

# Biblical Authority

## *A Social Scientist's Perspective*

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### INTRODUCTION

THIS CHAPTER IS MUNDANE in the sense of being concerned with earthly affairs, the affairs of human beings as opposed to those of God. In this chapter I describe biblical authority, not as idealized by theologians and their critics, but as it exists among the people in an evangelical institution. This account is thus descriptive rather than prescriptive, and anthropological rather than theological.

This description is worthwhile because the facts of evangelical biblicalism are rather badly misunderstood by both evangelicals and their critics. Consider the following facts:

1. The doctrine of biblical authority is justified by appeal to the Bible itself. The circularity of this argument is apparent to most evangelicals but does not perturb them.
2. Evangelicals are very selective about which biblical commands they obey—but they don't obey the Bible only when doing so is convenient, either. Their actual practice is neither one of doing what the Bible says nor one of carrying out only those biblical injunctions they like.

3. In establishing a relevant connection between the Bible and their lives, evangelicals are much more concerned with the *fact* of a connection than with the *nature* of the connection.

Those who view Christian doctrines only in the abstract tend to overlook these facts, to dismiss them as human weakness, or to pounce upon them as evidence of hypocrisy. From an anthropological and psychological viewpoint, these phenomena are clues: they point to *structural* features of evangelical biblicism, revealing tensions that are inherent in the social and psychological complex that is biblical authority.

The concern of this volume is with biblical inerrancy, and by the end of this chapter I will discuss what inerrancy means in practice. But the bulk of the discussion will be devoted to the broader topic of biblical authority, for only when we see what biblical authority amounts to *in practice* will we be able to appreciate what the doctrine of biblical inerrancy *does*, its *function* in evangelical communities.

The model advanced here is based on my ethnographic research from 1997 to 2001 at Creekside Baptist, an evangelical church in Ann Arbor, Michigan.<sup>1</sup> Creekside Baptist is a predominantly white, middle-class church with 350–450 attendees on an average fall or winter Sunday. Although nominally Baptist, its doctrine, liturgy, ethics, and ethos are not distinctively Baptist. It is affiliated with a loose federation of churches but, like most Baptist churches, it makes decisions in-house. My research consisted of a Sunday morning survey, interviews, and participant observation. The present chapter draws heavily from my ethnography, *How the Bible Works: An Anthropological Study of Evangelical Biblicism*, the conclusions of which have largely been sustained by subsequent research.<sup>2</sup> The reader is referred to my ethnography for a more extensive and more rigorous discussion of most of the points presented here.

1. The names of the church and all informants are pseudonyms. I must emphasize that the description given here pertains to Creekside Baptist only during the period of my fieldwork. Following a change of leadership shortly after my fieldwork ended, Creekside Baptist appears to have shed much of its emphasis on the Bible.

2. B. Malley, *How the Bible Works: An Anthropological Study of Evangelical Biblicism*, Cognitive Science of Religion Series (Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira, 2004). See J. S. Bielo, *Words upon the Word: An Ethnography of Evangelical Group Bible Study* (New York: New York University Press, 2009); J. S. Bielo, ed., *The Social Life of Scriptures: Cross-Cultural Perspectives on Biblicism* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2009); E. Keller, *The Road to Clarity: Seventh-Day Adventism in Madagascar* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005).

My interpretations have been shaped also by my childhood experiences. I grew up in a northern fundamentalist church formed in 1929 as part of the first wave of fundamentalist churches. Although I no longer think of myself as a fundamentalist, and probably not even as an evangelical, I respect fundamentalists and evangelicals for their intellectual courage and I laud their sincere devotion to God. I hope that my work brings them some small bit of self-understanding and a heightened appreciation of their tradition.

Although I describe biblicism as a set of psychological and social processes, I do not deny that God speaks to individuals or institutions through the Bible—please do not understand this omission as a tacit denial. But here I am discussing just the human side of things.

## DOCTRINAL STATEMENT

Creekside Baptist was formed in 1964 and has always identified itself as an evangelical Christian church in which the Bible is regarded as inspired, inerrant, and authoritative. The following is from the church constitution, the first item in the Affirmation of Faith:

We believe that the Bible is the Word of God, fully inspired and without error in the original manuscripts, written under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, and that it has supreme authority in all matters of faith and conduct (II Timothy 3:15-17; II Peter 1:16-21; 3:14-18; Luke 24: 36-49).

The statement on the Bible is thus a mixture of conservative doctrine about the high status of Scripture and a somewhat more liberal limitation of its authority to “matters of faith and conduct.”

In prioritizing its statement on the Bible, Creekside Baptist is similar to many other evangelical institutions. The historian Mark A. Noll reviewed statements of faith by three denominations in the American evangelical tradition, six evangelical parachurch organizations, and documents from the 1974 and 1989 International Congresses on World Evangelization:

Convergence in these evangelical statements of faith begins with the *Bible*. Eight of the ten begin with a statement on Scripture (for the other two—Wheaton and Lausanne—Scripture comes second). All of them speak in unison by affirming that the Bible

is infallible (it does not let people down) and inspired (its writing reflects the direct influence of God). They are equally in agreement that Scripture is the ultimate authority for beliefs and practices. The InterVarsity statement puts it most economically in affirming belief in "the unique divine inspiration, entire trustworthiness and authority of the Bible." The Lausanne Covenant expands matters considerably, but much along the lines of the other statements: "We affirm the divine inspiration, truthfulness and authority of both Old and New Testament Scriptures in their entirety as the only written word of God, without error in all that it affirms, and the only infallible rule of faith and practice. We also affirm the power of God's word to accomplish his purpose of salvation. . . . Through it [Scripture] the Holy Spirit still speaks today. He illumines the minds of God's people in every culture to perceive its truth freshly through their own eyes and thus discloses to the whole Church ever more of the many colored wisdom of God."<sup>3</sup>

Clearly, evangelical institutions like Creekside Baptist emphasize their view of Scripture, at least in their doctrinal statements.

Why such an emphasis? Belief in the special status of the Bible is not part of the Christian gospel; it is not required for salvation. If the special status of the Bible is the *result* of its divine inspiration, then it would seem that the statement on the Bible should *follow* rather than *precede* statements on God and God's revelatory activity in the world. So why foreground the institution's view of the Bible? There are three related reasons, I think, that evangelical institutions emphasize their doctrine of the Bible: epistemology, distinctiveness, and discursive structure. I will consider these in turn, along the way making some observations about what they mean in practice.

### *Epistemology*

Part of the epistemology of evangelical institutions is biblical foundationalism: the expectation that their beliefs are ultimately to be derived from the Bible. The people of Creekside Baptist sought to hold *biblical* views, make *biblical* choices, and lead *biblical* lives. Ideally, the Bible was the rule for their lives. In light of this shared epistemology, it makes

3. Mark Noll, *American Evangelical Christianity: An Introduction* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2001) 59-60.

sense for an institution to state the foundation before explicating the beliefs that are derived from it.

This statement involves narrowly circular reasoning: Creekside Baptist grounds its doctrine of biblical authority in the Bible itself. Interestingly, the patent circularity of this line of reasoning did not disturb the people of Creekside Baptist. This is particularly striking because the people of Creekside Baptist were unusually well educated—64 percent had done postgraduate work—and because it was not uncommon for them to examine intellectual arguments during Sunday school classes or Bible studies. Obviously, these people were not *blind* to the problems of circular argumentation nor had they *failed to notice* that this argument is circular. Rather, there are two possibilities here:

1. They found this circular argument, but not most others, compelling.
2. They recognized that this argument was circular but did not find this a compelling criticism in this case.

These are genuinely distinct possibilities: 1) allows that the argument is persuasive and that there is some formal difference that they detected between this circular argument and others; 2) suggests that although the statement has the form of an argument, its persuasiveness derives not from the argument but from some other source. My discussions with the people of Creekside Baptist strongly favored the latter option: they recognized that the argument is circular—they did not suggest that it was somehow different from other circular arguments—but they did not seem perturbed by its admitted circularity. Rather, it was very much as if they felt the charge of circularity were of limited interest—*valid* but not really *relevant*. We will see why it was largely irrelevant later.

### *Distinctiveness*

In terms of institutional distinctiveness, evangelical institutions distinguish themselves from the less “traditional,” mainline Christian churches by their high view of the Bible. A high view of the Bible is part of evangelical identity. So it makes sense for evangelical institutions to foreground their view of the Bible because this is an evangelical distinctive.

It is important to note that this distinction is *self-perceived*; it is part of evangelicals’ normative self-concept. In my research, I asked people

how they identified themselves religiously. Specifically, I asked a standard series of six questions:

1. "Do you consider yourself a Christian?" followed by, "And what do you mean by *Christian*?"
2. "Do you consider yourself an evangelical?" followed by, "And what do you mean by *evangelical*?" and
3. "Do you consider yourself a fundamentalist?" followed by, "And what do you mean by *fundamentalist*?"

I posed the questions in this way so as to gather information about people's religious identities without forcing upon them one or another definition of the categories *Christian*, *evangelical*, and *fundamentalist*. All of my informants identified themselves as Christians, and none of them included belief in the Bible as part of what made them Christian. Almost all of my informants identified themselves as evangelicals, and all who did picked out their belief in the Bible as the primary (and often only) thing that identified them as evangelical. Thus belief in the Bible was perceived as a necessary (and often sufficient) condition for being an evangelical.

Thus biblical authority is tied in with individuals' sense of identity. It was also a primary criterion by which they select a church. In response to the question, "What do you look for in a church?" most informants mentioned belief in the Bible:

Well, I think the most important thing is doctrine; that they believe that Jesus Christ is the only way to God. Something I don't think I mentioned in my definition of Christian—maybe it was implied—but just that Jesus is the only way [and] the Bible is the word of God. . . . But a church should definitely hold to the Bible as the word of God, [and] Jesus [as] the only way—I think those are kind of the first things you can check up on.

Another informant responded similarly:

Flat off, the assumption that they believe in the Bible. . . . Those type of things. So it would have to be a Christian church, it would have to believe that the Bible is the word of God, and seek to do that evangelism we spoke of. But are you looking for . . . what are some more peripheral type of things? In more detail, I would look for the preaching, programs for kids, the type of participants and what do they do with their kids, things like that.

In general, I found that the people who attended Creekside Baptist were attracted to the church in part by its biblicism. So biblical authority is part not only of how evangelicals define themselves but also how some individuals select churches. Given that the American religious landscape is pluralistic and voluntary, it is *good marketing* for evangelical churches, as evangelical churches, to advertise their view of the Bible.

The link between biblical authority and both individual and institutional identity is a potent one. Psychologically, there is good reason to believe that individuals are strongly motivated by their identities. Sociologically, it is necessary for institutions, if they are to survive, to reproduce their defining features.<sup>4</sup> We should expect, therefore, for evangelicals, both individually and institutionally, to be particularly concerned with biblical authority.

### *Discursive Structure*

Finally, it is useful for evangelical institutions to foreground their view of the Bible because doing so communicates something about the predominant discursive structure in such institutions. Reference to the Bible was a common feature of discourse at Creekside Baptist. Expository sermons took a Bible passage as their point of departure, but also returned to the passage regularly and also referenced other biblical texts. Most Sunday school classes and small group meetings were structured as Bible studies in which people either read a text together and then talked about what it meant or started with a topic and interrogated the Bible for its teaching thereon. In both cases, the focus was on identifying the Bible's teaching. This assumption of biblical authority is part of the ground of evangelical discourse, and therefore it is practical for evangelical institutions to advertise this fact up front.

On the other hand, they seemed almost completely unconcerned with the *nature* of the connection to the Bible. For instance, men were discouraged from ogling women by appeal to Jesus' saying in Matt 5:27-28: "You have heard that it was said, 'Do not commit adultery.' But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart." Looking at a woman to admire her—"the second look," as one fellow put it—was (ostensibly) equated with adultery. This saying of Jesus was taken at face value, and the context in

4. See D. Sperber, "Anthropology and Psychology: Towards an Epidemiology of Representations," *Man* 20 (1985) 73-89.

which it occurred—the hyperbolic Sermon on the Mount—was ignored . . . unless discussion proceeded to the next verse.

In Matt 5:29–30, Jesus himself offered a rather straightforward and, I should think, effective solution to the problem of ophthalmological adultery:

If your right eye causes you to sin, gouge it out and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to be thrown into hell. And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to go into hell.

The straightforward interpretation of this solution—though contextually relevant and well reasoned—was never even considered. It was regarded either as an allegory in which the parts of one's body stood for friendships and associations or—more often and, I think, more accurately—as hyperbole.

To be more precise: Matt 5:27–28 was taken at face value, automatically, without discussion; Matt 5:29–30 was taken as hyperbole, automatically, without discussion.<sup>5</sup> When, in individual discussions with evangelicals, I have suggested either that both be treated hyperbolically or that both be taken at face value, discussants have regarded this suggestion as if it were obviously unreasonable. I take this as an honest and forthright response; I am sure that when they read Matt 5:27–30 their inferential processes are following rules that preclude such interpretations. Specifically, I think that they dismiss the lopping off of body parts as *unwarranted* and the permissibility of lustful looking *irrelevant*. There is compelling psychological evidence that we have a moral inference system, one function of which is to reckon proportionality between offenses and punishments. Jesus' solution, though theologically sound, violates those intuitions, and its face-value reading is thus almost immediately dismissed because the belief that Jesus was *just*—that is, acted in accordance with the intuitions produced by this moral inference system—precludes him intending for us to violate those intuitions. Largely preconscious inferences cause evangelicals to think that Jesus *just cannot* have intended for that solution to be taken at face value.<sup>6</sup>

5. I have also witnessed interactions where Matt 5:31–32 were taken at face value, automatically, without discussion—but not at Creekside Baptist.

6. Psychologically, this is an issue of relevance. The inference that Jesus intended what he actually said—that it was intended to be taken at face value—does not receive



The converse possibility, that Jesus really did not mean for men to abstain from looking lustfully at women, is considered *irrelevant*.<sup>7</sup> Surely Jesus meant *something* by what he said, and if he did *not* mean that men should not look at women lustfully, it is difficult to see what that would be. Thus the presumption that Jesus' statement is relevant virtually ensures that it will be taken at face value.

Except, I predict, for the *adultery* part. I have not tested this, even hypothetically, so it is merely a prediction, but I predict that our moral inference system would generate the intuition that it would be *unjust* to apply the full penalty for actual adultery to a lustful look. If we lived in a society where the punishment for adultery were, say, castration, I predict that evangelicals would not advocate castration as punishment for lustful looking. I predict that they would regard that as *unwarranted* by exactly the same psychological mechanism that causes them to regard lopping off body parts as unwarranted. We do not see this in practice because there are no practical consequences for calling a lustful look *adultery*.<sup>8</sup>

The point I am making is that evangelicals, even though they assign great importance to establishing connections between their beliefs and the Bible, are inconsistent in the kinds of connections they establish and—importantly—are not much concerned by this inconsistency *per se*. So long as all *particular* interpretations seem reasonable to them, they are not concerned with consistency in their *method* of interpretation. They are concerned when interpretive inconsistency creates some theological or practical problem, but they do not much worry about interpretive consistency *in its own right*.

It is not that they fail to see the problem with inconsistent interpretative methods. Rather, they see the problem but it just does not bother them very much. Mostly they just shrug it off and do not change their

enough support from other inferences to achieve relevance. See D. Sperber and D. Wilson, *Relevance: Communication and Cognition*, 2nd ed. (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 1995).

7. On the cognitive principle of relevance, see Sperber and Wilson, *Relevance*.

8. This might more realistically be tested as follows. Find a community where adultery is considered legitimate grounds for divorce and pose the following scenario: "A woman wants to divorce her husband because he has committed adultery; by his own admission, he looked lustfully at another woman. Is this legitimate grounds for a divorce?" I predict that most people in this community will say *no*, even if they have been primed by affirming that adultery is a legitimate ground for divorce.

interpretations at all. Looking at women is still adultery, and they are not cutting anything off. It is very much as if the inconsistency is *irrelevant*—a point to which we will return.

### *Limitations of the Formal Statement*

Thus far I have suggested that evangelical institutions emphasize their doctrine of the Bible because doing so reflects their epistemology, distinctiveness, and discursive structure. Along the way, I have hinted that evangelicals' practice of biblical authority—in particular their circular justification of it and their inconsistency in applying it—suggests that there is more going on in practice than the doctrinal statement would indicate.

I have not spent much time unpacking the doctrinal statement itself, however, and this is because the doctrinal statement is of very limited value in understanding how the people of Creekside Baptist think about biblical authority and inerrancy. First, the constitution of Creekside Baptist, while available in printed form, in practice gets cited only to define issues of official procedure: never did I hear the Affirmation of Faith quoted in a sermon, Sunday school, or Bible study. Rather, the constitution is distributed to new members when they join the church, and they are given to understand that this document defines church polity and procedure. Once part of the church, they use the constitution seldom, if at all. Below we will consider why this might be.

Second, the doctrinal statement is not an accurate representation of people's actual beliefs. For example, it leaves out an assumption critical to biblical foundationalism. In the doctrinal statement, the Bible's inerrancy is limited to *the original manuscripts*. By *original manuscripts* is meant the parchments and papyri upon which the biblical authors (or their secretaries) first wrote the biblical texts—documents that are usually referred to as the *autographs*. This declaration allows that all manner of errors may have crept into the Bible in the process of copying. By itself this is completely irrelevant: the attribution of inerrancy to the original manuscripts is of little interest if that inerrancy has not been preserved. The doctrinal statement leaves out the assumption—necessary for confidence in actual Bibles—that the transmission process was largely faithful. If we are to understand what people actually think about biblical authority, we cannot trust the formal statement of doctrine but must look to more direct evidence.

## LAY BELIEF AND PRACTICE

I will treat lay belief in and practice of biblical authority first in terms of ideation and then with regard to institutional and private practice. These approaches are not distinct so much in their subject matter as in their approach. All data are behavioral: in my discussion of ideation the behaviors are verbal responses to survey and interview questions; in my discussion of practice the behaviors are activities carried out in more natural contexts. And in both cases the theoretical object is what the people of Creekside Baptist—and by extension, other evangelicals—think. In this section, the distinction between ideation and practice is merely methodological. In the next section I will draw a different distinction, between two different sorts of biblical authority, each of which has its associated motivations, ideas, and practices.

*Authority, Inspiration, and Inerrancy*

Biblical authority is closely connected in people's minds with the beliefs about the Bible's divine inspiration. The following is from my discussion with Chris, a middle-aged man who had attended Creekside Baptist for almost ten years.

BRIAN: Is the Bible the word of God?

CHRIS: Boy, you're asking a lot of . . . now if we define what is the word of God . . .

BRIAN: I'll let you define it however you like.

CHRIS: You know, for me it is the word of God, it's the inspired word of God. Is it affected by who wrote it? Yeah, I think it is. I think . . . but it is the inspired word of God. I believe, you know. And it is inerrant, in things spiritual.

BRIAN: What does it mean to say the Bible is inspired by God?

CHRIS: Well to me it means that the person who wrote it is basically—I don't know how to say this—is mentally stimulated through a spiritual force, the Holy Spirit, that is in them, and they are attuned so much when they are writing this, or God has them attuned so much, that it would be as if he were writing it. That's what I think the inspiration of the Holy Scriptures is, is that they sat down to write this, and they could do nothing else but write what they wrote. It was inspired by God.

Chris's answers were among the most explicit that I received and reflect his independent study of his faith. His rhetorical question, "Is it affected by who wrote it?" shows that, somewhere in his study, he had come across the objection—usually posed rhetorically in discussions of inspiration, just as Chris does here—that the biblical writings vary considerably in vocabulary, grammar, and style. He did not say where he ran across this objection, but it was probably not at Creekside Baptist. The doctrine of inspiration was seldom mentioned, let alone discussed, at Creekside Baptist.

Chris's ideas about inspiration were as well developed as those of any other layperson whom I interviewed. He gave an almost physical description of how God, acting through a "spiritual force," determined what the biblical writers would write. Other informants described inspiration with phrases like "God guided their thoughts" or "impressed their minds." But they were clearly reaching for words, and freely admitted that they were very uncertain about how inspiration might have worked.

When informants said that they did not know exactly how inspiration worked, I followed up with questions about the *implications* of the belief in biblical inspiration: Does it entail that God is the author of the Bible? Does it entail that the Bible is true? Does it entail that the Bible is authoritative? Each of these questions received an unequivocal "yes" from all interviewees. Whatever the inspiration of the Bible might be exactly, the people of Creekside Baptist believed that it entailed that the Bible is authoritative, true, and authored by God.

The Sunday morning survey I gave had two items related to inerrancy, to which respondents had the options to agree, disagree, or choose not to say. The first item, which received 100 percent affirmation, was that the Bible is authoritative in spiritual matters. The second item, that the Bible is authoritative even in matters of science and history, received 69.5 percent affirmation. These sorts of conscious reflections are essential to understanding what people think about the Bible, but they give us a very incomplete picture. They must be complemented by observations of what people actually do with Bibles.

#### *Discourse about the Bible*

Bibles were ubiquitous at Creekside Baptist. Many people—even children who could not yet read—brought Bibles to church. When the Bible was read aloud during the Sunday morning worship service, it was com-

mon for people to follow along in their own Bibles. People also consulted their own Bibles during Sunday school classes and in Bible studies.

At Creekside Baptist, the order of worship on Sunday mornings involved a reading from the Bible. Sometimes the church followed the lectionary, other times not. Often the Bible reading was preceded by the invitation, "Listen to the word of the Lord," and closed with the statement, "This is the word of the Lord." Sermons at Creekside Baptist were expository: they took a Bible passage as their point of departure and usually framed their exhortations as exegesis or application of what the passage said. Sermon series were sometimes topical and sometimes systematic studies of a book of the Bible. Sunday school meetings, Wednesday evening meetings, and small group meetings during the week usually took the form of Bible studies in which some passage was interrogated for its instruction for the readers.

In all these contexts was evidenced the discursive convention of tying assertions about faith and practice to one or another biblical passage. The consistency and pervasiveness of this discursive pattern was such that one *could not help* but infer 1) that the people of Creekside Baptist regarded the Bible as authoritative and 2) that they assumed that other people at Creekside Baptist did too. I do not mean merely that their discursive behavior was compelling evidence that they regarded the Bible as authoritative: I mean rather that the attribution of this belief to them was *conversationally necessary*, that one *could not understand* their conversation, much less actively participate in it, if one did not assume that they regarded the Bible as authoritative. In this way, biblical authority was woven into the discourse of the institution.

I never heard anyone suggest, for any important practical question, that the Bible simply did not address it, nor did I ever hear anyone challenge biblical teaching on any point. People were perfectly willing to admit that the Bible left some things mysterious or that its overall teaching on a point might be complex enough that different passages could seem contradictory (e.g., regarding free will and determinism), but I never heard anyone suggest that the Bible was inadequate, whether by omission or error, as a guide to faith and practice. Most likely, the people of Creekside Baptist never entertained these possibilities. The Sunday morning survey showed that the people of Creekside Baptist regarded the Bible as both infallible and inerrant in matters of faith

and practice, so it is not surprising that they never suggested fallibility or error in conversation.

### *Devotional Reading*

Biblical authority was not, however, just an institutional affair: the people of Creekside Baptist practiced biblical authority independently, as individuals and families. The strongest evidence of biblical authority in people's lives was their independent devotional reading of the Bible.

Their devotional Bible reading was motivated and framed, psychologically, by an expectation of profound relevance. Evangelicals expect the Bible to be profoundly relevant to them in their individual circumstances. They expect it to say especially important things about their contemporary needs and concerns. In response to the question, "Does your Bible reading differ from other reading you do?" one of my informants told me:

Yeah, I read the Bible differently. It's to understand the significance of what it says and how it relates to me today. And that's why it's so fascinating, 'cause it's so relevant, it's just so profoundly relevant. So yeah, I read it differently. I mean I can read other stuff about the Bible and learn from it . . . but I take the Bible also as authoritative, so I don't take the other stuff as being authoritative.

The Bible need not say something evangelical readers necessarily *like*, but they believe it should be highly relevant to them, and they try reading it in different ways to see how it might be.

In talking with people about their devotional reading habits, I inquired how they decided to stop reading for the day. How did they decide that they had read enough? I found that devotional reading is often brought to a close by mundane external factors such as the clock or by convenient divisions in the text, but people also stop reading when something strikes them, when they come across something especially meaningful. This latter sort of voluntary, motivated cessation suggests that devotional reading is at least partly a goal-directed process that is terminated when its objective is achieved. Its objective is an interpretation that achieves a high degree of relevance. When you suddenly see the importance of a passage for your life, it means God has spoken to you.

Close questioning indicated a slight asymmetry in the sort of relevance sought. I posed the following question: "Suppose you set down to

read your Bible for fifteen minutes. And you're reading along, and after ten minutes you encounter a verse that strongly convicts you of some sin in your life. Would you stop reading or continue?" Most informants responded that they would stop reading and pray about whatever they had been convicted about. I then posed a variant of the question in which, instead of being convicted of sin, they were strongly reminded of God's love for them. Again, they said they would stop reading. I then asked the convicted-of-sin version again, but this time the conviction came after only three minutes of Bible reading. They seemed less certain of their answers this time, but they generally said they would stop reading and pray. Finally, I posed a version in which they were impressed with God's love, but after only three minutes of reading. All agreed that in this last scenario they would keep reading. Conviction stops reading, even after only three minutes, because it calls for a response—it is an actionable outcome. The reader then has something to do and has no need to read further; full relevance has been achieved.

Contrary to a common assumption, the people of Creekside Baptist were *not* finding in the Bible only what they wanted to find. But the fact that they were looking for relevant connections between the Bible and their lives and that, in particular, they were looking for some actionable item is evidence of their belief that the Bible is authoritative. This interpretation is strengthened by their reports that they then tried to make choices in conformity with what they understood God to be saying to them.

## AN ANTHROPOLOGICAL MODEL OF BIBLICAL AUTHORITY

It is now time to explicate an anthropological and psychological model of biblical authority, one that makes sense of the preceding observations.

### *The Principle of Biblical Authority*

The *principle* of biblical authority is evangelicals' self-conscious belief that the Bible is the inspired Word of God and thus authoritative. This belief has particular importance for self-identified evangelicals because it is linked to their identity. The link to identity provides this belief with its primary motivation. This is why the circularity of the doctrine of biblical authority—the citation of the Bible in support of its own author-

ity—is recognized by evangelicals but does not bother them. Because the principle is *categorically* linked with identity—“I believe the Bible is inspired and authoritative because I am an evangelical”—the weakness of its justification is simply irrelevant. They see the weakness, but it does not count against the belief’s real motivation.

The principle of biblical authority is precisely a *principle*: people express their belief in what the Bible says in advance of knowing what exactly that might be. It is an abstract principle that defines an individual’s relationship to the Bible and stipulates an ideal: belief that the Bible is authoritative in principle creates a situation in which actual practice may be compared to the text. The abstract nature of this principle contributes to a dynamic of renewal and reformation.

On an institutional level, the principle of biblical authority is part of an evangelical community’s self-definition in a pluralist, voluntaristic religious environment. Statements of biblical authority occur mainly on institutional borders, where the institution is being defined and marketed. Thus such statements are seldom used *within* the institution.

### *The Practice of Biblical Authority*

Evangelicals’ *practice* of biblical authority consists in the establishment of connections between the Bible and their lives. Whether conducted institutionally or privately, evangelicals search for relevant connections between the Bible and their lives.

This search is guided by the cognitive principle of relevance.<sup>9</sup> The operation of this principle, modified by the genre-specific expectations, leads evangelicals to slip from one interpretive approach to another largely without conscious awareness. Their hermeneutic is consistent not in its assumptions about language but in its assumption that the text will be highly relevant to them today.

This is why most evangelicals are more concerned with the *fact* of a connection between the Bible and their lives than with the *nature* of that connection, and also why they find the charge of interpretive inconsistency to be of limited interest. The practice of biblical authority is motivated by its productivity in their lives: the Bible is for them a source—a fountain—of highly relevant inferences. This utility alone justifies the practice. The *practice* of biblical authority is not motivated

9. See Sperber and Wilson, *Relevance*.



by the *principle* of biblical authority, and so concerns relevant to the principle are not necessarily relevant to the practice: evangelicals see the problems that interpretive inconsistency poses for biblical foundationalism, but they are not greatly concerned by them.

Evangelicals' selectivity in the biblical injunctions they obey requires some further explanation. First, in the face of ambiguity, people often look to others to see how they are interpreting the situation, a process called *informational social influence*. This sort of social influence also impacts the ways evangelicals understand the Bible: they look to other people to see what they think the Bible says, or what they think it means to live a *biblical life*. So from the time a person first begins to develop an evangelical identity, his or her ideas about what the Bible teaches are informed by what others practice. (This is in the nature of a working assumption and may later be overturned with regard to specific issues.)

Second, part of evangelicals' practice of biblical authority is the assumption that the meaning of a particular passage is never exhausted: there is always more to understand. In my experience, this belief is occasionally articulated, but the strongest evidence for it is that evangelicals are always open to re-examining any particular passage. They might reach a point where they feel the returns for further study are diminishing, but they never seem to claim that there is no more for them to learn from a passage.

### *Principle vs. Practice*

I have drawn a sharp distinction between the principle of biblical authority and the practice of biblical authority because they are different psychological and social processes. People commonly assume that the principle of biblical authority *motivates* the practice of biblical authority, but the evidence does not support this interpretation. In fact, it is curiously easy to find examples of perfectly clear biblical injunctions that are uniformly ignored by large communities of people who claim to believe the Bible.

I have in mind texts like Rom 16:16, "Greet one another with a holy kiss" (repeated in 1 Cor 16:20, 2 Cor 13:12, 1 Thess 5:26, and in another form in 1 Pet 5:14). When I inquired about this command of a few people at Creekside Baptist, informants concurred 1) that its meaning is quite clear, 2) that it is in the Bible, and 3) that they are not going to do it. My

informants' explanation was that this particular command is "cultural." In the words of one woman: "Well, in their culture that was how people greeted each other, you know, a kiss on each cheek. It would be weird if you went to church and just started doing it." But of course, this rationale could be used to get one out of nearly any biblical command, and my informants were unconvinced by the parallel argument that what was objectionable about homosexuality was the particular way it was practiced in biblical times. Conversely, *weirdness* is not considered a barrier to obeying other biblical commands. The "cultural" rationalization is an ad hoc argument widely endorsed because it has the convenient consequence of exempting evangelicals from a socially awkward command.

Ad hoc explanations develop when the results of the practice of biblical authority conflict with the principle of biblical authority. In principle, the whole Bible is authoritative, but in practice, in a community like Creekside Baptist, commands like "Greet one another with a holy kiss" are not because unrelated Midwesterners just do not walk up and kiss each other. The "cultural" rationalization finds an audience because it defers the conflict and changes it into an abstract hermeneutic one. The audience is susceptible to it because they are caught between the principle and the practice of biblical authority.

I would suggest that the real reason that evangelicals do not find the kiss-one-another command binding has to do with informational social influence. Informational social influence is a social process whereby an individual, faced with an ambiguous situation, looks to others to see how they are interpreting the situation. In this case, the fact that the Bible says "Greet one another with a holy kiss" is ambiguous in the sense that the *importance* of this command is not clear from the Bible. According to the principle of biblical authority, all such commands should be authoritative, but remember, the principle does not guide the practice. The practice is driven by relevance, and not all biblical injunctions are *equally* relevant or relevant *in the same way*. Thus it is not surprising that individuals observe the community to see *in what way* this injunction is relevant. They can observe that others are not taking this injunction at face value, so they do not do so either. They do not see themselves as rejecting the command; rather, they see themselves as taking its point without implementing it in its face-value form. By the process of informational social influence, communities shape their participants' interpretations.

## INERRANCY

As this volume is concerned with the doctrine of inerrancy, I should like to close with predictions about the implications of changing this doctrine.

The *practice* of biblical authority would, I think, be unaffected. The practice of biblical authority is driven by cognitive relevance but may produce relevant inferences that are either consistent or inconsistent with the reader's other motivations. A conflict arises only if the inferences are inconsistent with other motivations. In such a case, the reader must resolve the conflict by repentance (overriding the other motivations) or by reinterpreting the passage (finding a different relevant inference) so that there is no conflict. There are many forms that this reinterpretation can take, and I do not see how adding the possibility that the passage is in error will really change anything. In the practice of biblical authority, the issues are relevance and motivation, not verity.

The *principle* of biblical authority would be affected by the allowance of errors in the Bible. For most evangelicals, the doctrine of biblical inerrancy amounts to *confidence* that the most popular Bibles—the major translations—are reliably true. The allowance of unspecified errors would, I think, effectively dissolve this confidence. It would probably create a market for a new Bible with only the true parts, perhaps something along the lines of the one created by Thomas Jefferson.

I think that evangelicals would have to give up their epistemology of biblical foundationalism. Evangelical epistemology is analogous to scientific epistemology in that both accept something as given and then build knowledge upon it.<sup>10</sup> For scientists, the basis is reality (as revealed by observation, direct and indirect); for evangelicals, it is the Bible. Evangelicals generally find this a plausible and intuitive epistemology. If the Bible were not reliable, however, I am doubtful that this epistemology would have the same popular appeal.

If an institution gave up the doctrine of inerrancy, it would no longer attract people who identify themselves as evangelicals. Because biblical authority is tied to identity, and inerrancy is at the crux of the principle of biblical authority, I think many evangelicals would react strongly against this change.

10. See E. Keller, *Road to Clarity*.

It was clear from my interviews that the doctrine of inerrancy was psychologically grounded in people's confidence in God's loving nature. I think that some evangelicals would have a difficult time reconciling an error-prone Bible with a loving and involved God, at least so long as they still subscribed to biblical foundationalism.

In short, my analysis suggests that inerrancy is critical to the principle of biblical authority, but not to its practice, and that dropping inerrancy would force a reconception of evangelicalism, but not necessarily many changes in practice.