

It is probably not an accident that when I was a very conservative evangelical Christian who wanted to get a PhD in New Testament studies, I chose to focus, in particular, on textual criticism, the study of manuscripts in order to establish the wording of the original text. That was, and is, a fairly common “track” for evangelicals who want to be biblical scholars. Maybe it’s not as common now as it used to be. But it used to be common.

As it turns out, most of the scholars who work in the field of New Testament textual criticism in North America either are or used to be committed evangelical Christians. You might think that the findings of textual criticism would drive evangelicals away from their faith. But just the opposite is the case. I know very few people who have found their faith challenged by their knowledge of the textual problems of the New Testament. Very few indeed. I was a bit of an oddball that way. (I’ll say more about that in a future post.)

The reason most textual scholars in this country are, or used to be, evangelical Christians (and throughout the world, if they are not evangelicals, they are at least fairly conservative Christians) – and the reason I probably was attracted to textual criticism myself as an evangelical – is that this is one field of biblical studies that is considered “safe” for those with a high view of the inspiration of Scripture.

Most New Testament scholars are deeply interested in and committed to views of “higher criticism,” the rigorously historical attempt to understand the New Testament. Engaging in this kind of critical work virtually presupposes that one will acknowledge (and be willing to discover) that there are historical problems with the New Testament: discrepancies, contradictions, historical errors, and factual mistakes. The goal of higher criticism is not simply to point out such problems. The goal is to provide a historically rooted understanding of the text. But for most scholars, doing so means acknowledging that such problems exist, simply at the starting point.

But evangelical scholars – such as I, when I was at that stage – simply refuse to acknowledge that view. Which means they cannot start where all the other critical scholars start. They start not with the sense that the New Testament needs to be treated like all other books from the ancient world, but that it needs to be treated differently, as the inspired Word of God. But if that’s the starting assumption, you can’t really do the kinds of analysis that others apply with their own assumption that the New Testament is a very human book with all the frailties that a close connection with fallible human authors entails.

And so it is very hard to be a New Testament interpreter as an evangelical if you want to work in and contribute to scholarship done by others in the field. It can be done (depending on which interpretive issues you’re dealing with), but it’s very tricky. This is true on so many levels. For example, if you don’t think there can be any contradictions in the Gospels, then your interpretation of a passage in Matthew that is also in Mark will be affected, because you will not be able to acknowledge that Matthew has changed something in Mark in a way that is at odds with it. But that kind of acknowledgment is absolutely fundamental to a historical-critical understanding of Matthew.

Or if you refuse to acknowledge that there are letters in the New Testament that claim to be written by Paul which in fact were written by someone else simply claiming to be Paul, then your interpretation of those letters will be radically different from someone who, on historical-critical grounds, thinks that some of the thirteen letters claiming to be written by Paul were written in fact by someone else. If you think Paul wrote 1 Timothy (evangelicals as a rule do; non-evangelicals, among the scholars, as a rule do not), then you would use 1

Timothy as evidence for what Paul thought and taught, and you would interpret 1 Timothy in light of what Paul says elsewhere and you would interpret what Paul says elsewhere in relation to what he says in 1 Timothy. If you think Paul did not write the letter, you simply would not treat it that way. And your interpretation would be massively different.

And so, if you want to talk with other scholars in the field, or publish articles and books in the field in journals and presses that presuppose historical-critical views and approaches, and you have a completely different set of assumptions and presuppositions ... well, it's very hard. Most of the time it doesn't work.

Let me stress - I can't stress this enough, although roughly 36% of my readers won't believe me or possibly hear me - I am NOT saying there cannot be evangelical scholars of the New Testament. That is absolutely not the case, in the least. There are lots of evangelical scholars of the New Testament. Some of them superb scholars. BUT, if they approach the New Testament from the point of view that there can be no mistakes of any kind in the New Testament (that would be a very hard-core evangelical, and certainly a fundamentalist, position) then they have to restrict their scholarly conversation partners to one another, publishing in journals and with presses that support their theological views, not in the standard critical journals and presses.

And so fundamentalists - people like me back then - simply do not work in the realm of the critical scholars. They do scholarship for fundamentalists.

How to avoid that problem if you are a fundamentalist or hard-core conservative evangelical? One of the most popular ways to avoid it is to work in an area of New Testament studies where your presuppositions about the inspiration of Scripture have almost NO bearing on your work. And one area where that is true is textual criticism. Anyone, with any personal theological views about the inspiration of Scripture, can study the manuscripts of the New Testament to determine what the authors originally wrote. It's a very difficult field to work in, because it involves massive expertise in a range of complicated areas. But it does not require a person either to presuppose or not to presuppose that the words written by the biblical authors are inspired by God.

And so many evangelicals who want to be serious biblical scholars turn to textual criticism. It is a "safe" discipline. That too is what I did, when deciding what to focus on in my graduate studies.

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