

THE FOUNDATION OF BIBLICAL AUTHORITY

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ENCOUNTERING PRESENT-DAY VIEWS OF SCRIPTURE

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ENCOUNTERING PRESENT-DAY VIEWS OF SCRIPTURE

THREE GENERAL observations will make clear the standpoint from which I write.

THEOLOGY AND RELIGION

First, *when you encounter a present-day view of Holy Scripture, you encounter more than a view of Scripture.* What you meet is a total view of God and the world, that is, a total theology, which is both an ontology, declaring what there is, and an epistemology, stating how we know what there is. This is necessarily so, for a theology is a seamless robe, a circle within which everything links up with everything else through its common grounding in God. Every view of Scripture, in particular, proves on analysis to be bound up with an overall view of God and man. Nowadays, awareness of this fact seems to be fairly general, due to the intense and self-conscious preoccupation with questions of method that has marked theology, along with most other fields of study, during the past half-century. We all now know (don't we?) that your method and presuppositions—in other words, the things you take for granted—will always have a decisive influence on your conclusions. So there should certainly be no difficulty in getting agreement on the point that you do not encounter any view of Holy Scripture, or of any other doctrinal matter, at proper depth till you see it as part of a larger intellectual whole and understand

how it relates to and "works" within the unity of that larger unit.

Indeed, to take the full measure of a view of Scripture, you must go wider than that and explore its implications for religion. For each set of theological convictions (of which the view taken of Scripture will form an integral part) belongs to a total view of religion, that is, of right behavior and relationships toward God, as well as of right beliefs and reasonings in one's own mind. No theology can be properly evaluated except in the light of the religion to which it prescribes, explains, and justifies.

Calvin saw this; hence he composed his theological textbook under the title *Institutio Religionis Christianae* (Instruction in Christian Religion), writing into it a treatment of the basic realities of Christian living and making it breathe a spirit of devotion and doxology throughout. Puritans and seventeenth-century continental Reformed theologians saw the point too and hence defined theology in ways that highlighted its practical and religious thrust; thus, Perkins called it "the science of living blessedly for ever,"¹ and Turretin described it as "*theoretico-practica* . . . more practical than speculative."² More recently, the Anglican Austin Farrer showed himself aware of the same point when he said somewhere that something must be wrong with Tillich's theology, because it could not be prayed. (Nor can it; Tillich himself later in life made the sad admission that he had given up prayer for meditation.) The evaluative relevance of the practical implications of a position is surely too plain for anyone to deny.

But for all that, the link between theology and religion is something that Protestant theologians today, as for the past hundred years, repeatedly ignore. They talk and write as if they see theology as just an intellectual exercise of forming and analyzing notions; they treat the practical bearing of these notions as someone else's concern rather than theirs; they isolate topics artificially for speculative treatment, thus losing sight of the very nature of theology; and they fail to draw out the wide-range implications of each notion for Christian obedience. The trouble no doubt is that these theologians have been too busy keeping up with the philosophical Joneses in the secularized university circles where so much of their work is done and discussed and have been too little concerned to sustain their churchly identity and role. On this, Eric Mascall speaks the word in season:

What I hold as essential for the theologian is that his theologizing should be an aspect of his life as a member of the Body of Christ; he

needs to be under not only an academic but also a spiritual asceticism, as indeed all the Church's greatest theologians have been . . . the theologian needs insight and he needs conversion, neither of which are simply the routine application of rules.³

Agreed! But meanwhile we have to cope with the effects of a century of failure at this point, and the effects are that, on the one hand, theology has been made to look like an intellectual game divorced from life and, on the other hand, theological notions are not usually evaluated by the test that is most decisive, namely, whether they further or impede the practice of biblical religion. Thus, for example, Clark Pinnock, in his helpful chapter in *Biblical Authority*, "Three Views of the Bible in Contemporary Theology," observes the convention and lacks the element of practical and religious evaluation that his avowed concern for spiritual renewal might have been thought to require.⁴ In this essay I try to write pastorally and practically, as a would-be church theologian, rather than in the manner of a secularized academic.

EVANGELICALISM AND SCRIPTURE

Second, *when you encounter the evangelical view of Holy Scripture, you are encountering the source, criterion, and control of all evangelical theology and religion.* Chillingworth's open-textured dictum that the Bible alone is the religion of Protestants can mean several things, not all of them acceptable, but it fits evangelicalism most precisely. Methodologically, evangelical theology stands apart from other positions by its insistence on the clarity and sufficiency of the canonical Scriptures, and evangelical religion is distinctive by reason of the theology and the method of application that determines it. Let me spell this out.

Roman Catholicism, Anglo-Catholicism, and Orthodoxy characteristically say that though the God-given Scriptures are a sufficient guide for faith and practice in themselves, they are at key points unclear and can rightly be understood only by the light of the church's God-taught tradition. By contrast, Protestantism's many blends of rationalism, mysticism, and existentialism (unstable compounds, all of them) characteristically say that while it is fairly clear what beliefs and behavior patterns the Bible writers want their readers to adopt, the books vary so much from each other, and Scripture as a whole stands at such a distance from the modern world, that the Bible cannot be a sufficient guide for today till what it says is sieved, edited, and

recast in the light of all that our age takes for granted. Let it be said that both positions invoke the Holy Spirit, the former as author of both Scripture and tradition, the latter as illuminating mind and conscience to enable each individual to formulate his personal understanding of Christianity. Let it also be said that both types of position are held with learning and integrity and admit of a great deal of internal debate and adjustment (a factor that tends to prolong the life of scholarly options), and there is no sign of their imminent decease. Not, of course, that their vitality implies that either is wholly right.

Against both, evangelicalism characteristically says that Scripture is both clear and sufficient; that the God-given Scriptures are the self-interpreting, self-contained rule of Christian faith and life in every age; that, though the canonical books were composed over a period of more than a thousand years, during which significant cultural shifts become apparent in the records themselves, they do in fact present within the framework of progressive declaration and fulfillment of God's saving purpose in Christ a consistent view of how God deals with men; that, since God does not change nor, deep down, does man, this view remains true, timely, and final; and that the central covenanted ministry of the Holy Spirit is to lead us to the Scriptures that he inspired, to open the Scriptures to us, and so to induce both conceptual and relational knowledge of the Father and the Son to whom the Scriptures introduce us. It is further characteristic of evangelicalism to insist that both the church and the individual Christian must live by the Bible (that is, by appropriate contemporary application of biblical principles); that the proper task of the teaching and preaching office that God has set in the church is to explain and apply the Scriptures; and that all beliefs, disbeliefs, hopes, fears, prayers, praises, and actions of churches and Christians must be controlled, checked, and where necessary reshaped—*reformed*, to use the good old word—in the light of what God is heard saying as the Spirit brings biblical principles to bear.

Evangelicals see this methodology as entailed in acknowledging the divine authority of the teaching of Christ's apostles, whose message we have firsthand in the New Testament letters, and of their Lord, to whose mind, as all sober criticism allows, the Gospels give ample access. For the teaching of Christ and the apostles includes, on the one hand, a use of Old Testament Scripture, taken in conjunction with their own message, which

assumes that God's definitive instruction comes in both, and, on the other hand, a diagnosis of the fallen and unaided human mind as dark, perverse, insensitive, incapable, and untrustworthy in spiritual matters, needing to be enlightened and taught by God at every point. Though all men have an inescapable awareness of God that comes by way of his creation (Rom. 1:19-21, 28, 32), there can be no natural theology of traditional Thomist type: only through Scripture are these inklings of our Maker brought into true focus, by being integrated with the revelation of the living God that Scripture contains.⁵ Scripture here means the Old Testament that Christ and his apostles attest, plus the New Testament, which their own inspiration produced, and for true knowledge of the true God we are shut up to Scripture absolutely. So, at any rate, evangelicals see the matter.

Scripture shows us Jesus Christ, and it is happily true that Christians of many schools of thought—Roman Catholic, Orthodox, neoorthodox and “liberal evangelical” Protestants, and charismatics of all sorts—speak from time to time of the ministry of the Christ who is Savior, Lord, and God and of communion with him through the Spirit, just as evangelicals do. Sometimes it is urged that those who speak so should be seen as all evangelicals together, sharing a common faith in Christ and proclaiming a common message about him. For the measure of truth in this estimate we should thank God. Yet the deeper and, for our present purposes, the more relevant truth is that the rigorous biblical methodology described above sets the evangelical position apart as something distinctive and unique. My own standpoint in this present essay is that of a would-be consistent evangelical at this deeper level.

THE INERRANCY DEBATE

Third, *when you encounter the current evangelical debate on Holy Scripture, you are encountering an awkwardly confused situation.* What is it all about? Professedly, it is about inerrancy. Men like Harold Lindsell and Francis Schaeffer urge the importance of a clear confession that the Bible is totally trustworthy, not erring in any of its declarations. I believe they are right and have done well to raise their voices. But why is this confession important?

Here the awkwardness of cross purposes and divided values begins to appear. Some predict that once inerrancy as an avowed principle is given up, it is only a matter of time before all the

outlines of Christian supernaturalism will be eroded away, as happened in the liberal Presbyterianism of the past half-century, and that institutions and churches that do not insist explicitly on the factual truth of Scripture at all points will soon be unable to maintain a full testimony to the gospel of Christ. Behind this "domino" thinking lies a sense that once any biblical declaration is disbelieved, the evangelical methodology is abandoned, the floodgates of skepticism are opened, and biblical authority as a principle runs aground on the sandbank of subjectivism, where it can be expected to break up completely. Others, however, object that what the domino thinkers mean by inerrancy is a body of (1) interpretations of texts, (2) harmonizations of phenomena, (3) argumentations against older types of skepticism and (4) formulations of the doctrine of Scripture against which the Bible itself sets a question mark; and that the real issue is whether, as a matter of evangelical method, we are free to submit to biblical, historical, and theological analysis the "inerrancy tradition" of the past one hundred years to see if it is really scriptural enough. Whether there is substantial disagreement about the nature and place of Scripture as such—that is, about God and the Bible—as well as about interpretative techniques and preferred ways of speaking in apologetics and dogmatics—that is, about man and the Bible—is so far unclear. Nor is it yet apparent whether the weight of the debate is on how to approach and handle Scripture or on how to define inerrancy and how far it is politic to use this term in Christian communication—whether, that is, the argument is essentially about things or about words.

The dim light of the discussion, allied to the heat that it generates, makes clarity hard to achieve, and debate is never easy when the state of the question is unclear. Also, because of the way in which academic faculties have lined up, it is hard to take any position in the debate without seeming to call into question someone else's competence or good name as an evangelical, and this is most unfortunate. In the present essay, I try to spell out my own position without attempting to adjudicate on that of others.

ENCOUNTERING LIBERAL VIEWS

What Pinnock calls "the curious coalition known as conservative evangelicalism" (why curious? one wishes that he had told us) is, in fact, a transdenominational Protestant family, united by a common faith in Jesus Christ as our sin-bearing Savior and

divine Lord and a common purpose of allowing God in Christ to rule our minds and lives through the Bible. With this purpose goes a common understanding of the Bible's basic contents, which the striking unanimity of evangelical systematic theology over four centuries reflects.⁶ Also, underlying this body of shared convictions is, as we saw, a common recognition that God himself has taught us the principle of biblical authority through the words of our Lord and of the New Testament writers. Squabbles within the family as to how in detail the principle should be applied presuppose agreement on the need to apply it: the arguments have to do only with establishing a proper technique for the task. Thus we find that the world-wide evangelical constituency today displays an impressive solidarity of conviction and purpose, and with that an impressive and increasing international cohesiveness, of which such a document as the tight-packed Lausanne Covenant, 3,000 words long, produced in a congress lasting just over a week and assented to by some 4,000 Christians representing 151 countries, is striking proof.⁷

The case with liberal Protestantism, however, is quite different.

What is liberal Protestantism? It really is "a curious coalition," for the resemblances that make up the liberal family likeness are more negative than positive. The positive principle that gives liberalism its basic identity is Schleiermacher's view of religion as a sense of God that is caught rather than taught and can be put into words in more than one way. Then a further major element in that identity has been the polemic, more or less explicit, that liberalism has maintained against evangelical belief in revealed truth. Polemics, however, like adversity, can make strange bed-fellows; shared peeves do not guarantee common purposes, and liberals are often at each others' throats, much oftener, it would seem, than evangelicals. The word *liberal* is usually explained by those who espouse it as voicing their claim to a spirit of liberality, that is, of tolerance, flexibility, openness to new ideas, and freedom from doctrinaire dogmatism; though whether self-styled liberalism always shows this spirit is a question that, if explored, might leave some faces red. But what convictions do liberals as a body share? Three motifs constantly appear, all with a decidedly negative slant.

First, liberal Protestantism affirms, in Pinnock's words, that "divine truth is not located in an ancient book but in the ongoing work of the Spirit in the community, as discerned by critical

rational judgment.”⁸ Note, however, that “divine truth” means to liberals, not God’s instruction nor a permanently valid human formulation, but simply an authentic awareness of God, to which no particular form of words is necessary either as a means or as an expression. As J. Gresham Machen pointed out half a century ago in *Christianity and Liberalism*, the liberal position in all its forms is deeply anti-intellectual in both its stance and its thrust, and this explains why it is so consistently hostile to the attempts of both Roman Catholics and evangelicals to formulate a definitive theology on the basis of a supposedly definitive Bible.

Second, liberal Protestantism espouses a type of Christology that is not “from above” in the sense of seeing Jesus Christ as the divine Son, the second person of the Godhead, and the eternal Word made flesh, according to John’s Gospel, Philippians 2, Colossians 1, and Hebrews 1–2, which the Nicene and Chalcedonian formulae follow. Instead, liberal Protestant Christologies are “from below,” seeing Jesus in “humanitarian” terms as a prophetic, God-filled man, an archetype of religious insight and excellence, one who, however much he carries for us what Ritschl called the “value” of God, is not God in person. Such Christologies involve, of course, abandoning all thought of a real ontological Trinity and a real divine sin-bearer. They require a reconstructed view of salvation in which Christ’s mediation appears as a matter of teaching and trail-blazing only, with no hint of his having borne the Creator’s wrath against our sins in order to render him propitious to us—for it would take a divine person to do that. Liberals characteristically cut the knot here by denying that there is any personal wrath of God against us that needs to be quenched and maintain a barrage of criticism against “word-made-flesh” Christology as being necessarily docetic, minimizing the true humanness of our Lord.

It seems right to class all existentialist Protestant positions that build on a “humanitarian” Christology, even those that, like Bultmann’s, came out of neoorthodoxy, and that affirm a real “Christ of faith” transcending the “historical Jesus,” as jazzed-up liberal Protestantism rather than anything else.

Third, liberalism highlights human religious greatness, as seen in the Bible, in Jesus, and in all Christian, pagan, and secular pioneers who have in any way contributed to man’s “humanization” by stressing life’s spiritual and moral values. Rightly does Pinnock say that liberals have sought to replace the idea of the

Bible's infallibility as teaching from God with what they saw as "proper respect for its human greatness" as "a classical witness of those in whose lives God once worked which can once again serve to alert us to his reality";⁹ but there is need to go further and underline the deep difference between the mystical and moral naturalism of the liberal idea of religious greatness, of God in men's lives, and of the redemptive supernaturalism of those who censure these ideas biblically, in terms of fellowship with God through a divine Savior. A very great gulf is fixed between those who see Jesus' greatness and significance for us in his human God-consciousness (so Schleiermacher), or in his ethics (so Ritschl, Harnack, and Albert Schweitzer), or in his self-understanding as a man in God's hands and his example of loyal and hopeful commitment (so Ernst Fuchs, James Robinson, and the authors of the British symposium *The Myth of God Incarnate*)¹⁰ and those who, with the writer to the Hebrews, see his greatness in terms of his being our divine-human high priest who put away sins and now saves to the uttermost (cf. Heb. 10:21; 7:4; 9:25-26). The width of that gulf must be stressed; it can hardly be exaggerated.

The point needing emphasis is that liberal Protestant views of Scripture, as indeed of all else relating to our redemption, differ from the generic conservative evangelical view, not just in detail, but in their whole frame of reference. It is naive and misleading to present the theological relationship between the two types of view (as distinct from the partnership they rightly maintain in the pretheological exercise of historical exegesis) in terms of partial agreement and partial disagreement. The deeper insight was and remains that of Machen, who half a century ago saw here two rival religions that at fundamental level relate to each other only by mutual contradiction and in polemical grapple. Even the word *God* has radically different meanings in the two systems. Granted, some moderns call themselves liberals without espousing fully characteristic liberal views; granted, liberals use a biblical and evangelical vocabulary (though in a changed and diminished sense); granted, some of today's liberals were yesterday's conservative evangelicals, who see their current views as a natural outgrowth of what they held before. Yet the basic antithesis between the two types of position remains. The Bible that is thought of as man's testament of religious feeling, self-understanding, and ethical inklings is not really the same book as

the Bible that is received as God's testimony to himself, even if the sixty-six books with their almost two million words coincide in both cases. The two types of theological interpretation of Scripture do not mesh at all. It would have been helpful if Pinnock had underlined this more clearly.

ENCOUNTERING NEOORTHODOX VIEWS

The word *neoorthodox* has always been somewhat loosely used. For half a century it has stood as a label for that body of theological work that, following the lead of Karl Barth, has sought a way back from liberalism to the revelation-shaped, salvation-centered orthodoxy of the Reformation without returning to belief in the inerrant inspiration of the Bible on which that orthodoxy rested. The fact that, though far from unanimous on matters of substance, neoorthodox theologians shared this common purpose justifies Pinnock's reference to neoorthodoxy as "a trend in contemporary theology."¹¹ "Contemporary," however, coming from an author writing in 1977 is not quite right. It is true that for something like a generation after 1930 the neoorthodox program was a matter of prominent, perhaps dominant concern among Protestant theologians; but by about 1965 interest had clearly moved to the problems of ontology, epistemology, and hermeneutics pinpointed by Bultmann's call to demythologize in order to communicate, and there it remains. Also, while it is true that positions characteristic of neoorthodoxy are still held, the neoorthodox pilgrim trail is empty today, simply because the old liberalism that was its starting point is now a thing of the past. It is from other places in the wilderness that theologians traveling toward the gospel start today.

In the following paragraphs, Karl Barth is the main object of attention. That is because he was not only the first but also in many ways the greatest of neoorthodox teachers; also because, being a "dazzlingly brilliant"¹² writer who gave the world, along with some five hundred other items, the *Church Dogmatics*, an unfinished *summa theologiae* of over seven thousand pages, he is likely to have more long-term influence than other theologians of this type; also because neoorthodoxy appears at its strongest intellectually and its noblest spiritually in the writings of Barth, and his weaknesses, however great, are comparatively less than the corresponding defects of others on the same trail. It should, however, be realized that Barth stands at the extreme right of the

neoorthodox spectrum; that others who shared his overall purpose (Emil Brunner and Reinhold Niebuhr, for instance) did not backtrack so far from the man-centered liberalism in which they were reared as Barth did; that some who were with him at the start in hoisting the banner of God's transcendence with the ropes of Kierkegaard's existentialism, and were thought of as neoorthodox in consequence, never got through to anything like Reformation faith in Christ (Rudolf Bultmann and Friedrich Gogarten, for instance), so that their views, if thought of as in any sense standard, make Barth's look utterly perverse (and vice versa, of course); and finally that in Barth's account of Jesus Christ the Word, the God-man, Creator and Redeemer, presupposition and determinant of all that is not God and representative of all mankind both as reprobate and as elect, there really are major eccentricities of his own, by which his otherwise impressive teaching is deeply flawed.¹³

It is to Barth's credit that he laid constant stress on God's sovereign freedom and lordship in grace, on man's incapacity in his sin to feel after God and find him, on the reality of God's communion with us through the Word that he speaks to us in Christ, and on the instrumentality of the Scriptures in conveying to us the knowledge of Christ and of grace that they exhibit. It is to Barth's credit too that the "Procrustean bed" of his theological method, whereby he collapses all doctrines concerning God and his creation into Christology, whatever its shortcomings in other ways, presupposes and builds on a substantially Nicene Trinitarianism, a Chalcedonian Christology, an acknowledgment of Jesus' death and resurrection as the work of God saving mankind, and a robust confidence that the biblical witness to Jesus Christ, which is God's own witness given through man's, can be truly and precisely expressed in the propositions and theses of rational, disciplined theological discourse. The irrationalism, skepticism, arbitrariness, and ultimate incoherence involved in Emil Brunner's so-called dialectical method, which keeps our minds perpetually in unstable equilibrium as they fly between poles of assertion and denial of the same truth, and of belief and disbelief of biblical teachings,¹⁴ were abandoned by Barth at an early stage and became more and more conspicuous by their absence from successive volumes of the *Church Dogmatics*.

Since Barth never repudiated liberal skepticism about the space-time factuality of some biblically recorded events, choosing

rather to ignore and bypass it, and since he never developed a rational apologetic making ontological and epistemological links between what Scripture tells us and the rest of our knowledge, but derided such ventures as vicious, his teaching is beclouded with mists of ambiguity. Though it seems clear that he meant to define and describe a Christ whose virgin birth, crucifixion, and resurrection were, and whose future return will be, facts of public space-time history, it is an open question whether his exclusively kerygmatic method, allied to his use of phenomenological categories for expressing the contents of revelation, enables him to anchor his Christ in the world of objective reality as well as in that of the theologian's fertile mind.¹⁵ But even if we think that the answer to this question is no, there is much to admire in and learn from Barth's treatment of particular themes.

What does Barth say about the Bible?¹⁶ His basic idea is that the Bible is the means whereby the event of revelation takes place, for in and through its human witness to God, God constantly discloses himself to us. The confession of biblical inspiration (*theopneustia*) concerns in the first instance not its divine origin in the past but its divine instrumentality in the present. This view may reflect a doubtful exegesis of *theopneustos* in 2 Timothy 3:16 and involve something of a false antithesis, but its positive thrust is welcome, and merits our approval. And though, as Pinnock notes, Barth makes quite a meal of rejecting any formal ascription of inerrancy to the Bible and of affirming its "capacity for errors," he declines to identify particular mistakes in it, although he declares in general terms that there are some, both factual and religious.¹⁷ On the contrary, "while preaching the errancy of the Bible, Barth practices its inerrancy":¹⁸ his interpretations, while sometimes novel and unconvincing, are always presented as elucidations of the witness the text actually bears, without any suggestion that anything it says should be discounted as false. Evangelicals will applaud Barth's exegesis as correct in method, if not always in substance; but we must realize that by stating that the prophets and apostles erred in their writings, even if we cannot say where, Barth himself has made his exegetical method seem hazardous, arbitrary, and untrustworthy. There is ruinous irrationality here. As Colin Brown says (twice!), "It is impossible to maintain high doctrines of revelation and inspiration without at the same time being willing to defend in detail the veracity and historicity of the biblical writings."¹⁹ But here Barth fails us, and

the effect of his failure is to make it seem unreasonable for anyone, himself included, to trust the texts as he does. Sadly, it must be recorded that other neoorthodox thinkers see this very clearly, and therefore do not so trust them.

The truth is that the neoorthodox enterprise of trying to re-establish the authority of biblical teaching on salvation while rejecting biblical teaching on Scripture is inherently inconsistent and self-contradictory; thus, all versions of neoorthodoxy, like all versions of liberalism before them, exhibit a built-in arbitrariness that it is not possible to eliminate. There is no road to rational faith this way. Barth's exegesis shows him ready in practice to treat the testimony of all texts as divine truth, but his general statement that the human authors made errors in Scripture, even in its religious and theological content, can be squared with his practice only if we suppose that in his view *either* some biblical statements are true in their character as God's Word but erroneous in their character as man's word (which is surely incoherent nonsense, though some who have looked to Barth for inspiration have talked this way), *or*—and this is the way Barth himself seems to lean—the divine message of the passage does not always coincide with the human writer's meaning, since God is free in the event of revelation to use the human words any way he pleases. But that opens the door to allegorizing and turns God's gift of insight into Scripture into the bestowal of uncheckable private revelations. There seems no way out of this dilemma.

Something similar must be said from a methodological standpoint about "biblical theology" as practiced by such teachers as Sir Edwyn Hoskyns, Oscar Cullmann, Gabriel Hebert, Michael Ramsey, and John Bright during the past half-century. Like neoorthodoxy, with which indeed it has conscious links, this movement has sought to reapprehend the faith of the biblical writers, reading the Bible "from within," and, like neoorthodoxy, it has highlighted the character of Scripture as witness to God in history and its instrumentality in communicating God and his Word to human hearts today. The method of identifying with biblical faith is impeccable, but it is inconsistently applied, for biblical faith includes the conviction that Scripture as such, being God's Word (both what he *said* and what he *says*), is wholly true and trustworthy, and "biblical theology" has regularly allowed itself to "criticize the Bible by the Bible," as the procedure has been described; that is, to set up a privately selected "canon

within the canon” as a standard for determining what biblical teaching is valid and what is not. It has to be said, however, that nothing in biblical faith itself justifies one’s doing this; on the contrary, one who does it parts company, methodologically at least, with biblical faith, and throws doubt on the seriousness of his announced intention always to “be biblical.”

Nor is it only exponents of neoorthodoxy and “biblical theology” who lapse in this way. Pinnock detects the same faulty method in Dewey Beegle, who identified himself as an evangelical critic of inerrancy, and in Paul King Jewett, who sets out to correct Paul’s supposedly sub-Christian utterances on the relation of the sexes in Christ by his Christian ones. As Pinnock says, the natural implication of this method is that “in Scripture God does not always speak, requiring the reader to determine where he speaks and where he does not. In principle this seems to be liberal . . . theological methodology.”²⁰ As an Englishman who can look back over some seventy years of self-styled “liberal evangelical” British theology, based on just this approach, I can only sigh agreement. The method is arbitrary and false, involving both denial and disruption of the unity of biblical teaching that those who seek find. The method of integrating Scripture with Scripture in interpretation—the method Calvin called the “analogy of Scripture,” and the confession of biblical inerrancy safeguards—is the only method with biblical warrant, and the only one that can keep us from the impoverishment to which an unsanctified selectiveness will otherwise lead.

ENCOUNTERING ROMAN CATHOLIC VIEWS

One might have expected that on the topic of biblical inerrancy, if on no other, evangelicals would be able to look to Roman Catholics as their natural allies, for during the past century official Roman Catholic assertions of inerrancy have been frequent and explicit. In 1957, in his book *The Authority of Scripture*, J.K.S. Reid began his chapter on “The Roman view” with this statement: “The Roman Church steadfastly adheres to the doctrine of the infallibility and inerrancy of Holy Scripture,” followed by a weighty if tortuous quotation from Leo XIII’s encyclical *Providentissimus Deus* (1893), as follows:

All the books which the Church receives as sacred and canonical, are written wholly and entirely, with all their parts, at the dictation of the Holy Ghost; and so far is it from being possible that any error

can co-exist with inspiration, that inspiration not only is essentially incompatible with error, but excludes and rejects it as absolutely and necessarily as it is impossible that God himself, the Supreme Truth, can utter that which is not true.²¹

Rome has always officially held that Scripture has the nature of, among other things, revealed truth and that inspiration entails inerrancy; the historical cleavage between Rome and the Protestant churches over the Bible concerns its interpretation and authority, not its inspiration.

The strength of Rome's past commitment to inerrancy can be gauged from the fact that when the Modernist Abbé Loisy, in the manner of Protestants like Harnack then and Bultmann since, rejected biblical inerrancy in the course of his fundamental questioning of Jesus' divinity and bodily resurrection and the authenticity of Paul's Christianity, the encyclical of 1907, *Pascendi Gregis*, that preceded his excommunication quoted against him the words of Augustine: "In an authority so high [i.e., Scripture], admit but one officious lie, and there will not remain a single passage of those apparently difficult to practice or to believe, which on the same most pernicious rule may not be explained as a lie uttered by the author willfully to serve a purpose. . . ." ²² The domino thinking of Lindsell and Schaeffer about inerrancy has thus some striking precedents! Rather than risk further challenges to inerrancy, Roman Catholic authorities largely clamped down on critical biblical scholarship from the time of the Loisy affair to Pius XII's 1943 encyclical, *Divino Afflante Spiritu*, and it is only since then that it has really flowered.

But Roman Catholic biblical criticism has tended to develop as a getting in on the skeptical act that has now been a liberal Protestant speciality for a century and a quarter, and Reid anticipated in 1957 that the Roman Catholic Church would have to "choose between a recession of sympathy toward criticism and a diminution of the principle of biblical inerrancy."²³ At the second Vatican Council (1962-65) the choice was clearly if unobtrusively made. The Council affirmed: "Since everything asserted by the inspired authors or sacred writers must be held to be asserted by the Holy Spirit, it follows that the books of Scripture must be acknowledged as teaching firmly, faithfully and without error that truth which God wanted put in the sacred writings for the sake of our salvation."²⁴ This looks at first sight like a reassertion of the older position without change, but it seems to have

been drafted with a view to its functioning as a hole in the dike of biblical inerrancy, and that is certainly how Roman Catholic theologians since Vatican II have used it. Bishop B.C. Butler, for instance, in his authoritative book *The Theology of Vatican II*, argues that this statement guarantees as inerrant only truths necessary to salvation, though Scripture contains a great deal more material than this, and his position is typical.²⁵ Hans Küng has gone so far as to deny that God's saving "truth" has the nature of divine assertions, that is, revealed truths.²⁶ Though individual conservatives still maintain the older view, it does not look as if the Church of Rome will ever officially go back to it. The dike has been breached.

The significance of this change should not, however, be exaggerated. After all, the Roman Catholic faithful are required to take their beliefs from the infallible church, as embodying the true interpretation of Scripture, rather than directly from a Bible that they have ventured to interpret for themselves. There is a sense in which Rome, relying on the infallibility of the church, does not need biblical inerrancy to undergird anything. But for evangelical Protestants the issue is more serious—and this brings us to our last section.

THE CRUCIALITY OF INERRANCY

In the light of what we have seen so far, three matters seem to call for comment as I close.

First, *what does the confession of biblical inerrancy mean?*

Pinnock is one for whom *inerrancy* is "a strong, excellent term when properly understood."²⁷ For him it "declares the conviction that the Bible is our divine teacher by means of which God himself meets, instructs, saves and corrects us."²⁸ But because, as commonly used, the word 1) centers attention on the lost autographs of Scripture rather than its present life-giving power in whatever form it meets us; 2) emphasizes "questions of factual detail—historical, grammatical, cosmological and the like"—rather than the focal point of Scripture, which is Christ and the truth concerning him; and 3) is not usually qualified clearly enough from a hermeneutical standpoint to make plain that it refers only to what each writer meant his readers to gather and learn from what he wrote,²⁹ Pinnock will not insist on anyone using it, provided one does not "settle for an alternative which is really weak and permissive, allowing one to side-step the teachings of Scripture."

Pinnock raises a series of questions: Is this notion of inerrancy scriptural? logically entailed by inspiration? capable of clear definition? necessary as a basis for learning from the Bible? a central concept involved in grasping what is central in Scripture? an assertion honestly justifiable in the light of the phenomena of Scripture? a proper criterion of authentic evangelicalism? Believing, it seems, that one who understood the word in what has become the usual way (see above) could responsibly decline to say yes to any of these questions and yet retain a credible evangelical identity, Pinnock invites us to conclude that the inerrancy debate is sterile and profitless and that what we should all be doing is working harder together on the factual and theological interpretation of the biblical text and on the task of theological construction in the light of the Scriptures.³⁰

If Pinnock's account of what "inerrancy" has come to mean is taken as the whole truth, his argument might seem to be the last word on its subject; and certainly, I have no quarrel with its positive thrust. But I think there is more to be said. Pinnock has not fully focused the logical function that the word *inerrant*, when applied to the Scriptures, fulfills for evangelicals in defining, circumscribing, and safeguarding correct theological method. Starting where Pinnock starts, namely with a recognition that words mean what they are used to mean, neither more nor less, I venture to affirm that when evangelicals call the Bible "inerrant," part at least of their meaning is this: that in exegesis and exposition of Scripture and in building up our biblical theology from the fruits of our Bible study, we may not 1) deny, disregard, or arbitrarily relativize, anything that the biblical writers teach, nor 2) discount any of the practical implications for worship and service that their teaching carries, nor 3) cut the knot of any problem of Bible harmony, factual or theological, by allowing ourselves to assume that the inspired authors were not necessarily consistent either with themselves or with each other. It is because the word *inerrant* makes these methodological points about handling the Bible, ruling out in advance the use of mental procedures that can only lead to reduced and distorted versions of Christianity, that it is so valuable and, I think, so much valued by those who embrace it.

The second matter requiring comment is: *What does the confession of biblical inerrancy accomplish?*

What has just been said shows the answer. Where this confes-

sion is not made, Scripture will not all be taken with all seriousness, elements of its teaching will inevitably be ignored, and the result, as Lindsell and Schaeffer with others correctly foresee, is bound to be a certain diminution of supernatural Christian faith—as we have seen in the various versions of liberalism, neoorthodoxy, and “biblical theology” and as we must now expect to see in new forms in tomorrow’s Roman Catholicism. But the confession of inerrancy, though it cannot guarantee sound exegesis or agreement among scholars on just what this or that text means, does make a full and faithful articulation of biblical Christianity possible in principle, whereas apart from this confession it is not possible even in principle.

A warning should perhaps be voiced here against the psychological trap (for it is psychological, a matter of falsely associated feelings, rather than logical, a formal mistake in inference) of supposing that the confession of inerrancy involves a commitment to treat all narrative and predictive passages in Scripture as if they were written according to the conventions that would apply to ordinary English prose used today for these purposes, rather than the conventions of their own age and literary genre. Put thus, the mistake sounds too silly for anyone to make, but in fact it is made frequently: hence Pinnock’s complaint that not enough care is taken to attach the necessary hermeneutical qualifications to inerrancy as an idea. And one can see how the mistake happens: people feel, sincerely if confusedly, that the only natural, straightforward way to express their certainty that the contents of Scripture are contemporary in their application is to treat Scripture as contemporary in its literary form. So, for example, Genesis 1 is read as if it were answering the same questions as today’s scientific textbooks aim to answer, and Genesis 2 and 3 are read as if they were at every point prosaic eyewitness narratives of what we would have seen if we had been there, ignoring the reasons for thinking that in these chapters “real events may be recorded in a highly symbolic manner,”³¹ and books like Daniel, Zechariah, and Revelation are expounded in total disregard of the imaginative conventions of apocalyptic. But it does not follow that because Scripture records matters of fact, therefore it does so in what we should call matter-of-fact language.

We have to realize that the confession of inerrancy, like that of the inspiration that entails it, implies nothing at all about the literary character of particular passages. The style and sense of

each passage must be determined inductively in each case, by getting to know its language, history, and cultural background and by attending to its own internal characteristics. Some Bible narratives are written in plain, unvarnished, eyewitness prose, and some are not. Which are which? We will find out only as we go and look.

But my point is that though the confession of inerrancy does not help us to make the literary judgments that interpretation involves, it commits us in advance to harmonize and integrate all that we find Scripture teaching, without remainder, and so makes possible a theological grasp of Christianity that is altogether believing and altogether obedient. Without this commitment, no such grasp of Christianity is possible. So, despite its negative form, this disputed word fulfills in evangelical theology a most positive, enriching, and indeed vital function, comparable with that fulfilled by the Chalcedonian negatives concerning the union of our Lord's two natures in his one person ("without confusion, without change, without division, without separation"). In both cases the negative words operate as a methodological barrier-fence that keeps us from straying out of bounds at the behest of unruly rationalistic instincts and digging for the gold of understanding where no gold is to be found.

The third matter requiring comment is: *Why is the confession of inerrancy important?*

Again, the answer is clear from what has already been said. It is important that we should embrace a fully believing method of biblical interpretation and theological construction and it is equally important that the fellowship of evangelical theologians—of all theologians, as far as possible—should be based on a common commitment to such a method. The point is surely plain enough by now, and need not be argued further. And let it be added that this point is a substantial rather than a verbal one. Words are not magic; each man has a right to use them in the way that best expresses what he has in mind. So if with, for instance, G.C. Berkouwer³² and, as it seems, teachers at Fuller Seminary³³ we think the word *inerrant* tainted through its past associations with literary insensitiveness and an improper rationalism in interpreting Scripture, and so prefer not to use it but to say "infallible" instead, that is our privilege. But what, in that case, our colleagues in evangelical theology have a right to expect from us is a clear demonstration in both word and action that we are nonethe-

less committed to what, in the light of the foregoing paragraphs, may be called the "inerrancy method." Given this, we shall be able to walk together, whatever words we elect to use—not, however, otherwise.

Notes

¹Ian Breward, ed., *William Perkins* (Abingdon: Sutton Courtenay, 1970), p. 177.

²Francis Turretin, *Institutio Theologiae Elencticae* (Utrecht and Amsterdam, 1701), Locus I, Question VII, 6, 15. See also Gisbert Voetius: "'Practical theology' may mean, in the broad sense, all theology that follows Scripture or is based upon it . . . because all theology among pilgrims on earth is in its nature practical, and no portion of it can be correctly and completely discussed unless it is developed practically; that is, applied to the practice of repentance, faith, hope, and love, or to consolation or exhortation" (*Reformed Dogmatics*, ed. John W. Beardslee III [New York: Oxford University Press, 1965], p. 265).

³E.L. Mascall, *Theology and the Gospel of Christ: An Essay in Reorientation* (London: SPCK, 1977), p. 60. Mascall alludes to a remark that he quoted from Bernard Lonergan: "The real menace to unity of faith does not lie either in the many brands of common sense or the many differentiations of human consciousness. It lies in the absence of intellectual or moral or religious conversion" (pp. 54-55).

⁴Clark Pinnock, "Three Views of the Bible in Contemporary Theology," in *Biblical Authority*, ed. Jack Rogers (Waco: 1977), pp. 49-73.

⁵This was the point of Calvin's famous image of the spectacles: "Just as, when you put before old or bleary-eyed and weak-sighted men even the most beautiful book, though they may recognize that there is something written they can hardly make out two words, yet with the aid of spectacles they will begin to read distinctly; so Scripture, gathering up the otherwise confused knowledge of God in our minds, having dispelled our dullness, clearly shows us the true God" (*Institutio Christianae Religionis*, I. vi. 1)).

⁶See J.I. Packer, *God's Inerrant Word*, ed. John Warwick Montgomery (Minneapolis: Bethany Fellowship, 1974), pp. 55ff.

⁷For the text of the Lausanne Covenant, together with the Congress papers and addresses that lay behind it, see *Let the World Hear His Voice*, ed. J.D. Douglas (Minneapolis: World Wide Publications, 1975).

⁸Pinnock, "Three Views of the Bible," p. 53.

⁹*Ibid.*, p. 51.

¹⁰John Hick, ed., *The Myth of God Incarnate* (London: SCM, 1977; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1978). The contributors are John Hick, Michael Goulder, and Frances Young (Birmingham University); Maurice Wiles, Dennis Nineham, and Leslie Houlden (Oxford University); and Don Cupitt (Cambridge University). The thesis the essays seek to establish is that "Jesus was (as he is presented in Acts 2:21) 'a man approved by God' for a special role within the divine purpose, and that the later conception of him as God incarnate, the second person of the Trinity living a human life, is a mythological or poetic way of expressing his significance for us" (p. ix).

¹¹Pinnock, "Three Views of the Bible," p. 54.

¹²Colin Brown, *Karl Barth and the Christian Message* (London and Chicago: Inter-Varsity, 1967), p. 140. Pinnock, "Three Views of the Bible," p. 56, speaks of Barth's "massive brilliance."

¹³For a bird's-eye view of this, see Brown, *Karl Barth*, chapter 4, "Barth's Christ-centered Approach to God, Creation and Reconciliation," pp. 99-139.

¹⁴The best study of the knots into which Brunner's dialectic ties him is that by Paul King

Jewett, *Emil Brunner's Concept of Revelation* (London: James Clarke, 1954).

¹⁵Reasons for doubting Barth's success at this point are given by C. Van Til in *Christianity and Barthianism* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1962).

¹⁶See Brown, *Karl Barth*, pp. 35-67, 143-47; Gordon H. Clark, *Karl Barth's Theological Method* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1963), pp. 185-225; Klaas Runia, *Karl Barth's Doctrine of Holy Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1962); and, from a distinctively Barthian standpoint, J.K.S. Reid, *The Authority of Scripture* (London: Methuen; New York: Harper, 1957), pp. 194-221. Barth's own discussions are in *Church Dogmatics*, I. 1, ch. 1, pp. 51-335 and I. 2, chs. 3 and 4, pp. 457-884 (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1936, 1956).

¹⁷"The prophets and apostles as such, even in their office, . . . were . . . actually guilty of error in their spoken and written word" (*Church Dogmatics*, I. 2, pp. 528-29). Scripture's "capacity for error . . . extends to its religious or theological content." Yet "we must be careful not to be betrayed into . . . playing off the one biblical man against the other, into pronouncing that this one or that has 'erred.' From what standpoint can we make any such pronouncement?" (p. 509).

¹⁸Pinnock, "Three Views of the Bible," p. 57.

¹⁹Brown, *Karl Barth*, pp. 62, 146.

²⁰Pinnock, "Three Views of the Bible," pp. 69-70, referring to Dewey M. Beegle, *Scripture, Tradition, and Infallibility* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1973) and Paul King Jewett, *Man as Male and Female* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975).

²¹Reid, *Authority of Scripture*, p. 103; *Providentissimus Deus*, xxiii, echoing the statements of the Council of Trent (Session IV) in 1546 that Holy Scripture was "dictated either orally by Christ or by the Holy Ghost," and of the First Vatican Council in 1870 that the Scriptures "contain revelation, with no admixture of error," and that "having been written by the inspiration of the Holy Ghost, they have God for their author" (*Constitution on Revelation*, ch. II). For ways in which Roman Catholic theologians have worked out these formulae, see J.T. Burtchaell, *Catholic Theories of Biblical Inspiration since 1810* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1969).

²²Cited from David F. Wells, *Revolution in Rome* (Chicago: Inter-Varsity; London: Tyndale, 1973), p. 29.

²³Reid, *Authority of Scripture*, p. 155.

²⁴*Constitution on Revelation*, 11.

²⁵Butler, *The Theology of Vatican II* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1967), p. 56. See also John Warwick Montgomery, "The Approach of New Shape Roman Catholicism to Scriptural Inerrancy: A Case Study for Evangelicals," in *Ecumenicity, Evangelicals and Rome* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1969), pp. 73-93.

²⁶See *Infallible? An Inquiry* (Garden City, N. Y.: Doubleday, 1971).

²⁷Pinnock, "Three Views of the Bible," p. 68.

²⁸Clark Pinnock, "The Inerrancy Debate among the Evangelicals," in *Theology, News and Notes* (Fuller Theological Seminary: special issue, 1976), p. 11.

²⁹*Ibid.*, p. 12. He goes on to say that when inerrancy is qualified as it should be by reference to the author's purpose in writing, one can "fairly say that the Bible contains errors but teaches none, [and] that inerrancy refers to the subjects rather than all the terms of Scripture [and] to the teaching rather than to all the components utilized in its formulation."

³⁰Pinnock, "Three Views of the Bible," pp. 62-70.

³¹James I. Packer, "Fundamentalism" and the Word of God (London: Inter-Varsity Press; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1958), p. 99. It must be a private mental extrapolation from this phrase that led Pinnock to suppose that I should not agree with Francis Schaeffer's insistence, in *No Final Conflict* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1975), pp. 33-34, that the special creation of Adam, and of Eve from Adam, is part of what Genesis 2 teaches (see Pinnock, "Inerrancy Debate," p. 13, note 8). But a glance at the paragraph from which this phrase comes will show that Pinnock's inference was unwarranted and that his supposition is in fact quite false. His whole footnote is most unfortunate.

³²See G.C. Berkouwer, *Holy Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975), p. 265.

³³The Fuller Seminary Statement of Faith declares: "All the books of the Old and New

Testaments, given by divine inspiration, are the written word of God, the only infallible rule of faith and practice. They are to be interpreted according to their context and purpose and in reverent obedience to the Lord who speaks through them in living power" (III). David Hubbard, president of the Seminary, formulates the questions currently in debate as follows: "1) Is inerrancy the best word to use to describe the Bible's infallibility and truthfulness? 2) If inerrancy is to be used, how do we define it in a way that accords with the teaching and the data of Scripture?" ("The Current Tensions: Is There a Way Out?" *Biblical Authority*, p. 178).