

Review of Kenton L. Sparks, *God's Word in Human Words*<sup>1</sup>

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I welcome this opportunity to engage in discussion of critical biblical scholarship as it relates to the work and life of the Church, especially as “sparked” by Kenton Sparks’ new book. In sum, this book is Kent’s agenda for fashioning “a Christian response to modern biblical criticism that is intellectually satisfying as well as theologically and spiritually healthy” (p. 24). Along the way, Professor Sparks provides an impressive treatment of the philosophical underpinnings of critical scholarship, and especially I found helpful Professor Sparks’ opening chapter tracing epistemological and hermeneutical background issues from premodern, modern, and postmodern periods.<sup>2</sup> Other chapters consider historical-critical method per se, using Assyriology as an instructive foil for the method applied to biblical criticism, while other chapters survey various Christian responses to historical criticism or offer alternative responses, all intending to fashion the Christian response Kent envisages as “intellectually satisfying” as well as healthy. Thus his stated goal – rather ambitious, perhaps even audacious – is “to help shape the intellectual contours of the church” so that the church can better perform its scholastic duty of considering and assimilating the fruits of academic endeavors to faith in Christ (p. 18). Specifically, he offers “the possibility that historical criticism – in spite of its potential faults and negative import – might offer a relatively accurate portrait of Scripture that will be of theological value once the church correctly understands its insights” (p. 23).

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<sup>1</sup> Kenton L. Sparks, *God's Word in Human Words: An Evangelical Appropriation of Critical Biblical Scholarship* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Academic, 2008).

<sup>2</sup> This chapter alone is worth the price of the book as required reading for introductory courses on hermeneutics, where such philosophical underpinnings regularly get short-changed.

As I have said already in my blurb for the book, it is an impressive accomplishment, reflecting considerable erudition on every page and across a broad spectrum of topics. While it may be a stretch to say he has succeeded in shaping the intellectual contours of the church universal as it relates to biblical criticism,<sup>3</sup> the book nevertheless succeeds in moving the conversation forward in ways that are helpful and healthy. And so, I find little here with which I disagree directly, at least with topics directly related to his main agenda. However, I will offer this critique of Kent’s attempt at “Calminianism” (*my word*, pp. 311ff), because as I hope to show, it does bear additionally an indirect criticism of the overall project. Professor Sparks asserts that both Calvinism and Arminianism are true – both that God is sovereign and humans choose freely – falling back on a mysterious uncertainty of how both can be true. Respectfully, I believe his discussion too blithely glosses over Arminian appreciation for God’s sovereignty, oversimplifies Arminian convictions about libertarian freedom, which is certainly more nuanced than “a God-given freedom of the will” (p. 311), while at the same time underestimating Calvinistic determinism. Professor Sparks regrets the construal of Calvinism and Arminianism as a fork in the theological road, and proposes instead a theological antinomy, in which both conflicting principles should be embraced as true because each is valid and necessary. But what he proposes as a theological antinomy is neither possible nor desirable, and the compromise he proposes is really only Arminianism properly so-called, but which rejects all forms of determinism. I respectfully counter that the debate *is*, in fact, a fork in the theological road, and I urge

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<sup>3</sup> He even parallels his project with the church’s realization that Galileo’s astronomy was correct (pp. 17 and 23).

accepting the advice of the great philosopher of America's favorite pastime, Yogi Berra, who said, "when you come to a fork in the road, take it."

Having placed that theological argument aside, however, I now turn to two other thoughts, one as a slight reconfiguration of what Professor Sparks has accomplished in this impressive volume, and a second that reflects on his work from my own theological tradition as a means of moving the conversation forward.

(1) First, while it may sound persnickety to say it, I admit to being uncomfortable with the sub-title, "An Evangelical Appropriation of Critical Biblical Scholarship." My discomfort does not stem from the term "evangelical," given the book is written by a professor at a distinguished evangelical university and published by a leading evangelical press. The author places himself squarely within this tradition and reasons that his tradition must now embrace critical biblical scholarship, for the good of the tradition itself. Indeed the parallels between this tradition and that of both Jewish and Roman Catholic scholars are instructive. So, e.g., the encyclical of Pope Leo XIII, *Providentissimus Deus*, condemned higher criticism, while on the other hand, the Pontifical Biblical Commission, *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church*, declared historical criticism to be an "indispensable method." This process took precisely one century from Leo's encyclical in 1893 to the PBC's statement in 1993.<sup>4</sup> Similarly, early Jewish rejection of nineteenth century biblical criticism was most famously articulated in the well-known hyperbole of Rabbi Solomon Schechter, when he called Old Testament higher criticism "higher anti-Semitism."<sup>5</sup> There is a sense in which these reactions –

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<sup>4</sup> Carolyn Osiek, "Catholic or catholic? Biblical Scholarship at the Center," *JBL* 125/1 (2006): 5-22, esp. 7.

<sup>5</sup> Solomon Schechter, "Higher Criticism – Higher Anti-Semitism," in *Seminary Addresses and Other Papers* (Cincinnati: Ark Publishing, 1915), 36-37.

whether Jewish, Catholic, or evangelical Protestant – constitute a parenthesis of the twentieth century, in which reactionary scholarship continued the failed attempts of nineteenth century conservatives to rebut the results of critical research (Hengstenburg, Franz Delitzsch, et al.). I suppose we could view Professor Sparks’ project as an attempt to bring evangelicals along on the journey with those Catholic and Jewish brothers and sisters who have thoroughly embraced critical scholarship.

The difficulty, of course, as always, will be deciding who gets to define the terms. Some will no doubt respond that to be evangelical is to reject higher criticism itself, in which case Professor Sparks has renounced his own evangelical credentials by making such proposals. Others will define evangelicalism by a certain soteriology, leaving open questions of biblical inspiration and methodology, making an evangelical acceptance of critical scholarship only natural.<sup>6</sup>

So my discomfort is not with the term “evangelical” but rather with “appropriation,” which I suspect is not the right word here. Strictly speaking, appropriation is “a deliberate act of acquisition of something, often without the permission of the owner,” or “to set apart for, or assign to, a particular use.” I have seen and heard it used of NT appropriation of OT texts or ideas, in which case it frequently seems to have the idea of changing those texts or ideas in order to make them suitable for the NT context. Thus “appropriation” in the subtitle implies that evangelicals should somehow co-opt critical scholarship, alter the methodologies in some way to make them more palatable, and apply them in a different way to an evangelical agenda, almost as

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<sup>6</sup> I remember years ago a delightful story about Roland Murphy reading over the convictions of the evangelical authors of the Word Biblical Commentary series, after which he enthusiastically proclaimed to the editor, David Allan Hubbard that he was, in fact, an evangelical Carmelite, and therefore eligible to write for the WBC, which he did (#23A, Ecclesiastes).

though evangelical use of critical scholarship is unnatural or somehow different from the critical approach of others. It suggests evangelicals should somehow hijack the methodology, adjust and change it to fit our own particular evangelical context, and then to use critical scholarship in a way that is therefore different from Jewish and Catholic critical scholars, or even secular scholars. But I think Professor Sparks is actually arguing for something altogether different in this book, almost the opposite of this unnatural cooptation. In fact, I suspect that this type of evangelical “appropriation” of critical biblical scholarship would *not* be satisfying to him. Perhaps in his response he will clarify whether I have misunderstood him, or clarify further the subtitle.

(2) Second, at several critical junctures, Professor Sparks affirms his commitment to evangelicalism’s “doctrine of inerrancy” (pp. 21-22, 55, 139, 358). He attempts to make a distinction between classical inerrancy of the church fathers on the one hand, which admits that the Bible accommodates human error in its pages,<sup>7</sup> and today’s evangelicals in the Cartesian tradition. In other words, the doctrine of inerrancy today, as articulated by most evangelicals, is driven by a Cartesian thirst for incorrigible truth, which leads inevitably into an epistemological cul-de-sac, as Sparks puts it (p. 55, and see also 357-58). So he seeks to distance himself from today’s too narrow an understanding of inerrancy, while holding to an orthodox conviction that God’s word is inerrant.

Although I appreciate the author’s sensitivity to the views of the early Church on this issue and I am in complete sympathy with his high view of Scripture, his distinction puts entirely too fine a point on the topic. I suspect this is precisely part of what has

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<sup>7</sup> On p. 358, Kent avers that the fathers (and Calvin) were not denying inerrancy when they made such concessions. But this seems to counter the very etymological root of the term “inerrancy” itself.

driven Professor Sparks through this research agenda; the need to hold to some form of inerrancy while also embracing thoroughly critical scholarship. So I want to close these remarks with a few comments from my own theological perspective and (sub-)tradition, if I may. I am part of a branch of North American evangelicalism that has always lived in an uneasy tension with the rest of the movement, especially at this interstice between Wesleyan-Arminians and the larger fold of brothers and sisters in the more Reformed camp of evangelicalism. A few scholars on our side of the interstice continue to hold to some form of inerrancy, but like Professor Sparks, they tend to ‘define it out of existence,’ so that it becomes an unfortunate (and often untenable) position to hold, rather like Kent’s cul-de-sac. The majority of Arminian scholars see inerrancy as a twentieth century North American and largely Reformed teaching, which owes more to Calvinistic determinism than to the early church.<sup>8</sup> In this sense, I would agree that the concept of inerrancy owes more to the epistemic optimism of René Descartes than to a biblically-rooted doctrine of inspiration. In 1987, James Davison Hunter averred that “nearly 40 percent of all evangelical theologians have abandoned the belief in the inerrancy of Scripture.”<sup>9</sup> More recently one of my colleagues at Asbury Seminary, Ken Collins in *The Evangelical Moment*, spoke of an Arminian “witness” to our Reformed sisters and brothers in the evangelical tradition, calling them “to throw off the last vestiges of fundamentalism,” including what he calls an all-too-human construction of our view of

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<sup>8</sup> For a nuanced discussion of “hard determinism,” “libertarian freedom,” and “soft determinism,” see Scott R. Burson and Jerry L. Walls, *C.S. Lewis and Francis Schaeffer: Lessons for a New Century from the Most Influential Apologists of Our Time* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1998), 66-69, and specifically on the issue of inerrancy, see 112-38. Cf. also Jerry L. Walls and Joseph R. Dongell, *Why I Am Not a Calvinist* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2004).

<sup>9</sup> James Davison Hunter, *Evangelicalism: The Coming Generation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 31.

Scripture.<sup>10</sup> So in conclusion, I congratulate Professor Sparks on a compelling argument that evangelicals should imbibe deeply at the well of critical biblical scholarship. But I respectfully suggest that the task is made more complicated by his tenacious commitment to inerrancy, regardless of how carefully he defines and nuances the concept.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> “The Wesleyan witness, then, offers encouragement to its Reformed evangelical brothers and sisters that at the beginning of the twenty-first century, as we prepare for a broader evangelical future, it is time to throw off the last vestiges of fundamentalism, not simply in terms of its militancy, ongoing social and cultural irrelevance, and even anti-intellectualism, but also in terms of its all-too-human constructed view of Scripture.” Kenneth J. Collins, *The Evangelical Moment: The Promise of an American Religion* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Academic, 2005), 70-78, quote from p. 78.

<sup>11</sup> Although I cannot self-identify as a postmodern practical realist, as Sparks does, I believe that, by locating himself as such, he has prepared the way to jettison inerrancy. By admitting that our capacity *to know* does not also carry with it the illusion that we have access to error-free, God-like knowledge (p. 50), he has opened the door to inspiration without a determinism that overrides the freedom of human authors.

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