreams and visions (though I haven't entirely ignored them), precisely because such dreams and visions are not customarily accorded great credibility in my culture. In other words, ruthless self-examination of one's motives and biases, so far as we are aware of them, can go a long way to mitigating this problem.

2. Heart Embarrassment before the Text

This is a more acute form of the first failure. Not infrequently preachers avoid certain topics, in part because those topics embarrass them. The embarrassment may arise from the preacher's awareness that he has not yet sufficiently studied the topic so as to give him the confidence to tackle it (e.g., some elements of eschatology, transgenderism), or because of some general unease at the topic (e.g., predestination), or because the preacher knows his congregation is sharply divided on the topic (any number of possibilities), or because the preacher simply really does not like the subject even though it surfaces pretty often in the Bible (e.g., hell, eternal judgment). In its ugliest form, the preacher says something like this: "Our passage this morning, Luke 16:19–31, like quite a number of other passages drawn from the life of Jesus, depicts hell in some pretty shocking ways. Frankly, I wish I could avoid these passages. They leave me distinctly uncomfortable. But of course, I cannot ignore them entirely, for after all they are right here in the Bible." The preacher has formally submitted to Scripture's authority, while presenting himself as someone who is more compassionate or more sensitive than Jesus. This is as deceptive as it is wicked—and it is easy to multiply examples.

Contrast the apostle Paul: "Therefore, since through God's mercy we have this ministry, we do not lose heart. Rather, we have renounced secret and shameful ways; we do not use deception, nor do we distort the word of God. On the contrary, by setting forth the truth plainly we commend ourselves to everyone's conscience in the sight of God" (2 Cor 4:1–2).

3. Publishing Ventures That Legitimate What God Condemns

Recently Zondervan published *Two Views on Homosexuality, the Bible, and the Church*;[2] this book bills these two views as "affirming" and "non-affirming," and two authors support each side. Both sides, we are told, argue "from Scripture." If the "affirming" side was once viewed as a stance that could not be held by confessional evangelicals, this book declares that not only the non-affirming stance but the

[2] Preston Sprinkle, ed., *Two Views on Homosexuality, the Bible, and the Church*, Counterpoints (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2016).

affirming stance are represented within the evangelical camp, so the effect of this book is to present alternative evangelical positions, one that thinks the Bible prohibits homosexual marriage, and the other that embraces it.

All who read these lines will of course be aware of the many books that proffer three views or four views (or two, or five) on this or that subject: the millennium, election, hell, baptism, and many more. Surely this new book on homosexuality is no different. To this a couple of things must be said.

(a) The format of such volumes, "*x* views on *y*," is intrinsically slippery. It can be very helpful to students to read, in one volume, diverse stances on complex subjects, yet the format is in danger of suggesting that each option is equally "biblical" because it is argued "from Scripture." Of course, Jehovah's Witnesses argue "from Scripture," but most of us would hasten to add that their exegesis, nominally "from Scripture," is woefully lacking. The "*x* views on *y*" format tilts evaluation away from such considerations, baptizing each option with at least theoretical equivalent legitimacy. In short, the "*x* views on *y*" format, as useful as it is for some purposes, is somewhat manipulative. As I have argued elsewhere, not all disputed things are properly disputable.[3]

(b) Otherwise put, it is generally the case that books of the "*x* views on *y*" format operate within some implicit confessional framework or other. That's why no book of this sort has (yet!) been published with a title such as "Three Views on Whether Jesus is God." We might bring together a liberal committed to philosophical naturalism, a Jehovah's Witness, and a confessional Christian. But it's hard to imagine a book like that getting published—or, more precisely, a book like that would be tagged as a volume on comparative religion, not a volume offering options for Christians. Most books of the "*x* views on *y*" sort restrict the subject, the *y*-component, to topics that are currently allowed as evangelical options. To broaden this list to include an option that *no* evangelical would have allowed ten years ago—say, the denial of the deity of Jesus, or the legitimacy of homosexual practice—is designed simultaneously to assert that Scripture is less clear on the said topic than was once thought, and to re-define, once again, the borders of evangelicalism. On both counts, the voice of Scripture as the *norma normans* ("the rule that rules"), though theoretically still intact, has in fact been subtly reduced.

Inevitably, there have been some articulate voices that insist that adopting an "affirming" stance on homosexual marriage does not jeopardize one's salvation and should not place such a person outside the evangelical camp. For example, in his essay "An Evangelical Approach to Sexual Ethics," Steven Holmes concludes, "Sola Fide. I have to stand on that. Because the Blood flowed where I walk and where we all walk. One perfect sacrifice complete, once for all offered for all the world, offering renewal to all who will put their faith in Him. And if that means me, in all my failures and confusions, then it also means my friends who affirm same-sex marriage, in all their failures and confusions. If my faithful and affirming friends have no hope of salvation, then nor do I."[4] But this is an abuse of the evangelical insistence on *sola fide*. I do not know any Christian who thinks that salvation is appropriated by means of faith plus an affirmation of heterosexuality. Faith alone is the means by which *sola gratia* is appropriated. Nevertheless, that grace is so powerful it transforms. Salvation by grace alone through faith alone issues in a new direction under the lordship of King Jesus. Those who are sold out to the "acts of the flesh ... will not inherit the kingdom of God" (Gal 5:19–21). The apostle Paul makes a similar assertion in 1 Corinthians 6:9–11:

[3] D. A. Carson, "Editorial: On Disputable Matters," *Them* 40 (2015): 383–88.

[4] Steven Holmes, "An Evangelical Approach to Sexual Ethics," http://tinyurl.com/jvfnwzd.

> Or do you not know that wrongdoers will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: Neither the sexually immoral nor idolaters nor adulterers not men who have sex with men nor thieves nor the greedy nor drunkards nor slanderers nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God. *And that is what some of you were. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God* (emphasis added).

In the context of Paul's thought, he is not saying that without sinless perfection there is no entrance into the kingdom, but he is saying that such sins—whether greed or adultery or homosexual practice or whatever—no longer characterize the washed, sanctified, and justified. In other words, it is one thing to affirm with joy that *sola fide* means that we appropriate the merits of Christ and his cross by faith alone, not by our holiness—that holiness is the product of salvation, not its condition—and it is quite another thing to say that someone may self-consciously affirm the non-sinfulness of what God has declared to be sin, of what God insists excludes a person from the kingdom, and say that it doesn't matter because *sola fide* will get them in anyway. The Scriptures make a lot of room for believers who slip and slide in "failures and confusions," as Holmes put it, but who rest in God's grace and receive it in God-given faith; they do not leave a lot of room for those who deny they are sinning despite what God says. *Sola gratia* and *sola fide* are always accompanied by *sola Scriptura*, by *solus Christus*, and by *soli Deo gloria*.

Or again, one really must question the recent argument by Alan Jacobs, from whose books and essays I have gained a great deal over the years. In his essay "On False Teachers: Bleat the Third,"[5] however, Jacobs argues that when we warn against doctrine that is so dangerous it must be labeled and condemned, one naturally thinks of 2 Peter 2, where Peter warns against false teachers analogous to false prophets in the old covenant, and 1 Timothy 4, where Paul warns us against doctrines of demons. What is remarkable, Jacobs argues, is that when Paul rebukes Peter in Antioch (Gal 2:11–14), he tells him he is not walking in line with the gospel, but he does not label him a "false teacher." If Paul can be so restrained in rebuking Peter over conduct that challenged the very heart of the gospel, then should we not allow a very wide swath of what we perceive to be inappropriate conduct before we assert someone is a false teacher and expounding doctrines of demons? As Jacobs summarizes: "So if we can be as wrong as Peter was about something as foundational for the Gospel and still not be denounced as a false teacher, then I think it follows that if people do not 'walk correctly' in relation to biblical teaching about sexuality, they likewise should not be treated as *pseudodidaskaloi* [false teachers] but can be seen as brothers and sisters whom those who hold the traditional views patiently strive to correct, without coming out from among them, speaking with the patience and gentleness commended in 2 Timothy 3:24–25." Against this, the following must be said.

(a) In Galatians 2:11–14, Paul is building off his argument (2:1–13) that Paul and Peter enjoy theological agreement. Peter's problem, Paul thinks, is that Peter's conduct is inconsistent with his theological commitments. This is all the clearer when we see that Peter's preference for eating with "those from James" has to do not with any alleged confusion in his mind about justification, but with this concern for the persecution his fellow Jews are enduring back home in Jerusalem at the hands of "the circumcision group."[6] In any case, this is rather different from the current situation in which some

[5] Alan Jacobs, "On False Teachers: Bleat the Third," https://blog.ayjay.org/on-false-teachers-bleat-the-third/.

[6] D. A. Carson, "Mirror-Reading with Paul and against Paul: Galatians 2:11–14 as a Test Case," in *Studies in the Pauline Epistles: Essays in Honor of Douglas J. Moo*, ed. Matthew S. Harmon and Jay E. Smith (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2014), 99-112.

voices are insisting that homosexual marriage is not wrong. Paul is not saying that Peter's theology is wrong, but that his conduct is not in line with his theology. Incidentally, Jacobs assumes, probably correctly, that the Jerusalem Council (Acts 15) occurs *after* this episode in Antioch, prompting him to comment, "... and of course Paul's view won out at the Council of Jerusalem (where, I have always thought comically, Peter presents it as his own view, with no reference to Paul having corrected him)."[7] But there is nothing comical about Peter's stance at the Council: Paul himself insists that so far as their theological understanding goes, he and Peter are in agreement, so it is neither surprising nor comical to find Peter saying the same thing.

(b) It is not clear to me why Jacobs rests so much weight on the "false teacher" passage in Peter and the "doctrines of demons" passage in Paul. There are plenty of other passages that deploy quite different terminology and that insist that false doctrine or untransformed behavior keep one out of the kingdom: Matthew 7:21–23; 11:21–24; Luke 16:19–31; Romans 1:18–3:20; Galatians 1:8–9; Revelation 13–14, to name but a few.

(c) Despite the best efforts of bad exegesis, the Bible makes it clear that treating homosexuality as if it were not a sin, but a practice in which people should feel perfectly free to engage, keeps one out of the kingdom (as we have seen: e.g., 1 Corinthians 6:9–11). There is nothing more serious than that, and the seriousness is present whether or not a particular term, such as *pseudodidaskalos* ("false teacher") is used.

From time to time, expansion of the frame of reference of what has traditionally been called evangelicalism has been influenced by William J. Webb's trajectory hermeneutic, which argues that sometimes it is not what Scripture actually *says* that is authoritative but rather the direction to which it points.[8] His favorite example is slavery; his favorite application of that example is the role of women. This trajectory hermeneutic has been adequately discussed elsewhere;[9] it would be inappropriate to rehearse the hermeneutic here. What cannot be denied, however, is that this way of reading the Bible diminishes the authority of what the Bible actually *says* in favor of what the interpreter judges to be the end goal of the Bible's trajectory after the Bible has been written and circulated. One of the latest examples is the defense mounted by Pete Briscoe and his elders as the Bent Tree Bible Fellowship in Dallas embraces egalitarianism, a defense that specifically references Webb's work.[10] Further, Briscoe says he has moved the debate over egalitarianism and complementarianism into the "agree to disagree" category, which may function well enough in the cadre of evangelicalism *as a movement,* but can only function practically at the level of the local church if one side or the other is actually being followed at the expense of the other. In any case, the "agree to disagree" argument nicely brings us to my fourth point:

[7] Jacobs, "On False Teachers."

[8] See especially William J. Webb's *Slaves, Women and Homosexuals: Exploring the Hermeneutics of Cultural Analysis* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2001).

[9] Wayne A. Grudem, "Review Article: Should We Move Beyond the New Testament to a Better Ethic? An Analysis of William J. Webb, *Slaves, Women and Homosexuals: Exploring the Hermeneutics of Cultural Analysis*," *JETS* 47 (2004): 299–346. See also Benjamin Reaoch, *Women, Slaves, and the Gender Debate: A Complementarian Response to the Redemptive-Movement Hermeneutic* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed, 2012).

[10] "The Future of Leadership at Bent Tree," April 2016, http://tinyurl.com/h6pe4zj.

4. "The Art of Imperious Ignorance"

The words are in quotation marks because they are borrowed from Mike Ovey's column in a recent issue of *Themelios*.[11] This is the stance that insists that all the relevant biblical passages on a stated subject are exegetically confusing and unclear, and therefore we *cannot* know (hence "imperious") the mind of God on that subject. The historical example that Ovey adduces is the decision of a church Council during the patristic period whose decisions have mostly been forgotten by non-specialists. At a time of great controversy over Christology—specifically, over the deity of Christ—the Council of Sirmium (357), which sided with the pro-Arians, pronounced a prohibition against using terms like *homoousios* (signaling "one and the same substance") and *homoiousios* (signaling "of a similar substance"). In other words, Sirmium prohibited using the technical terms espoused by *both* sides, on the ground that the issues are so difficult and the evidence so obscure that we *cannot* know the truth. Sirmium even adduced a biblical proof-text: "Who shall declare his generation?" they asked: i.e., it is all too mysterious.

Nevertheless, the orthodox fathers Hilary of Poitiers and Athanasius of Alexandria assessed the stance of Sirmium as worse than error: it was, they said, blasphemy. They decried the element of compulsion in Sirmium's decree, and insisted that it was absurd: how is it possible to legislate the knowledge of other people? But the blasphemous element surfaces in the fact that the decree tries to put an end to the confession of true propositions (e.g., the eternal generation of the Son). Practically speaking, the claim of dogmatic ignorance, ostensibly arising from Scripture's lack of clarity, criticizes Scripture while allowing people to adopt the positions they want.

This art of imperious ignorance is not unknown or unpracticed today. For example, both in a recent book and in an article,[12] David Gushee argues that homosexual marriage should be placed among the things over which we agree to disagree, what used to be called *adiaphora*, indifferent things. He predicts that "conservatives" and "progressives" are heading for an unfortunate divorce over this and a handful of other issues, precisely because they cannot agree to disagree. He may be right. In all fairness, however, in addition to the question of whether one's behavior in the domain of sexuality has eternal consequences, it must be said, gently but firmly, that the unified voice of both Scripture and tradition on homosexuality has not been on the side of the "progressives": see especially the book by S. Donald Fortson III and Rollin G. Grams, *Unchanging Witness: The Consistent Christian Teaching on Homosexuality in Scripture and Tradition*.[13] As Trevin Wax has pointed out, on this subject the "progressives" innovate on teaching and conduct and thus start the schism, and then accuse the "conservatives" of drawing lines and promoting schism instead of agreeing to disagree.[14]

A somewhat similar pattern can be found in the arguments of Jen and Brandon Hatmaker. Most of their posts are winsome and compassionate, full of admirable concern for the downtrodden and

[11] Michael J. Ovey, "Off the Record: The Art of Imperious Ignorance," *Them* 41 (2016): 5–7.

[12] David Gushee, *A Letter to My Anxious Christian Friends: From Fear to Faith in Unsettled Times* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2016); idem, "Conservative and Progressive US Evangelicals Head for Divorce," *Religion News Service*, 12 February 2016, "Christians, Conflicts and Change," http://religionnews.com/2016/02/12/conservative-progressive-evangelicals-divorce/.

[13] S. Donald Fortson III and Rollin G. Grams, *Unchanging Witness: The Consistent Christian Teaching on Homosexuality in Scripture and Tradition* (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2016).

[14] Trevin Wax, "Can We 'Agree to Disagree' on Sexuality and Marriage,' *The Gospel Coalition*, 25 February 2016, https://blogs.thegospelcoalition.org/trevinwax/2016/02/25/why-we-cant-agree-to-disagree-on-sexuality-and-marriage/.

oppressed. Their recent move in support of monogamous homosexual marriage has drawn a lot of attention: after devoting time to studying the subject, they say, they have come to the conclusion that the biblical texts do not clearly forbid homosexual conduct if it is a monogamous commitment, but condemn only conduct that is promiscuous (whether heterosexual or homosexual), rape, and other grievous offenses.[15] In his explanation of their move, Brandon testifies that after seeing so much pain in the homosexual community, the Hatmakers set themselves "a season of study and prayer," and arrived at this conclusion: "Bottom line, we don't believe a committed life-long monogamous same-sex marriage violates anything seen in scripture about God's hopes for the marriage relationship."[16] Quite apart from the oddity of the expression "God's hopes for the marriage relationship," Brandon's essay extravagantly praises ethicist David Gushee, and ends his essay by citing John 13:34–35 (Jesus's "new command" to his disciples to "love one another").

Among the excellent responses, three deserve mention here.[17]

(a) Speaking out of her own remarkable conversion, Rosaria Butterfield counsels her readers to love their neighbors enough to speak the truth.[18] "Love" that does not care enough to speak the truth and warn against judgment to come easily reduces to sentimentality.

(b) With his inimitable style, Kevin DeYoung briefly but decisively challenges what he calls "the Hatmaker hermeneutic."[19] To pick up on just one of his points:

> I fail to see how the logic *for* monogamy and *against* fornication is obvious according to Hatmaker's hermeneutic. I appreciate that they don't want to completely jettison orthodox Christian teaching when it comes to sex and marriage. But the flimsiness of the hermeneutic cannot support the weight of the tradition. Once you've concluded that the creation of Adam and Eve has nothing to do with a procreative *telos* (Mal. 2:15), or the fittedness of male with female (Gen. 2:18), or the joining of two complementary sexes into one organic union (Gen. 2:23–24), what's left to insist that marriage must be limited to two persons, or that the two persons must be faithful to each other? Sure, both partners may agree that they *want* fidelity, but there is no longer anything inherent to the ontology and the *telos* of marriage to insist that sexual fidelity is a must. Likewise, why is it obvious that sex outside of marriage is wrong? Perhaps those verses were only dealing with oppressive situations too. Most foundationally, once stripped

[15] See, for example, Jen Hatmaker's interview with Jonathan Merritt, "The Politics of Jen Hatmaker," *Religion News Service*, 25 October 2016, http://religionnews.com/2016/10/25/the-politics-of-jen-hatmaker-trump-black-lives-matter-gay-marriage-and-more/.

[16] https://www.facebook.com/HatmakerBrandon/posts/661677820673474.

[17] See also Justin Taylor, "The Only Four Things You Need to Read in Response to the Hatmakers," *The Gospel Coalition*, 2 November 2016, https://blogs.thegospelcoalition.org/justintaylor/2016/11/02/the-only-four-things-you-need-to-read-in-response-to-the-hatmakers/. Taylor highlights the articles by Butterfield and DeYoung mentioned below.

[18] Rosaria Butterfield, "Love Your Neighbor Enough to Speak Truth: A Response to Jen Hatmaker," *The Gospel Coalition*, 31 October 2016, https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/love-your-neighbor-enough-to-speak-truth.

[19] Kevin DeYoung, "A Few Brief Thoughts on the Hatmaker Hermeneutic," *The Gospel Coalition*, 2 November 2016, https://blogs.thegospelcoalition.org/kevindeyoung/2016/11/02/before-you-leave-behind-the-historic-understanding-of-biblical-sexuality/.

> of the biological orientation toward children, by what internal logic can we say that consensual sex between two adults is wrong? And on that score, by what measure can we condemn a biological brother and sister getting married if they truly love each other (and use contraceptives, just to take the possibility of genetic abnormalities out of the equation)? When marriage is redefined to include persons of the same sex, we may think we are expanding the institution to make it more inclusive, but in fact we are diminishing it to the point where it is something other than marriage.

(c) And finally, I should mention another piece by Kevin DeYoung, presented in his inimitable style as a "Breakout" session at T4G on 13 April 2016, titled, "Drawing Boundaries in an Inclusive Age: Are Some Doctrines More Fundamental Than Others and How Do We Know What They Are?" I have not yet seen that piece online, but one hopes its appearance will not be long delayed, and he has given me permission to mention it here.

I have devoted rather extended discussion to this topic, because nowhere does "the art of imperious ignorance" make a stronger appeal, in our age, than to issues of sexuality. By the same token, there are few topics where contemporary believers are more strongly tempted to slip away from whole-hearted submission the Scripture's authority in our own lives.

The rest of my points, although they deserve equal attention, I shall outline more briefly.

5. Allowing the Categories of Systematic Theology to Domesticate What Scripture Says

Most emphatically, this point is neither belittling systematic theology nor an attempt to sideline the discipline. When I warn against the danger of systematic theology domesticating what Scripture says, I nevertheless gladly insist that, properly deployed, systematic theology enriches, deepens, and safeguards our exegesis. The old affirmation that theology is the queen of the sciences has much to commend it. The best of systematic theology not only attempts to bring together all of Scripture in faithful ways, but also at its best enjoys a pedagogical function that helps to steer exegesis away from irresponsible options that depend on mere linguistic manipulation, by consciously taking into account the witness of the entire canon. Such theology-disciplined exegesis is much more likely to learn from the past than exegesis that shucks off everything except the faddish.

So there are ways in which exegesis shapes systematic theology and ways in which systematic theology shapes exegesis. That is not only as it should be; it is inevitable. Yet the *authority* of Scripture in our lives is properly unique. Systematic theology is corrigible; Scripture is not (although our exegesis of Scripture certainly is).

Failure to think through the implications of this truth makes it easy for us to allow the categories of systematic theology to domesticate what Scripture says. The categories we inherit or develop in our systematic theology may so constrain our thinking about what the Bible says that the Bible's own voice is scarcely heard. Thus diminished, the authority of the Bible is insufficient to reform our systematic theology. Recently I was re-reading Exodus 7–11. After each of the first nine "plagues" with which God chastened the Egyptians, we read variations of "Pharaoh hardened his heart" and "God hardened Pharaoh's heart" and "Pharaoh's heart was hardened." I could not help but remember with shame and regret some of the exegetical sins of my youth. Barely twenty years old at the time, I was invited to speak to a group of young people, and carefully explained the three stages: first, Pharaoh hardens his own heart; second, as a result, Pharaoh's heart is hardened; and finally, God imposes his own final

sanction: he judicially hardens Pharaoh's heart. Of course, I was aware that the narrative did not display those three expressions in this convenient psychological order, but the homiletical point seemed to me, at the time, too good to pass up—it simply is the way these things develop, isn't it? So my theology of the time, shallow as it was, domesticated the text. Only later did I learn how commonly the Bible juxtaposes human responsibility and divine sovereignty without the smallest discomfort, without allowing the slightest hint that the affirmation of the one dilutes belief in the other (e.g., Gen 50:19–20; Isa 10:5–19; Acts 4:27–28). It is the part of humility and wisdom not to allow our theological categories to domesticate what Scripture says.

6. Too Little Reading, Especially the Reading of Older Commentaries and Theological Works

The more general failure of too little reading contributes, of course, to some of the paths that tend with time to hobble the authority of Scripture, paths already articulated. The obvious one is that we do not grow out of youthful errors and reductionisms; we prove unable to self-correct; our shallow theology becomes ossified. Thus too little reading is partly to blame for my irresponsible exegesis of Exodus 7–11 (#5, above), or to downplaying the cultural importance of dreams and visions in other parts of the world (cf. #1, above). But a more focused problem frequently surfaces, one that requires separate notice. Too little reading, especially the reading of older confessional material, not infrequently leads to in an infatuation with current agendas, to intoxication by the over-imbibing of the merely faddish.

Of course, the opposite failure is not unknown. Many of us are acquainted with ministers who read deeply from the wells of Puritan resources, but who have not tried to read much contemporary work. Their language, thought-categories, illustrations, and agendas tend to sound almost four centuries old. But that is not the problem I am addressing here, mostly because, as far as I can see, it is far less common than the failure to read older confessional materials, not least commentaries and theological works.

The problem with reading only contemporary work is that we all sound so contemporary that our talks and sermons soon descend to the level of kitsch. We talk fluently about the importance of self-identity, ecological responsibility, tolerance, becoming a follower of Jesus (but rarely becoming a Christian), how the Bible helps us in our pain and suffering, and conduct seminars on money management and divorce recovery. Not for a moment would I suggest that the Bible fails to address such topics—but the Bible is not primarily *about* such topics. If we integrate more reading of, say, John Chrysostom, John Calvin, and John Flavel (to pick on three Johns), we might be inclined to devote more attention in our addresses to what it means to be made in the image of God, to the dreadfulness of sin, to the nature of the gospel, to the blessed Trinity, to truth, to discipleship, to the Bible's insistence that Christians will suffer, to learning how to die well, to the prospect of the new heaven and the new earth, to the glories of the new covenant, to the sheer beauty of Jesus Christ, to confidence in a God who is both sovereign and good, to the non-negotiability of repentance and faith, to the importance of endurance and perseverance, to the beauty of holiness and the importance of the local church. Is the Bible truly authoritative in our lives and ministries when we skirt these and other truly important themes that other generations of Christians rightly found in the Bible?

7. The Failure to be Bound by Both the Formal Principle and the Material Principle

The distinction between these two principles was well known among an earlier generation of evangelicals. The *formal* principle that constrains us is the authority of Scripture; the *material* principle that constrains us is the substance of Scripture, the gospel itself. And we need both.

That the formal principle by itself is inadequate is obvious as soon as we recall that groups such as Jehovah's Witnesses and Mormons happily and unreservedly affirm the Bible's truthfulness, reliability, and authority, but their understanding of what the Bible *says* (the material principle) is so aberrant that (we insist) they do not in reality let the Bible's authoritative message transform their thinking. On the other hand, today it is not uncommon to find Christians saying that they refuse to talk about biblical authority or biblical inerrancy or the like, but simply get on with preaching what the Bible says. History shows that such groups tend rather quickly to drift away from what the Bible says.

In other words, to be bound by only one of these two principles tends toward a drifting away from hearty submission to the Bible's authority. If one begins with adherence to the formal principle, thus nominally espousing the biblical authority of the formal principle, and adds penetrating understanding of and submission to what the Bible actually says, the result is much stronger, much more stable. Conversely, if one begins with an honest effort to grasp and teach what the Bible says, thus nominally espousing the material principle, and adds resolute adherence to the formal principle, one is much more likely to keep doing the honest exegesis that will enrich, revitalize, and correct what one thinks the Bible is saying.

8. Undisciplined Passion for the Merely Technical, or Unhealthy Suspicion of the Technical

By the "technical" I am referring to biblical study that deploys the full panoply of literary tools that begin with the original languages and pay attention to syntax, literary genre, text criticism and literary criticism, parallel sources, interaction with recent scholarship, and much more. An exclusive focus on technical study of the Bible may, surprisingly, dilute the "listening" element: manipulation of the tools and interaction with the scholars of the guild are more important than trembling before the Word of God. Conversely, some so disdain careful and informed study that they seduce themselves into thinking that pious reading absolves one from careful and accurate exegesis. In both cases, the Bible's real authority is diminished.

A variation of this concern surfaces when students arrive at the seminary and begin their course of study. Often they enter with boundless love for the Bible and a hunger to read it and think about it. Soon, however, they are enmeshed in memorizing Greek paradigms and struggling to work their way through short passages of the Greek New Testament. What they are doing now, they feel, is not so much reading the Word of God as *homework*, and it is hard. Instead of simply reading the Bible and being blessed, they are required to make decisions as to whether a verb should be taken this way or that, and whether an inherited interpretation really can withstand accurate exegesis. Confused and not a little discouraged by the demand to memorize defective Hebrew verbs, they talk to sympathetic professors and ask what is wrong, and what they can do about the coldness they feel stealing over their hearts.

It is not helpful to tell such students that, on the one hand, they simply need to get on with the discipline of study, and, on the other, they need to preserve time for devotional reading of the Bible. That

bifurcation of tasks suggests there is no need to be devotional when using technical tools, and no need for rigor when reading the Bible devotionally. Far better to insist that even when they are wrestling with difficult verbal forms and challenging syntax, what they are working on is *the Word of God*—and it is *always* imperative to cherish that fact, and treat the biblical text with reverence. And similarly, if when reading the Bible for private edification and without reference to any assignment, one stumbles across a passage one really does not understand, one is not sinning against God if one pulls a commentary or two off the shelf and tries to obtain some technical help.

In short, one should not be seduced by merely technical disciplines, nor should one eschew them. In every case, the Bible remains the authoritative Word of God regardless of the "tools" one deploys to understand it better, and it functions authoritatively in our lives when we manage a better integration of technical study and devotional reading.

9. Undisciplined Confidence in Contemporary Philosophical Agendas

Many examples could be provided. For example, some of the choices offered by analytic philosophy wrongfully exclude structures of thought the Bible maintains.[20] Or again, the most recent book by Charles Taylor,[21] written in the heritage of some forms of deconstruction and, like all his work, inevitably stimulating, argues that language is in some measure cut off from reality: it is not so much something that designates as the medium in which we exist. There is no fixed "meaning" to texts (which is very hard to square with the conviction expressed in Jude 3). One form of this approach to texts, often dubbed American Pragmatism,[22] thinks of readers as "users" of the text. A "good" reading, for example, is one that meets specific needs in the reader or the community. There is much to be said in favor of this stance, but it becomes self-defeating when it says, in effect, that a "good" reading meets particular needs on the part of the reader or community, *and must not be thought of as conveying timeless truth.* Occasionally entire commentaries are today written out of this philosophical commitment. Yet as many have pointed out, the stance is self-defeating: American Pragmatism defends itself with an ostensible timeless truth about the virtues of American Pragmatism. Pretty soon the commentaries that work out of this tradition do not so much help us think about God and his character and work, as about what we think we need and how the biblical texts meet those needs. The door is opened to interpretations that are exploitative, merely current, sometimes cutesy, and invariably agenda-driven, but only accidentally grounded in responsible exegesis.

Not for a moment should we imagine that this is the first generation to make such mistakes. Every generation in this sin-addled world experiments with a variety of philosophical stances that can easily (sometimes unwittingly) be used to subvert what Scripture says—and thus the authority of Scripture is again domesticated. Students of history have learned to appreciate the contributions of, say, Aristotelianism, Platonism, Gnosticism, Thomism, Cartesianism, Rationalism—but also to allow Scripture's voice to stand over them. It is more challenging to avoid the pitfalls lurking in the "isms" that are current.

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[20] For an example, see my essay, "Biblical-Theological Patterns Needed to Support Faithful Christian Reflections on Suffering and Evil," scheduled to appear in the Spring 2017 fascicle of *Trinity Journal*.

[21] Charles Taylor, *The Language Animal: The Full Shape of Linguistic Capacity* (Cambridge: Belknap, 2016).

[22] For a brief introduction, see Benjamin Sargent, "Using or Abusing the Bible? The Hermeneutics of American Pragmatism," *Churchman* 130 (2016): 11–20.

10. Anything That Reduces Our Trembling before the Word of God

"These are the ones I look on with favor: those who are humble and contrite in spirit, and who tremble at my word" (Isa 66:2). "'All people are like grass, and all their glory is like the flowers of the field; the grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of the Lord endures forever.' And this is the word that was preached to you" (1 Pet 1:24–25; cf. Isa 40:6–8).

The things that may sap our ability to tremble before God's word are many. Common to all of them is arrogance, arrogance that blinds us to our need to keep reading and re-reading and meditating upon the Bible if we are truly to think God's thoughts after him, for otherwise the endless hours of data input from the world around us swamp our minds, hearts, and imaginations. Moral decay will drive us away from the Bible: it is hard to imagine those who are awash in porn, or those who are nurturing sexual affairs, or those who are feeding bitter rivalry, to be spending much time reading the Bible, much less trembling before it. Moreover, our uncharitable conduct may undermine the practical authority of the Bible in the lives of those who observe us. Failure to press through in our studies until we have happily resolved some of the intellectual doubts that sometimes afflict us will also reduce the fear of the Lord in us, a subset of which, of course, is trembling before his Word.

11. Concluding Reflections

So that concludes our list of subtle ways to abandon the authority of Scripture in our lives. I'm sure these ten points could be grouped in other ways, and other points could usefully be added.

But I would be making a serious mistake if I did not draw attention to the fact that this list of warnings and dangers, an essentially negative list, implicitly invites us to a list of positive correlatives. For example, the first instance of subtle ways to trim the authority of Scripture was "an appeal to selective evidence"—which implicitly calls us to be as comprehensive as possible when we draw our theological and pastoral conclusions about what the Bible is saying on this or that point. If "heart embarrassment" before this or that text (the second example) reduces the authority of Scripture in my life, a hearty resolve to align my empathies and will with the lines of Scripture until I see more clearly how God looks at things from his sovereign and omniscient angle will mean I offer fewer apologies for the Bible, while spending more time making its stances coherent to a generation that finds the Bible profoundly foreign to contemporary axioms. It would be a godly exercise to work through all ten of the points so as to make clear what the positive correlative is in each case.