

A HISTORIAN LOOKS AT INERRANCY

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During the summer of 1964, CHRISTIANITY TODAY polled the membership of the Evangelical Theological Society. Its members were asked to designate the major areas of conflict in the theological arena. Two thirds of those who responded to the poll (2/3 of 112 respondees) said that biblical authority is the main theological theme now under review in conservative circles in America. The replies left this writer with the definite impression that the overall theological viewpoint of any man will ultimately be a reflection of his answer to the question, "What is the nature of inspiration and authority?"

Now I am not a theologian in the formal sense of that term. However, this does not disqualify me from speaking on the subject of biblical authority for I shall deal with it in a perspective consonant with my formal training. Just as a judge must be familiar with the law and make decisions about matters outside the realm of his intimate knowledge, so the historian can come to the conclusions about men and movements that operate within complex disciplines outside his own competence but which can be subjected to historical scrutiny competently. I speak, therefore, as a historian, and as a member of that craft I wish to take a hard look at the inerrancy of the Bible, a subject that is intrinsic to the question of biblical authority.

One of the historian's first conclusions is that in every period in the history of man some central issue has dominated that age. This is true both for profane and sacred history. We are concerned here with sacred history, and to that area I will limit myself.

Any serious study of the Old and New Testaments will show that the writers devoted little space to the careful formulation of a doctrine of revelation, inspiration, and inerrancy. Nowhere in Scripture is there any reasoned argument along this line such as will be found for justification by faith alone in Romans and for the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead in I Corinthians. This may appear strange at first until we recognize that this is true for many of the key doctrines of the Christian faith. There is no great apologetic for the existence of God or for the Trinity. Everywhere these truths are enunciated and taken for granted, however. Yet they are not the subject of formal treatment in the same sense that justification by faith and the resurrection from the dead are dealt with.

Search the Gospels and you will find little that deals directly with this question of the Scriptures. Jesus Christ constantly refers to the Old Testament Scriptures, but nowhere does he speak with the view to defend them. Rather he takes it for granted that the Scriptures are inspired, authorita-

tive, and inerrant, and on the basis of this assumption he interprets the Scriptures and instructs friend and foe alike. He assumes that they, like himself, are controlled by a view similar to his own. Thus when Jesus addresses himself to the Jews concerning his relationship to God, he defends himself and his claim to deity by using the expression "scripture cannot be broken." It was this claim that the Jews would not and could not deny. They believed it. What they did not believe was the claim of Jesus to be God. This they held to be blasphemy.

Read the Acts of the Apostles. What do you find there? Surely there is nothing that deals decisively with the phenomena of Scripture. Central to the Acts of the Apostles is their witness to the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, not to that of an inerrant record. Later when Paul deals with the truth or the falsity of the Gospel in I Corinthians 15, he never makes reference to the authority, inspiration, or inerrancy of Scripture. But he does state that the faith rises or falls on the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead.

One can read the balance of the New Testament, and search in vain he must, for anything that suggests that the writers sought to formulate a carefully defined doctrine of an inspired, authoritative, and inerrant revelation. There is adequate material dealing with this subject but not in the context of a disputed issue and not with the intention of forging an apologetic to answer the opponents of such a viewpoint. Indeed there was no need for the writers of the New Testament to spend much time dealing with this subject. They embraced the common view of the Old Testament held by the Jews of every age. There is a sense in which it may be said that the New Testament deals with the inerrancy of the Scriptures much the same way that it deals with the Virgin Birth. Both are stated and affirmed. But neither one is the object of real definitive treatment. Both are taken for granted.

In the early centuries of the church, the theologians and church councils faced grave problems. But none of them devoted much time to the question of an inspired and inerrant Bible. The question of Christology agitated every fisher-monger in the Eastern church. The philosophically minded Greek world wrestled with the question of the pre-incarnate Christ. The Arian controversy symbolized this struggle and from it came decisions which firmly imbedded into the theology of Christendom the teaching that Jesus Christ is co-eternal with the Father, of one substance in essence and yet distinct in person.

The Christological controversy did not stop with the pre-incarnate Christ. It continued as the church sought answers to the questions raised by the incarnation. If Christ is God, is he also true man? Or is his appearance as man simply an appearance and nothing more? Under the guise of docetism, the humanity of Christ was obscured and the church had to fight its way through that miasma of speculation until the formula was devised of one person in two natures, with a human nature and a divine

nature, separate and distinct without fusion or confusion. And then it was declared that Christ had both a human and a divine will as over against the teaching of the monothelites.

Still later the church was gripped by the anthropological controversy, better known under the label of Pelagianism and semi-Pelagianism. There, as in the other controversies, the problem was not one that involved the inspiration and inerrancy of the Bible. It was a matter of interpretation. Augustine, of course, was part and parcel of this period of strife, and lines he laid down influenced John Calvin as any reading of *The Institutes of the Christian Religion* will demonstrate.

The Reformation period did nothing to change the picture materially relative to inspiration and inerrancy. It is true that the Reformation involved the Scriptures, but never was it a question of either the authority or the inspiration of the Scriptures. Both Romanists and Reformers alike held firmly to an inerrant Word of God. The problem did center in the addition of tradition as a source of belief and authority which addition the Reformers repudiated vehemently. *Sola Scriptura* was the key phrase in the mouths of the Reformers. But it is also true that the question of *interpreting* the Scripture was central in the Reformation. Thus Luther's formula *sola fide*, or justification by faith alone, involved the problem of biblical interpretation, not biblical inspiration and inerrancy which both Romanists and Reformers accepted cordially. The authority of the Bible alone and without anything else was the formal principle of the Reformers; justification by faith alone which repudiated the view that the church's interpretation of Scripture must prevail was the material principle of the Reformation.

It may be said without fear of contradiction that the Roman Catholic Church in its official position has always clung to an inerrant Scripture. And this Church has constantly defended itself against any other teaching. Thus *The Catholic Encyclopedia* of 1910 (p. 48) says:

"For the last three centuries there have been authors—theologians, exegetes, and especially apologists, such as Holden, Rohling, Lenormant, di Bartolo, and others—who maintained, with more or less confidence, that inspiration was limited to moral and dogmatic teaching, excluding everything in the Bible relating to history and the natural sciences. They think that, in this way a whole mass of difficulties against the inerrancy of the Bible would be removed. But the Church has never ceased to protest against this attempt to restrict the inspiration of the sacred books. This is what took place when Mgr. d'Hulst, Rector of the Institut Catholique of Paris, gave a sympathetic account of this opinion in "Le Correspondant" of 25 Jan. 1893. The reply was quickly forthcoming in the Encyclical "Providentissimus Deus" of the same year. In that Encyclical Leo XIII said: 'It will never be lawful to restrict inspiration to certain parts of the Holy Scriptures, or to grant that the sacred writer could have made a mistake. Nor may the opinion of those be tolerated, who, in order to get out of these difficulties, do not hesitate to suppose that Divine inspiration extends only to what touches faith and morals,

on the false plea that the true meaning is sought for less in what God has said than in the motive for which He has said it.' In fact, a limited inspiration contradicts Christian tradition and theological teaching.

"As for the inerrancy of the inspired text it is to the Inspirer that it must finally be attributed, and it matters little if God has insured the truth of His scripture by the grace of inspiration itself, as the adherents of verbal inspiration teach, rather than by a providential assistance!"¹

Luther and Calvin both accepted and taught the doctrine of an inerrant Scripture. This has been documented and is beyond denial.² Curiously enough, some of the followers of Luther went beyond anything taught by him and formulated a view which few, if any, conservative theologians would accept today. I quote: "The Lutherans who devoted themselves to composing the Protestant theory of inspiration were Melancthon, Chemnitz, Quenstadt, Calov. Soon, to the inspiration of the words was added that of the vowel points of the present Hebrew text. This was not a mere opinion held by the two Buxtorfs, but a doctrine defined, and imposed under pain of fine, imprisonment and exile, by the Confession of the Swiss Churches, promulgated in 1675. These dispositions were abrogated in 1724" (*The Catholic Encyclopedia*, p. 48).

1. It should be noted here that the question of the means by which an inerrant Scripture came into being is not the subject of discussion. One can honestly disagree with the person who believes in the mechanical dictation theory as over against the view that God by his Spirit allowed the writers to speak consonant with their linguistic talents and peculiarities. Yet whatever the means were, the end product is the same—an inerrant Scripture.
2. In *Scripture Cannot Be Broken*, Theodore Engelder adduces overwhelming evidence to support this assertion about Luther. Luther endorsed Augustine by saying: "The Scriptures have never erred"; "The Scriptures cannot err"; "It is certain that Scripture cannot disagree with itself." Augustine's famous statement is: "To those books which are already styled canonical, I have learned to pay such reverence and honour as most firmly to believe that none of their authors has committed any error in writing. If in that literature I meet with anything which seems contrary to truth, I will have no doubt that it is only the manuscript which is faulty, or the translator who has not hit the sense, or my own failure to understand" (*A Catholic Dictionary*, Addis and Arnold, N.Y., 1884, p. 450). In the case of Calvin there are those who have argued on both sides of the issue. In favor of inerrancy are H. Banke, *Das Problem der Theologie Calvins*; R. E. Davies, *The Problem of Authority in the Continental Reformers*; E. A. Dowe, *The Knowledge of God in Calvin's Theology*; A. M. Hunter, *The Teaching of Calvin*; and J. Mackinnon, *Calvin and the Reformation*. Mackinnon senses as everyone must that Calvin the scholar over against Calvin the theologian had problems: ". . . when he (the scholar) sees an obvious error in the text before him, there is no indication that it makes any *theological* impression on him at all Again, why, if not because the error is a trivial copyist's blunder, not a misunderstanding of divine 'dictation' by an apostle or prophet?" In other words Calvin would have been in agreement with Augustine. In both cases it means that they were looking to the autographs, not to copies which were in some measure defective due to copyist's mistakes. Ernest R. Sandeen, of North Park College, in his paper *The Princeton Theology* (*Church History*, September, 1962) says that Hodge and Warfield "retreated" to "lost and completely useless original autographs" as though this was an innovation. He labels it "the Princeton argument." He failed to see that Hodge and Warfield followed both Augustine and Calvin. Thus the problem was not a new one, but it was "new" in the sense that for the first time in the history of the church it was *the* central issue being discussed and fought.

The eighteenth century witnessed no radical departure from the view of Scripture that had been normative through the centuries. Indeed in 1729 the Westminster Confession of Faith was adopted. When propounding a doctrine of Scripture, the Confession spoke of "the consent of all the parts . . . and the entire perfection thereof" (chapter I, Section V). The Westminster Confession was used as the basis for the Savoy Declaration of 1658 which became normative for the Congregational Churches. And the Baptists, in the United States, in 1742, adopted what is generally known as the Philadelphia Confession of Faith based upon the Westminster Confession for the most part and retaining its statement on the Scriptures. A century later in 1833 the New Hampshire Confession of Faith was adopted by Baptists in America and included a statement that the Word of God is "without any mixture of error" (Declaration I).

Of course there always were dissenting voices that did not believe the Word of God to be infallible and inerrant. But these voices were neither normative nor dominant. They did not exercise a determinative voice in the historic churches at this moment in history. Following the Reformation there was a mighty struggle waged between the Arminians and the Calvinists which extended from the sixteenth well into the nineteenth century. The battle was not waged, however, over the nature of inspiration but over questions relating to a proper understanding and interpretation of the Scriptures.

The eighteenth century marked a definite point of departure on the subject of inspiration. Sparked by the writing of John Locke in the seventeenth century, the next two centuries were characterized by the rise of Rationalism, Romanticism, Evolution, and higher criticism. Many great names are connected with this period of change: Hume, Paley, Paine, Hegel, Kant, Darwin, Nietzsche, Schopenhauer, Spencer, Comte, Marx, and the like. Included in this list should be scores of Germans popularly associated with higher criticism in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, not to mention the various schools of thought represented by university centers such as Berlin, Tübingen, and Heidelberg. Whereas earlier ages argued whether ultimate religious authority was to be found in the Bible alone, or the Bible through the teaching of the Church, or the Bible through the Pope, or by the addition of tradition, now there was a direct frontal assault on the Bible itself. Just about everything was questioned and discarded. The Bible under this attack ceased to be a book with the stamp of the divine upon it. It became to the critics a human document composed by men who were no more inspired than other literary figures and certainly not to be fully trusted for ultimate truth in theological or other areas of witness. The storm generated by the higher critics gathered in intensity and seemed to sweep everything before it. Citadels crumbled rapidly; seminaries capitulated; Liberalism or Modernism with all of its trappings became the order of the day in the twentieth century. In the battle, the fundamentals of the Christian faith which had stood for almost two millennia were discarded. Clifton Olmstead, in his *History of Religion in the United*

States, speaks of the resistance forged against this attack on the Bible:

"In the Protestant world the theses of liberal theologians went not unchallenged. Many a theological school, especially those in the Calvinist tradition, produced scholars who were sharply critical of the new currents in religion and clung rigidly to the doctrine of the plenary inspiration of the Bible. Among the leaders in this camp were the Presbyterians A. A. Hodge, Francis L. Patton, and Benjamin B. Warfield, and the Baptists John A. Broadus and Asahel Kendrick. At the Niagara Bible Conference, which opened in 1876 and continued to meet annually until the end of the century, conservatives regrouped their forces for a frontal attack on the new theology. Their leaders were A. J. Gordon, Arthur Pierson, C. I. Scofield, and James Gray. At the meeting in 1895 the conference formulated its famous "five points of fundamentalism" or necessary standards of belief. They were the inerrancy of Scripture, the Virgin Birth of Jesus Christ, the substitutionary theory of the atonement, the physical resurrection of Christ, and his imminent bodily return to earth. These doctrines were taught as essential at such conservative centers as Moody Bible Institute in Chicago and Los Angeles Bible Institute. In 1909 two wealthy Californians, Lyman and Milton Stewart, financed the publication of twelve small volumes entitled *The Fundamentals: A Testimony to the Truth*, nearly three million copies of which were circulated among ministers and laymen in the United States and abroad. The effect was to stir up a militant antagonism toward liberalism which would reach its height in the decade which followed the First World War. By that time the new theology would have grown old and about to be replaced by theologies which dealt more positively with contemporary issues."

It hardly seems necessary to detail the contributions rendered in the defense of orthodoxy by the Princetonians, Hodge, Warfield and Green. They, and others with them, constructed an apologetic which has been neither equalled nor surpassed in the last generation. They worked out conservative Christianity's finest defense. Their writings are still the chief source of fact and fuel for contemporary conservative Christianity. The debt which is owed them is almost beyond estimation. It was their work which preserved the Presbyterian Church from rapid and complete surrender to the claims of higher criticism. Other denominations were infiltrated and their walls breached, but the onslaughts were thrown back by the Presbyterians. Again Olmstead speaks a word from history about this:

"In several of the major denominations the fundamentalist-modernist controversy grew to gigantic proportions. None was more shaken by the conflict than the Presbyterian, U.S.A. During the painful theological controversies of the late nineteenth century, the church had held to its official position of Biblical inerrancy. In 1910 when a complaint was made to the General Assembly that the New York Presbytery had licensed three ministerial candidates whose theological views were somewhat suspect, the Assembly ruled the following articles of faith were necessary for ordination: the inerrancy of Scripture, the Virgin Birth of Christ, the miracles of Christ, the substitutionary atonement, the Resurrection of Christ. No mention was made of pre-millennialism, a necessary article for fundamentalists. Though the

Assembly of 1910 and the Assemblies of 1916 and 1923, which reiterated the five-point requirement, had no intention of reducing the church's theology to these five articles, the conservative element in the church tended to treat the articles in precisely that manner. The general effect was to increase tension and encourage heresy-hunting."

At last the Presbyterian Church was breached. J. Gresham Machen and others continued their apologetic for a trustworthy Scripture from without the Church. At no time during this struggle within the Presbyterian Church could the defenders of an inerrant Scripture be called Fundamentalists nor would they themselves have desired the appellation. It was reserved for another group of theologically conservative people more largely connected with the Bible Institute movement and with independent Bible churches throughout the land. It was the accretions to Fundamentalism that gave it a bad name among so many people in America. And here one must make a distinction between theological fundamentalism and sociological fundamentalism. At no time could the Machen movement be called sociologically fundamentalist, but it certainly could be called theologically fundamentalist in the best sense of that term.

The Second World War saw the rise of what might be called the New Evangelicalism that was keenly aware of the plight of a Fundamentalism that majored on codes of conduct and defected to Liberalism in the area of Christian social ethics. Earlier Carl F. H. Henry's contribution, *The Uneasy Conscience of Modern Fundamentalism*, brought some of this unto sharp focus. The New Evangelicals started with certain presuppositions in mind: (1) a desire to create a new and vigorous apologetic for the conservative position by raising up a new generation of well trained scholars with all of the badges of academic respectability who could speak to the current issues of the day, talk the language of the opposition, and present cogently and compellingly the viewpoint of historic Christianity in the present milieu; (2) a desire to move more vigorously into the area of social ethics and do something about the renovation of society from the vantage point of conservative theology; (3) a desire to meet and overcome the rise of Neo-orthodoxy which had replaced the decadent Liberalism of the 1920s; (4) a desire to engage in dialogue with those with whom it was in disagreement based upon the supposition that the best defense is a good offense and that to man the walls behind barricades had led to nothing constructive in former years; (5) and a desire to move away from the negativism in personal conduct of the older Fundamentalism.

This effort began to bear fruit. New and able exponents of the orthodox faith came on the scene. Their names are as familiar to you as they are to me. Books, monographs, and articles were written. Even a magazine like *Time* could conclude as did its Religion Editor that Conservative Christianity had depth, strength, scholarship, and something to offer. The evangelistic ministry of Billy Graham, the establishment of CHRISTIANITY TODAY, the opening of Fuller Theological Seminary, and other events evidenced the new trend. Moreover the voices of Evangelical spokesmen were listened to and heard in places where they long had been silent. And

nificant conservative movement of the twentieth century, labeled by many the New Evangelicalism, has already been breached by some, and is in the process of being breached by others. And the Evangelical Theological Society that has been such a vital part of the New Evangelicalism had better be aware of the turn of events. It has been infected itself and its own foundations need to be reexamined. For what this Society does and how it reacts to this challenge may well determine the direction that churches, denominations, and institutions take in the years immediately before us.

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