

THE FOUNDATION OF BIBLICAL AUTHORITY

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EVANGELICALS AND THE DOCTRINE OF INERRANCY

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EVANGELICALS AND THE DOCTRINE OF INERRANCY

EVANGELICALISM HAS gained in visibility and newsworthiness during recent years, and the reason is clear: Evangelicals have returned to the offensive.

Whereas nonevangelical seminaries are barely holding their own by admission of large numbers of women students, the inclusion of many M.A. and Ph.D. candidates who have little or no intention of seeking ordination to the ministry, and the introduction of the new Doctor of Ministry degree, evangelical schools are everywhere overflowing. Even after allowance is made for many of these same changes in their own programs, the evangelical schools are clearly attracting more students because of their evangelical position. Apart from works on psychology, the occult, sex, marriage, and the family, nonevangelical publishers are finding it difficult to market religious books by nonevangelical writers. But evangelical publishers are prospering today, so that many older publishing houses, which have long discouraged evangelical representation in their trade, are now openly courting evangelical writers and audiences.

The alternatives to evangelicalism, by contrast, have not fared well. The historicism¹ and rationalism of liberal theology have not proved religiously effective, and religious liberalism, at least in its traditional forms, seems everywhere in decline. Barthians, who brought so much promise to the theological scene in the late 1940s

and 1950s, never really caught on in the United States, and, with the misnamed and ill-fated death-of-God movement, simply faded out in the 1960s. In Europe Barthian theology dissolved before our eyes to be replaced by the cold winds of Bultmann and a new rationalism.

The theological world of the 1970s, therefore, by default if for no better reason, is interested in hearing what evangelicalism has to say—just at a time when evangelicals have recouped some of their early losses and are endeavoring once again to move into the open forum of religious debate. With this reentrance of evangelicalism on the theological battlefield has come a corresponding new influence from nonevangelicals and, indeed, some casualties among the evangelical forces.

Probably the most emotion-stirring issue on the current scene is that of the precise nature of biblical authority and particularly of biblical inerrancy, together with the question as to how we are to use the Bible in order to build a valid and normative theology. This is particularly the issue of the moment for evangelicals, though, of course, it has never been far from the center of their concern.

For the defenders of biblical inerrancy, it is significant that in this renewed battle over the Bible no new facts about the Bible have caused the issue to reappear in focus. The opponents of a high view of the Bible turn in the final analysis not to new discoveries in science or history or to new data in psychology or astrophysics. Rather, as in liberal proponent Harold De Wolf's *Theology of the Living Church* they list a series of contradictions between one biblical passage and another as final proof for scriptural errancy.² Likewise, among the evangelicals, Dewey Beegle does exactly the same with his blue-ribbon argument against inerrancy drawn from the apparent discrepancies between Kings and Chronicles and other biblical passages containing parallel references.³ Such data was threshed over in detail by Jerome and Augustine in their correspondence sixteen centuries ago.⁴ The medievalists, Luther and Calvin and their sons and daughters in the Reformation churches, and orthodox scholastics of the seventeenth, eighteenth, and even nineteenth centuries renewed the debate.⁵ The newness of the issue of inerrancy is therefore not in any new fact but in a new way of looking at the data and in revived and heightened contemporary concern over the inspiration of the Bible.

PRESCRIPTION FOR THE FUTURE

I should like to propose some guidelines for evangelicals to enable them, while keeping themselves under the judgment of all of Scripture, to develop an effective strategy for action with reference to the doctrine of inerrancy.

1. Evangelicals never again dare withdraw from the intellectual battlefield of the day and hope thus to protect their delicate faith from worldly attack. Such anti-intellectualism is irresponsible. Not only does it lead inevitably to loss of faith, but there is something inherently antibiblical and anti-Christian about such an ego-protecting stance. It is a reflection of little faith. Moreover, it is inconsistent with the commands of the Lord to the church to go into all the world preaching and teaching and to let the light of the gospel shine out into the cultures of all people.

2. Inerrancy, the most sensitive of all issues to be dealt with in the years immediately ahead, should not be made a test for Christian fellowship in the body of Christ. The evangelical watch-cry must be "believers only, but all believers."⁶ Evangelicals did not construct the church and do not set its boundaries. Christ is Lord, and he is Lord over his church. The bounds of fellowship, therefore, are to be set by Christ. They are determined by our relationship to Christ and by the life we share in him by grace through faith alone. The question is frequently raised: "Can one be an evangelical and not believe in inerrancy?" In answer, it is important to note that a word means what a significant body of those who use the word mean when they employ it. Since obviously not all use the word *evangelical* uniformly to mean the same thing, we must conclude that the word means several things and that even the same person does not always use it to mean the same thing. Words change their meanings by debasement or enrichment.

Several distinct meanings for the word *evangelical* can be documented. On the basis of its derivation, it refers in its broadest meaning to all who hold to the good news that sinful men and women are saved solely by the grace of God through faith in Jesus Christ.

Historically, a second meaning of the term has evolved. Because of the characteristic unity of doctrine espoused and defended by the early Protestants—whether Lutheran, Reformed, Anglican, or Anabaptist—the word *evangelical* has tended in a

narrower sense to denote all who remain fully committed to Protestant orthodoxy. No one has ever been able to maintain a distinct boundary between the broad and the narrow usage. Accordingly, history reflects considerable disagreement as to how many departures a Christian believer can make and at what points before he ceases to be evangelical in the narrow sense but, if evangelical at all, remain so in the broad sense. Thus, a wide spread of divergent views is vaguely referred to as evangelical.

Finally, in dependence on its narrow meaning, the term sometimes refers merely to churches and movements originally characterized by orthodox Protestant or evangelical theology irrespective of whether or not the body continues to adhere to traditional evangelical doctrine. Examples are the Lutheran Church in northern Germany, Protestantism in South America, and Anglican low churches in England and some other parts of the English-speaking world.

Disregarding the last or institutional definition of the word, evangelical is, therefore, frequently used in a broad sense to denote full commitment to orthodox Protestantism.

One who rejects a doctrine characteristic of traditional Protestant orthodoxy such as, for example, the Virgin Birth or the inerrancy of Scripture, may defend himself by arguing that that particular doctrine is not really an essential element of traditional Protestantism. Or he may defend his evangelicalism by appealing to the broader definition—he really does believe in the essential gospel—the “evangel” of Christianity. But there is value in resisting the debasement of verbal coins and immense value in identification with one’s cultural and religious roots. I am indisposed to relinquish the word *evangelical* to suborthodox viewpoints.

Nevertheless, in the interests of effective communication, where context does not precisely indicate the meaning intended, we must be content with a rather loose term that can mean different things to different people, or else tighten up our own expressions by the use of qualifying modifiers such as, on the one hand, “basically” evangelical, “generally” evangelical, or “essentially” evangelical and, on the other hand, “strictly” (which can refer to life style rather than to doctrine or experience), “conservatively” or “consistently” evangelical. However, even such carefully qualified terms carry a measure of ambiguity, for we ask: How strict, how conservative or consistent, in what way? Whenever it is important that the term be understood precisely and exactly, all

who employ it must depend on context and qualifiers to indicate the sense in which they are using the word.

3. Though the doctrine of inerrancy should not be made a test for Christian fellowship and cannot be presumed to be included in the term evangelical as sometimes used, inerrancy, nevertheless, is important. It is even essential for *consistent* evangelicalism and for a full Protestant orthodoxy. This is why many evangelical institutions, such as the Evangelical Theological Society, include a statement on biblical inerrancy in their doctrinal platform and why many denominations require commitment to inerrancy for their officers and for ordination to the Christian ministry. This is a wise safeguard in view of the specific purpose of the group or individuals for whom it is required. To remove the word *inerrancy* from the platform of the Evangelical Theological Society, for example, would be to remove its *raison d'être*. To fail to require belief in the inerrancy of Holy Scripture on the part of its leadership would be to jeopardize the evangelical heritage of a strict orthodoxy. But this guideline regarding the importance of requiring belief in inerrancy for certain purposes must not be substituted for the previous guideline that it should not be made a requirement for fellowship.

To the charge, sometimes made, that this introduces a double standard into the body of Christ, we must respond that only this conforms to the explicit instruction of Scripture provided for the church. Officers responsible for the guidance and instruction of the church must meet special requirements, including sound doctrine and firm adherence to the sure Word (Titus 1:9), but the church is composed of all who confess Christ as Lord and Savior regardless of the level of their doctrinal understanding. The evangelical church, by and large, has not required belief in inerrancy for fellowship (that is, for membership in the local church or for common worship), but it has traditionally demanded it of those entrusted with the leadership of the church or with teaching responsibilities.

4. The case for inerrancy rests precisely where it has always rested, namely, on the lordship of Christ and his commission to the prophets and apostles, who were his representatives. Because it rests on Christ and his authority, the question of inerrancy will therefore remain a key doctrine of the evangelical church so long as Christ is Lord. Evangelicals must remember, however, that this basis must be set forth anew for every generation. What was

adequate for Gaussen, Pieper, and Warfield is still valuable, but it is not necessarily adequate to serve as the foundation for the thinking of our generation. The case for inerrancy must be made anew with each presentation of the gospel teaching.

5. There is an imminent danger of a debilitating division within evangelical ranks over this issue and even of a decimation of evangelical forces. In the interest of truth and for the sake of obedience to the gospel, some of this may be necessary. When it is necessary, so be it. Clear and difficult distinctions must be set forth in love even when they will lead to unwanted misunderstanding and division. But some of the danger to evangelicalism is due only to dust in the air, and a little cool-headed sprinkling with cold water may clear the atmosphere.

6. Evangelicals must show that inerrancy is not a new doctrine, but conversely they must not concentrate so exclusively on inerrancy in their study and publishing as to make it *seem* to be the focus of the gospel or the central and fundamental doctrine of Christian faith, thus replacing Christ. Such a move would create a warped and unattractive image of Christianity and alienate many, not because they see objections to the doctrine of inerrancy, but because they see that it is not the gospel.

7. The presuppositions of the opponents of a full-fledged orthodoxy must be spelled out explicitly, and these must be set forth in contrast to sharply and clearly delineated presuppositions of evangelical faith. Before the facts are examined, many contemporary thinkers have predetermined their conclusions on the basis of nonbiblical positions taken as to theism, the supernatural, the nature of truth, the possibility of knowledge, the use of language, and other highly mooted philosophical and theological tenets. Invalid assumptions fundamentally inconsistent with biblical faith must be exposed as such. In their place must be substituted valid presuppositions, inherently consistent with each other and with clear biblical teaching.

8. Inerrancy must be defined carefully, and the entire church must be instructed without fear that such precise definition will weaken faith. Sometimes a weak faith must be destroyed in order to make room for a genuine and stronger faith. But the day is long past when evangelicals can refuse to face up to difficult arguments in their public writings on the grounds that they do not wish to give free hearing to a doctrine of demons. Extreme caution of this sort is born of little faith and in the end renders the youth and

lay Christians in our churches helpless before the innuendos and counterarguments that they hear in spite of us.

9. Evangelicals must show that they are not insisting on a single word as a shibboleth but rather are witnessing to the complete truthfulness and complete divine authority of Scripture. The terms infallibility, entire trustworthiness, plenary inspiration, inerrancy as to teaching, or inerrant in all it affirms, are all adequate. But all can be and are being used with qualifications suggesting only limited truthfulness and limited divine authority in Scripture, and thus the very opposite of what was originally intended. They are used to teach that some of what Scripture says, affirms, or teaches is *not true*.

The word *inerrancy* is also by no means free from such abuse and ambiguity. As applied to biblical inspiration, it is used by some to mean: a) exact and precise language throughout the whole of Scripture, b) literal interpretation of Scripture, or c) dictation methodology for the production of Scripture—all excesses of the right. According to others, inerrancy means: a) that the Scripture is certain to accomplish its purpose, b) that Scripture will never lead us astray from the gospel, or c) that Scripture is infallible only in limited areas such as its formal didactic passages or in those parts representing divine revelation—all excesses of the left. Evangelicals assert the truthfulness and divine authority of all Scripture, but this will need clarification and amplification.

10. Evangelicals must show the relevance of inerrancy thus defined. Inerrancy does not involve us in a useless defense of "Bible X," the unknown Bible that no one has ever seen, will ever see, or ever expects to see. Rather, evangelicals must show that it is just because we believe the autographs were inerrant that we have an objective path to truth. Assurance that we possess the correct text (on the basis of the objective and public data of textual criticism), plus assurance that we possess the meaning of the Scripture (on the basis of the objective and public data of grammar, syntax, and usage), provides proper and adequate support for the conviction that we have the truth of God. Such textual and exegetical data warrant complete certitude that we possess God's very truth in our Bibles.

11. Evangelicals must relate their doctrine of inerrancy to current biblical scholarship. Most heresies grow out of firm but one-sided grasping for truth. Consistent evangelicals must discover the piece of truth that gives strength to such basically

antievangelical methodologies as redaction criticism. But they must also be sufficiently alert and expert to draw the fine lines that inevitably distinguish truth from error. Old and New Testament experts should concentrate on the exposition of Scripture. In recent decades many evangelicals have been pushed by their doctoral mentors into linguistic studies and historical analysis but have carefully avoided expositions of Scripture that set forth its teaching in all richness. Now, by contrast, they must assume a proper responsibility to their Lord and to the church for the employment of their expertise in aiding in the construction of evangelical doctrine. Any Old or New Testament expert who seriously says, "I am not interested in biblical doctrine," ought immediately to question the state of his own evangelicalism. He should remember the ultimate purpose and significance of the Bible as set forth in 2 Timothy 3:15-17: "The sacred writings . . . are able to instruct you for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. All scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work."

A FINAL WORD

Finally, a word seems appropriate both to those who as evangelicals defend the doctrine of biblical inerrancy and to those who as evangelicals do not rest at ease with the word *inerrant*. To those who confess their evangelical faith but are not at ease with inerrancy, I would point out three things:

1. Do not think you will win liberal and neoorthodox theologians to evangelicalism by fighting what you consider to be the bad view of the Bible held by more conservative evangelicals.

2. Proceed constructively as evangelicals, if you are evangelical. It is always easier to tear down than it is to build anew. Your first and primary responsibility as theologians is to build the instruction of our Lord into a meaningful whole, a positive body of doctrine and ethical guidance.

3. Since it is hard to think of an instance in which an institution has preserved complete doctrinal orthodoxy for as long as a full generation except on the basis of inerrancy, those who deny inerrancy ought to create an abiding and permanent institution that will maintain orthodoxy without it, before they commend their position on Scripture to the church. Limited inerrancy is a difficult line to draw. Let those who argue for a limited inerrancy

prove just once that they and their institutions can remain on that thin knife edge.⁷

For the consistent evangelical who witnesses to and defends the inerrancy of Holy Scripture I have this to say:

1. As evangelicals we must reverse our traditional role if we wish an effective strategy for our day. For seventy years we have been Green Berets furiously waging a rear-guard mission to search and destroy the enemy. We must stop conceiving of ourselves primarily as embattled guerrillas on the defensive. We must see ourselves primarily as heralds and persuaders.

2. If in order to show the importance of adhering to inerrancy we use the illustration of a row of dominos (and, with proper precautions, it is legitimate to do so), let us not forget that it is only an illustration and therefore must not be pressed at all points. There is, for example, nothing of mechanical inevitability by which an individual or institution that moves to an errancy view of the Bible must necessarily reject all orthodox doctrines. By his Spirit God can stay and has stayed the process. At times he has even reversed it. So it is worthwhile to try by all means to persuade our fellow believers of the truth and value of a doctrine of inerrancy. We should seek by every honorable means to penetrate and reclaim institutions that are wavering on this issue.

3. Evangelical strategy must incorporate a multidimensional perspective that is adequately comprehensive. Accordingly, evangelicals must not permit those who waffle on inerrancy to set the agenda for evangelical action, and especially they must not permit them to determine the way to present the case for biblical authority. Evangelicals must emphasize a full-fledged orthodoxy, including (but not focusing on) a doctrine of biblical inerrancy, for only in this way may Christianity be perceived in rounded fullness with the lordship of Jesus Christ set forth in full consistency and practical adequacy.

4. Conservative evangelicals, especially, must take great care, lest by too hasty a recourse to direct confrontation they edge into unorthodoxy the wavering scholar or student troubled either by problems in the biblical text or by some of the common connotations of the word *inerrant*. It is right to bend every effort to win to a right understanding of biblical inerrancy all who by any means are winnable, and anyone who takes with adequate seriousness the lordship of Jesus Christ is certainly winnable or should be presumed to be winnable.

In all that we do let us remember that orthopraxis is the crown of orthodoxy. Let us debate in love—with liberals in such a way that, if our love does not shine through our discourse, we lay down our pen, and with our fellow evangelicals deemed less consistent than ourselves, with honesty. Honesty—intellectual and spiritual no less than financial—is not a policy; anything less is wrong. As we defend what we believe to be our Lord's instruction as to the inerrancy of biblical authority, we are not out to conquer and destroy. Rather, we are witnesses seeking to share, convince, and persuade fellow believers in Christ to follow him in this as in all other areas of obedience to his written Word.⁸

Notes

¹Historicism means many things, but as used here the term refers to the belief that ultimate meaning may be derived from a study of history, usually interpreted naturalistically.

²L. Harold De Wolf, *A Theology of the Living Church* (New York: Harper, 1953), pp. 68-74.

³Dewey M. Beegle, *Scripture, Tradition, and Infallibility* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1973), pp. 175-97.

⁴Augustine, *Letters in The Fathers of the Church*, trans. Wilfrid Parsons (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America, 1951), 12:98-99, 411 and *passim*.

⁵See John F. Walvoord, *Inspiration and Interpretation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1956); and Robert Preus, *The Inspiration of Scripture: A Study of the Theology of 17th-Century Lutheran Dogmaticians* (Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd, 1955).

⁶See, for example, Arnold T. Olson, *Believers Only: An Outline of the History and Principles of the Free Evangelical Movement in Europe and North America* (Minneapolis: Free Church Publications, 1964). For the traditional Reformed view, note also statements by that arch defender of orthodoxy, Charles Hodge, in his *Systematic Theology* (New York: Scribner, 1872), 3:545-46. He says that the church requires only "a credible profession of faith," which he defines later as "a profession against which no tangible evidence can be adduced" (*ibid.*, p. 625).

⁷I am not suggesting, of course, that one ought to believe in inerrant inspiration because it is advantageous to the church to do so. Rather, we ought to believe it because we seek to be obedient to our Lord. Inerrancy is important because of the stress Scripture itself lays on its own complete truthfulness and divine authority and also because of the role this doctrine has played in the church.

⁸This chapter is an edited reprint of a chapter entitled "Evangelicals and the Inerrancy Question" in *Evangelical Roots*, ed. Kenneth S. Kantzer (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1978).