What Does “Biblical” Mean? **[1]**

Submitted by Wessel on Monday, 17 February 2020 - 23:12



Read time: 9 minutes
After getting engaged last year [2], I started listening to an audio book on marriage preparation. The primary author of the book was a prominent American evangelical pastor. While it contained many good things, I was shocked by the chapter on sex. I was not blushing at the subject matter, but at the fact that the authors had turned the book Song of Songs in the Bible into a how-to guide for sex: virtually a Christian version of the Kama Sutra. Suddenly, I found myself doubting the credibility of the authors as teachers.

Years ago a local pastor warned me about using the term “evangelical”. Evangelical, properly, means someone who takes the Bible seriously. But in the U.S.A., it has gained a more narrow meaning: it refers to a particular brand of (politically) conservative Christian. These were the “fundamentalists” of earlier decades. The term “fundamentalist” had become derogatory (even before the contemporary association with terrorism since 11 September 2001), but the same is happening with the word “evangelical”.

I do not believe that there is anything inherently wrong with being a “fundamentalist” or “evangelical”. People with progressive leanings may think that these designations make a person dangerous and even indicate a low intelligence. Neither of these are necessarily the case. The problem is that people take a certain superficial or literal reading of the Bible without consideration of the various contexts and advance it as the only valid interpretation. Faced with the lack of scientific or historical evidence, they invent their own sciences and conspiracy theories to balance the scales: their steadfastness is a sign of their firmly planted faith.

I am being deliberately vague: it is not my intention to discuss any *particular* issues. There are some issues on which I am “liberal”. There are other issues on which I am “conservative”. (Irrespective of which position I hold on a particular topic, someone will criticise me for it.) I also have a wide range of tolerance: being willing to listen to others’ positions without necessarily trying to convince them otherwise, and being open to the real possibility that I *may be wrong*. So, instead of discussing *issues*, I want to discuss a *trend* which I *do* find disturbing.

One of the foundational creeds of the Reformation was “sola scriptura”: “by Scripture alone”. What this succinct expression means is that the Bible is God's sufficient and full revelation of how mankind should relate to Him [3]. This is something with which I agree. Over the subsequent centuries, this principle has become ingrained in reformed Christians, particularly Calvinists. Again, this is not something with which I disagree. Having gone through a period where I questioned “which” Christianity is true, I came to the conclusion that a church must affirm the Bible. If a church does not affirm the Bible, then it is permissible to twist and turn Christianity into anything. But, wherever there is good, there is an opportunity for corruption. For some people, the Bible has become the *only* authority for, well, anything. For these people, the Bible is above questioning. This leads to uncritical hard-line beliefs which should best be held loosely, critically, and within context. It also means that

people will try and shoehorn anything and everything into the Bible in order to make it “biblical”, so that it can become an acceptable belief.

Last year my wife and I attended a seminar which introduced the principles of biblical counselling[1]. We were excited for the seminar, and hoping to grow through the content. My wife has been professionally involved with mental health for years, and I have a degree of familiarity in that area as well through some of my formal studies. We both found the content good and helpful. Yet it struck us both that, what was presented to us, closely resembled the principles of contemporary mainstream secular psychology. I need to distinguish between the underlying principles (creation, sin, redemption)—which are biblical—and the methods of the therapy through which those principles are applied. Mainstream psychology has evolved over the past few decades. What is commonplace in treatment (methods) now was not necessarily so four decades ago: neither in psychology, nor in biblical counselling. I again need to stress that the contents of the course was *good and helpful* (both the principles and methods), irrespective of whether it had a secular influence or not. Or, indeed, whether it was biblical or not. But it *was* being presented as being all *biblical*, inadvertently implying that these truths and methods were plainly presented in Scripture for two thousand years and that they only happened to recently have been discerned. This again awakened in me the distress which I felt from listening to the audio book on marital preparation.

There is a perception that high profile Christians (those who write books, have speaking engagements, host podcasts and YouTube channels) do it for the money [4]. While there are certainly easier ways to make money (especially if you are faking it), I think that once someone has “broken into the market”, it may be tempting to rush out another book. I am not accusing anyone, merely speculating that, as fallen human beings, the temptation at least can exist, and that therefore some people may very well have fallen prey to it. What this means, is that the words “biblical” and “evangelical” may become, for some people, the magical fairy dust which can be sprinkled on a book (which otherwise would find a home on the self-help or pop-psychology shelves) in order for it to penetrate the evangelical Christian market in the U.S.A. (and beyond). Verses can, and have been, quoted out of context to justify all sorts of thinking, practices and perspectives.

Given this “danger”, I would like to say three things in response. The first is that good things can be said which are not “biblically“ justified. I believe that the Bible does provide a framework through which we can properly and completely view and interact with the world. However, sometimes details are cultural or technical. In the same way as how we do not use the Bible in a geology or economics classroom, we need to be open-minded that God can and does still provide general revelation on particulars. If, for example, secular psychology has provided us with some good methodologies, then there is no need to appropriate them and redefine them as “biblical”. Similarly, if a person can give good advice about how to have sex for the first time, then do so by drawing from God-given experience and advice, rather than jerry-rigging the Song of Songs by appropriating the “beloved” in that book as a woman with modern anxieties, concerns and self-image.

The second is that we need to use the word “biblical” *correctly*. The Bible teaches us God's salvation plan and His purposes: it is not a rulebook. There are dangers when latching on to verses taken out of context, for example Old Testament commandments, utterances in the Psalms, or even things which Paul wrote. The context always needs to be explained, and that usually involves both a biblical and systematic theology of what is being discussed. Such explanations are exhaustive. It would not only inflate the size of many easily-accessible contemporary Christian books, but may even awkwardly contradict how some verses are being employed. Evangelical Christians would not argue that slavery is moral or should be legal, because passages in the Bible which deal with slavery should be understood in context [5]. Similarly it should be expected that when Paul writes about women or predestination, it should not necessarily be taken at face value, but understood *in context*. It is less helpful to ask “what does the Bible say?”, and more so to ask “what does the Bible *show*?”.

My final response is that we should be humble and continually re-examine our understanding of the Bible and how it fits with contemporary social issues. We do not want to do this, because we like to think that we have things figured out. Thankfully, the incredible richness and depth of the Bible means that we continually learn from it (no matter how learned about it we already are). Age is also a great teacher: as we grow in wisdom over time, we realise that we may not have things as “figured out” as we once thought that we had. Teachers (whether pastors, Bible study leaders, authors of

books, speakers at conferences, etc.) will be held to higher account, because teacher can either uplift or mislead people (James 3:1). If we cannot imagine that we may mislead someone, then that implies that we believe we fully grasp all of God's truths. I am not willing to make such a claim, and I hope others, in humility, won't either.

- 1. Biblical counselling is a means of providing support and growth based on a Christian worldview. It takes, as a starting point, conceptions about humanity, sin, etc. as described in the Bible, and enables a person to view their circumstance through such a lens. Typically it explores the idolatrous desires of the heart (which is a consequence of sin) in order to bring them under Lordship of Christ (which is the intended ordering of creation) for change and healing as a Christian.

Categories:

- Terminology & Concepts [6]

Tags:

- biblical [7]
- bible [8]
- biblical counselling [9]
- psychology [10]
- marriage preparation [11]
- evangelical [12]
- evangelicalism [13]
- fundamentalism [14]
- sola scriptura [15]
- context [16]
- purpose [17]
- intention [18]

Source URL: https://siyach.org/node/1222

Links
[1] https://siyach.org/node/1222
[2] https://siyach.org/node/1213
[3] https://siyach.org/node/1155
[4] https://twitter.com/iamAtheistGirl/status/1219771417694298114
[5] https://siyach.org/node/1053
[6] https://siyach.org/taxonomy/term/36
[7] https://siyach.org/taxonomy/term/967
[8] https://siyach.org/taxonomy/term/89
[9] https://siyach.org/taxonomy/term/968
[10] https://siyach.org/taxonomy/term/969
[11] https://siyach.org/taxonomy/term/970
[12] https://siyach.org/taxonomy/term/971
[13] https://siyach.org/taxonomy/term/972
[14] https://siyach.org/taxonomy/term/973
[15] https://siyach.org/taxonomy/term/974
[16] https://siyach.org/taxonomy/term/126
[17] https://siyach.org/taxonomy/term/674
[18] https://siyach.org/taxonomy/term/975