I have been asked to address how the Church might read and appropriate her Scripture in a manner that is simultaneously progressive and evangelical in a post-Christian cultural context. I begin by commenting briefly on the three main descriptors.

Progressive is indisputably a positive word. After all, who would willingly and happily self-identify as regressive? My rhetorical question presupposes that progressives see themselves not over against folk who consciously assume a regressive posture, but over against those who are unwittingly and mistakenly regressive. To the extent that progressive manifests itself as, say, support for social-justice, or tolerance for diversity, or openness to and respect for other religious perspectives, an antithetical term would refer to people who are indifferent to injustice or inadvertently promote it, or who are wary of diversity, or who think that openness and respect are code words for ceding the truth of or diluting the Christian Gospel. If this is so, then progressive is a question-begging word insofar as I use it of myself while using an opposite pejorative term to modify the views with which I disagree or which I disparage. Whether a particular approach to Scripture is progressive will depend entirely on what one means by progress. What has to be discarded and what needs to be embraced to make an approach to Scripture progressive? I will return to this, but anticipate just a little by playing off the title of my lecture and posing the question: Is it possible to move forward, that is, progress in some sense, by going backward?

Parenthetically, if progressive denotes the old term “social Gospel,” I see no reason for debate. John Wesley aptly said that “All holiness is social holiness.” In my view, there is no legitimate theological construal of Christianity in any form in which the Church’s ministry to the poor, marginalized, and disenfranchised is not an organic part. This goes for the Church’s stance over against those who erect for their own self-interests social, political, or economic structures which are inherently unjust. The Church of Jesus Christ will always see herself in opposition to
any such powers and principalities. The devil may be in the details, but the basic commitment is settled.

Regarding the term *evangelical*, this is for me the most elusive and potentially controversial descriptor. Though part of this distinguished institution’s name, I suspect that it is precisely this term about which the GETS community is most defensive and the one which it most readily wants to define preemptively so as to preclude theological or ecclesial identity theft. I am quite certain that the evangelicals about whom media pundits have been speaking during this election year do not represent the theological positions or socio-political ethos of GETS or its constituency. Whatever sort of Evangelicals may exist here, they are in the main not *those* kinds of Evangelicals. In point of fact, many of *those* Evangelicals likely would be considered as representative of the polar opposite of *progressive*. I understand this sentiment, and even feel your pain. In a moment I will attempt to indicate my empathy by recounting the evolution of my own experience with the term *evangelical*.

When it comes to the alleged *post-Christian* context, I confess to being ambivalent. I realize that it has become common place in some circles to pronounce that a post-Christian era is now a reality. Still, I am not sure exactly what this means. World-wide, Christianity continues to grow. In some places—Africa comes to mind—the growth has been staggering. Other areas of the world exhibit impressive numerical increase as well. Granted, Europe, once virtually synonymous with Christianity, has doubtless become post-Christian. This is indicated not only by falling Church attendance but also the vigorous attempt to exclude any but the vaguest references to the Christian past in the European Union founding document.¹ Doubtless there are other places as well that may be considered post-Christian. But is it accurate to claim in an unqualified manner that Christianity is in decline or stagnating worldwide?

More pertinently, I question whether the United States should be understood as post-Christian. Close to 80% of the population of the United States continues to self-identify as Christian, making this country anomalous in the industrialized West. To be sure, *Christian* is broadly, complexly, and confusedly conceived of in the various surveys; but the percentage

---

remains significant. By no means is the United States a Christian nation constitutionally, but demographically is another matter.

There is, I freely grant, no denying that a case may be made for a post-Christian outlook in certain segments of American culture. The world of academe comes to mind. A few critics would sarcastically suggest that post-Christian would be something of an improvement over the often less-than-subtle anti-Christian bent in the American university. In some political groups a post-Christian disposition is also evident. Typically, folk in this category insist that faith is a private matter, that religious considerations have no place in the public square, and that the Constitution unambiguously forbids religion from having a role in the policy deliberations of a secular state. Though this outlook is ostensibly against all religions, Christianity, most especially the conservative variety, seems most often to be the target of this line of thinking. Then again, elements of the mass media may appear to be post-Christian in terms of cultural awareness or basic presuppositions. Nevertheless, all things considered, I am not convinced that a blanket statement that the United States as a whole now presents as a post-Christian culture is beyond challenge.

However, rather than trying to sort out which cultural pockets are manifestly post-Christian, or even fretting that the whole culture is leaning in that direction, or quibbling about what exactly we mean by this, I’m inclined to take a different tack: So what? The Church, the Body of Christ, has always found herself in a non-Christian, a pre-Christian, an anti-Christian, post-Christian or semi-Christian culture. She has had to learn to adapt to any and all of these situations, or combinations of them. The Church is called upon by her Lord to be salt, leaven, and light regardless of the social or cultural setting in which she finds herself.\(^2\)

At this point I return to the Evangelical nomenclature as a way of engaging the topic of Scripture. I begin with a prior claim. Etymologically and biblically the word Evangel from which we derive the adjective Evangelical, which often functions also as a noun, is a term which is short-hand for the astounding good news that God was in Christ reconciling the whole created

\(^2\) One thinks of H. Richard Niebuhr’s taxonomy: Christ against culture; the Christ of culture; Christ above culture; Christ and culture in paradox; Christ’s transforming culture. See Christ and Culture.
order to God’s own self (2 Cor 5:18-19). In that sense, it seems to me requisite that all Christians of whatever historical tradition or theological inclination must by that definition be evangelical.

But James Barr warned us long ago about the etymological fallacy. That is, words take on meaning and nuance by their usage in textual or social locations, not by their linguistic roots. Thus, in Germany Evangelical (evangelische) merely means Protestant. In Wesley’s England it meant fervent Christian commitment rather than a sterile orthodoxy or nominal ecclesial association. In this country the word defines Bob Jones University and my institution, Seattle Pacific University, though a short stint on either campus would reveal that these two schools come from not only different planets but different galaxies. The Bob Jones crowd would adamantly maintain that there is not a shred of Evangelicalism at Seattle Pacific, whereas the Seattle Pacific administration and faculty are appalled and embarrassed when lumped with schools in the Bob Jones’ orbit. Besides institutions of Bob Jones’ and Seattle Pacific’s ilk, the word crops up as well at places like GETS and in denominations like the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America. A word that elastic seems to have lost all ability to communicate meaningfully. Has Evangelical finally met its demise by dying the death of a thousand qualifications? The severity of the problem is illustrated by the fact that Pat Robertson once called the late Jerry Fallwell a secular humanist! Obviously, if we want to preserve this word for whatever reason we have carved out for ourselves a daunting task. For better and for worse, certain historical developments in the United States have stamped Evangelical indelibly. Understanding that history likely will not resolve everything that needs to be resolved, but it may give us a little better idea what the difficulties are. My own brief attempt at explanation, as you will see, is shamelessly autobiographical.

The first time I recall hearing the word Evangelical with a smidgeon of theological awareness was in 1961, as an undergraduate at Greenville College, a Free Methodist school in the so-called Wesleyan “holiness tradition.” Greenville was conservative in terms of theology and ethos, which meant it considered itself classically orthodox as well as a promoter of holy living. Greenville was forthright that its embrace of theological and life-style conservatism was

---

thoroughly Evangelical, but it was just as insistent that it was not Fundamentalist. At Greenville I was taught that being Evangelical was a very good thing but being Fundamentalist was not. The Fundamentalist students, typically transfers from Moody Bible Institute in those days, complained about being singled out for discrimination. Their perception was correct.

For me, then, in the early 60s, Evangelical was a refreshing, liberating, positive label. In the Greenville version of reality, Fundamentalism was to be differentiated from Evangelicalism at two levels, one attitudinal and the other theological. Respecting attitude, Fundamentalism was portrayed as narrow-minded, anti-intellectual, obscurantist, parochial, shrill, and stubbornly unwilling to engage other Christian outlooks. Evangelicalism, on the other hand, was depicted as open, enthusiastically intellectual, accepting of a broad range of denominations, civil, and more than willing to dialogue with non-Evangelical Christians.

In terms of theology, the specifics were equally telling. This was especially the case in the matter of Scripture. All but one of my Greenville religion professors rejected the well-known Fundamentalist doctrine of biblical inerrancy, granted the validity of a critical approach to Scripture and the concomitant implications for interpretation. For me, in those days being Evangelical was a breath of fresh air. I liked that I could be profoundly Christian and take the Bible with utmost seriousness, but not be burdened by a discredited Fundamentalist worldview, its sour mood, and most especially its bankrupt approach to Scripture.

There was another aspect to Greenville’s take on Evangelicalism. Over and over it was emphasized that even though we were mainstream Evangelicals our brand was nevertheless a little different. We were informed that most Fundamentalists and Evangelicals were rooted in the Reformed tradition. But Greenville’s background was Wesleyan, Methodist, and Holiness. Consequently, the college construed the Christian faith in a manner that varied in many respects from Fundamentalism or reformed Evangelicalism. I recall my professors asserting that they would not and could not join the Evangelical Theological Society or the National Association of Evangelicals, but they did participate in the National Holiness Association as well as organizations such as the Society of Biblical Literature. Hence, Greenville was certainly Evangelical, but marched to a slightly different Wesleyan drumbeat.
I remember being extremely excited about studying the Bible in the Greenville context. We read scholars in the Albright circle, which meant we made a concerted effort to locate the meaning of the biblical text in its original social and historical context. As Albright and his students maintained, the main story found in the Bible was broadly historical in spite of problematic details, fit squarely into the ancient Near Eastern cultural setting, and should not be seen as negatively as German critics saw it, even though the basic critical approaches derivative of German scholarship were largely accepted. Plus, we read widely among those scholars who were associated with the Biblical Theology movement. In retrospect, this approach to reading and interpreting Scripture I came to view as seriously problematic at a number of key theological points, but at the time I could not have been more enthralled.

But that quickly changed. Disillusionment all but overwhelmed me when I attended seminary. I had figured that seminary would be a continuation of my heady college experience, only at an even higher level. Alas, that proved a false hope. Even though my seminary was ostensibly Methodist, I discovered that most of the faculty and a majority of the students did not share the understanding of Evangelical than I had developed in college. In fact, a critical mass of faculty and students at this seminary—Asbury Theological Seminary—regarded Evangelical and Fundamentalist as virtually synonymous, though they preferred the former and thought of themselves as more socially and culturally adept than the latter. In terms of the salient theological issues, however, there was little to distinguish between them, except for a Wesleyan emphasis that somehow made no impact on the understanding of Scripture. Based on my seminary experience, some years later I made the cheeky observation that, “Evangelicals are Fundamentalists with good manners.”

To be fair, I should add that a handful of faculty and a number of students understood Evangelical in the way I found attractive. Relative to Scripture, once again this meant acceptance of modern biblical scholarship as well as a belief that that scholarship could be put to the service of a profound appreciation of Scripture’s usefulness for Christian faith and life. Again, as I look back on those days I believe there were major theological flaws inherent in that approach, but at

---

4 This so-called “movement” was later famously described and severely criticized by Brevard S. Childs, *Biblical Theology in Crisis* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1970).
the time I simply sided with the minority and saw myself still as an Evangelical, howbeit of
relatively more liberal stripe.  

In graduate school, I became fully immersed in the critical tradition. Studying at The
University of Michigan under two Albright students, George E. Mendenhall and David Noel
Freedman, my conversion was complete. Whatever caution I had previously I now threw to the
wind. At the same time, I remained convinced that the critical approach to which I was now
inexorably committed could be wed confidently to a view of Scripture as useful for serious
Christians.

After my formal education, fully armed with my critical arsenal and my newly adopted
“liberal Evangelical” tag, I joined the theology faculty at an institution that was like my alma mater,
only on steroids. Seattle Pacific College (until 1976) was urban, larger, somewhat less parochial,
and more denominationally diverse. For example, we had then, as we have now, more Roman
Catholic than Free Methodist students. I thought it was an excellent fit for me. Now I had an
educational laboratory for testing how my brand of liberal Evangelicalism would work.

Almost immediately I got in trouble. At first, I did not know what hit me. During the
interview process I could see that my colleagues were sympathetic to my Evangelical stance.
They rejected in no uncertain terms the bedrock Fundamentalist doctrine of biblical inerrancy. I
could not have felt more at home. The discordant note was sounded when I entered the
classroom. Now, I confess that I was not bashful in those years about teaching my students the
modern approaches: source criticism, form criticism, tradition criticism, historical criticism, and the
like. The newer literary methods were just emerging. From differing perspectives, James Barr,
James Sanders, and Brevard Childs had begun to call for a recalibration of the relationship
between biblical scholarship and taking seriously the Bible as the Church’s canon.  But before
their work significantly began to alter my own thinking, I was operating as a standard biblical
critic, happy as a clam and doubtless as naïve as one, too. This happiness was ephemeral,
though, in that my classrooms became hotbeds of controversy and student protest, which led to

---

5 A decade later a more Wesleyan understanding of Evangelicalism was articulated by Donald Dayton,
parental protest, which led to wariness on the part of those who hired me, and extreme nervousness on the part of the administration. Before this, I had thought that disciplines like Form Criticism or Source Criticism were necessary but colossally boring. Somehow, they were no longer boring. Worse, my advocacy of them plunged me into extremely hot water. My continuation at Seattle Pacific was jeopardized. Metaphorically speaking, I saw myself as the biblical Joseph, going from a pit to slavery in Potiphar’s house to confinement in Pharaoh’s prison. My survival was likely not as providential as Joseph’s turned out to be, but in those tumultuous days I believed that I needed divine intervention or at least a sympathetic Pharaoh in a hurry.

Of course, since I stand before you as a thirty-five year member of the Seattle Pacific faculty I obviously won the larger war even if I did lose a skirmish or two along the way. The question is: What did I win? Well, I and other like-minded theology faculty won the right to be fully critical in our approaches to the Bible. We viewed this as a sweet victory for scholarship and a corresponding abject defeat for obscurantism. Even better, we won the right to define Evangelical in line with our own convictions and understanding of the Wesleyan tradition. Increasingly, we modified the word Evangelical with the adjective Wesleyan. This included being up front about rejecting biblical inerrancy. Remember that the “battle for the Bible” was being waged in Evangelical circles in the middle 70s. Finally, we won the right to bring onto our faculty those who were in sympathy with our general theological outlook. In our mind, there would be no synergy possible with Fundamentalists or Evangelicals who in reality thought like Fundamentalists as our colleagues. As a result of our victory, we set the stage for when a Seattle Pacific President would ask the Board of Trustees to accept four descriptors for our institution: Evangelical, Orthodox, Wesleyan, and Ecumenical. We regard these four descriptors as unique among educational institutions of our kind. Those who have joined our faculty more recently know nothing of this early warfare, but those of my vintage look back on that turbulent decade with great satisfaction. We fought hard, we were principled, we were sometimes bloodied but

---

never bowed, and we won. We were not smug, but we were extremely pleased. We allowed ourselves to think that God was bursting with pride over our efforts.  

With those unpleasant howbeit necessary pitched battles behind me, I settled in as a tenured professor, primed to teach the Bible to university students confidently using all the critical tools at my disposal. It was a heady feeling. Yet, it was not long at all before I discovered to my chagrin that the victory I and my colleagues had worked so hard to achieve turned out to be hollow. This was because I and my colleagues, as scholars and as women and men of the Church, were committed to teaching the Bible as Scripture, something for which we initially believed the critical methods were absolutely essential. But on reflection, we began to have serious doubts, not because we thought the critical disciplines were unnecessary, but because we began to think they were insufficient. We had no doubt that the critical methods came into play in a number of crucial areas: the history of Israelite religion, the complicated development and editorial processes of biblical literature, the relationship of biblical thought to that of surrounding cultures, reconstructing where evidence permitted historical events, the array of extra-canonical materials that required analysis for understanding the permutations of nascent Judaism and Christianity, and the like. I and my colleagues considered all of these and similar topics to be legitimate grist for scholarly mills. But we also came to realize that such approaches are only partially applicable to a full-scale treatment of the Bible as Scripture. We thought a valid point was made by the wag who quipped, “The Bible begins where modern biblical scholarship ends.” This did not mean we were jettisoning the critical methods. But it did mean we were recalculating how to put these methods into the service of reading the Bible principally as Scripture.

The question is: Where did we go wrong? Or, what was it about critical methods that led us astray? How could the scholarly approach that we believed held so much promise and in fact

---

8 I later wrote about these developments in an unpublished paper: “Biblical Scholarship in a Wesleyan Mode: Retrospect and Prospect.” I delivered the paper on the occasion of the University’s 100th year celebration.  
9 With James Sanders, we thought of modern biblical criticism as the “gift of God in due season.” This phrase marks a Festschrift in Sanders’ honor. See Richard D. Weis and David M. Carr, eds., A Gift of God in Due Season: Essays on Scripture and Community in Honor of James A. Sanders (Sheffield, England: Sheffield Academic Press, 1996).  
the very key to biblical interpretation and use end up being so disappointing? The answer to that query lies initially in a number of antitheses which contrast the goal of reading the Bible as Scripture with reading it as an example of ancient Near Eastern literature, or as an ancient cultural artifact, or as ancient literature in which an occasional religious insight could be found, or as a potential source for reconstructing history. I list the most salient of these antitheses, not necessarily in order of importance:

1) Insisting on a ruthless objectivity, biblical scholarship demands that its proponents conduct their work as methodological atheists. Religious commitments or theological perspectives are not permitted to interfere. But that is an impossible position for approaching the Bible as Scripture. Reading the Bible as Scripture not only requires but presupposes a commitment to the deity who is witnessed to in its pages.

2) Biblical scholarship is essentially historical in its orientation and consequently avails itself of all available data, textual and otherwise, for reconstructing any actual events alluded to in the biblical tradition. Equally, the historical enterprise in which the biblical scholar engages confines itself to the nexus of human cause and effect. As a corollary, divine activity, even if considered a theoretical possibility, must be considered as beyond the purview of a historian qua historian. Conversely, reading the Bible as Scripture takes seriously that the text is an indispensable part of the Church’s canonical heritage. Further, this is not merely a mundane historical datum, but a substantive theological supposition. This means, to use James Sanders’ provocative metaphor, that when approaching the Bible as Scripture we are attempting to conjugate the verbs of God’s activity and decline the nouns of God’s presence.

3) Biblical scholarship has steadfastly emphasized approaching the biblical tradition with a “hermeneutics of suspicion.” As a consequence, the Bible has been read with an eye toward exposing any number of unattractive ideological elements: sexism, ethno-centrism, anti-Semitism, tribalism, the valorization of hierarchical political structures, and the like. But reading the Bible as Scripture is based on a hermeneutics of trust and faith, not in denial of the array of any
problematic –isms reflected in the biblical tradition, but in the belief that God can and does work through, transcend, and even subvert such flawed perspectives.  

(4) Biblical scholarship largely regards the confessions of the Church as impediments to reading and analyzing the Bible correctly. Ecclesial confessions are adjudged to be an ideological skewing of what the biblical text meant in its original historical and social setting. However, reading the Bible as Scripture takes seriously the Church’s regula fidei, or rule of faith. This is not a warrant for eisegesis. Nonetheless, scriptural interpretation which is informed by the Church’s confessional traditions is not only welcome but requisite.  

(5) Biblical scholarship assigns the highest value to biblical ideas which are consonant with those that are manifested universally in other humanistic or religious traditions. Particularity is worrisome to biblical scholarship. Conversely, when approaching the Bible as Scripture it is unnecessary to eschew the “scandal of particularity” in which the Christian Bible proclaims throughout that God, the creator of all that is, was exclusively involved in the people Israel and the man Jesus of Nazareth. To be sure, God’s exclusive election has an inclusive goal, namely, the eventual blessing of all the families of the earth (Gen 12:1-3). Still, the scandal of particularity cannot be ignored or glossed over in the biblical story if one is concerned to read this material as Scripture.  

(6) Biblical scholarship regards the religious views found in the Bible as expressive of human insight, perhaps compelling insight, but strictly human nonetheless. Every culture, after all, has produced religious geniuses. But reading the Bible as Scripture accepts the text as a testimony to divine revelation in which God’s self-disclosure took place in the elect people Israel and in Jesus, not simply as an extraordinary teacher or ethical exemplar, but as one whose  

---

ministry and work, including the cross and resurrection, is fundamentally revelatory. There is no denying that divine revelation comes through ordinary human beings and ordinary human processes, even morally compromised human beings and processes, but the end result is nevertheless divine revelation which trumps even the most incisive or penetrating human insight.14

(7) Biblical scholarship takes the position that most if not all of the Church’s biblical exegetes have been gravely mistaken in their interpretations. Plus, as pre-moderns, they could not help but be more or less oblivious to the genuine meaning of the biblical text. This is because pre-modern interpreters were not enlightened by modern epistemological advances, not to mention more recent textual or archaeological discoveries. But reading the Bible as Scripture is based on the one hand on an appropriate criticism of modern epistemic claims and on the other hand an openness to those in the Christian interpretive tradition, not as infallible guides, but as people often possessed of a penetrating spiritual, moral, and theological discernment into the biblical text.15

(8) Biblical scholarship operates on the assumption that it is immaterial whether one believes what the biblical texts teach. Indeed, it is not uncommon to hear that an agnostic stance is somehow to be preferred, as this ostensibly makes for greater objectivity. But reading the Bible as Scripture is founded on the assumption that the very purpose of the text is to induce belief of the most profound and life transforming sort in the context of a worshipping community that reveres the text precisely as sacred Scripture. For a Christian, the proper response to reading the Bible as Scripture is not, “That’s interesting,” but rather, “I believe.”

At this juncture, I need to reiterate my views about modern biblical scholarship. The realization I came to that modern biblical scholarship did not establish a suitable foundation for reading the Bible as Scripture in no way means that I reject the project outright. Far from it. Biblical scholarship is perfectly designed for getting at any number of substantive questions about the emergence of biblical traditions, their reception and use in differing fledgling religious

communities, the editorial processes that led to the text as we now have it, the issues involved in relating the many diverse biblical manuscripts to one another, the circuitous route to canonization, the complex historical events standing behind the texts, non-religious uses to which the texts were put, and so forth. I fully and without reservation embrace the critical stance.16

Having said that, there is for me little question that the presuppositions on which modern biblical scholarship operates are inadequate for treating the Bible as Christian Scripture. A robust scriptural reading demands a completely different set of assumptions. Stating the matter aphoristically, when it comes to reading the Bible as Scripture modern biblical scholarship is a wonderful servant but a terrible master. I repeat: the critical methods provide an invaluable service for understanding much about the biblical tradition in all its complexity. But a category mistake confronts us when biblical scholarship is allowed to make the rules for a scriptural reading, as it is geared to an entirely different set of questions. Ultimately, reading the Bible as Scripture requires rules which are theological in nature, rules which are the purview of the Church, not the academy.

I should add that I am convinced that many of the theological inadequacies of modern biblical scholarship are shared by mainstream Evangelicalism, if I may use that phrase. Biblical scholarship and Evangelicalism have carried out their exegetical and interpretive work under the assumption that the referent of the biblical text is a history which is either potentially or fully recoverable. The only difference is that modern scholarship reconstructs that history on the basis of the usual criteria of historical investigation whereas Evangelicalism sees no need to engage in reconstruction because the Bible’s historicity is guaranteed by a theological presupposition. Archaeology is called in to support Evangelical contentions about the Bible’s historicity, but at the end of the day archaeology can only support and never call into question the reliability of a

16 Parenthetically, my complete acceptance of the critical project in all its dimensions is what leads me to tell my students that developing a cogent doctrine of Scripture requires three elements: (1) what one says theologically about Scripture, its production and use, must be coherent with one’s overall theological stance; (2) what one says theologically about Scripture, its production and use, must take seriously what we know about how Scripture came into being as established by modern biblical scholarship; (3) what one says theologically about Scripture, its production and use, must take with utmost seriousness the actual phenomena of the Scriptures, contradictions and all. One of the worst aspects of the doctrine of inerrancy, devised mainly to combat biblical criticism, is that it does not allow Scripture to say what in fact Scripture says. I brashly tell my students that I’m too conservative about Scripture to accept the doctrine of inerrancy.
biblical account. This is specious. In the final analysis, biblical scholarship ends up with a history that is devoid of revelatory content or theological import. Similarly, Evangelicalism ends up with an artificial biblical history in that contrary evidence is ignored or explained away, disparities in the biblical text are simplistically harmonized (which is a tacit admission that there’s something terribly wrong with the canonical text), and finally because the theological payoff of the events is based on inferences drawn from them rather than the biblical text itself.

Just as politics sometimes makes for strange bedfellows, so the pressure of modernity has led to the delicious irony of scholars who see themselves as complete opposites, and who typically have vilified and demonized each other, finding themselves under the same sheets. One group has attempted to accommodate modernity, the other has attempted to eliminate its effects, but both are inexplicable apart from that same modernity. If I may be biblical for a moment, it is a little like Jacob waking up on his honeymoon morning to find the wrong woman in his bed. I hate when that happens, but in the rush of passion sometimes we don’t notice with whom we are being epistemologically intimate!

Apropos to the above contrasts I have drawn, in recent years a number of scholars in the Society of Biblical Literature have demanded that their counterparts who happen to be religious, that is, who are substantively informed by or committed to the biblical tradition, whether in a Jewish or Christian context, respect the organization’s secular outlook and confine their contributions to areas in which a religious framework or theological considerations are not in play. Some of those who are calling for a purely secular Society of Biblical Literature charge that scholarship carried out in a religious context or as a function of theological conviction is pseudo-scholarship. In spite of the heated controversy this has not surprisingly engendered, the scholars making this case have a point. They correctly realize that the questions which interest modern biblical scholarship and the questions which concern scholars who approach the text from a religious grounding and within a theological framework are radically different. The

---

contention that the latter is pseudo-scholarship at best and hypocritical at worst is in my judgment an egregious example of the conceit of modernity and its presumptive epistemic hegemony. That is however a topic for another time. For now, I would only add that the reality on the ground is that the religious and theological types are either impervious to insult or too obtuse to take the hint. Far from slinking off into the shadows, there has arisen over the last several years one official section or seminar after another in the Society which is dedicated to religious and theological approaches to the Bible. There are questions being asked and addressed now in the Society of Biblical Literature which were all but inconceivable a few decades ago. As a signal of how uncomfortable some are about these developments, it is widely rumored that the decision of the American Academy of Religion to cease holding joint meetings with the Society of Biblical Literature is due to the former’s perception that the latter is becoming too religious or theological and, heaven forefend, far too Christian.

The upshot of my thinking about these issues has quite naturally led to substantial changes in how I execute my task as a professor of Scripture. I will readily admit that my deliberation along these theological lines has not had as its central focus how I might retain Evangelical as a personal label. Sometimes I have joked that folk who want to rescue the Evangelical nomenclature either because of frustration over the way others have co-opted it or because it is part of an historic description have little choice but to be “Yes, but . . . “ Evangelicals: “Well, yes, I am in a way Evangelical, and it is a proud part of the name of my institution or church, but I mean something quite different than the millions of other Christians who wear that name like a garish out-of-style garment or as a “more Christian than thou badge”; “Sure, I suppose I am an Evangelical of sorts, but please do not include me with the folk the pundits have in mind.” “Yes, but . . . “ Evangelicals perpetually seem to be on the defensive. Explaining oneself by what one is not rather than what one is seldom commands confidence.

Most of you know without my reminding you that the publicity battle over the designation Evangelical is extremely difficult to win. In the early 1950s Carl Henry founded Christianity Today, got an enormously influential endorsement by broadly associating the magazine with a rising young evangelist by the name of Billy Graham, and convinced a whole generation of
Fundamentalists that that term had taken on a much too negative cast in the general culture and should be replaced with the more palatable term *Evangelical*. This was a stroke of genius. It not only worked, it worked beyond anyone’s wildest imagination. Once thought of as some backwater, retrograde, thoroughly *regressive* movement that the high culture thought would soon disappear, by 1976 it was broadly seen as having played a decisive role in electing evangelical Jimmy Carter to the Presidency. By the way, that was the last time the religious and political left thought any good thoughts about the "evangelical movement" in this country. That demographic soon devolved in the mind of many into the "religious right" and the scourge of those who denied vehemently and absolutely that right-thinking people were to be found on either the political or the religious right. Right-thinkers were on the left, virtually without remainder (pun intended).

In my own setting, I have long since given up on fussing over redefinitions of *Evangelical*, though I speak to the issue when asked. Instead, I have put my energies in a different direction entirely. In a sense, I suppose my efforts may fairly be described as a flanking maneuver. Many of my students come from Fundamentalist and Evangelical backgrounds of the “religious right” sort. There was a time, in my brash youth, when I was convinced that I could not teach this cadre anything until I first completely dismantled the structures of their thinking. I was, by the way, quite proficient at that, evidenced by the resultant carnage. Now, however, in my brash dotage, I have been employing another tactic. I present positively and with as much passion and persuasion as I can muster my own agenda for treating the Bible as Scripture, simply allowing the theological chips to fall where they may. In my experience, this has caused considerably less emotional upheaval and made my students more teachable.

But this is more than a pedagogical tactic for me. This represents a substantial change in my theological thinking over the years. I have come to the place where I believe we can only go forward in our approach to Scripture by going backward as well. I have already affirmed the value of modern biblical scholarship. That has represented a wonderful leap forward. As for going backward, I am not referring to some futile attempt to recover a golden age of biblical interpretation. First, there is no golden age. Second, even if there were, it would be impossible to return there. Rather, by going backward I have in mind taking steps calculated to foster a
robust reading of the Bible as Scripture. What does this entail? I mention briefly the main ingredients as I see them. As you will see, they are summaries of the points I touched on in the antitheses I previously listed.

First, it is imperative to take seriously that the Bible is the Church’s book and the only proper context for its reading, interpretation, and appropriation as Scripture.\textsuperscript{18} Strictly speaking, there is no such thing as the Bible or Scripture apart from the Church, since the Bible is made up of many discrete literary units which were written by any number of different authors, who wrote at different times, in different places, for different reasons, to different audiences, and finally whose work went through complex and elaborate editorial processes over a long time-span. Religious communities, the Synagogue and the Church, rendered these materials into a Bible or Scripture.

Consonant with this assertion, we need to keep in mind that the Church is more than a social institution that took on the task of collecting, editing, and organizing disparate literary items into a collective whole. The Church is the Body of Christ. She was established and continues to be sustained by the Holy Spirit, and is further organically connected to the Kingdom which Almighty God has been bringing about in the elect people Israel and finally in the ministry, cross, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus the Christ. To be sure, the development of the scriptural canon may be understood in starkly historical and sociological categories, with all the vagaries and vicissitudes that obtain in any human enterprise. Acknowledging that, however, does not preclude God’s ability to transform what is completely ordinary and mundane into what is compellingly extraordinary and sublime.

Second, because the Bible is the Church’s book, it follows that the Church’s rule of faith (regula fidei) is an indispensable component of scriptural interpretation and application. The rule of faith is not reducible to a single creed or a hermeneutical system or a theological grid which is placed over Scripture to make the interpretive outcome predictable regardless of the content of the text. Rather, the rule of faith is to be broadly conceived as the sum total of the Church’s

deepest theological convictions. Just as the community of faith’s most cherished beliefs determined what writings would finally be accepted as canonical, those same beliefs provide the parameters for the Church’s use of the Bible as Scripture. For example, the rule of faith reinforces for the interpreter that we are dealing in Scripture with one God, not many, in spite of the fact that God will be pictured in ways that on the surface suggest otherwise. The God who lavishes grace and the God who pronounces judgment is one God, not two. Equally, though each of the four Gospels presents Jesus in a manner specific to that Gospel’s unique theological perspective, there is ultimately for the Church only “one Lord, one faith, one baptism.” Then again, the Old Testament and the New Testament together constitute Christian Scripture. Prophet and Apostle are one word and one witness, the differing accents, nuances, and perspectives notwithstanding. Christians, of course, read what Jews call “the Bible,” or “the Hebrew Scriptures,” or “the Jewish Scriptures,” but they read it as “the Old Testament” and as an integral part of the whole Christian Bible. These are just a few examples of what is involved in an appropriation of the Church’s rule of faith.

Third, reading the Bible as Scripture in an ecclesial context is foremost a theological task. My contention is not that the Christian Bible has a theology, but that the biblical text is inexorably theological in the following ways. One, God is the main subject of Christian Scripture and the protagonist of the biblical Story. Two, the biblical text is revelatory in the sense that it witnesses to God’s self-disclosure in Israel and Jesus the Christ. Three, the Christian Bible does not provide us with facts or historical accounts in which we may or may not be interested as educated people, but tells a Story which is designed to “make us wise unto salvation.” Four, the Story that is recounted in Scripture continues to the present day in the life of the Church. That is, the Christian Bible is not about “them” as opposed to “us.” In a vital and substantive manner, we as the “one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church” are integrally and organically related to what God has done in Israel and Jesus and what God continues to do in and through the Body of Christ.

20 James Barr has argued for years that it is futile to try to extract a biblical theology from Christian Scripture, yet agrees that the text is inherently theological. See James Barr, The Concept of Biblical Theology: An Old Testament Perspective (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999).
Five, precisely because of the theological content of Christian Scripture there is finally no possibility of religious neutrality. If, in fact, Christian Scripture is a testimony to what God is doing to effect the redemption, restoration, and reconciliation of the whole created order, the very order which God created, blessed, and called good, then that testimony makes transformative claims.²¹

Fourth, as a consequence of regarding the Bible as Scripture the Church’s long interpretive tradition should be taken into account. This is not because pre-critical exegetes are to be regarded as beyond criticism. It is rather that their view of the Bible generally eventuated in their treating it precisely as Scripture and not as something else.

Fifth, the nature of biblical language is fully appreciated when approaching the Bible as Scripture. Biblical language is artful, metaphorical, symbolical, figural, poetic, and parabolic, not because it is untrue, but because the truth it proclaims is about a Reality that cannot be expressed in technical language. The analogy is the language we use to express our love of a spouse, a child, or a friend. We use language in a particular way to express the heartfelt truth of our deepest selves. Such language is never reducible to technical assertions.

Sixth, and finally, taking the Bible seriously as Scripture is a self-involving and community-participating activity in which every aspect of our common life together in the Church is included. Christians read Scripture in the context of and as a function of a full-orbed ecclesial life. Prayer, worship, discipleship, deeds of love and mercy, attending to the poor and promoting justice, being salt, light, and leaven in a myriad of circumstances, are all related to reading and appropriating the Bible as Scripture. When the Bible is read as Scripture, it is in the most profound and comprehensive sense, the “word of life.”

Is this Evangelical? In my judgment, etymologically, biblically, and theologically it is. Historically and culturally, at least in the United States, it probably is not. Most Evangelicals, for instance, have in my opinion an anemic doctrine of the Church. I do not worry about this much any more, though. I will define the term using my own categories when called upon to do so, but other than that I am not overly concerned. What I have said is progressive, I think, at least in the

---

²¹ See Hays’ enunciation of the elements of a theological reading of Scripture in “Reading the Bible with Eyes of Faith,” pp. 11-15. See as well the important footnote number 15 and helpful bibliographical listings in the same article, pp. 10-11.
sense that it affirms and participates in the critical project that has defined biblical scholarship in
the modern era; and, in the sense that it rejects any dichotomy between a so-called “spiritual” and
“social” Gospel. There is only one Gospel. But it is not progressive if that term means without
qualification that the present is always an improvement on the past, or that the modern is always
to be preferred to the old or traditional. Those contentions will necessarily require argument. I
have tried to make clear, however, that one way of going forward on the many issues that are
being debated in the Church regarding Scripture and its use is to go forward and backward at the
same time. One result of going forward has been the affirmation and application of so much in
the critical project that has been salutary. Going backward, though, allows us on the one hand
properly to be critical about modern biblical scholarship and on the other hand to recover those
features of the Church’s history that remain vital and viable for a truly robust reading of the Bible
as Scripture.