

DO WE ACT AS IF WE REALLY BELIEVE THAT “THE BIBLE  
ALONE, AND THE BIBLE IN ITS ENTIRETY,  
IS THE WORD OF GOD WRITTEN”?

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I. INTRODUCTION

Do we act as if we really believe that “the Bible alone, and the Bible in its entirety, is the Word of God written”? I am quoting, of course, from our ETS doctrinal statement that each of us affirms by personal signature every year. That statement is based on and rightly derived from passages of Scripture such as 2 Tim 3:16, “All Scripture is θεόπνευστος (‘God-breathed’),” and, as such, it all shares the characteristic of being the very words of God.

But do we ponder the implications of this stupendous affirmation? We are saying that throughout the entire history of the world, and throughout all written documents of all civilizations, the eternal, omnipotent Creator of the universe, the God who will one day judge every human being who has ever lived—this God who is over all has given the human race just one collection of his written words: This book. The Bible.

The Bible *alone* is the Word of God written. There are no other written words of God anywhere else in the entire world. And the Bible *in its entirety* is the Word of God written. Every single bit of this book in the original documents has a fundamentally different character from every other bit of writing in the entire world.

Now do we act as if we really believe this, that “the Bible alone, and the Bible in its entirety, is the Word of God written”? In many ways, we do. We write commentaries by the hundreds, massive commentaries. I picked up Greg Beale’s commentary on Revelation<sup>1</sup> the other day in the bookstore and wondered if they were going to sell it by the pound. We produce Bible translations, many very good translations. We require Greek and Hebrew in our seminaries because we take the Word of God seriously. We require courses in exegesis and in exegetical preaching. We require faculty members at our colleges and seminaries to hold to Biblical inerrancy.

The result of all of the detailed attention that we pay to the Word of God is seen in the book displays here at this conference. This is another indication of the value we place on the Word of God, for there are more Christian books

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<sup>1</sup> G. K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (NIGTC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998).

available in English in the United States today than in any other culture in any other country at any other time in the history of the world. Ps 90:17 is a prayer, “Let the favor of the Lord our God be upon us, and establish thou the work of our hands upon us, yea, the work of our hands establish thou it.” God has heard that prayer again and again with regard to the members of this society and their work. He has truly established the work of our hands. He has given abundant favor and blessing to our academic work, and we should be profoundly grateful.

We wouldn’t do these things, we wouldn’t pay so much attention to this Book, unless we really believed that “the Bible alone, and the Bible in its entirety, is the Word of God written.”

But in other ways I wonder if we could do better. Yes, it is good to look back at the past 50 years and be thankful. But it is also good to look forward to the next 50 years, and to the next 100 years—to forget “what lies behind” and, as the Apostle Paul says, to “press on toward the goal” (Phil 3:13–14).

In looking ahead tonight, I don’t have ten commandments, or ninety-five theses, or thirty-nine articles, or even five points that remind us of a certain flower. But I have six suggestions. Consider them with me if you will.

## II. SIX SUGGESTIONS

1. *Suggestion #1: Consider the possibility that God may want evangelical scholars to write more books and articles that tell the Church what the whole Bible teaches us about some current problem.* When Paul met with the elders of Ephesus in the city of Miletus in Acts 20, he said to them, “I testify to you this day that I am innocent of the blood of all of you, for I did not shrink from declaring to you  $\pi\acute{\alpha}\sigma\alpha\nu$  τὴν βουλὴν τοῦ θεοῦ, the whole counsel of God” (Acts 20:27). The implication is if he had shrunk back from declaring to them any part of the whole counsel of God, perhaps because something was unpopular or difficult, then he could not have said, “I am innocent of the blood of all of you.” He says, “I am innocent of the blood of all of you *because* (γάρ) I did not shrink from declaring to you the whole counsel of God.” Are we doing that? Are we teaching the Church what it is crying out to know?

I counted and categorized the articles published in three refereed evangelical journals for the last five years: *Westminster Theological Journal*, published by my *alma mater*, Westminster Theological Seminary; *Trinity Journal*, published by my current institution; and, of course, the *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society*. For the last five years in those journals, not counting book reviews, there were 257 scholarly articles. This is not an exhaustive search of articles by evangelical authors, of course, but the distribution of articles does tell us something interesting, and troubling. The largest number, 105 of them (or 41%) were exegetical studies in some area of NT or OT. Forty-nine articles (19%) had to do with Church history or historical theology. Another 7% were in philosophy of religion and apologetics, another 5% were in practical theology, and the remaining 72 articles (or 28%) were in systematic theology and ethics.

It sounds at first like a healthy balance. However, when I looked more closely at the systematic theology and ethics articles, half of them, 35 out of the 72, did not make any argument at all from Scripture. Many were analyzing the thinking of some other writer, such as Carl Henry or Hans Frei or John Hick. Others were making ethical arguments based on general revelation. When I put these non-Scripturally based articles in a sub-category of theology and ethics articles, that left thirty-seven articles out of 257, or 14%, that did build some kind of argument based on Scripture (and I was generous in including articles in that category).

These thirty-seven articles, then, these 14%, are the articles on systematic theology or ethics that appealed in a significant way to the Bible as an authority. These are the articles that attempted to tell the Church (or at least to tell the academically astute leaders of the Church who were reading these journals) what the whole Bible teaches us about some current question or problem.

Some examples were Cal Beisner's article on the *imago Dei* and the population debate,<sup>2</sup> or an article by Jeffrey Boyd, a psychiatrist, on our self-concept and Biblical theology.<sup>3</sup> Other articles were on baptism, the canon of Scripture, dispensationalism, and so forth.

What was noteworthy about those thirty-seven articles, however, was that only eighteen of them were written by someone whose doctoral work was in NT or OT. More precisely, only eighteen of them were written by someone whose doctoral work was in NT (that's 7% of the articles). And of those eighteen, five were written by one person (Vern Poythress from Westminster Seminary). Apart from his articles, only thirteen others, or 5%, were written by someone with doctoral training in NT. None of the articles was written by anyone with doctoral training in OT.

That means that of the small number of articles that were actually trying to answer a question or to solve a problem facing the Church—articles that were trying to tell us what the Church should believe—of that small number, half of them were written by people with other backgrounds: psychiatry, natural sciences, history, philosophy. I'm happy for the attempts of these scholars in other fields to tell us what the whole Bible says, and I want to encourage their work. I believe the Bible was written so that it could be understood by ordinary believers, and I believe that intelligent believers who are not technically trained in exegesis, but who will seek diligently to find the teaching of Scripture, can do quite a good job.

But my question is this: Where are the whole-Bible exegetes? Where are those trained at the doctoral level in NT or OT exegesis? Where are the Biblical exegetes who will use their exegetical skills to help the Church know what the whole Bible teaches about some problem? Has it become true that the more people know about interpreting the Bible, the less willing they are to tell the Church what the Bible says? Not just what one verse says, or one

<sup>2</sup> E. Calvin Beisner, "Imago Dei and the Population Debate," *TrinJ* 18NS/2 (1997) 173–197.

<sup>3</sup> Jeffrey H. Boyd, "One's Self-Concept and Biblical Theology," *JETS* 40/2 (1997) 207–227.

book, but the whole of the Bible, interpreted and applied rightly to the Church today.

Let me ask the question again. Has it become true that the more people know about how to interpret the Bible with academic precision, the less willing they are to tell the Church what the whole Bible says?

“About what?” you might say. It seems to me that there are many topics that need treatment and that cry out for solutions. For example, think of divorce and remarriage. It is a major problem facing every church today. Evangelicals are widely divided on the issue. There is no consensus. And out of 257 articles in these journals there was one article on divorce and remarriage, by William Heth.<sup>4</sup> Another issue is capital punishment—a major dispute in the western world today. There is no consensus in society as a whole, and evangelicals hear different purportedly “Christian” options. Mostly they end up confused and therefore silent on a major dispute in our society. Out of 257 articles, there was one article on capital punishment, by J. Daryl Charles.<sup>5</sup>

Here’s another topic: God’s guidance in our daily lives. Zero articles. Yet some understanding of God’s guidance affects *every* Christian *every* day of his or her life! And there is no well-formulated doctrine of guidance that has anything near a consensus in the evangelical world.

What about this topic: The role of obedience to God in the Christian life. Zero articles. Yet I hear and read, in popular Christian sermons and literature, massive confusion about obedience. It is peddled in the popular market as “living under grace,” and “not being legalistic” finds expression in warnings against “thinking I can manipulate God by trying to obey him.” Much of this is just antinomianism with a license to sin dressed up in new words, and many of our churches are wandering in confusion about obedience, tossed to and fro by every wind of doctrine. And we’re doing nothing. Our journal articles—which we would hope to be the place to find cutting-edge, formative, evangelical academic thought—cry out to the Church with deafening silence.

I’ve mentioned just four topics. There are dozens more. For example, the Bible and money. This is an urgent need for the wealthiest society in the history of the world. We could profit from vigorous academic debate among exegetes, perhaps leading to a growing consensus in at least some areas of this controversy, but there were zero articles. And our churches are tossed to and fro by every wind of Sider or Burkett.

Do you see the need of the Church? It is crying out for solutions! And there are yet more topics: Emotions such as anger—when is it right and when wrong? Depression. Inheritance and the question of leaving things to our children. Birth control. Even guns and gun control. Might Scripture give us any principles, any guidance on these questions, or are we left completely to natural law?

<sup>4</sup> William A. Heth, “Divorce and Remarriage: The Search for an Evangelical Hermeneutic,” *TrinJ* 16NS/1 (1995) 63–100.

<sup>5</sup> J. Daryl Charles, “Crime, the Christian, and Capital Punishment,” *JETS* 38/3 (1995) 429–441. (The title was listed this way on the cover of *JETS*, and the subject of the article is clearly capital punishment, but the title of the article on the first page was “Crime, the Christian, and Capital Justice” [p. 429].)

During World War II John Murray of Westminster Seminary wrote an article on God and the war,<sup>6</sup> but I'm sad to say that the journal my own *alma mater*, the *Westminster Theological Journal*, has become almost entirely a journal of historical theology, rather than publishing these whole-Bible treatments so needed by the Church (with the notable exception, as I said, of several articles by Vern Poythress). Now historical theology is useful, and the gains made in Biblical understanding and synthesis from Calvin to Warfield were marvelous, but surely the Lord did not intend that his work of purifying the Church and deepening its understanding of Scripture would end with Warfield. Indeed, Warfield himself wrote at the very end of the last century, “. . . the nineteenth century has brought no single branch of Biblical investigation to its definite completion. It has done its part; but it hands on an unfinished task to its successor. . . . It is the whole Bible that is committed to the twentieth century—to receive from it, as we believe, an even deeper reverence and an even completer obedience.”<sup>7</sup> But we need now, at the end of the twentieth century, to ask ourselves whether we have really succeeded in leading the Church into that deeper reverence and deeper obedience to the “whole Bible” that Warfield hoped this century would produce. I do not think our progress has been astounding or perhaps even very noteworthy.

During the nineteenth century slavery was debated vigorously in theological journals. But on controversial matters today that affect the whole Church or the whole society, our academic journals in the evangelical world say very little and our exegetes are almost entirely silent. They are not silent in terms of treating one or two verses, but they are silent in trying to synthesize the teaching of the whole Bible and saying to the Church, “This is what we should believe,” or “This is what we should do.”

I could go on. The question of self-defense—a topic that confronts every child in every school playground every year, and we tell pastors nothing. Education of children—Home school? Christian school? Public school? We have some writing on this topic, but much more could be done. Church discipline. Worship. Our use of the environment. Racial reconciliation. Spiritual warfare. And on and on. We could list every area in which there are widely differing viewpoints and substantial confusion in the Church as a whole.

Now you may have your own list of topics, and you may not think all of these need more treatment, but let me ask this question: When you look at your own church, or when you look at the churches in the evangelical world in general, do you complain, and do you criticize their weaknesses and confusion? Or do you help?

In fact, if the churches in the evangelical world are weak, we must remember that we in this room have trained their pastors. Then who is to blame?

<sup>6</sup> John Murray, “God and the War,” *National Republic Magazine* (Dec. 1942 and Jan. 1943; cited from *Collected Writings of John Murray*, Vol. 1 [Edinburgh and Carlisle: Banner of Truth, 1976] 344–355).

<sup>7</sup> B. B. Warfield, “The Century’s Progress in Biblical Knowledge,” *Homiletic Review* (March 1990) 195–202 (cited from *Selected Shorter Writings of Benjamin B. Warfield*, Vol. 2 [ed. John E. Meeter; Nutley, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1973] 12–13).

But wait, you might say, we may not have articles, but we have *books* on many of these topics. Yes, there are some books on these topics. In fact, to gain some perspective on the kinds of books being published, I looked through the catalogs of two major evangelical publishers: Zondervan and InterVarsity Press. There is much really excellent material.

In the Zondervan catalog I counted 185 commentaries, Bible study tools, Biblical language books, and books on OT and NT. In fact, 79% of the academic books they publish are in Biblical studies or Biblical tools. By contrast, in systematic theology and ethics, Zondervan had 38 books or 16% of their academic books (at least according to those that I could count in the catalog). These are helpful books, but several of them are what I would call teaching books, such as a book on the Holy Spirit, a book on the doctrine of God, and so forth—books that are not addressing any new problem or resolving an unsettled problem, but books useful to teach the Church what it has always believed.

Then there are nine books on “four views” of various topics. I am not going to criticize these “four views” books; in fact, I edited one myself,<sup>8</sup> and they are important. But we should remember that they are useful steps in moving toward a consensus and toward a solution of a problem, but they are by definition *not* the solution. The Church of the fifth century AD could, I suppose, have had a book, “The Person of Christ—Four Views: The Apollinarian view, the Eutychian view, the Nestorian view, and some proto-Chalcedonian view”—but such a book would have *led to* Chalcedon. It would have been *preparation* for Chalcedon. It would not have been the final result to which the Holy Spirit was leading the Church. Or might you imagine the Chalcedonian Creed beginning this way: “We then, following the holy fathers, all with one consent, teach men to confess one of the following four views . . .”?

The conclusion is that there are many good books published by Zondervan, but in terms of solving a current controversy or a current unresolved problem in the Church, it seemed to me there were only three that stood out as noteworthy examples. These were books in which there was a serious attempt by a technically-trained exegete to take an unsolved problem currently facing the Church and argue vigorously for a solution, basing his argument on the whole of the Biblical testimony. Two of the books were by Jack Deere, *Surprised by the Power of the Spirit*,<sup>9</sup> and *Surprised by the Voice of God*.<sup>10</sup> Whether you agree with his conclusions or not, he made a serious attempt to solve important questions based on exegesis of the whole Bible. The third book was D. A. Carson, *The Gagging of God*,<sup>11</sup> which attempted to confront contemporary pluralism in the light of the testimony of the whole Bible.

A similar example, but by a different publisher, is Craig Blomberg, *Neither Poverty Nor Riches: A Biblical Theology of Material Possessions*.<sup>12</sup> Here is an

<sup>8</sup> Wayne Grudem, ed., *Are Miraculous Gifts for Today? Four Views* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996).

<sup>9</sup> Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1993.

<sup>10</sup> Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996.

<sup>11</sup> Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996.

<sup>12</sup> Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999.

excellent example of a NT exegete searching the whole of the Bible on the question of the Bible and economics. But it's only one book, on a gigantic topic! A few years ago, when I was setting out to do some research on the Bible and economic decisions, I could find no book in all evangelical literature that was written by a technically trained exegete and was a treatment of what the whole Bible said about wealth and poverty.

When we turn to InterVarsity Press, out of about 800 books, ten were books that tried to solve a particular doctrinal or ethical problem facing the whole Church and were written by authors with doctorates in OT or NT. Those ten books constitute 1.3% of the books published by IVP. Again, there are some very good books, such as Grant Osborne's *The Hermeneutical Spiral*,<sup>13</sup> or Thomas Schmidt's *Straight & Narrow? Compassion and Clarity in the Homosexuality Debate*.<sup>14</sup> But these are so very few compared to the hundreds of commentaries that we write.

This absence of whole-Bible exegesis by OT and NT scholars is aggravated by another factor that largely prevents such exegesis by other people, people who are outside those academic disciplines. For reasons I do not fully understand, within our lifetimes it seems to me a change has occurred whereby NT and OT studies seem to the outsider to be so specialized that very few scholars outside those disciplines feel competent to interpret the Bible in any published article. They suffer from what we might call "exegetophobia"—the fear of publishing any written exegesis of their own, flowing no doubt from a conviction that they do not *really* understand any part of it, or that any understanding they have might be overthrown by specialists with technical knowledge unavailable to them.

Please do not misunderstand me. I think there are some in this society who are called by God to spend decades of their lives on detailed, technical research, the results of which are only understood and appreciated by a small number of other scholars. We must never lose sight of the value of such work, but must encourage it and bless it and pray for those who engage in it. But I am concerned that this emphasis can loom so large among us that we not only neglect to bring the whole Bible to bear on real-life problems, but also by our disdain we may discourage others from trying to do it.

This phenomenon may be related to the restriction of discussion to a small cadre of trained specialists in other disciplines as well. Ten years ago Robert Bork noted the change that had occurred in the field of constitutional law:

The older constitutional commentators, secure in their commonsense lawyers' view of the Constitution, wrote prose that remains clear, to the point, self-confident, and accessible to the nonprofessional reader. The modern theorists are different. Their concepts are abstruse, their sources philosophical, their arguments convoluted, and their prose necessarily complex. These writers are in fact undertaking . . . the alteration of the Constitution by "ingenious subtleties," . . . to make it not a document "addressed to the common sense of the people" but one addressed to a specialized and sophisticated clerisy of judicial

<sup>13</sup> Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1991.

<sup>14</sup> Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1995.

power. . . . Working lawyers and judges can only despair in the realization that they will never be able to master even a significant fraction of what they are given to understand to be a very important body of theory.<sup>15</sup>

Whether such a situation occurs in law or in Biblical studies, the result is an unfortunate one. The primary document that should govern decisions—in one case, the Constitution, in the other case, the Bible—is removed from people's hands, and they no longer think they can understand it or appeal to it for any important decision. Even worse, the tens of thousands of practitioners who are supposed to use the primary document for the benefit of ordinary people—the lawyers and judges with the Constitution and the pastors with the Bible—no longer think they can understand it without the mediation of an “expert.” Even those who are professional scholars in related fields no longer think they can understand the source documents.

And so in evangelical books and journals, we commonly see a failure of non-specialists to appeal in any significant way to the Bible in their arguments. This should not be the case, because there are many philosophers and ethicists and theologians and historians who could do quite a good job of interpreting Scripture and arguing from it in written discourse. Many have earned an M.Div. at one of our seminaries and have previously acquired considerable exegetical skill in Greek and Hebrew. Yet they will *avoid* basing any argument on Scripture or perhaps avoid even quoting it at all. Even when they do quote Scripture, it will usually be only in a cursory way.

As a consequence of this, in many books and articles that tell us what we should believe or do, we have historians arguing on the basis of historical precedent alone, not historical precedent plus their own synthesis and analysis of the teaching of Scripture. And we have philosophers and ethicists arguing on philosophical grounds alone, not on philosophical arguments plus their own analysis of the teaching of the whole of the Bible. Of course, historical and philosophical studies are important. But if we really believe that “the Bible alone, and the Bible in its entirety, is the Word of God written,” then ultimately what we tell the Church to believe and do must be grounded in Scripture.

The net result of all of this is that OT and NT exegetes don't tell us what the whole Bible teaches. And other scholars don't tell us what the whole Bible teaches. So my question is this: *Where are the whole-Bible exegetes?* The Church needs you! Who among us will be able to say at the end of our lives, “I did not shrink from declaring to you the whole counsel of God”? (Acts 20:27). Do we act as if we really believe that “the Bible alone, and the Bible in its entirety, is the Word of God written”? Do we really believe that God has caused it to be written in such a way that we can understand his will from it? Here, then, is suggestion #1: Consider the possibility that God may want you to write more books and articles that tell the Church what the whole Bible teaches us about some current problem.

<sup>15</sup> Robert H. Bork, *The Tempting of America: The Political Seduction of the Law* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1990), 134.

2. *Suggestion #2: Consider the possibility that God wants the Church to discover answers and reach consensus on more problems, and wants us to play a significant role in that process.* This is a development of the previous point, and an implication of it. It has been about 1970 years since Pentecost, and during that time Jesus Christ has been gradually purifying and perfecting his Church. In fact, Ephesians 5 tells us that “Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, that he might present the church to himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish” (Eph 5:25–27). Throughout history, Jesus Christ has been purifying the Church, working toward the goal of a beautiful, holy, mature, godly Church.

Sometimes that process of purification has been marked by specific historical events; for example, in 325 and 381, the Nicene Creed; in 451, the Chalcedonian Creed; in 1517, Martin Luther’s 95 theses; even in 1978, the International Council on Biblical Inerrancy’s Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy. At other times, there has been no one defining moment, but a gradual rejection of misunderstanding and a growing consensus endorsing Biblical truth in some area. For example: the rejection of the militarism of the crusades and their attempt to use the sword to advance the Church; or the realization that the Bible does not teach that the sun goes around the earth; or, in the 16th and 17th centuries, the marvelous advances in doctrinal synthesis that found expression in the great confessions of faith following the Reformation; or, in the 17th and 18th centuries, the realization that the civil government could and should allow religious freedom; or in the 19th century, the growing consensus that slavery is wrong and must be abolished; or in the 20th century, the growing consensus that abortion is contrary to Scripture. Other examples could be given, but the pattern should be clear: Jesus Christ has not given up his task of purifying his Church. The long-term pattern has not been nineteen centuries of decline in the purity and doctrinal and ethical understanding of the Church, but rather a pattern of gradual and sometimes explosive increase in understanding and purity.

But how does that growth in understanding, leading to a new measure of purity in the Church, come about? More specifically, how does the Bible-believing, evangelical Church in the present time come to solve a problem on which there exist widely differing opinions? We evangelicals do not have a pope to decree anything for us. We seldom have a council such as Chalcedon. Instead, in the evangelical world, scholars write articles and they criticize and correct each other. There is vigorous debate, and eventually (if it is an issue that cries out for resolution) denominations and churches and parachurch groups form study groups. These study groups read the various sides in that debate and talk about the issues and arguments, and then they decide. Tens of thousands of groups, one at a time, decide these issues. They will do that on controversial issues that face us today as well. We have a role in that process, but seldom do we as scholars make the final decisions.

I realize that there are some unresolved issues that seem to be particularly resistant to resolution. Baptism is one. Calvinism versus Arminianism is another. But on many issues, eventually there is a resolution.

Do we think, then, when we consider current problems facing the Church, that the Bible is truthful in what it says about itself? Do we really believe that God has given this Book to be a “lamp to my feet and a light to my path” (Ps 119:105)? That it has been given so that we might be “blameless” (Ps 119:1)? That it has been given to equip us “for every good work” (2 Tim 3:17)? Do we believe that God has given this book to make “wise” even “the simple” (Ps 19:7)?

If we really believe these things, then, if we are willing to work at these and other concerns that face Christians and churches daily, shouldn't we hope that God will bring resolution and eventual consensus on many of them? Think again, for a moment, about just four of the topics I've mentioned: divorce and remarriage, God's guidance in our daily lives, the role of obedience in the Christian life, and the Christian's responsibility for the use of money and resources. Because I believe that these are crucial questions facing the Church today, and because I believe that God has given his Word to guide us in knowing how he wants us to live the Christian life, I honestly believe that we can resolve those questions. We can work at them until we see the whole evangelical world come to increasing consensus on these topics.

I think the process will look like this: Take, for example, the issue of guidance: either Garry Friesen<sup>16</sup> is right on that topic, or he's wrong. Or take divorce and remarriage: either Bill Heth and Gordon Wenham<sup>17</sup> are right on that topic, or they are wrong. If these colleagues of ours are right, then we should expect to see many more scholars contributing articles and books supporting and developing their viewpoints. But if they are wrong, we should expect an increase of scholarly arguments showing why their exegesis is not correct, why their arguments are not persuasive, and why we should correct some of the things they say. The process of resolving such questions may take several years, and it will no doubt take many articles and books written back and forth in vigorous debate.

Will it succeed? If we don't try, if we go on writing zero articles on these topics, it is certain that we will fail to resolve these questions. But if we try, perhaps the Lord will grant us success! Jesus Christ has not given up on his task of purifying the Church progressively over time. Even where resolution does not come quickly, we will grow through the process. And if we can refrain from wrongful ways of pursuing these discussions, we may even love each other in the end!

As scholars we face particular temptations to hinder, not help, the process of resolution. We must resist the temptation simply to rest content with unresolved problems. We must resist the temptation to enjoy telling our students year after year how terribly complex are the problems in which we alone out of all the world are specialists. We must resist the scholarly temptation to delight in the difficulty and complexity of a problem. And we must resist temp-

<sup>16</sup> Garry Friesen, *Decision Making & the Will of God: A Biblical Alternative to the Traditional View* (Portland, OR: Multnomah, 1980).

<sup>17</sup> William Heth and Gordon Wenham, *Jesus and Divorce: The Problem with the Evangelical Consensus* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1985).

tations to hermeneutical paralysis and press on, with help from each other, to genuine resolution of such problems. It is only confidence in God, and confidence in his Word, that will enable us to resist these temptations.

Our Lord Jesus Christ wants to “present the church to himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing” (Eph 5:27). That transformation into a spotless Church will be instantaneously completed at Christ’s return, but it is also being gradually carried out, to the glory of God, throughout this present Church age. And I believe the Lord will be pleased to work through us as we respond to his call to use our gifts for this purpose.

Here, then, is suggestion #2: Consider the possibility that God wants the Church to discover answers and reach consensus on more and more problems, and wants us to play a significant role in that process.

3. *Suggestion #3: Consider the possibility that God wants evangelical scholars to speak with a unified voice on certain issues before the whole Church and the whole world.* Sometimes scholars can exercise remarkable initiative in bringing consensus to the evangelical Church. Last year there was one hopeful example of that kind of process. In the June 14, 1999 issue, *Christianity Today* published “The Gospel of Jesus Christ: An Evangelical Affirmation.”<sup>18</sup> It started as the work of evangelical scholars, but soon they included several other wise leaders in the discussion, people who were not technically trained academics but had much wisdom and significant leadership responsibility. Then, after comments and input from many others, this group issued a detailed, carefully worded document on justification and related doctrines. An amazingly broad group of evangelical leaders signed onto it. It was a bold statement. It did not seek unity with those who disagree in substance by retreat into vague language that would conceal the disagreements. I thought it was an excellent statement, and I believe it deserves wide circulation and assent.

In 1978 the ICBI statement on inerrancy functioned in a similar way. In that case as well, evangelical scholars began with an initiative that eventually brought large-scale consensus to the Bible-believing Church.

Now, are those the only topics we can agree on? I am convinced that there are many other areas where eventually we can agree and thereby can give encouragement to a confused Church “tossed to and fro and carried about with every wind of doctrine” (Eph 4:14). Perhaps in many cases we can also give clear testimony to a world wandering in darkness.

I am not, however, suggesting that the Evangelical Theological Society is the vehicle for such unified expression of viewpoints. I thought it was last year, and I vigorously pushed for a resolution on homosexuality, which we passed.<sup>19</sup> But now if I project that process out into the future and realize that we could have hours of business meetings devoted to debate on resolutions, I fear that it could consume our meetings, and politicize them in a harmful way, and turn the ETS aside from its founding purpose. Therefore

<sup>18</sup> *Christianity Today* 43/7 (June 14, 1999) 51–56.

<sup>19</sup> “Resolution Five,” in *JETS* 42/1 (March 1999) 179–180.

I do not really think that the ETS is the vehicle for such corporate expressions of evangelical scholarly opinion. I think this is better carried out by *ad hoc* groups, and by other organizations. We can read our scholarly papers here and issue the statements somewhere else.

But however it is done, here is suggestion #3: Consider the possibility that God wants evangelical scholars to speak with a unified voice on certain issues before the whole Church and the whole world.

4. *Suggestion #4: Consider the possibility that God may want many of us to pay less attention to the writings of non-evangelical scholars.* I am not saying that *all of us* should pay less attention to the writing of non-evangelical scholars (though I suppose some people will misunderstand me as saying that). I am saying, however, that perhaps *many of us* should do that.

Let me affirm at the outset the value of some participation by evangelicals in the American Academy of Religion (AAR) and the Society of Biblical Literature (SBL). One of my earliest memories of the Society of Biblical Literature is sitting in a seminar room at the SBL watching Bob Stein—out-numbered six- or seven-to-one—holding his own, defending the historicity of various parts of the Synoptic Gospels against some rather argumentative liberal scholars. He made it look easy and even made them laugh with him as he defeated their arguments. And just last year I was pleased to hear the reports and then read the paper in which my colleague Bob Yarbrough with courage and grace dismantled the assumptions behind Bart Ehrman's NT introduction<sup>20</sup> in an SBL seminar in which Ehrman was present.

There are other times when evangelicals interact with non-evangelicals not just to challenge and critique but to contribute positively to some aspect of the academic enterprise on which both groups share substantial agreement. For example, I remember the skill with which Moisés Silva and Don Carson interacted with James Barr and David Clines in an SBL seminar on Biblical lexicography in New Orleans in 1996. These examples could be multiplied by the dozens. I am genuinely thankful for such interaction, and as I have sat in a number of those sessions it seemed to me that God had called these evangelicals to such participation in AAR/SBL meetings. Therefore it should be clear at the outset that in what I am going to say, I am not speaking about, nor do I even have in mind, any one individual or any one book or article. Nor am I discouraging participation in AAR/SBL meetings by those who wish to do so and who feel that God has called them to this type of scholarly interaction.

But I do want to say that I am increasingly troubled by what I perceive as an unnecessary, unjustified, and even harmful "intellectual inferiority complex" on the part of some evangelical scholars. "If only a liberal journal will publish my article, then it will show that I am truly a scholar." "If only I can get a paper accepted and read at an SBL seminar, then it will show that I'm truly a scholar." "If only we could have an evangelical appointed to teach at

<sup>20</sup> Bart D. Ehrman, *The New Testament: A Historical Introduction to the Early Christian Writings* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1997).

Harvard Divinity School, then it would show that evangelicals have some genuine scholars (or one at least).” “If only we can hire a faculty member who has a Ph.D. from Harvard or Yale or Princeton, then it will show that our college or our seminary is truly worthy of academic respect.”

Now I fear that behind all of those sentences (or unexpressed thoughts), and lurking deep in our hearts, there may be a world view and an attitude of heart that comes dangerously close to seeking the favor of men and not of God, an attitude which God will not bless. And so, speaking as a graduate of both Harvard and Cambridge, I confess that I have a deep and longstanding uneasiness with the way some evangelical scholars and leaders seem to be enamored with the prospect of gaining approval from non-evangelicals for their academic work.

What I say here may or may not apply to you personally. You must decide. But let me offer some words of caution to any of you who make it your goal to seek approval from liberal scholars:

(a) Be aware that the temptation is great to yield to the anti-supernatural presuppositions of liberal scholarship in this phrase and that sentence and this paragraph until your academic output anemically proclaims three-fourths of the counsel of God or half the counsel of God, or even less.

(b) Be aware that one of the greatest pressures encouraging evangelical colleges and seminaries to stray from their doctrinal heritage has been faculty members who seek academic recognition from non-evangelicals and who think a small concession here and there will not make much difference. But it will.

(c) Be aware that in seeking the approval of non-evangelical scholars, by your example you might be teaching your students and others that you think the *best* Biblical and theological scholarship operates on anti-supernatural and anti-inerrancy presuppositions, and that the *best* Biblical research restricts itself to analysis of only those parts of Scripture that our liberal audience likewise considers to be authoritative (such as failing to appeal to the Pastoral Epistles as evidence of Paul’s writing when we are interpreting one of his widely-accepted epistles). But my question is this: why should a failure to use part of the truth and part of the data that God has left for our benefit lead to better results? In what other area of inquiry will you get better results by ignoring part of the evidence? Do we act as if we really believe that “the Bible . . . in its entirety is the Word of God written”? My concern is that when they deny the truthfulness of the Bible, the elite secular media believe them. And the world believes them. And evangelism becomes immensely more difficult because our neighbors think the true Bible “experts” have announced that we cannot believe the Bible. And our children who go off to college are told that this is the only position that is intellectually justifiable.

So here is a word of caution: if you quietly assume and act as though you think that liberal scholars at Harvard and Yale and Princeton are the greatest academic experts on the Bible, you will simply reinforce that assumption in the larger society, and especially in the elite media. There is a price to pay.

And do we realize how completely, totally different some non-evangelical campuses are as far as what is inculcated in students? In last month’s Harvard alumni magazine, Jon D. Levenson, List professor of Jewish studies

at Harvard Divinity School, commented on the atmosphere at the divinity school:

You try to take a pro-life position there, boy, you're dead. . . . In the old days, one was required to believe certain theological dogmas: the incarnation of God in Jesus, the Resurrection, and so on. Now the School requires that one subscribe to radical feminism, to inclusive language, to their views on homosexuality and affirmative action—there are probably more things that one has to subscribe to now than there were 50 years ago. Harvard Divinity School . . . prides itself on its liberalism and open-mindedness, its embrace of diversity, but in fact there is no diversity in those issues. Political correctness is the new orthodoxy.<sup>21</sup>

Yet the voice of faculty from these high-prestige institutions is almost the only theological voice that gets a hearing in the major media today. Somehow we need to work at establishing a distinctively evangelical scholarly voice that can be heard in the secular media. There is a Jewish voice. And there is a Roman Catholic voice. And there is a liberal academic voice. But there is no distinctly evangelical academic voice. We lose by default.

I am asking us to think about whether a continual seeking of the blessing of non-evangelical academics simply reinforces and contributes to that problem. We are saying that their rules are the rules that we'll play by, and their ballpark is the ballpark that we'll play in—at least when we are doing our “best” academic work. Is this really what we want to do?

I suspect that we fail to appreciate the damage done by the prominence of skeptical, unbelieving views of the Bible in our culture. There is no clear voice telling our society what the Bible says about anything. When Texas Governor George Bush recently said he thought the Ten Commandments should be posted in school rooms, the standard response he got from the religious establishment and the secular media was, “Which version of the Ten Commandments, and which numbering system?” The underlying message was clear: nobody can really know *anything* about the Bible for sure. Even something that people might think to be fundamental, central, simple, and clear is really confusing and unable to be determined. So much for the Bible.

Now let me say again that I am not calling for a withdrawal into an evangelical fortress. I encourage and support vigorous interaction with non-evangelical scholars on the part of at least some evangelicals, at least some of the time. But the pendulum can swing too far in that direction as well. At this point in history, I want us to keep on examining our motives very carefully (is this really what God wants us to do, in each instance?) and evaluating our results very honestly (what is actually being accomplished?). I want us to keep on asking, in each instance, whether God is really giving blessing to these efforts, or whether we might be neglecting a higher, more productive, more fruitful calling—a calling to focus our efforts and our highest scholarly energies on extensive interaction with others who share a fundamental commitment to the complete authority of Scripture. And I

<sup>21</sup> *Harvard Magazine* (Sept.-Oct. 1999) 61.

want to make very clear that I reject outright the assumption that interacting with non-evangelicals is more difficult or intellectually more challenging than detailed, extensive exegetical work searching out the teaching of the whole of Scripture as it applies to all of life. This latter task is by far the more challenging one.

Perhaps the most relevant question here is the stewardship of time: How much will we accomplish for the Kingdom of God by ten or twenty years of interaction with liberal scholars, and how much will be accomplished by ten or twenty years of serious work with the Biblical text in conversation and academic interaction with others who believe that “the Bible alone, and the Bible in its entirety, is the Word of God written”? And of course, if that is the direction that we choose, then this cannot be an excuse for anti-intellectualism, but rather we face the challenge that we have to work so hard that the quality of our technical work is not just as good as but better than the non-evangelical writings that we decide to pay scant attention to.

This concern is directly related to my first two suggestions, suggestions that highlighted (1) the need to do more whole-Bible exegesis, and (2) the need to discover answers and reach consensus on many problems facing the Church. Are some of us so busy seeking the approval of liberal scholars (or, if not seeking approval, at least spending so much of our time on topics and agendas that have been set by liberal scholars), that we neglect the real needs of the Church, and we fail to pour our energies into the work that the Lord wants us to do in the Church? And might we discover at the end of our lives, to our dismay, that most of the agenda set by liberal scholarship was a ruse, a never-ending series of doctrinal permutations that were never resolved and that diverted our attention from the true task that God had called us to, the task we had neglected—the task of building up the Church?

The disciplines of systematic theology and ethics need special comment here. It seems to me that interaction with non-evangelicals is more productive the more we can agree on the subject matter for research. This means that, in several aspects of NT and OT studies, profitable interaction with non-evangelicals is somewhat easier because in studying (for example) Hebrew or Greek lexicography or grammar, or in studying some aspects of exegesis, we at least agree what the facts are that we are studying. We are both studying the very same words in the Biblical text. In the field of philosophy of religion there can be a similar agreement on the subject for study: You can agree that you are going to argue on the basis of what we evangelicals call “general revelation.” Similarly, in historical theology, you can agree with non-evangelicals that what you are studying is (for example) the writings of Jonathan Edwards or John Calvin or the early Greek fathers. In all of these areas, we can at least agree with non-evangelicals on the subject matter for study.

But when it comes to systematic theology and ethics, and, within these areas, especially when it comes to deciding what Christians today should believe and do, then we do not even agree with non-evangelicals on the proper subject matter for study. As evangelicals we believe that “the Bible *alone*, and the Bible *in its entirety*, is the Word of God written, and is therefore inerrant

in the autographs.” In systematics and in ethics this clearly sets us apart from all non-evangelicals.

My own doctoral supervisor in NT at the University of Cambridge was Professor C. F. D. Moule, one of the great NT scholars of this century. When I was writing my dissertation on the gift of prophecy in 1 Corinthians, we agreed on the subject matter for research: I was trying to understand and explain the words that Paul had written in 1 Corinthians. Professor Moule was a wonderful encouragement and help to me in that process. Then ten years after I did my doctoral work we returned to England for a sabbatical and I visited him in his retirement at Pevensey on the south coast of England. In the evening we sat and talked about a commentary I was writing on 1 Peter for the Tyndale New Testament Commentary Series. I had some questions that puzzled me about the Greek text of 1 Peter, and once again he interacted with me so graciously and with his characteristic combination of humility and erudition. Then he asked, “What else are you working on?”, and I showed him the first 300 pages of my *Systematic Theology*,<sup>22</sup> a book in which I was attempting to tell what the whole Bible says about the doctrine of Scripture, about the doctrine of God, about God’s attributes, about the Trinity, and so forth. I held the book in my hand and said to him, “Professor Moule, I don’t think that you think this kind of thing can be done. But I’m trying to do it anyway.” And I handed it to him. He looked at the table of contents, saw the topics being treated, paged through it and saw how I was trying to synthesize the teaching of all of Scripture on these various topics, and with a twinkle in his eye he handed it back to me and he said, “You’re right, I don’t think it can be done. But I hope you enjoy doing it!”

I knew I had crossed a line in writing that book. I didn’t leave my exegetical skills behind when I began to work on a synthetic treatment of the whole Bible, but I was turning those exegetical skills to a new use. My goal was no longer to have my dissertation approved by the Board of Graduate Studies at the University of Cambridge, or even to have my work meet the approval of this gracious scholar who stood on the conservative end of those who do not share our view of the nature of Scripture. My goal was not to earn the approval of anyone in the non-evangelical academic world. My goal was to help the evangelical Church around the world—a Church that now numbers 660 million people, 11% of the world’s population, people who also believe that “the Bible alone, and the Bible in its entirety, is the Word of God written,” but who are sorely lacking theological leadership. So in deciding to write that *Systematic Theology*, and in the way in which I wrote it, I turned from trying to gain approval from and perhaps influence the wider academic world, and turned to trying to build up the evangelical Church.

In fact, I had moved in that direction long before my evening conversation with Professor Moule. When I first started teaching at Bethel College in St. Paul, Minnesota, in 1977, I submitted my first academic article intended for publication to Ron Youngblood, who was editor of *JETS*, an article entitled “An Alphabetical Reference List for Old Testament Apocrypha and Pseude-

<sup>22</sup> Leicester, England: IVP, and Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994.

pigrapha.”<sup>23</sup> In submitting that article to *JETS*, I remember deciding that for my whole academic career, whenever I wrote an article or a book, I would send it to an evangelical journal or an evangelical publisher. Why? Because I wanted to give my best efforts to help evangelical scholarship and evangelical publishing and evangelical journals. And I plan to do that as long as God gives me strength. I thought, “Why should non-evangelicals who believe only parts of the truth of the Bible be better scholars than evangelicals who have the distinct academic advantage of believing all of the truth of the Bible?”

That is why, personally, I have always read papers at ETS meetings. I have tried to bring my best efforts here. I love this society and, frankly, I have immensely enjoyed being president of the ETS for this past year. I have a great time coming here every year, participating in discussions and sometimes in strong disagreements, and still remaining friends with those with whom I disagree. I know that many of you feel the same way—God’s blessing is quite evidently on this work, and it is right that we thank him for it. What a privilege God has given us, to allow us to participate in a society of this kind!

It was also while I taught at Bethel College in 1977–1981 that I taught a course on “contemporary theology,” which was set up at that time to be a course in “non-evangelical theology.” The course was for advanced students, and I had them read 100–200 page sections from Kant and Schleiermacher and Bultmann and Moltmann and Pannenberg. The students did quite well in understanding what they read and being able to analyze and respond to it. But at the end of the course, after I had taught it for the second time, I remember saying to myself, “I honestly don’t think this is a very good use of my time.” Neither I nor my students attained any new insight into the teachings of Scripture that could be used to help the Church. I gained some understanding of views held by non-evangelicals; I understood some of the trends in society more deeply; and I gained greater appreciation for those of you whom God calls to analyze and respond to writers like these; but I did not think it was what God was calling me to spend much time on. And, frankly, I don’t think that God calls very many evangelicals to do that, particularly in the realm of systematic theology and ethics.

This question of the emphasis we place on interacting with non-evangelical scholars is mostly a question of focus and stewardship of time. If we send all of the city’s best craftsmen off to fight battles in other lands, who will be left to build the city? Or to keep it from crumbling?

Surely we are mistaken if we hold up non-evangelical theologians as the ideal for students to emulate, and surely we are mistaken if we build our theology primarily on the opinions of non-evangelical theologians, taking a quotation here and a phrase there, rather than primarily on the teachings of the Bible itself.

I have been troubled by the way some evangelical journals praise non-evangelical writings so uncritically. This was evident, for example, in the contrast between two articles in the same issue of a recent evangelical journal. In

<sup>23</sup> *JETS* 19/4 (1976) 297–313.

the first article, Donald Macleod of Edinburgh analyzes the Christology of Jürgen Moltmann and comments generally on Moltmann's approach to theology:

This is linked to a further difficulty: verification. How does Moltmann satisfy himself that something is true? More important, how does he convince the reader that something is true? The two means of verification normally open to Christians are Scripture and tradition. Neither of these seems particularly important to Moltmann. He has a decidedly smorgasbord approach to the canon; and his respect for fathers and reformers is scant, to say the least. His real criteria lie elsewhere. In order to be true, a doctrine must offer a viable theodicy (it must shed light on Auschwitz); it must advance Jewish-Christian dialogue, bearing in mind that Jews were "sufferers" and Christians "perpetrators"; it must meet the ecological concerns of humankind; it must give a platform for Christian political activism; and it must both illuminate and be illuminated by the preoccupations of feminism. Above all, theological statements must be validated by experience. Even what looks like his fundamental theological principle, *crux probat omnia* ("the cross is the test of everything") is itself accepted only because it conforms to these criteria.<sup>24</sup>

I have no objection to these and other criticisms with which Macleod analyzes Moltmann. But what troubled me was that in the same issue of this journal another writer reviews Moltmann's work on eschatology, *The Coming of God*. The reviewer tells us that "it is impossible to do justice to the riches of this book in a brief review," and, with only one mild indication of disagreement, praises the book as "a most impressive work. When read with a critical mind, it is highly recommended."<sup>25</sup>

Now think for a moment of the apostles Paul and Peter and John, with their burning concern for the doctrinal purity of the churches. If they were writing to a church where Moltmann's teachings held sway, do we really think they would similarly praise Moltmann to the skies and offer only the most timid of criticisms? Do we really think that a denial of the unique authority of Scripture for establishing doctrine makes no difference?

Another example was a review of the second volume of Pannenberg's *Systematic Theology*<sup>26</sup> in an evangelical journal. The review praised it as "a valiant attempt to reaffirm historical Christian faith." But the review said, quite honestly, that Pannenberg "will not accept the historicity of the virgin birth of Christ," "rejects a historical Adam and Eve," "is remarkably open to the theory of evolution," thinks that physical death "is a product of finitude not sin," puts the infancy narratives in the Gospels "in the genre of legend," and does not view Christ's death "as a propitiation of a holy and wrathful God." Then, the review concludes, Pannenberg's work is to be viewed as a "valiant attempt to reaffirm historical Christian faith."<sup>27</sup> Friends, this is not "historical Christian

<sup>24</sup> Donald Macleod, "The Christology of Jürgen Moltmann," *Themelios* 24/2 (Feb. 1999) 35–36.

<sup>25</sup> Nik Ansell review of Jürgen Moltmann, *The Coming of God: Christian Eschatology* (trans. Margaret Kohl; London: SCM, 1996) in *Themelios* 24/2 (1999) 75–76.

<sup>26</sup> Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology*, Vol. 2 (trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994).

<sup>27</sup> Donald Bloesch, review of Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology*, Vol. 2, in *Christianity Today* 39/4 (April 3, 1995) 106.

faith"! Why do we think it right to heap praise on such destructive teaching? Is this the kind of doctrine we want our pastors to preach?

Here, then, is suggestion #4: Consider the possibility that God may want many of us to pay less attention to the writings of non-evangelical scholars. Particularly in the areas of systematic theology and ethics, might God be calling some of us—even some of our best, most gifted intellects—to pay little or no attention to liberal scholars, and to devote our lives to seeking out the whole counsel of God from Scripture, focusing on positive, constructive Biblical syntheses that will build up the Church?

But let not him who eats at liberal tables despise him who does not. And let not him who avoids liberal tables despise him who partakes.

5. *Suggestion #5: Consider the possibility that God may want us to quote his Word explicitly in private discussions and in public debates with non-Christians.* Most of you have some influence in some spheres of non-Christian activity, whether you are a parent and there are "values" curricula in your schools, whether you are a school board member, whether you are discussing something of ethical import with your neighbors, whether you are involved in ethics debates in the community, whether you are on radio talk shows in local secular stations, or whether you even have national influence in congressional committees or on ABC's *Nightline* and other such venues.

If we believe that "the Bible *alone* . . . is the Word of God written," then shouldn't we quote it in these contexts? One of my jobs as department chairman in systematic theology at Trinity is to approve syllabi for theology and ethics classes taught by adjunct professors at extension sites. Recently a syllabus came across my desk—I don't even remember the name of the teacher—and I felt compelled to question the term paper assignment. It said, "Prepare an argument on a current moral issue that would not cite the Bible and so would be acceptable for use with a nonbeliever."

I think this reflects a common attitude that assumes that non-evangelicals and non-Christians don't believe the Bible, so we don't quote it. But I seriously doubt the wisdom of that approach. If "the Bible *alone* . . . is the Word of God" out of all the writings of the whole world, and if we hide it from unbelievers, where will they ever hear it?

Now you could say, "Well, maybe somebody else will share the Four Spiritual Laws with them. And after they accept Christ we'll let them know what the rest of the Bible says."

But why should we think that "all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God" (Rom 3:23) and "the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Rom 6:23) are the only parts of the Bible through which the Holy Spirit can draw people to himself? Can God not speak through any and all parts of Scripture to manifest his wisdom and to draw people to himself? Can God not speak especially through those parts of Scripture that speak to current, urgent problems today? And quoting parts of Scripture may not be as futile as we think, for we often forget that in society at large there is still a residual sense that the Bible is somehow a book from God.

When we fail to quote Scripture in public and private discussions about hundreds of questions, we leave our most powerful weapon at home. “The Bible alone, and the Bible in its entirety” is the “sword of the Spirit” (Eph 6:17). “The Bible alone, and the Bible in its entirety” is “sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and spirit, of joints and marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart” (Heb. 4:12). *Unleash it!* “The Bible alone, and the Bible in its entirety” is “like a hammer, which breaks the rock in pieces” (Jer. 23:29). “The Bible alone, and the Bible in its entirety,” is like the rain and the snow that “come down from heaven” and do not return there, but water the earth. God himself says, “so shall my word be that goes forth from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and prosper in the thing for which I sent it” (Isa 55:10–11). Stewards of the Word of God, unleash it! Release its power to a lost and dying world!

How does the book of Acts tell us that the Church grew? In Acts 6:7, “the word of God increased.” In Acts 12:24, “the word of God grew and multiplied.” In Acts 13:49, “the word of the Lord spread throughout all the region.” In Acts 19:20, “the word of the Lord grew and prevailed mightily.”

By failing to quote Scripture in private and public discussions with unbelievers I think we are often reduced to pragmatic arguments that are not decisive or to moral arguments that have no apparent transcendent moral authority behind them, and as a result the Church is anemic and has no influence in the world. But what should we expect when we leave our sword at home?

Of course, I am not saying that we have to quote the Bible in every conversation and every circumstance. But I am saying that we fail to quote it far too often, and I think it is because we do not really believe that it has unique power to change human hearts.

Several years ago I went to the office of John Porter, the U.S. Congressman for our district in northern Illinois, who is a fairly liberal Republican. I went by appointment, with the purpose of talking to him about abortion. I thought he might give me three or four minutes, and I brought a Bible along (an NIV) with the hope of talking with him about what it said. We looked at Exod 21:22–25, the passage about two men struggling and striking a pregnant woman, and discussed its relevance for the abortion question. Then I also brought Lincoln’s second inaugural address, in which he quotes Scripture and says that the Civil War is God’s judgment on our nation because of slavery. What surprised me was the interest with which this congressman listened to the words of Scripture and questioned me about it in detail. He spent 45 minutes with me. This book is the Word of God!

If we fail to quote it, the result is that the only true source of absolute values, the only true solution to the world’s problems, is never allowed to enter the playing field, and it loses the game by forfeit. When we are in academic discussions—especially regarding ethics and moral values, or regarding the proper role of government with regard to ethical questions—might the Creator of the universe have something he wants to say?

So my suggestion is this: consider quoting the Bible explicitly in public and private discussions. If we do this, what will happen? Well, some will protest and mock. But others will argue back, and they’ll say, “The Bible doesn’t mean

that” or “The Bible says something else,” or “Why don’t you follow these other verses of the Bible if you want to believe those verses?” or “Here’s another Bible expert that says the opposite of what you are saying.” Friends, if that happens, you have come to the kingdom for such a time as this, because now the game is being played in our ballpark. Now they are quoting our rule book! We’ve played in this ballpark since we were toddlers in Sunday School. So then we simply say, “Oh, that’s an interesting objection. I wonder if we could look at that verse together. Maybe I could explain why I don’t think that’s a correct interpretation.” And we begin to talk. We begin to talk about the only written words of God in the whole world. And ultimately some will be persuaded. How many? Well, that’s up to the Holy Spirit. But the Word of God will once again begin to triumph and prevail.

Here, then, is suggestion #5: Consider the possibility that God may want us to quote his Word explicitly in private discussions and in public debates with non-Christians.

6. *Suggestion #6: Consider the possibility that the world as we know it may change very quickly.* There might be more urgency to our task than we realize. We meet here at the end of the millennium with the general theme of “eschatology” for this meeting, yet the one thing that we can agree on about the future is that we do not know what next year will bring. Or the next. Or the next.

The first possibility is suffering: What if great persecution and suffering were suddenly to come to the Church in the United States (as it has to much of the rest of the world) before our next annual meeting? What if (and this would surprise some of you, of course) even the Great Tribulation would begin, a time of tribulation “such as has not been from the beginning of the world until now, no, and never will be” (Matt. 24:21). Would we suddenly regret that we had not done more to help evangelical churches? Would we suddenly regret that we had not done more to use our skills to help purify and strengthen the Church? Would we suddenly regret that we had left the Church in confusion, secretly despising its weaknesses but doing little to help solve its genuine problems? Or would we regret that we had not done more to unleash the Word of God in the society in which we live? “When people say, ‘There is peace and security,’ then sudden destruction will come upon them as travail comes upon a woman with child, and there will be no escape” (1 Thess 5:3).

The second possibility is revival: What if great revival would suddenly break out in the United States before our next meeting? What if there were a great ingathering of souls, the great harvest that God often brings before the storms of judgment? What if our churches were to double or triple in size before the end of next year? Then we would have three times as many untaught Christians and three times as many people with important, unanswered questions about the teaching of the whole Bible about the Christian life. Would we suddenly regret that we had not done more to help guide and direct and purify and strengthen the Church? We don’t know if revival will come, but it might, because God sometimes punctuates history with massive demonstration of his power and glory.

The third possibility is Christ's return: What if our Lord Jesus suddenly returns before our next meeting, and the Church age in which we have labored suddenly comes to an end, and the fruit of our ministry then is what it is, and it is finished? Would we suddenly regret that we had not done more to answer the real problems facing the evangelical Church, or that we had not done more to let the Word of God speak to an unbelieving culture? Would we suddenly regret that we had not done all we could to help purify the Church, that it might be "without spot or wrinkle, or any such thing" (Eph 5:27)? Paul says in 1 Cor 14:12, "Since you are eager for manifestations of the Spirit, strive to excel in building up the Church." We might apply that to the Evangelical Theological Society and say, "Since you are eager for academic achievement, strive to excel in building up the Church."

### III. CONCLUSION

If we really believe that "the Bible alone, and the Bible in its entirety, is the Word of God written," then shouldn't we consider these six suggestions?

Suggestion #1: Consider the possibility that God may want evangelical scholars to write more books and articles that tell the Church what the whole Bible teaches us about some current problem.

Suggestion #2: Consider the possibility that God wants the Church to discover answers and reach consensus on more problems, and wants us to play a significant role in that process.

Suggestion #3: Consider the possibility that God wants evangelical scholars to speak with a unified voice on certain issues before the whole Church and the whole world.

Suggestion #4: Consider the possibility that God may want many of us to pay less attention to the writings of non-evangelical scholars.

Suggestion #5: Consider the possibility that God may want us to quote his Word explicitly in private discussions and in public debates with non-Christians.

Suggestion #6: Consider the possibility that the world as we know it may change very quickly.

And may the Lord say to each of us at the end of our lives, or when he returns, "Well done, good and faithful servant. I entrusted you with great and marvelous gifts. I entrusted you with my Word. And I have found you faithful."