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THE SECULARIZING ETHOS AND THE END OF
BIBLICAL AUTHORITY: HOW TODAY'S EVANGELICALS
ABANDONED EVANGELICALISM

In a 2016 article in the *Los Angeles Review of Books*, Jim Hinch tells conversion story of A. J. Zimmerman, a 25 year old graduate of divinity school who is now a youth pastor and works for a Pentecostal seminary in San Diego, California.¹

The life of Zimmerman exemplifies the “prototypical evangelical experience” of an inspiring conversion story. As a lost adolescent he had once attended a Pentecostal youth group to chase after this cute girl he was crushing on, but instead he ended up in an intense emotional experience encountering the presence of the Holy Spirit. Zimmerman found Jesus, and grew up to be an Evangelical minister.

What is unique and noteworthy about Zimmerman, and what is becoming more prevalent within American evangelical culture across the board, is Zimmerman’s current view of the role and doctrine of scripture. The Bible for Zimmerman is no longer regarded “as inerrant, dictated by God, historically accurate in all its claims or even internally consistent with itself”, as most evangelicals traditionally have maintained. Doctrines that are typical of conservative evangelicals such as Biblical inerrancy, creationism, salvation through Christ alone, sex within marriage only, rejection of the practice of homosexuality, and even the bodily resurrection of Christ are increasingly seen as dated “products of their time”, ancient myths in need of a different hermeneutic that takes into account the current ethical issues of today’s globalized world and offers a more ‘inclusive’ perspective.

What is emerging now is a “progressive evangelicalism”, which journalist Deborah Jian Lee describes well in her latest book *Rescuing Jesus: How People of Color, Women, and Queer Christians are Reclaiming Evangelicalism*. She argues that recent demographic shifts within Evangelical culture are leading to a theology that is “becoming more inclusive of the people who are within the church”, a theology that advocates for change and progress within what has traditionally been considered a conservative culture.

As Jim Hinch, author of the *Los Angeles Review of Books* article observes: “Evangelical Christianity in America is in the midst of a wholesale generational, cultural, and doctrinal transformation. Confronted by a secularizing and diversifying society, evangelicals are abandoning long-held political allegiances, softening their views on sexuality, grappling with the racial divide in their churches, and rethinking their entire approach to ministry and evangelization. Underlying all these developments is a more fundamental change in the way evangelicals understand and interpret their most cherished text, the Bible.”

¹ Jim Hinch, “Evangelicals are Losing the Battle for the Bible. And They’re Just Fine With That.” *Los Angeles Review of Books*, February 15, 2016, www.lareviewofbooks.org/article/evangelicals-are-losing-the-battle-for-the-bible-and-theyre-just-fine-with-that/. Retrieved Nov. 15, 2018.

According to David Bebbington's famous formula, evangelicals tend to be defined by the quadrilateral of Biblicism, crucicentrism, conversionism, and activism.² But what orders and structures this quadrilateral for Evangelicals is Biblicism, the chief cornerstone upon which the other three sectors are built. The absolute authority of the Word of God in all manners of doctrine or practice, *sola Scriptura*, is the defining theological and cultural characteristic that distinguishes the Protestant Evangelical from the Roman Catholic or Eastern Orthodox.

With the loss of the authority *sola Scriptura* due to the underlying fundamental shift of how Evangelicals are coming to "understand and interpret" the role and authority of scripture, there will likely follow a large transformation of the basic identity of American evangelicals, shifting away from the conservatism and scriptural orthodoxy that defined them since their rise in the early twentieth century, and shifting them towards the identity of "progressive evangelicals", or what Dave Tomlinson calls the "post-evangelical". American Evangelicals are now the new Protestant mainline. This is due to two congruent reasons. The first is the problem of religious authority in relation to multiple interpretations of scripture, and the second is the cultural context of an increasing secularizing America where religion and culture are parting ways for the Millennial generation, which was born between 1981 and 2004.

The first problem is what Notre Dame sociologist Christian Smith calls *pervasive interpretative pluralism*. For Smith, "scripture taken at face value itself often cannot resolve differences in interpretation, because of its multivocal, polysemous and multivalent nature"³. The fact is that despite the best modern tools of exegesis, Evangelicals have only managed to fragment their consensus more and more on matters of doctrine and practice. Globalization only serves to exacerbate this pastiche. St. Paul's injunction "One Lord, one faith, one baptism" has become more the exception rather than the rule. The Bible itself standing alone cannot resolve the issue of pervasive interpretative pluralism, and to simply appeal to scriptural authority to settle doctrinal arguments is circular reasoning.

Of course, the problem of plural interpretations is nothing new. Throughout Church history there has always been sectarianism and rivalry of different interpretations, particularly after the Reformation. In the 20th century, the "Battle for the Bible" in America was at its apex in the 70's when Evangelicals felt embattled by the burgeoning secular culture and radical politics in the universities and their perception of declining morals in the media and the public square. The 1978 *Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy* was meant to decisively settle the issue of pervasive interpretative pluralism and the basis of scriptural authority through a consensus: "The Authority of Scripture is inescapably impaired if this total divine inerrancy is in any way limited or disregarded, or made relative to a view of truth contrary to the Bible's own; and such lapses bring serious loss to both the individual and the Church."

Yet by 1979, the Evangelical biblical scholar Robert K. Johnson, in his *Evangelicals at an Impasse: Biblical Authority in Practice*, observed "that evangelicals, all claiming a common biblical norm, are reading contradictory theological formulations on so many of the major issues they are addressing suggests the problematic nature of their...understanding of theological interpretation. To argue that the

² David Bebbington, *Evangelicals in Modern Britain: A History from the 1730s to the 1980s* (London: Unwin Hyman, 1989).

³ Christian Smith, *The Bible Made Impossible: Why Biblicism is Not a Truly Evangelical Reading of Scripture* (Grand Rapids MI: Brazos Press, 2011), 21.

Bible is authoritative, but to be unable to come to anything like agreement on what it says (even with those who share an evangelical commitment) is self defeating.”⁴

The increasing diversity and contradictions of pervasive interpretative pluralism in Evangelical culture will increasingly undermine and fragment any central religious authority, in particular when it comes to theological doctrines that are seen as too dated or not inclusive enough. This leads to secularization, which is equivalent to a decline in religious authority.

Doctrine that has historically been considered essential will become non-essential to the progressive or post Evangelicals, and will be either subordinated or replaced with the higher norms and values of social justice, tolerance, diversity, inclusivity, and NGO activism – which leads me to my second point of a secularizing and “unchurching” America. This shift in interpretation within Evangelical culture is largely due to the “spiritual but not religious” ethos or what Barna Group calls the “nomadism” of the Millennials, which is “the most common spiritual journey” of their generation, that of having left the church but still self-identifying as a Christian. According to Barna, “nomads” are “most likely to say they love Jesus but not the church”.

The Millennial generation is losing its religion. The young adults of the Millennial generation comprise the bulk of the religiously unaffiliated, or the so-called “nones”. According to the Pew Forum in *Americas Changing Religious Landscape*, “fully 36% of young Millennials (those between the ages of 18 and 24) are religiously unaffiliated, as are 34% of older Millennials (ages 25-33).”⁵ And the trend of the secular youth seems to be growing. As the Pew Forum notes, “the unaffiliated are comparatively young – and *getting younger*, on average, over time.” This secularization consists mostly of those raised mainline Protestants and Catholics, but this is now a growing trend with Evangelicals.

To be clear, the religiously unaffiliated does not only consist of atheists and agnostics. The “nones” often consider themselves Christian but do not attend church nor belong to any specific denomination or tradition, and do not necessarily hold to any traditional doctrines. The religiously unaffiliated often embrace an eclectic spirituality that is based more on the concept of Western human rights, individualism and self-realization rather than any theological revelation or religious tradition in its classic sense.

The secularizing ethos of declining religious authority within the millennial generation influences and converges with the progressive post-Evangelicals, offering the trajectory for their interpretation of the authority and doctrinal content of scripture. The Millennial-Evangelical interpretation of Scripture will continue to conflict with the interpretation of the older generation of Evangelicals, and therefore will create a deeper divide. This separation between generations and interpretations is evident with the “Benedict Option” led by conservative author Rod Dreher, which is a reaction against both a perceived politically hostile post-Christian America, and a Christianity that in their view accommodates to secular culture in the name of relevance. The “Benedict Option” aims to gather together ‘orthodox’ Christians across all denominations for the

⁴ Robert K. Johnson, *Evangelicals at an Impasse: Biblical Authority in Practice* (Louisville KY: John Knox Press, 1979), 18.

⁵ Pew Forum, “America’s Changing Religious Landscape”, May 12, 2015, <http://www.pewforum.org/2015/05/12/americas-changing-religious-landscape/>. Retrieved Nov. 10, 2018.

purpose of cultural preservation of traditional doctrine and practice, as well as to serve as a cross-national support network for their project. One can imagine that progressive-post Evangelicals are perhaps not invited.

Not that they would want to be apart of this option anyways.

The future of any religion is its youth, and the youth just don't want mom's and pop's old time religion anymore. This time around however, the old time religion is not nineteenth century-style organized religion, nor early twentieth century fundamentalism, but it is rather the Evangelical religion of Francis Schaeffer, Campus Crusade, and even the Emergent Church. To the progressive post-Evangelical, the "secular-liberal" is no longer the *bête noir* that it once was to the older generation. In fact, the Millennials often finds the world outside the church exemplifying Christian compassion and charity at a greater rate.

Angelina Jolie and Angela Merkel are the new Mother Teresa.