

***Apostles of Reason:
The Crisis of Authority in American Evangelicalism***

Molly Worthen

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“Secular intellectuals have not been kind to the evangelical mind. They are inclined to see evangelicals as a menace to progress and free thought. Yet their scorn cannot erase a vexing fact: American evangelicals, so maligned as anti-intellectual, have a habit of taking certain ideas very seriously” (1). So, Molly Worthen seeks to discern whether anti-intellectualism is a just charge against evangelicals, and if so, why. She attempts to describe the “American evangelical intellectual life” (9) over the past 70 years.

Molly Worthen is an Assistant Professor of History at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. According to the university’s website, her research interests include “North American religious and intellectual history, particularly the ideas and culture of conservative Christianity.”¹ She teaches classes on the History of Religion in America and Global Evangelicalism.

Worthen states that evangelicalism, as it is understood today, grew out of the pietistic reaction to the “overly formal and cerebral” (6) state churches that emerged from the Protestant Reformation. The Pietists taught that “heartfelt piety was more important than a head full of theological knowledge” (6). This challenge to ecclesiastic authority was contemporaneous with the Enlightenment’s rejection of theology as the “queen of sciences,” which created a shift in ultimate authority from the Bible to science and human rationality. This shift forced some Christians (evangelicals) to take a defensive position in intellectual dialog; they now had to defend orthodoxy, both from secularists and some other Christians.

In seeking to describe how evangelicals have wrestled with the issue of authority, Worthen intentionally has limited her review to the “elites: the preachers, teachers, writers, and institution-builders in the business of creating and disseminating ideas” (9). She further restricts her work to leaders in the movement who are White evangelicals, because of the broad scope of the “evangelical universe” (5), and even then has restricted her study to selected persons and institutions as representative of that category. In doing this, she acknowledges that evangelicals from other ethnic or cultural groups differ in their thinking from those in her target group.

With the rise of fundamentalism among some evangelicals, a clear division has formed in the movement. The more conservative branch “embedded the Bible in the framework of nineteenth-century Common Sense Realism, a philosophy that neglected the role of spiritual experience and left little room for Anabaptist ideas of communal discipleship. They treated scripture as a compilation of objective facts” (87). Another group within evangelicalism rejected this approach,

seeking to harmonize scripture and reason, and allowing experience and tradition to have significant weight as one seeks to understand God's will.

So why has this divide not completely ruptured the evangelical community? The author posits that three basic concerns form the bond that has held the evangelical movement together. She describes these three concerns as "how to repair the fracture between spiritual and rational knowledge; how to assure salvation and a true relationship with God; and how to resolve the tensions between the demands of personal belief and the constraints of a secularized public square" (4). In other words, evangelicals what to know (a) how to reconcile faith and reason, (b) how to know Jesus, and (c) how to act publicly on faith after the rupture of Christendom.

And so evangelicalism continues to maintain a measure of cohesion despite the struggle over authority that has plagued it for decades.

Worthen's thesis is that the American evangelical world has been involved in a crisis over authority for almost three quarters of a century. This crisis has caused conflict with both the increasingly secular culture at large, and internecine warfare over biblical authority within the movement. The fundamentalist wing of evangelicalism came to hold a very literalist (inerrancy) view of the Bible and believe its teachings are the supreme authority in all areas of life and thinking. The more moderate element in the movement tolerates more dissent and freedom to question, while still holding Scripture in high regard as the source of truth and understanding. The moderates see the Bible as a means of revelation, but not the sum of all revelation. They see "revelation not in terms of scripture's fixed, scientific meaning, but as an epiphany that occur[s] at the intersection of text, tradition, experience, and human reason" (40). So, evangelicals not only battle the secular culture that denies the authority of the Bible, but also fight with each other over how to interpret and use the Bible as an authority for thinking and living.

An example of this strife was the move into higher education by many evangelical denominations and organizations. "The one thing most crucial to professional higher education was the one thing that most stymie conservative Protestant educators: academic freedom. Behind their hand-wringing over the liberal arts and their resentment of meddling accreditors was the fear that these reforms would encourage teachers and students to prize intellectual exploration over evangelism and prefer the scientific method to proof texts" (109). A strict fundamentalist, literalist approach to Holy Writ was seen as threatened by those who made room for reason, experience, and tradition as contributors in the hermeneutic process, even when the Bible was held as the highest authority.

So, the rise of evangelical seminaries and graduate schools, and publications like *Christianity Today* and *Christian Century*, were due to this "segregated character of evangelical intellectual culture" (54). The desire by fundamentalists to protect members and leaders from the "corruption" of the neo-evangelicals tended to inhibit collaboration and reconciliation between the parties.

Worthen posits that this divide in the evangelical world persists to today, and probably will for a long time. Thus, the movement is not monolithic, but includes must "diversity and internal contradiction" (264). There is not unanimity even on such a basic issue as the ultimate authority for Christians. So we should be careful not to stereotype evangelicals.

Evangelicals, according to Worthen, are not anti-intellectual in the sense that they cast all reason to the wind. In fact, the movement is fragmented to some degree over how to properly use

reason, experience, and tradition in understanding the teachings of the Bible. Although most evangelicals reject a rationalism that makes human thinking supreme, they differ on exactly what role reason plays in hermeneutics. I think this is a valid assessment, and one that evangelicals continue to struggle over. Worthen's contribution is that she helps us see more clearly what is going on in the movement. Her insights can help those on all sides of the discussion to better understand both their own position and that of those they oppose. And this is always helpful, so that at least people can respect each other despite their disagreements.

Worthen approaches the topic as an historian, and seems to want to fairly represent evangelicalism, though she is willing to reveal the problems as well as the strengths. There are a few brief moments in the text where one might think he or she detects a modicum of distain for the more conservative wing of the movement, but I think that overall she does a good job of trying to be objective, which none of us can do completely.

The Apostles of Reason contributes to the ongoing debate in several denominations over the role of Scripture in the life of the Christian community. Worthen clearly describes how we arrived at where we are today, and clarifies what the root issues are. I can testify that her book has helped me clarify my own thinking, as my denomination is wrestling with some of the issues she addresses. I highly recommend this work to all evangelicals, and those who are not, but want to better understand this complex and vibrant section of the Christian Church.

¹ Retrieved May 25, 2016, from <http://history.unc.edu/people/faculty/molly-worthen/>