THE FOUNDATION OF BIBLICAL AUTHORITY

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THE PREACHER AND GOD'S WORD

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THE PREACHER AND GOD'S WORD

ANYONE WHO thinks seriously about the state of preaching in the twentieth century must notice a strange contradiction. On the one hand, there is a strong acknowledgment of the need for great preaching, usually defined as expository preaching. But on the other hand, good expository preaching has seldom been at a lower ebb. Evangelical (and even liberal) seminaries exhort their young men, "Be faithful in preaching. . . . Spend many hours in your study poring over the Bible. . . . Be sure that you give the people God's Word and not merely your own opinions."[1] But in practice these admonitions are not heeded, and the ministers who emerge from the seminaries—whether because of poor instruction, lack of focus, or some other, undiagnosed cause—generally fail in this primary area of their responsibility.

Pulpit committees know this. So do the people who sit in the pews Sunday after Sunday. Many know what they want. They want a minister who will make his primary aim to teach the Bible faithfully week after week and also embody what he teaches in his personal life. But ministers like this from the standard denominations and even some others are hard to find and apparently are getting harder to find all the time. What is wrong? How are we able to explain this strange contradiction between what we say we want and what is actually produced by most of our seminaries?

Decline of Preaching

This problem is so obvious that a number of answers have inevitably been given, most of which contain some truth. One answer is that attention has been shifted from preaching to other needed aspects of the pastoral ministry: counseling, liturgics, small group dynamics, and other concerns. Hundreds of books about these diverse aspects of the ministry are appearing every year, many of them best sellers, but there are not many valuable books on preaching. There are some, but they are not very popular. And one cannot really imagine a work like Clarence Macartney's *Preaching Without Notes* attracting anywhere near the degree of attention in the seventies as it attracted just thirty years ago. Clearly the attention of a great majority of ministers is being directed away from expository preaching to other concerns.

On the surface, then, this seems to be a valid explanation of the decline of good preaching, and one might even tend to justify the decline temporarily if, so we might argue, these other equally important concerns are being rediscovered. But the trouble with this view is that these concerns need not be set in opposition to good preaching and, indeed, must not. In fact, the greatest periods of faithful expository preaching were inevitably accompanied by the highest levels of sensitivity to the presence of God in worship and the greatest measure of concern for the cure of souls.

The Puritans are a great example, though one could cite the Reformation period or the age of the evangelical awakening in England as well. The Puritans abounded in the production of expository material. We think of the monumental productions of men like Richard Sibbes (1577-1635), Richard Baxter (1615-1691), John Owen (1616-1683), Thomas Watson (d. 1686), John Flavel (1627-1691), Jonathan Edwards (1702-1758), and that later Puritan Charles Haddon Spurgeon (1834-1892). These men produced material so serious in its nature and so weighty in its content that few contemporary pastors are even up to reading it. Yet common people followed these addresses in former times and were moved by them. Worship services were characterized by a powerful sense of God's presence, and those who did such preaching and led such services were no less concerned with the individual problems, temptations, and growth of those under their care. Who in recent years has produced a work on pastoral counseling to equal Baxter's *The Reformed Pastor* (1656)? Who has

analyzed the movement of God in individual lives as well as did Jonathan Edwards in *A Narrative of Surprising Conversions* (1737) and *Religious Affections* (1746) or Archibald Alexander in his *Thoughts on Religious Experience* (1844)? Questions like these should shake us out of self-satisfied complacency and show that we are actually conducting our pastoral care, worship, and preaching at a seriously lower level.

Another explanation given for the current decline in preaching is the contemporary distrust of oratory. Again, there is some truth to this. The decline in popularity of orators such as William Jennings Bryan has been accompanied by a decline in the popularity of oratorical preaching by men like Henry Ward Beecher and his more recent successors. But the trouble with this explanation is that great preaching is not inseparably wedded to any one style of preaching. Indeed, the Puritans themselves were not commonly great orators. And, for that matter, good speakers are not really unpopular today, though today's popular style is somewhat different from that of a previous age. John Kennedy was quite eloquent, for example, and he was highly regarded for it.

The trouble with these explanations of the decline of preaching is that each is based on an external cause. They deal with the mind-set of the secular world. What is really needed is an explanation that deals with the state of the contemporary church and with the mind-set of her ministers.

What is the answer in this area? The answer is that the current decline in preaching is due, not to external causes, but to a prior decline in a belief in the Bible as the authoritative and inerrant Word of God on the part of the church's theologians, seminary professors, and those ministers who are trained by them. Quite simply, it is a loss of confidence in the existence of a sure Word from God. Here the matter of inerrancy and authority go together. For it is not that those who abandon inerrancy as a premise on which to approach the Scriptures necessarily abandon a belief in their authority. On the contrary, they often speak of the authority of the Bible most loudly precisely when they are abandoning the inerrancy position. It is rather that, lacking the conviction that the Bible is without error in the whole and in its parts, these scholars and preachers inevitably approach the Bible differently from inerrantists, whatever may be said verbally. In their work the Bible is searched (to the degree that it is searched) for whatever

light it may shed on the world and life *as the minister sees them* and not as that binding and overpowering revelation that tells us what to think about the world and life and even formulates the questions we should be asking about them.

Nothing is sadder than the loss of this true authority, particularly when the preacher does not even know it. The problem is seen in a report of a panel discussion involving a rabbi, a priest, and a Protestant minister. The rabbi stood up and said, "I speak according to the law of Moses." The priest said, "I speak according to the tradition of the Church." But the minister said, "It seems to me. . . ."[2]

It is hard to miss the connection between belief in the inerrancy of Scripture issuing in a commitment to expound it faithfully, on the one hand, and a loss of this belief coupled to an inability to give forth a certain sound, on the other. Dr. D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones is one who makes the connection. He writes on the decline of great preaching:

> I would not hesitate to put in the first position [for the decline]: the loss of belief in the authority of the Scriptures, and a diminution in the belief of the Truth. I put this first because I am sure it is the main factor. If you have not got authority, you cannot speak well, you cannot preach. Great preaching always depends upon great themes. Great themes always produce great speaking in any realm, and this is particularly true, of course, in the realm of the Church. While men believed in the Scriptures as the authoritative Word of God and spoke on the basis of that authority you had great preaching. But once that went, and men began to speculate, and to theorize, and to put up hypotheses and so on, the eloquence and the greatness of the spoken word inevitably declined and began to wane. You cannot really deal with speculations and conjectures in the same way as preaching had formerly dealt with the great themes of the Scriptures. But as belief in the great doctrines of the Bible began to go out, and sermons were replaced by ethical addresses and homilies, and moral uplift and socio-political talk, it is not surprising that preaching declined. I suggest that this is the first and the greatest cause of this decline.[3]

Lloyd-Jones is right in the main in this analysis. So our first thesis is that *the contemporary decline in great (expository) preaching is due in large measure to a loss of belief in biblical authority and that this loss is itself traceable to a departure from that high view of inspiration that includes inerrancy.*

WORD OR DEED?

But there is a problem at this point. The problem is that those who approach preaching in this way are accused of making the Bible their God and of centering the gospel in a book rather than in the divine acts of God in history, which is where it should be, according to their critics.

There are various forms of this latter perspective. On the one hand, there is a valuable emphasis on the specific "acts" of God. An example of this is the work of G. Ernest Wright entitled *The God Who Acts*. In this study Wright stresses the acts rather than the Word of God, saying, "The Word is certainly present in the Scripture, but it is rarely, if ever, dissociated from the Act; instead it is the accompaniment of the Act."[4] He points to the Exodus as the event on which the giving of the law is based (Exod. 20:1-3) and to the signs given to and by the prophets. According to Wright, it is the act that is primary. Another form of this critique is held by those who emphasize the revelation of God to the individual in such a way that personal experience rather than the Word of God becomes decisive. What should we say to these emphases? Are those who emphasize the Word in their preaching bibliolaters? Do they worship the Bible? Have they distorted the Bible's own teaching through their excessive veneration of it?

Not at all! It is true that the acts of God can be overlooked in a certain kind of preoccupation with linguistic and other textual problems. But this is more often the error of the Old or New Testament scholar than the preacher. Actually, a hearty emphasis on the Word of God is itself profoundly biblical, and it is even mandatory if one is to appreciate the acts of God prophesied, recorded, and interpreted in the Scriptures.

Which comes first, the word or the deed? The most common answer is the deed, which the word is then seen to interpret. But this is a distortion of the biblical picture. Certainly the acts of God are of major importance in the Bible and in Christian experience. But it is inaccurate to say that the deeds come first. Rather, the Word comes first, then the deeds, then a further interpretation of the deeds scripturally.

Let me give a number of key examples. First, the creation. It is possible to argue that God created the world initially and then interpreted the creation to us in the opening pages of the Bible and elsewhere. But this is not the way the Bible itself presents this matter. What Genesis says is that first there is God, after that the

Word of God, and then creation. God spoke, and after that the things about which God spoke came into being. The words "and God said" are the dominant feature of the opening chapter of Genesis (vv. 3, 6, 14, 20, 24, 26). Only after that does God "see" (vv. 4, 10, 12, 19, 21, 25), "separate" (vv. 4, 7), "call" (vv. 5, 8, 10), "make" (vv. 7, 16, 25), "set" (v. 17), "create" (vv. 21, 27), "bless" (vv. 22, 28), and explain to the first man and woman what he has done (vv. 28-30).

The second example is the call of Abraham, the next great step in the unfolding of God's purposes. There is nothing in Abraham's story to indicate that God acted in any particular way to call Abraham. We read rather, "Now the Lord *said* to Abram, 'Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. And I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing'" (Gen. 12:1, 2). It was after receiving this word of promise that "Abram went, as the LORD had told him" (v. 4). Faith in the divine promise characterized Abraham, and it is for his response to the Word of God, even in the absence of the deed, that Abraham is praised: "By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to go out to a place which he was to receive as an inheritance; and he went out, not knowing where he was to go" (Heb. 11:8), "And he [Abraham] believed the LORD; and he reckoned it to him as righteousness" (Gen. 15:6; cf. Rom. 4:3; Gal. 3:6).

A third example of the primacy of the word to deed is the Exodus itself, so often cited in precisely the opposite fashion. Here we do have a mighty intervention of God in history on the part of his people, and it is certainly true that the ethical standards of the Old Testament are imposed on the grounds of this deliverance ("I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt. . . . You shall have no other gods before me," Exod. 20: 2, 3). But this does not mean that the deed precedes the word. Rather the deliverance was fully prophesied beforehand to Abraham (Gen. 15:13, 14) and was announced to Moses as the basis on which he was to go to Pharaoh with the command to let God's people go (Exod. 3:7-10).

The same is true of the coming of Jesus Christ. This fourth example is the greatest illustration of the intervention of God in history. But the event was preceded by the word even here, through prophecies extending back as far as the germinal announcement of a future deliverer to Eve at the time of the Fall

(Gen. 3:15) and continuing up to and including the announcement of the impending birth to Zechariah the priest (Luke 1:17), Joseph (Matt. 1:20-23), Mary (Luke 1:30-33), and others who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem (Luke 2:25-27, 36-38).

Emphasis on the word of God and faith in that word in reference to the coming of Christ is particularly evident in David's great prayer in 2 Samuel 7. God has just established his covenant with David, promising that his throne should be established forever. David responded:

> Who am I, O Lord GOD, and what is my house, that thou hast brought me thus far? And yet this was a small thing in thy eyes, O Lord GOD: *thou hast spoken* also of thy servant's house for a great while to come, and hast shown me future generations, O Lord GOD! And what more can David say to thee? For thou knowest thy servant, O Lord GOD! Because of *thy promise,* and according to thy own heart, thou hast wrought all this greatness, to make thy servant know it. . . . And now, O LORD God, confirm for ever the word which thou hast *spoken* concerning thy servant and concerning his house, and do *as thou hast spoken;* and thy name will be magnified for ever, saying, 'The LORD of hosts is God over Israel,' and the house of thy servant David will be established before thee. For thou, O LORD of hosts, the God of Israel, hast made this revelation to thy servant, saying, 'I will build you a house'; therefore thy servant has found courage to pray this prayer to thee. And now, O Lord GOD, thou art God, and *thy words* are true, and thou hast *promised* this good thing to thy servant; now therefore may it please thee to bless the house of thy servant, that it may continue for ever before thee; for thou, O Lord GOD, hast *spoken,* and with thy blessing shall the house of thy servant be blessed for ever (vv. 18-21, 25-29).

In these words David exercises faith in the word of God primarily.

A final example of the primacy of the word is Pentecost, which inaugurated the present age of the church. Peter, who was the spokesman for the other disciples on that occasion, recognized immediately that this was nothing other than the fulfillment of God's promise to Joel regarding a future outpouring of the Holy Spirit. "Men of Judea and all who dwell in Jerusalem . . . these men are not drunk, as you suppose, since it is only the third hour of the day; but this is what was spoken by the prophet Joel: 'And in the last days it shall be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall

prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams'" (Acts 2:14-17).

As the Bible presents the matter, in each of these key moments in the divine economy, the word of God rather than the deed of God is primary, though of course in some cases the actual writing of the biblical material followed both. This is not meant to suggest that the actual intervention of God is unimportant, for, of course, that is not true. It is of major importance. But it is meant to say that we are not getting the emphasis reversed when we follow the biblical pattern and stress the actual word or promise of God in contemporary preaching. This does not undermine God's acts. The promise is about them. It merely places them in the context in which God himself places them in Scripture.

So the second thesis is that *an emphasis on the Word of God in today's preaching is demanded by the very nature of God's revelation of himself in history.* It is declared of God through the psalmist, "Thou hast exalted above everything thy name and thy word" (Ps. 138:2).

Biblical Preaching

Having recognized the primacy of the word in God's own dealings with the human race, it is not at all difficult to note the primacy of the word in that early Christian preaching recorded in the New Testament.

Peter's great sermon given on the day of Pentecost is an example. Peter and the other disciples had experienced a visible outpouring of the Holy Spirit, manifested by the sound of a rushing mighty wind and tongues of fire that had rested on each of the disciples (Acts 2:1-3). They had begun to speak so that others heard them in a variety of languages (v. 4). In addition to this, they had all just been through the traumatic and then exhilarating experiences of the crucifixion, resurrection, visible appearance, and ascension of the Lord Jesus Christ. These were heady experiences. Yet when Peter stood up to preach on Pentecost, he did not dwell on his or anyone else's experiences, as many in our day might have done, but rather preached a profoundly biblical sermon centered on specific biblical passages. The format was as follows: First, there are three verses of introduction intended to link the present manifestations of the outpouring of the Spirit to God's prophecy of that even in Joel. These were a lead-in to the major text. Second, Peter cites the prophecy in Joel at length, giving a total of five verses to it. Third, there is a declaration of the

guilt of the men of Jerusalem in Christ's death, which, however, was in full accordance with the plan and foreknowlege of God, as Peter indicates. This takes three verses. Fourth, there is an extended quotation from Psalm 16:8-11, occupying four verses. These stress the victory of Christ over death through his resurrection and exaltation to heaven. Fifth, there is an exposition of the sixteenth psalm, occupying five verses. Sixth, there is a further two-verse quotation from Psalm 11:1, again stressing the supremacy of Christ. Seventh, there is a one-verse summary.

Peter's procedure is to quote the Old Testament and then explain it and after that to quote more of the Old Testament and explain it, and so on. Moreover, the Scripture predominates. For although there are eleven verses of Scripture versus twelve for other matters, much of the material in the twelve verses is introductory to the Scripture and the rest is explanation.

Peter's procedure does not demand that every subsequent Christian sermon follow precisely the same pattern. We know that even the other New Testament preachers did not preach in the same way that Peter did; each rather followed a pattern determined by his own gifts and understanding. But the sermon does suggest the importance that Peter gave to the actual words of God recorded in the Old Testament and the concern he had to interpret the events of his time in light of them.

One chapter farther on we have another example of Peter's preaching. This time his outline was slightly different, for he began with a more extended statement of what God had done in Jesus Christ, in whose name the lame man had just been healed. But this quickly leads to the statement that all that had happened to Jesus had been foretold by God through the prophets (Acts 3:18) and then to two specific examples of such prophecy: Deuteronomy 18:18, 19 (cited in vv. 22, 23) and Genesis 22:18 (cited in v. 25). The burden of each of these sermons is not the current activity of God in Christ and/or the Holy Spirit alone, still less the subjective experience of such activity by Peter or the others. Rather it is the activity of God as proclaimed in the Scriptures: "God has promised to do these things, and he has done them. Now, therefore, repent and believe the gospel."

Peter was concerned to affirm that God had said certain things about the coming of Christ and the Holy Spirit, that he had said these in certain specific passages and words of the Old Testament, and that God was now fulfilling these promises precisely. In other

words, in his preaching and thinking Peter gave full authority to the very words of Scripture as the words of God.

Peter's own formal statement of his attitude to the Word is in 2 Peter 1:19-21. "And we have the prophetic word made more sure. You will do well to pay attention to this as to a lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts. First of all you must understand this, that no prophecy of scripture is a matter of one's own interpretation, because no prophecy ever came by the impulse of man, but men moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God."

In his discussion of this text and others like it, Dewey M. Beegle argues that since Peter was not in possession of the original autographs of Scripture and does not refer his statement to them explicitly, he is referring therefore only to errant copies and cannot be saying that they are inerrant in accordance with a specific theory of verbal inspiration. He concludes, "There is no explicit indication in this passage that Peter made any essential distinction between the originals and the copies. The important teaching is that the Scriptures had their origin in God; therefore the copies that Peter's readers had were also to be considered as being from God and thus worthy of their careful study."[5] But surely to argue that Peter did not believe in an inerrant Scripture in this way is merely to read a twentieth-century distinction into Peter's situation where it does not belong. Certainly Peter is *not* making a distinction between the originals and copies. That is just the point. He is not even thinking in these terms. If someone would point out an error in one of his copies, he would readily acknowledge it—obviously the error got in somewhere—but still say precisely the same thing: that is, that the Old Testament is God's Word in its entirety. It is "from God" (v. 21). Consequently, it is "more sure" even than the theophany that he and two other disciples had been privileged to witness on the Mount of Transfiguration (vv. 16-19).[6]

Peter is not the only one whose sermons are recorded in Acts, of course. Stephen is another. Stephen was arrested by the Sanhedrin on the charge of speaking "blasphemous words against [the law of] Moses and God," and he replied with a defense that occupies nearly the whole of Acts 7. This sermon contains a comprehensive review of the dealings of God with Israel, beginning with the call of Abraham and ending with the betrayal and crucifixion of Christ. It is filled with Old Testament quotations.

Its main point is that those who were defending the law were not obeying it. Rather, like those before them, they were resisting the Word of God and killing God's prophets (Acts 7:51-53).

Acts 13 marks the beginning of the missionary journeys of Paul and contains the first full sermon of Paul recorded. It is a combination of the kinds of sermons preached by Peter on Pentecost and Stephen on the occasion of his trial before the Sanhedrin. Paul begins as Stephen did, pointing out to the Jews of the synagogue of Antioch of Pisidia that God, who had dealt with the people of Israel for many years, had promised repeatedly to send a Savior, who has now come. He points out that this one is Jesus, whose story he briefly relates. Then he offers his texts, citing in rapid sequence Psalm 2:7 (Acts 13:33), Isaiah 55:3 (v. 34), and Psalm 16:10 (v. 35). These are explained, and then there is a concluding quotation from Habakkuk 1:5 (v. 41). Clearly the emphasis is on these verses.

On the next Sabbath in the same city many came together to hear this gospel, but the Jews were jealous and spoke against it. Paul responded by preaching a sermon on Isaiah 49:6, "I have sent you to be a light for the Gentiles, that you may bring salvation to the uttermost parts of the earth" (Acts 13:47).

So it is throughout the other sermons in Acts. The only apparent exception is Paul's well-known address to the Athenians, recorded in chapter 17. In this address the apostle begins, not with Scripture, but with quotations from the altars of the Athenians and from Greek poetry, and he never gets to Scripture. But one must remember that Paul's sermon was interrupted at the point at which he began to speak of the resurrection. Can we think that if he had been allowed to continue he would have failed to mention that this was in fulfillment of the Jewish Scriptures, as he did when he reached this same point in other sermons? Besides, even if he would not have quoted Scripture on this occasion, it would only mean that he departed from his normal prodecure. It would not mean that he regarded the very words of God, recorded in the Old Testament, less highly.

We conclude that each of the New Testament preachers is concerned to proclaim God's word as fulfilled in the events of his own lifetime. Moreover, his emphasis is on this word rather than on his own subjective experiences or any other less important matter. The thesis that emerges at this point, our third, is that *preaching that is patterned on the preaching of the apostles and other early*

witnesses will always be biblical in the sense that the very words of the Bible will be the preacher's text and his aim will be a faithful exposition and application of them. This cannot be done if the preacher is sitting in judgment on the Word rather than sitting under it.

"Higher" Criticism

But how can the preacher honestly treat the Bible in this way in view of the development of biblical studies in the last century? We might understand how such an "uncritical" attitude would be possible for the early Christian preachers. They probably did not even consider the problem in adhering to an inerrant and therefore totally authoritative Bible when they actually had only "errant" copies to work from, for they did not know the full extent of the difficulties. But we do know. We "know" there are errors. We "know" that the Bible is not one harmonious whole but rather a composite work consisting of many different and often conflicting viewpoints. Is it not true that we must simply give up the biblical approach because of the assured findings of archaeology, history, and, above all, higher criticism? Are we not actually compelled to treat the Bible differently?

Our "knowledge" that the Bible contains errors and is a composite and often contradictory work is said to be the reason for the overthrow of the old inerrancy position. But is it? When looked at from the outside, this seems to be the reason. But confidence is shaken when we realize that most of the alleged errors in the Bible are not recent discoveries, due to historical criticism and other scholarly enterprises, but are only difficulties known centuries ago to most serious Bible students. Origen, Augustine, Luther, Calvin, and many others were aware of these problems. Yet they did not feel compelled to jettison the orthodox conception of the Scriptures because of them. Either they were blatantly inconsistent, which is a difficult charge to make of men of their scholarly stature, or else they had grounds for believing the Bible to be inerrant—grounds that were greater than the difficulties occasioned by the few problem passages or apparent errors.

What grounds could there be? The basic foundation of their belief, borne in upon them by their own careful study of the Bible and (as they would say) the compelling witness of the Holy Spirit to them through that study, was the conviction that the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments are uniquely the Word of God and are therefore entirely reliable and truthful, as God is truthful.

Divine truthfulness was the rock beneath their approach to Scripture. Their study of the Bible led them to this conclusion, and thereafter they approached the difficulties of biblical interpretation from this premise.

This approach has characterized the majority of their heirs in the Reformation churches down to and including many at the present time, although not all inerrantists feel obligated to use this approach.[7] In fuller form, the argument has been presented as follows:

1. The Bible is a reliable and generally trustworthy document. This is established by treating it like any other historical record, such as the works of Josephus or the accounts of war by Julius Caesar.
2. On the basis of the history recorded by the Bible we have sufficient reason for believing that the central character of the Bible, Jesus Christ, did what he is claimed to have done and therefore is who he claimed to be. He claimed to be the unique Son of God.
3. As the unique Son of God, the Lord Jesus Christ is an infallible authority.
4. Jesus Christ not only assumed the Bible's authority; he taught it, going so far as to teach that it is entirely without error and is eternal, being the Word of God: "For truly, I say to you, till heaven and earth pass away, not an iota, not a dot, will pass from the law until all is accomplished" (Matt. 5:18).
5. If the Bible is the Word of God, as Jesus taught, it must for this reason alone be entirely trustworthy and inerrant, for God is a God of truth.
6. Therefore, on the basis of the teaching of Jesus Christ, the infallible Son of God, the church believes the Bible also to be infallible.[8]

The negative criticism of our day does not approach the Bible in this way. Rather, it approaches it on the premise of naturalism, a philosophy that denies the supernatural or else seeks to place it in an area of reality beyond investigation. It is this philosophy, rather than the alleged errors, that is the primary reason for rejection of the inerrancy position by such scholars.

Critical views of the Bible are constantly changing, of course, and at any one time they exist in a bewildering variety of forms. Currently we think of the Bultmannian school in Germany, the

post-Bultmannians, the *Heilsgeschichte* school of Oscar Cullmann and his followers, and others. These views are competing. Nevertheless, there are certain characteristics that tie the various forms of higher criticism together.

One characteristic is that the Bible is considered man's word about God and man rather than God's word about and to man. We recognize, of course, that the Bible does have a genuine human element. When Peter wrote that "men moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God," he taught that it is *men* who spoke just as surely as he taught that their words were from God. We must reject any attempt to make the Bible divine rather than human just as we reject any attempt to make it human rather than divine. But recognizing that the Bible is human is still a long way from saying that it is not uniquely God's word to us in our situation and *merely* human thoughts about God, which is what the negative higher criticism does. The view that the Bible is man's word about God is simply the old romantic liberalism introduced into theology by Friedrich D.E. Schleiermacher (1768-1834), namely that "the real subject matter of theology is not divinely revealed truths, but human religious experience," as Packer indicates.[9] Is this the case? The answer to this question will determine how and even if one can preach the Word of God effectively.

A second characteristic of much higher criticism is its belief that the Bible is the result of an evolutionary process. This has been most evident in Old Testament studies in the way the documentary theory of the Pentateuch has developed. But it is also apparent in Bultmann's form-criticism, which views the New Testament as the product of the evolving religious consciousness of the early Christian communities.

Again, we acknowledge that there is a certain sense in which God may be said to unfold his revelation to men gradually so that a doctrine may be said to develop throughout the Scriptures. But this is not the same thing as saying that the religious expressions of the Bible have themselves developed in the sense that the negative critical school intends. In their view, early and primitive understandings of God and reality give way to more developed conceptions, from which it also follows that the "primitive" ideas may be abandoned for more contemporary ones. Crude notions, such as the wrath of God, sacrifice, and a visible second coming of the Lord Jesus Christ, must be jettisoned. So may various aspects of church government and biblical ethics. If we decide that

homosexuality is not a sin today, so be it. We can even cite the continuing activity of the Holy Spirit in revealing new truth to us in support of our rejection of such "outmoded" ethics. If we find Paul's strictures regarding the role of men and women in the government of the church obsolete, we can just disregard them. Such thoughts are blasphemous! Yet this is what flows from the essential outlook of today's higher criticism.

The third characteristic of much higher criticism follows directly upon the first two; namely, that we must go beyond the Scriptures if we are to find God's will for our day.

But suppose the preacher is convinced by the Scripture and by the authority of Christ that the Bible is indeed God's word to man rather than merely man's word about God, that it is one consistent and harmonious divine revelation and not the result of an evolutionary process, that it is to the Scriptures and not to outside sources that we must go for revelation. We must still ask: Can he actually proceed like this today? Is this not to fly in the face of all evidence? Is it not dishonest? The answer is: Not at all. His procedure is simply based on what he knows the Bible to be.

We may take the matter of sacrifices as an example. Everyone recognized that sacrifices play a large role in the Old Testament and that they are not so important in the New Testament. Why is this? How are we to regard them? Here the negative critic brings in his idea of an evolving religious conscience. He supposes that sacrifices are important in the most primitive forms of religion. They are to be explained by the individual's fear of the gods or God. God is imagined to be a capricious, vengeful deity. Worshipers try to appease him by sacrifice. This seems to be the general idea of sacrifice in the other pagan religions of antiquity. It is assumed for the religion of the ancient Semite peoples too.

In time, however, this view of God is imagined to give way to a more elevated conception of him. When this happens, God is seen to be not so much a God of capricious wrath as a God of justice. So law begins to take a more prominent place, eventually replacing sacrifice as the center of religion. Finally, the worshipers rise to the conception of God as a God of love, and at this point sacrifice disappears entirely. The critic who thinks this way might fix the turning point at the coming of Jesus Christ as the result of his teachings. Therefore, today he would disregard both sacrifices and the wrath of God as outmoded concepts.

By contrast, the person who believes the Bible to be the unique

and authoritative Word of God works differently. He begins by noting that the Old Testament does indeed tell a great deal about the wrath of God. But he adds that this element is hardly eliminated as one goes on through the Bible, most certainly not from the New Testament. It is, for instance, an important theme of Paul. Or again, it emerges strongly in the Book of Revelation, where we read of God's just wrath eventually being poured out against the sins of a rebellious and ungodly race. Nor is this all. The idea of sacrifice is also present throughout the Scriptures. It is true that the detailed sacrifices of the Old Testament system are no longer performed in the New Testament churches. But this is not because a supposed primitive conception of God has given way to a more advanced one, but rather because the sacrifice of Jesus Christ of himself has completed and superseded them all, as the Book of Hebrews clearly maintains. For this person the solution is not to be found in an evolving conception of God, for God is always the same—a God of wrath toward sin, a God of love toward the sinner. Rather, it is to be found in God's progressing revelation of himself to men and women, a revelation in which the sacrifices (for which God gives explicit instructions) are intended to teach both the dreadfully serious nature of sin and the way in which God has always determined to save sinners. The sacrifices point to Christ. Therefore John the Baptist, using an integral part of ancient Jewish life that all would understand, is able to say, "Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world" (John 1:29). And Peter can write, "You know that you were ransomed from the futile ways inherited from your fathers, not with perishable things such as silver or gold, but with the precious blood of Christ, like that of a lamb without blemish or spot" (1 Peter 1:18, 19).

In this the data is the same. The only difference is that one scholar approaches Scripture looking for contradiction and development. The other has been convinced that God has written it and therefore looks for unity, allowing one passage to throw light on another. The Westminster Confession put this goal well in saying, "The infallible rule of interpretation of Scripture is the Scripture itself; and therefore, when there is a question about the true and full sense of any Scripture, it must be searched and known by other places that speak more clearly" (1, ix).[10]

The thesis that emerges from this discussion is that *higher criticism does not make the highest possible view of the Scripture untenable.*

On the contrary, higher criticism must be judged and corrected by the biblical revelation.

REGENERATION

Not only does God exalt his name and his very words in the Scriptures and likewise in the preaching of that Word, but he also exalts his Word in the saving of men and women. For it is by his Word and Spirit, and not by testimonies, eloquent arguments, or emotional appeals, that he regenerates the one who apart from that regeneration is spiritually dead. Peter states it thus: "You have been born anew, not of perishable seed but of imperishable, through the living and abiding word of God" (1 Peter 1:23).

There are many moving images for the Word of God in the Bible. We are told in the Psalms that the Bible is "a lamp" to our feet and "a light" to our path (Ps. 119:105). Jeremiah compares it to "a fire" and to "a hammer which breaks the rock in pieces" (Jer. 23:29). It is "milk" to the one who is yet an infant in Christ (1 Peter 2:2) as well as "solid food" to the one who is more mature (Heb. 5:11-14). The Bible is a "sword" (Heb. 4:12; Eph. 6:17), a "mirror" (1 Cor. 13:12; James 1:23), a "custodian" (Gal. 3:24), a "branch" grafted into our bodies (James 1:21). These are great images, but none is so bold as the one Peter used in this passage: the Word is like human sperm. Peter uses this image, for he wishes to show that it is by means of the Word that God engenders spiritual children.

In the first chapter Peter has been talking about the means by which a person enters the family of God. First, he has discussed the theme objectively, saying that it is on the basis of Christ's vicarious death that we are redeemed. "You know that you were ransomed from the futile ways inherited from your fathers, not with perishable things such as silver and gold, but with the precious blood of Christ, like that of a lamb without blemish or spot" (vv. 18, 19). Second, he has discussed the theme subjectively, pointing out that it is through faith that the objective work of Christ is applied to us personally. "Through him you have confidence in God, who raised him from the dead and gave him glory, so that your faith and hope are in God" (v. 21). Finally, having mentioned these truths, Peter goes on to discuss the new birth in terms of God's sovereign grace in election, this time showing that we are born again by means of the Word of God, which he then likens to the male element in procreation. The

Vulgate makes this clearer than most English versions, for the word used there is *semen*.

What does this teach about the way in which a man or woman becomes a child of God? It teaches that God is responsible for the new birth and that the means by which he accomplishes this is his living and abiding Word. We might even say that God does a work prior to this, for he first sends the ovum of saving faith into the heart. Even faith is not of ourselves, it is the "gift of God" (Eph. 2:8). Afterward, when the sperm of the Word is sent to penetrate the ovum of saving faith, there is a spiritual conception.

The same ideas are in view in James 1:18, which says, "Of his own will he brought us forth ['begot he us,' KJV] by the word of truth that we should be a kind of first fruits of his creatures."

The point of these verses is that it is by means of the very words of God recorded in the Scriptures and communicated to the individual heart by the Holy Spirit that God saves the individual. It is as Calvin says, in speaking of faith:

> Faith needs the Word as much as fruit needs the living root of a tree. For no others, as David witnesses, can hope in God but those who know his name (Ps. 9:10). . . . This knowledge does not arise out of anyone's imagination, but only so far as God himself is witness to his goodness. This the prophet confirms in another place: "Thy salvation [is] according to thy word" (Ps. 119:41). Likewise, "I have hoped in thy word; make me safe" (Ps. 119:4, 40, 94). Here we must first note the relation of faith to the Word, then its consequence, salvation.[11]

Is it really the Word that God uses in the salvation of the individual? If it is, if God chooses so to operate, then the preacher can hardly fail to give the words of God the fullest measure of prominence in his preaching. He will revere them as that supernatural gift without which nothing that he desires to see happen within the life of the individual will happen.

We conclude that *the texts of the Bible should be preached as the very (and therefore inerrant) Word of God if for no other reason than that they are the means God uses in the spiritual rebirth of those who thereby become his children.*

A Fork in the Road

It is often said by those who adhere to inerrancy that a departure from the orthodox view of the Scripture at this point inevitably leads to a decline in adherence to orthodox views in other

areas. This would no doubt be true if all deviators were consistent, but it is hard to demonstrate that this is *always* true, since one individual is not always as rigorous in carrying out the full implications of a position as another. It is enough to say that this has happened enough times with those who have entered the ministry to concern deeply anyone who sincerely desires the stability and growth of evangelicals and evangelical institutions.

On the other hand, and this is perhaps even more significant, many of those who have wrestled through the problem of the Bible's inerrancy or noninerrancy and have come out on the inerrancy side, testify to this as the turning point in their ministries, as that step without which they would not have been able to preach with the measure of power and success granted to them by the ministration of the Holy Spirit. I can testify that this has been true in my own experience. As pastor of a church that has seen many hundreds of young men go into the ministry through years of seminary training, I can testify that this has been the turning point for the majority of them as well. It is sometimes said by those who take another position that inerrantists have just not faced the facts about the biblical material. This is not true. These men have faced them. But they are convinced that in spite of those things that they themselves may not fully understand or that seem to be errors according to the present state of our understanding, the Bible is nevertheless the inerrant Word of God, simply because it is the Word of God, and that it is only when it is proclaimed as such that it brings the fullest measure of spiritual blessing.

May God raise up many in our time who believe this and are committed to the full authority of the Word of God, whatever the consequences. In desiring that "Thus saith the Lord" be the basis for the authority of our message, the seminaries, whether liberal or conservative, are right. But we will never be able to say this truthfully or effectively unless we speak on the basis of an inerrant Scripture. We are not in the same category as the prophets. God has not granted us a primary revelation. We speak only because others, moved uniquely by the Holy Spirit, have spoken. But because of this we do speak, and we speak with authority to the degree that we hold to what Charles Haddon Spurgeon called "the *ipsissima verba,* the very words of the Holy Ghost."[12]

We need a host of those who have heard that Word and who are not afraid to proclaim it to a needy but rebellious generation.

Notes

[1]The author's own theological training was received at Princeton Theological Seminary, a seminary hardly noted today for being strongly evangelical, though many of its students are. But in the homiletics department the greatest honor was given to expository preaching and the students were repeatedly urged to allow nothing to take the place of solid exegetical work in sermon preparation. The problem is that the admonitions are not followed by the vast majority of Princeton's graduates, and the reason for this is that the concerns of the homiletics department are being undercut by the views of the Bible conveyed in the biblical departments.

[2]Of course, Judaism and Roman Catholicism are also undergoing their own struggles with the question of authority. The anecdote must involve an orthodox rabbi, a tradition-oriented priest, and an average Protestant clergyman.

[3]D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Preaching and Preachers* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1971), p. 13. Lloyd-Jones also cites a reaction against "pulpiteering" (in which he is thinking along lines similar to my remarks about oratory) and "publication of sermons" as literary productions.

[4]G. Ernest Wright, *God Who Acts* (London: SCM, 1952), p. 12. In more recent writing Wright has broadened this view considerably, stressing that a biblical Act is not merely a historical happening but rather one in which the Word of God is also present to interpret and give it meaning (cf. *The Old Testament and Theology* [New York: Harper, 1969], p. 48).

[5]Dewey M. Beegle, *Scripture, Tradition, and Infallibility* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1973), p. 155.

[6]A clear example of the fallacy of this kind of argument is Beegle's similar treatment of the often quoted words of Augustine to Jerome, "I have learned to pay them [the canonical books] such honor and respect as to believe most firmly that not one of their authors has erred in writing anything at all" (Epistle 82, *The Fathers of the Church*, vol. 12, "St. Augustine: Letters 1-82," trans. Wilfrid Parsons [Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1951], p. 392). Beegle disregards this statement because we know: 1) that Augustine read the Bible in a Latin translation made from the Septuagint, 2) that this version was errant, and 3) that Augustine was therefore wrong in regarding it so highly (*Scripture, Tradition, and Infallibility*, p. 137). But Augustine was no fool at this point. He knew there were errors in the various translations and copies. In fact, his letter goes on to say, "If I do find anything in those books which seems contrary to truth, I decide that either the text is corrupt, or the translator did not follow what was really said, or that I failed to understand it." Still Augustine says that the Bible, as God's Word, can be fully trusted. He believed that, as originally given, it was an inerrant revelation, and the copies (except where it can be shown that errors in text or translation have crept in) can be regarded and quoted as those inerrant originals.

[7]Some simply accept the Bible for what it claims to be and then operate on that premise. Thoughtful exponents of this view feel that any other approach is unwarranted and even presumptuous if the Bible is truly God's Word ("If it is, how can we presume to pass judgment on it?").

[8]This classical approach to the defense of Scripture is discussed at length by R.C. Sproul in "The Case for Inerrancy: A Methodological Analysis," in *God's Inerrant Word*, ed. John Warwick Montgomery (Minneapolis: Bethany Fellowship, 1974), pp. 248-60. It is the element most lacking in Earl Palmer, "The Pastor as a Biblical Christian," in *Biblical Authority*, ed. Jack Rogers (Waco: Word, 1977). Palmer speaks of a fourfold mandate given by Jesus Christ to every Christian: to grow in our relationship with God, to love our neighbor, to share the gospel, and to build up the body of Christ (p. 127). But as true and important as these four items are, they do not express the whole of our obligation as Christians. We are to believe and follow Christ in *all* things, including his words about Scripture. And this means that Scripture is to be for us what it was to him: the unique, authoritative, and inerrant Word of God, and not merely a human testimony to Christ,

however carefully guided and preserved by God. If the Bible is less than this to us, we are not fully Christ's disciples.

[9]J.I. Packer, *"Fundamentalism" and the Word of God* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1960), p. 148.

[10]I discuss the higher criticism at greater length in *The Sovereign God* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1978), pp. 97-109. The preceding five paragraphs are borrowed from pp. 113-15.

[11]John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960), Vol. 1, pp. 576, 577.

[12]Charles Haddon Spurgeon, *Lectures to My Students* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1954), p. 73.