

Apr 1st, 1:00 PM - 1:15 PM

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Tyler C. Detrick
Cedarville University, tylerdetrick@cedarville.edu

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Detrick, Tyler C., "Evangelicalism and Mental Slavery: A Miltonic Critique" (2015). *The Research and Scholarship Symposium*. 4.
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Evangelicalism and Mental Slavery: A Miltonic Critique

by Tyler Detrick

In the 1960s, Billy Graham and Carl Henry heralded evangelical identity as the crusade that would bolster Christian witness in the modern age. Recent scholarship, however, has labeled the movement a dramatic disappointment. Historian D.G. Hart contends that mainstream Christianity has become so inclusive that the label “evangelical” has ceased to mean anything intelligible, and Mark Noll echoes this critique by labeling evangelicalism a “scandal of the mind.” Christianity’s greatest hope for global gospel witness has proved a disappointment. One window into this evangelical failure may be found in the prose works of sixteenth century poet John Milton. Far from derived from modern concerns, the ecclesiastical and political turmoil of Milton’s day closely resembles the issue of evangelical identity in the twenty-first century, and the poet’s response applies well to Christianity’s contemporary situation. Milton’s critique of iconography, developed in his political tracts, reveals that mental slavery is the true scandal of the evangelical mind. While many scholars recognize the crisis of Christian identity in the twenty first century, Milton’s theory suggests that evangelicalism’s incompetence results from a failure to distinguish between the movement itself and the theological identity it signifies.

Evangelicalism began as a promising movement that offered unity to the splintered twentieth century Church. In 1960, Christianity in America was fragmented and incoherent. The arrival of Protestant Liberalism in the States during the early half of the century had challenged traditional views of Scripture and authority, leaving the Church more divided along denominational lines than it was after the Civil War. This disintegrating state of Protestantism concerned conservative Christian leaders like Billy Graham, Carl Henry, and Harold John Ockenga who wanted to uphold essential doctrines of the faith in the midst of America’s

increasingly liberal religious environment (48). Together, they resolved that the only way to maintain a prominent conservative Christian identity was to “rally and garner an umbrella alliance” of like-minded traditions (190). Difficulty in launching this program arose, however, as the founders of the evangelicalism struggled to define their crusade. Upon what doctrinal basis could Presbyterians, Baptists, Methodists and other Protestant denominations agree?

Evangelical leaders turned to theological minimalism to overcome this setback, historian D.G. Hart observes. “Although the faith they created borrowed fragments from historic Protestantism,” he explains, “its design was to affirm a lowest common denominator” (183). Thus, George Marsden explains in his 1984 book *Evangelicalism and Modern America* that only four basic features consolidated the diverse strands of conservative Protestantism: Biblicism, crucicentrism, activism, and conversionism (xi). Of first importance, evangelical leaders rallied the movement around the reformation principle of Sola Scriptura and its emphasis on the Bible as ultimate authority (xiv). The other three grounds of evangelical identity were eternal salvation through trust in Christ, an emphasis on evangelism and missions, and the importance of a transformed Christian life (xiv). Unified by these four affirmations, Church leaders formed institutes like Fuller Seminary and organizations like the National Association of Evangelicals, both which still exist today, to secure the future progress of evangelicalism.

The prominence of evangelical seminaries and associations in the twenty-first century reveals the successful preservation of the movement. Fuller Seminary, Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, and Dallas Seminary are three institutes among many others that seek to foster the evangelical mind through the pastors they train. The magazine *Christianity Today*, which began in 1956 as a small periodical edited by Henry, has also become a leading voice for evangelicalism, reaching over two and a half million readers every month (x). Efforts like these

are proving successful. According to a 2005 Gallup poll, about forty percent of America's population loosely identify as "evangelicals" or "born again Christians" (xi). This proliferation of evangelicalism in the twenty first century proves that the vision of men like Graham and Henry has effectively shaped contemporary Christianity.

Despite this organizational effectiveness, evangelicalism has encountered significant criticism in recent years. Leading historians and theologians contend that the minimal affirmations of the evangelical creed have produced a movement that appears stable but is in reality internally deficient. "Evangelicalism is a seemingly large and influential religious body," Hart explains, "but it lacks an institutional center, intellectual coherence, and devotional direction" (190). In his book *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind*, Mark Knoll agrees with Hart, arguing that the evangelical attempt to consolidate conservative churches around a lowest common denominator of beliefs has successfully produced numbers but not theological substance (Knoll). According to Knoll, the four-point creed offers only the most limited solidarity amongst churches. Most recently, historian Carl Trueman has carried Knoll's critique forward in his book *The Real Scandal of the Evangelical Mind* by suggesting that evangelicalism is internally divided (Trueman). He questions a movement that includes as diverse teachers as Joel Osteen, Brian McLaren, and John Piper. Such leaders hardly agree on what it means for Scripture to be the ultimate authority and what a transformed Christian life looks like. This disparity between those labeled evangelical, Trueman reasons, is evidence that the evangelical movement is more of a religious fellowship or coalition of which people feel a part than an effective witness to conservative Christian teaching (15).

The prose works of sixteenth century writer John Milton offer insight into this dilemma that scholars like Hart, Knoll, and Trueman seek to understand. Living during the tumultuous

time of the English Revolution, Milton himself experienced a failed movement to reform the Church and wrestled with the question of identity in relation to the ecclesiastical shifts of the 1640s. Milton considered himself a prophet to England, called by God to encourage further reformation of the Church through his writing. In the autobiographical section of his Church government tract, Milton compares himself to the ancient seer Jeremiah who sounded a “jarring blast” of the trumpet against wayward Israel (666). With this prophetic vocation settled in Milton’s mind, it is not surprising that he paused from his poetic endeavors to involve himself in the prose controversies that raged throughout his lifetime. Milton ambitiously joined the conversations related to church and state to seek “the most direct progress towards the liberation of all human life from slavery” (622).

If any message captures the essence of Milton’s prophetic insight it is slavery. For Milton, slavery is not exclusively, or even primarily, a physical problem but can also be a condition of the mind. This concept of slavery stems from the Protestant concern with iconography, the error of confusing a sign with the thing it signifies. From Milton’s reformed perspective, the Roman Catholic sacramental doctrine that baptism actually accomplishes the salvation it signifies and that the elements in the Lord’s Supper actually become the body and blood of Christ is rampant idolatry because it elevates physical representations to the level of ultimate spiritual significance. In the process, the person engaging in iconography becomes a slave to an image and fails to apprehend the truth behind it. Biographer David Hawkes observes that Milton saw this error of iconography as England’s central dilemma, the “spirit of the age itself” (4). Because Milton believed that sinful human nature predisposes all men towards idolatry, it is not surprising that he consistently traces diverse issues like Church government,

divorce, and regicide to the error of mental slavery and seeks to enlighten his fellow countrymen to their spiritual ignorance.

In his 1644 treatise *Areopagitica*, Milton developed this theory of iconography in light of the ecclesiastical shifts of the English Revolution. Prior to the 1640s, the monarchy upheld Episcopacy as England's national Church government. Puritans like Milton, however, opposed this hierarchical structure of the Church that too closely resembled Rome in joining Church and state under the all-powerful control of the king. The puritans hoped for a movement that would overrule King Charles's censorship laws that prohibited the publication of ideas contrary to the monarchy so that a true reformation of the Church might begin (Cambridge 96). In 1640, the crusade that puritans were expecting arrived in the English Revolution as Long Parliament replaced the king as England's highest authority, overturned Episcopal church government, and convened the Westminster Assembly of Divines to advise the church on a new settlement (CITE). To Milton's dismay, however, the new Presbyterian-dominant government re-instated censorship laws of their own in the Licensing Order of 1643 that upheld the oppression of the monarchy but under a new form. In *Areopagitica*, Milton identifies mental slavery as his principal critique of Long Parliament by using Parliament's censorship as evidence that the Presbyterians had set up "a second tyranny" (539). Milton saw in Parliament a tendency to promote mental slavery by confusing the sign with the thing signified. The shift from Episcopacy to Presbyterianism gave the appearance that oppressive control of the late order had ended, but Milton argued that beneath this shallow image was the reality that "Episcopall arts begin to bud again" (541). Through their control of the press, Presbyterians had unwittingly come to resemble the very movement they loathed. The only reason they couldn't see this, Milton explains, is because they so focused on the outward "muddy pool of conformity and tradition" that they had

lost sight of the true state their condition (739). The English Revolution lacked theological reality beneath its image-based crusade.

Adding to this conclusion that Parliament is enslaved to its outward image, Milton also contends in *Areopagitica* that the alleged unity of England under the Long Parliament is nothing more than “the forced and outward union of cold and neutral and inwardly divided minds” (743). The external organization of the English Church gave the appearance of unity, but beneath this surface were various “schisms and sects,” including the radical Anabaptists, who opposed the national establishment of a Church and the disagreements over Church government within Parliament itself. Milton saw this artificial unity as further evidence that the Presbyterians controlling Parliament were committing the slavish error of replacing the mere image of ecclesiastical unity with the reality of intense division amongst factions of the English Church. “I fear yet this iron yoke of outward conformity hath left a slavish print upon our neck,” Milton lamented, expressing his concern that England’s leaders were setting up an iconographic appearance of agreement in the Church rather than acknowledging its true state of fragmentation resembling “wood, and hay, and stubble forced and frozen together” (747).

This theory of mental slavery applies to the evangelical struggle for a stable identity. Scholars consistently identify the inherent weakness of evangelicalism, but Milton’s theory can improve upon the insights of these scholars by tracing the failure of the conservative Christian cause to the image-elevating minds of its proponents. Viewed through the lens of Milton’s concept of slavery, it is clear that the founders of evangelicalism privileged the external, organizational aspects of their cause but downplayed its ideological foundation. Graham and Henry’s vision of an “umbrella alliance” of churches took precedence over the doctrinal truths that would unite American Christians. The four ambiguous points that define evangelicalism are

almost an afterthought in comparison to these grandiose goals for a powerful movement. Milton's theory explains that, in light of its externally focused beginnings, evangelicalism is a functional icon, giving the appearance of strength but lacking ideological potency in reality. Like the Long Parliament of Milton's day, evangelical leaders constructed their movement upon a simulation of the truth. They championed their cause as doctrinally stable, intellectually stimulating, and biblically sound, but overlooked that their movement was impoverished of these qualities.

Today, this slavish mindset continues as evangelicalism towers over other Christian movements in America but remains doctrinally hollow. Seminaries claim to teach the evangelical tradition, magazines seek to expound the evangelical heritage, and millions identify as evangelicals, but, mirroring Milton's concerns in *Areopagitica*, no one has yet provided a stable definition of what the label "evangelical" actually means. This incongruity between appearance and reality makes clear that the evangelical movement prominent in America today is prone to the same slavish error of the Presbyterian Parliament in Milton's era because it confuses the outward aspects of its identity with true doctrinal substance.

Milton's extension of mental slavery in *Areopagitica* to the issue of Church unity also demonstrates the error of mental slavery in evangelicalism. Critics like Trueman note that evangelicalism is deeply divided despite the belief in a unifying, overarching movement. "There simply is no pure, platonic ideal of evangelicalism," he insists, "no common identity in which all evangelicals participate" (37). Milton's theory suggests that this, too, is a direct result of confusion between a sign and the reality it signifies. In Milton's day, the illusion of unity in the Church stemmed from Parliament's maximalist approach to doctrine that forced theological agreement through strict censorship laws. Contrastingly, evangelicalism is structured by

doctrinal minimalism. Nevertheless, in *Areopagitica*, Milton is not concerned with the length of a confession but the practice of using ecclesiastical documents to force a “rigid external formality” that does not exist. Evangelicalism is guilty of this error. Although its founders did not use censorship laws or official documents to bind churches together into a forced unity, the four points that they chose to mark evangelical identity reveal an obsession with the image of external agreement that overlooks the deep divisions within the Church. Biblicism, crucicentrism, activism, and conversionism, might appear to unite a variety of Protestant traditions around common truth, but these tenets are so vague that they accomplish little more than disguise the radical differences between those who claim to be evangelicals. Milton’s theory makes sense of this lack of agreement amongst evangelicals by showing that the appearance of a unified evangelical movement is an outward façade that hides the myriad opinions that exist within the umbrella of conservative Christian identity.

Critics of evangelicalism have also observed that the overarching problem of evangelical identity has created specific concerns in the Church related to authority. In his book *The Creedal Imperative*, Trueman explains that the minimalist approach towards doctrine taken by evangelicalism has obscured the power of officers in the Church. While the mantra “no creed but Christ” might sound spiritual, it miserably fails to delimit ecclesiastical authority. In Trueman’s words, “Authority without doctrinal competence...is a recipe for willful despotism, where the church is whatever the elders decide, no more and no less” (164). Without a comprehensive statement dictating the official position of the church on matters of doctrine and practice, the leaders of a congregation can choose to define doctrine however they would like and exercise church discipline arbitrarily. Consequently, the evangelical attempt to rally churches around a

minimal creed unwittingly permits the abuse of power in churches associated with the movement.

In his prose work, Milton moved beyond the question of mental slavery as it relates to identity to consider the symptoms of iconography amongst his countrymen. One conclusion that dominates Milton's writings is his idea that mental slavery leads to the abuse of authority. This theme looms large in *Areopagitica*. After accusing Parliament of mental slavery through their forced, external conformity imposed on the Church, Milton charges the Presbyters with violating the minds of their subjects. In order to achieve outward unity in the Church, the Presbyters outlawed opinions that deviated from their own by imposing censorship laws. Milton saw this suppression of ideas as detrimental to the critical thinking of Englishmen because it bound them to the beliefs of their authorities rather than respecting the rights of conscience. He believed that the doctrine of the priesthood of all believers was trampled on in this arrangement as truth became whatever the Church authorities declared it to be and laypersons were trapped in "the canons and precepts of men" (744). Even if Parliament's actions and doctrines are true, Milton maintained, people should still be encouraged to think for themselves rather than slavishly relying upon their authorities. "A man may be a heretic in the truth," he explains, "and if he believe things only because his pastor says so, or the Assembly so determines, without knowing other reason, though his belief be true, yet the very truth he holds becomes his heresy" (739).

This connection that Milton makes between mental slavery and authority explains the concerns of scholars like Trueman who see in evangelicalism a failure to delimit the power of Church authorities. Like Parliament in Milton's day, many evangelical leaders use creedal statements to abuse the power they have over laypersons. Only, while the Presbyters used stifling censorship laws and inflexible doctrinal standards to tyrannically govern the people, evangelical

authorities employ the alleged innocence of short theological statements to make laypersons dependent upon them.

Other scholars have argued that this failure of evangelicalism to delimit church authority is already evident in the contemporary trend towards celebrity pastors. John Stackhouse asserts this point in his book *Evangelical Landscapes*, insisting that twenty first century Christianity “venerates heroes” in the form of pastors (20). He argues that without a stable form of identity, evangelical churches turn to an “instructing and witnessing” dichotomy in which pastors, the experts in the faith, preach while their congregations passively accept the teaching without inquiring about the implications of a statement or challenging its validity (18). The congregation unquestioningly assumes that their pastor preaches truth. In this unrestricted position, celebrity pastors can use the pulpit to their own advantage by dictating the church’s position to be whatever they deem appropriate. Recent instances of such abuse of authority, including the Mark Driscoll scandal at Mars Hill, has destroyed congregations as the unchecked power of one man prescribes the identity of the Church (CITE). The evangelical identity crisis, then, is directly correlated to the issue of ecclesiastical authority.

Another prose work, *Eikonoclastes*, reveals a similar concern. Milton wrote this tract in 1649, months after English authorities placed King Charles I on trial and executed him for treason. While Milton supported this regicide, many of his countrymen remained loyal to the King, and their anger at Charles’s death was heightened by a publication entitled *Eikon Basilike: The Portraiture of His Sacred Majesty in His Solitudes and Sufferings* (Dobraski 130). This popular book, purporting to contain Charles I’s prayers and private meditations, presented the King as a humble Christian servant, dedicated to the good of his subjects (131). In *Eikonoclastes*, Milton repudiated this representation of Charles I and sought to tear down the idol of his person

in the eyes of the people. Milton maintained that the loyalists were committing mental slavery by confusing the office of Kingship with the actual character of the King. Even the Presbyters who were so eager to depose Charles I on the basis of his tyranny disapproved of his death. Milton explained this sudden regret over the King's death by arguing that the mental slavery of the people had led to an illegitimate view of Charles's authority. Milton's countrymen were so enamored by the Charles's Kingship that they overlooked the injustices he committed throughout his reign. Because they had replaced this truth of Charles's failure with an image of what a King ought to be, the loyalists had elevated Charles I to celebrity status and heralded him as a martyr. In Milton's eyes, this was nothing less an illegitimate abuse of the King's power.

While critics of evangelicalism recognize the deep problems inherent in the movement—problems that Milton aptly traces to mental slavery—they also seek constructive solutions to the errors they identify in their writings. Most of these scholars are what Hart calls “wounded lovers of evangelicalism” (196). They recognize the predicament of the movement's identity, but they believe that the evangelical vision of united congregations may be redeemed through a thoroughgoing reformation. Thus, Noll claims that though evangelicalism has been “fragmented a thousand ways,” it could find unity by supplementing its zeal for organization and activism with doctrinal substance (CITE). Baptist minister D.H. Williams advocated a similar optimism that evangelicalism could be revived, but he proposed that churches should turn to the stability of ancient Christian traditions to provide new norms that can secure the movement's success (25). Another scholar, Thomas Howard, wrote in his book *Evangelical Is Not Enough* that American Christians could restore their lost cause by integrating structured form into evangelical worship like liturgy and the church calendar (CITE). Though divided on the question of what means can

save evangelicalism, these scholars are united by the idea that evangelical identity can be saved through a thoroughgoing reformation.

In contrast to these optimistic scholars, Milton's prose works suggest that the true solution to the evangelical scandal can never be achieved within the movement itself. Milton was a classic iconoclast, committed to destroying idols in their various manifestations. Consequently, he never accepted the idea that a functional icon could undergo reformation. This attitude is evident in his approach towards Charles I in *Eikonoclastes* in which he criticizes the Presbyterians not only for idolizing the image of the king but also for attempting to restore the King to power after they had first deposed him. In Milton's eyes, this desire to restore the monarchy was no less than a revitalized mental slavery of those who "dote upon his [Charles's] deformities" (783). Rather than restoring the monarchy, Milton sought in *Eikonoclastes* to destroy the image of the King by exposing the falsity of his words and justifying his regicide. This iconoclastic attitude towards the idol of the King's image suggests that Milton would not approve of the "wounded lover" approach towards evangelicalism. Viewed through his theory of mental slavery, it is evident that the attempt of these scholars to uphold evangelicalism through reformation still maintains an iconographic devotion to the external image of evangelical identity. While many of the suggestions of these scholars are commendable, none effectively deal confront the problem of evangelicalism as image-based. Thus, even the best of their efforts for the movement's reformation are prone to revert to its original slavish state. According to Milton's theory, then, the best solution to the problem of evangelicalism is to depart with the movement altogether.

Beyond this pessimistic rejection of all things iconographic, Milton's works also furnish the contemporary Christian with a constructive alternative of ecumenical dialogue. For Milton,

one of the weaknesses of an icon is that it stunts true discourse by elevating the image over reality. In the process, discussion about the icon fails to move beyond a simulation to address the truth behind it. Milton accuses Parliament of this error in *Areopagitica* when he explains that their obsession over outward conformity of the Church had promoted an “implicit faith” that upholds tradition rather than “one general and brotherly search after truth” (739). Instead of recognizing the many religious factions throughout England and seeking to understand Scripture’s statement on the divisive issues, Parliament prevented theological discussion by ignoring the diversity of views and insisting that the superficial unity of the English Church was a reality. Milton believed that the solution to this error was abandoning the icon of overarching agreement in the Church so that the various factions in England could honestly seek for a stable identity through Scripture and in relation to one another.

This solution can equally apply to contemporary Christianity. Like the English Church in Milton’s day, evangelicalism prevents effective dialogue amongst the branches of American Christianity because it gives the illusion of unity. Churches focus more on how they can conform to the outward aspects of evangelical culture than on how they can better develop the distinctives of their tradition in relation to those who disagree. In this scheme, conformity and tradition supplants honest search for truth. By dissolving the evangelical label, however, churches can better assess one another and more effectively define their own identity by seeking ecumenical relationships on the basis of truth rather than external formality. Calvinists and Arminians, Credo-baptists and Paedo-baptists, and post-millennialists and pre-millennialists can seek fellowship with one another instead using the label “evangelical” to slavishly ignore their significant disagreements. Milton’s solution, then, achieves dialogue through disagreement instead of pretending it doesn’t exist.