

EVANGELICALS AND BIBLICAL AUTHORITY: A REVIEW ARTICLE

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Evangelicals at an Impasse: Biblical Authority in Practice. By Robert K. Johnston. Atlanta: John Knox, 1979, 178 pp., \$6.95 paper.

Johnston, associate professor of religion at Western Kentucky University, reminds fellow evangelicals that despite their common profession of Biblical authority their divisions over key issues seem to be deepening. He insists that the conservative crisis is really one of hermeneutics and that only community consensus-building can cope with conflicting views. This collective strategy must keep in view not only Biblical authority, he holds, but traditional formulations and contemporary cultural judgments also.

Johnston presents a pithy and orderly summary of evangelical concord and conflict on several controversial issues. He focuses on inspiration and social ethics, particularly the issues of women in Church and society, and homosexuality. He reflects divergent views with objectivity and with high accuracy.

He pursues an objectively sharable meaning in the Biblical texts. He has no brief for experiential Christianity that glosses over doctrinal concerns. He stresses the Bible's forefront emphasis on Scriptural authority rather than inerrancy and holds that the issue of interpretation precedes that of inerrancy or errancy (p. 35). But, we would ask, if the text is inherently errant, what transcendent import has even the right interpretation? Johnston seems uneasy because "outsiders have often regarded evangelicals as holding . . . to a belief in Biblical inerrancy" (p. 15). He thinks this commitment post-Reformation and peculiarly American, but not the Church's historical position. He opposes hinging the credibility of Christianity on Biblical inerrancy (p. 41).

Johnston distinguishes detailed inerrantists (Lindsell and Schaeffer: autographic inerrancy the watershed of true and false evangelicals; errancy a conduit to apostasy), irenic inerrantists (Pinnock and Fuller: the Bible must define its inerrancy by genre and purpose), complete infallibilists (Hubbard, who alters traditional meanings), and partial infallibilists (Beegle and Davis: external criteria decide Scripture's trustworthiness). Johnston's criticisms are penetrating. The terms inerrant, infallible and trustworthy, he notes, have become pawns in a theological chess game involving institutions and image.

Johnston seeks to limit the scope of Biblical error. He protests "premature judgment that there is 'error' in the intended message" (*n. b.*) of Biblical writers (p. 148). Scripture cannot be scientifically precise, he says, because it was written prior to modern science. But suppose next century's scientists consider this century's science highly imprecise?

Disagreements over the role of women in Church and world Johnston considers a test case of evangelical failure to examine the way Biblical authority func-

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tions to authorize theological commitments. In formulating doctrine, evangelicals are vulnerable to the influences of Church tradition and of culture.

In social ethics conflicting ecclesial loyalties outweigh hermeneutical concerns, Johnston contends (pp. 76, 79-80). In an incisive overview of differing perspectives he categorizes *Moody Monthly* (traditional and dispensational: emphasizes charity and Christian citizenship, but offers no social criticism); *Christianity Today* (moderately conservative, fluctuating commitment to social concerns, comment on specific issues, enlarging role for the institutional Church in political affairs, but no assault on social structures); *Reformed Journal* (Calvinist/socially liberal: critical of structures, champions government welfare programs); *Sojourners* (radical Anabaptist: rigorous discipleship, corporate Christian lifestyle, societal critique and disaffiliation, concern for the poor). Johnston finds political analogues in the different ideologies of Reagan, Nixon, Pat Brown and Jerry Brown.

Johnston's exposition of social justice raises questions. He rejects as culturally inspired the definition of justice in terms of equality or of desert and declares Biblical justice to be "to each according to his or her needs" (pp. 89, 112). But do passages he adduces to show that neglect of the poor is unjust really justify his definition and interpretation of justice? Johnston criticizes the view that the state should ideally preserve justice and holds instead that public institutions are to express love (pp. 101 ff.). But unless justice is the form in which love is expressed in the public arena, can government avoid preferential treatment? If civil government is to be paternalistic and partisan in its concerns we shall need to look elsewhere than to the Bible to legitimate it. Nobody can improve, I believe, on a wholly just state; such a state would be messianic.

Johnston seems to think, moreover, that this present reviewer opposes Christian cooperative action (in distinction from ecclesial political action) in the public arena. To the contrary, I have criticized evangelicals for too meager expectations from law, concentration on single-issue or or single-candidate politics, and neglect of platform, policy and programmatic concerns. And, contrary to evangelical leaders who onesidedly assign evangelism the sole priority, I insist that no Christian is called to neglect justice.

Johnston considers current scientific disagreement concerning homosexuality "the single most important source of present evangelical conflict" (p. 118). For that reason he examines the interface of interpretations and culture on the subject. Evangelical views are catalogued by James Nelson's typology: rejecting-punitive (Bryant, Falwell, Wyrzten); rejecting nonpunitive (Lovelace, Williams); qualified acceptance (Thielicke, Smedes); full acceptance (Scanzoni, Mollenkott). Johnston contends that contemporary culture lifts evangelicals from ignorance about the topic, yet exposes evangelical homophobia (exaggeration of homosexuality into the worst possible sexual vice).

The history of interpretation, Johnston emphasizes, will alert us to the richness of the text and the dangers of cultural bias. He rejects "ongoing revelation" but promotes "progressive understanding" (p. 74). Changing cultural situations draw out "new implications of the text" (p. 75). What then is culture's role in interpretation? Is it merely to promote theological relevance, to provide an effective beginning for theological discussion, to stimulate a reevaluation of positions—but not to serve as ultimate authority (p. 154)? Or has social science a necessary and equal role with the Bible in theological formulation? Johnston contends that

while the Bible conveys God's will, scientific analysis and experience "can serve as a guide"; rejection of this possibility he (curiously) considers a rejection of general revelation (p. 133). Johnston criticizes "selective listening" that does not hear "secular culture on its own terms" and that knows "prior to interaction with the wider culture what was to be considered Christian truth" (p. 153). Yet if the Bible conveys normative revelation, why does not Scripture have precedence? Johnston is vague about the "validity" that he, in common with Hubbard, derives from "human experience or scientific research." As a result, his epistemic verdict on homosexuality is somewhat spongy: "The Biblical mandate against homosexuality seems strong. While new evidence might be forthcoming which would alter this assessment, it is not, at present, available" (pp. 143-144). "Until evidence surfaces . . . the traditional position concerning the sinfulness of all homosexual activity is true to the Biblical norm" (p. 145). But from where would such new evidence surface?

The goal of Scripture, Johnston stresses, is salvation (p. 73), and faith alone enables the text to speak authoritatively in our lives (p. 74). But does this not confuse appropriation and epistemic validity? And is not the goal of Scripture to provide propositional truth about God, about creation, and about much else?

On the one hand Johnston criticizes isolating the timebound from the universal and divine; on the other, he disowns Scripture as timeless truth (p. 56). In agreement with G. C. Berkouwer he disputes the view that the Bible gives us revelation "in a pure and unambiguous form" (p. 39). Yet he implicitly defends "the authority and trustworthiness of all the Scriptures in their parts" (p. 43) without showing how this follows. He argues that by the perspicuity of Scripture the Reformers did not mean "'objective' clarity" (p. 75).

Johnston puts theology at greater distance from Biblical teaching than did earlier evangelicals who found objectively revealed doctrines in the Bible. For Johnston, theology's threefold sources are Scripture, tradition and contemporary judgments (p. 151). To be sure, not even evangelicals today have a theology of glory, and some present-day theology is inglorious. But Johnston condemns theology, it seems to me, to perpetual transiency on every theme, since tradition is ever changing, contemporary judgments are radically divergent, and some critics would add apocryphal and pseudepigraphical books to a supposedly errant canon.

What complicates Johnston's approach is his notion that the Biblical writers not only had different language and culture than ours but different thought-forms (p. 151), an emphasis deserving of more than uninterpreted passing mention. In the secular university mood he thinks seminary faculties should welcome major theological differences as long as the full authority of Scripture is professed (p. 148). "New interpretative possibilities must be encouraged" lest tradition become normative (p. 149). But are all seminary doctrinal commitments to be always considered tentative? If so, why not Biblical authority also? And if Scripture itself is errant, must we not seek—and can we ever find—a canon within the canon?

To be sure, a "common commitment of the evangelical community to work together at the interpretative task," as Johnston proposes, would be great gain (p. 149). This reviewer ventured a framework for initiating such a dialogue in "Footnotes" (*Christianity Today*, Nov. 5, 1976: "Agenda for Evangelical Advance"), but there were no takers. *Christianity Today* under Harold Lindsell polarized the

inerrancy camp and Fuller Seminary polarized the errancy camp into mutually exclusive rivalries that admit little conversation.

Johnston rightly stresses the need for evangelical pluralism in dialogue and interdependence and for humility in theological construction. But he seems to imply that theologizing is most effectively done in committee or conclave as a consensus theology. One can hardly think of any great dogmatic effort influential in the past nineteen centuries that has arisen or could have arisen that way. Johnston's volume has many analytic merits, and his urgent call for evangelical pursuit of greater theological unity must be heard if evangelicalism's professed priority for Biblical authority is to escape merely functional noncognitive reduction. But Johnston too much blurs the very concerns of interpretation and inerrancy and culture to provide confident direction. He calls attention to the problem, but the evangelical agenda requires more precise proposals for solution.