

ST2B

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What is Theology? Pt. 3A

Believing Through Scripture

Part A: Texts That Do Not Err?

Opening Questions

1. What can we read books for?
2. Why do Christians set apart a particular collection of books as unique?
3. Why do those who are not Christians not accept these books as being unique?
4. Explain the understanding of scripture implicit in 2 particular images:
 - Christ giving the bible to the world
 - Matthias Grünewald's John the Baptist pointing to Christ crucified while holding the scriptural text open (Isenheim altarpiece)

Introduction

“In the beginning was the Word.” (Jn. 1:1) Christianity is often declared to be a religion of the Book and Christians a “people of the book”.¹ Harold Lindsell, for example, argues that

had there been no Bible there would be no Christian faith today, nor, for that matter, would there be a faith called Judaism. [Lindsell, 1976, 18]²

¹ Grenz, in Grenz and Franke, 2001, 57.

² Perry notices that this stands in stark contrast to Warfield: “Were there no such thing as inspiration, Christianity would be true and all its essential doctrines would be credibly witnessed to us in the generally trustworthy reports of the teaching of our Lord. ... Inspiration is not the fundamental of Christian doctrines.” [Perry, 2001, 30, citing Warfield] As Warfield announces, “We will not say that Christianity might not have been founded and propagated and preserved without inspired writings or even without any written embodiment of the authoritative apostolic teaching. Wherever Christ is known through whatever means, there is Christianity, and men may hear and believe and be saved. But God has caused his grace to abound to us in that he not only published redemption through Christ in the world, but gave this preachment authoritative expression through the apostles, and fixed it with infallible trustworthiness in his inspired word.” [‘The Authority and Inspiration of the Scriptures’] This is an important corrective to Lindsell in that Christianity is not to be dependent on the bible in the way that it is to be upon God, theologically speaking. Yet there is a weakness, as N.T. Wright indicates: “according to Paul in Romans 15 and elsewhere, the Bible is itself a key part of God’s plan. It is not merely a divinely given commentary on the way salvation works (or whatever); the Bible is part of the means by which he

But this can be misleading.

- The Word and the Words

In the first place, Christianity is a religion of no Book – the Prologue to the Fourth Gospel makes it clear that the Word that was in the beginning *was God* (and not a text, as such), and the Word was made flesh and dwelt among us (and, again, not a text, as such). Christianity testifies, then, to the significance of the claim that God was in Christ reconciling the world to God's Self.³

- Plurality of Words

In the second place, Christianity can be said to be a religion of many books (and we have had cause to look at the importance of 'tradition', unfortunately a mistakenly much maligned term in many Protestant circles) – the bible is not one book, of course, but a collection of many books (taking its 'name', of course, from the Greek plural *ta biblia*) written by different authors with varying perspectives and emphases, during different periods, and often for distinctly different reasons. Walter Brueggeman warns that

There is not one voice in Scripture, and to give any one voice in Scripture or in tradition authority to silence other voices surely distorts the text and misconstrues the liveliness that the text itself engenders in the interpretive community.⁴

While this set of features is obvious to many, to others it is much less so. What is being lost when rhetoric such as "the Bible says..." is emphasised is, however, theologically significant.

What I hope to do in this lecture is explore several important issues with regard to the texts Christians call their 'scriptures' (questions such as why are these particular texts important? What does 'authority' mean in relation to the bible? What do these texts do? How are they to be interpreted?).

puts his purposes of judgement and salvation to work."

³ B.B. Warfield claims, "Christianity is often called a book-religion. It would be more exact to say that it is a religion which has a book." ['The Authority and Inspiration of the Scriptures']

⁴ Walter Brueggeman, 'Biblical Authority: A Personal Reflection', 16.

Before we do so, however, there are a couple of other provisional points we need to bear in mind.

- Bible and Scripture

Just so that the terminology is clear, ‘bible’ is the set of texts that have been composed, collected and canonised; ‘scripture’ is the set of biblical texts as they are performed as authoritative for the life, belief, and worship of the communities who ‘own’ them in some religious sense. As Daniel Migliore argues,

the authority of Scripture has to be understood in relation to its particular function within the community of faith. [Migliore, 40]⁵

- Authority and Interpretation

While, authority-type questions and interpretation-type questions are often distinguished and even separated, I am suggesting that they cannot be, or at least not clearly and easily.

- Any view of what it is that makes the bible authoritative operates on a certain understanding of what the bible is, *and this is interpretation*;
- similarly, any perspective on how best to approach the interpretation of these texts makes some supposition of why these texts are important, *and that is an authority type question*.

This relation, for example, is clearly displayed at the popular end of the creationist-evolutionist debate – if what the bible says is not true *factually/historically*, so the story of much of this debate goes, then the bible is not true – and this unfortunate understanding of the bible that at the very least does demonstrate the close link between authority and interpretation. But also, the God who is the rational *explanation* for the beginning of all things is the God who makes all this work – this is the God who gives truth, meaning the finally authoritative set of biblical texts, the God who is the *explanation* of why the scriptures are true. This type of approach to what makes the biblical texts scriptural largely depends on a view of scripture that has come over the past couple of centuries in particular to dominate especially in English-speaking Christian circles: the concept of *inerrancy*. It is that which will be put to the theological text in this lecture.

⁵ Kathryn Tanner, ‘Scripture as Classic Text’, *Modern Theology* 14 (1998), 279-298 (286): “the structure of the text itself remains unfinished without the reader’s active participation; its organization exists only as a field of possibilities or a set of tools for construction, actively demanding the reader’s entrance.”

- Authority and the Theology of God

The notion of authority, because it is connected with interpretation, is not free from theological assumptions (whether they are warranted assumptions or not is a question we will address). In other words, views of biblical authority depends upon a certain understanding of ‘God’ – different accounts of ‘God’ will yield different accounts of what makes the Bible scripture and therefore spiritually authoritative texts.

We will survey very broadly 2 particular models on the question ‘what makes the bible authoritative?’, centered on two words that do considerable theological work: ‘inerrancy’ and ‘witness’.⁶

Inerrancy

Some Suggested Reading:

Richard J. Coleman, ‘Biblical Inerrancy: Are We Going Anywhere?’, *Theology Today* (1975), 295-303.

Harold Lindell, *The Battle for the Bible* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan Publishing House, 1976).

Clark Pinnock, *Biblical Revelation* (Moody, 1971).

Clark H. Pinnock, ‘Evangelicals and Inerrancy: The Current Debate’, *Theology Today* (1978), 65-69.

Benjamin B. Warfield, *The Inspiration and Authority of the Bible* (Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co., 1970).

Benjamin B. Warfield, ‘The Real Problem of Inspiration’, in *The Living God: Readings in Christian Theology*, ed. Millard J. Erickson (Baker Book House, 1973).

In the 1960s, but particularly in the late 1970s and early 1980s Evangelicals raged over the question of the inerrancy of the bible as the best way of understanding inspiration⁷ (and in some cases this was understood as being the main criteriological rule for assessing the Christianness of one’s faith)⁸ – a text that does not err in the statements it makes – and the

⁶ The distinction is not a hard and fast one – an inerrantist, for example, would want to maintain that the inerrant texts provide a witness to God. Someone taking the ‘witness’ position I will outline, however, would be highly unlikely to claim that they are in any way ‘inerrant’.

⁷ Anthony and Richard Hanson record that for many, “Inerrancy was the practical effect, in fact almost the only practical effect, of inspiration. The two concepts are closely bound up together, indeed cannot exist without each other. Inspiration implied inerrancy; the Scriptures could not be wrong because they were inspired.” [*Reasonable Belief: A Survey of the Christian Faith* (Oxford, et al.: OUP, 1980), 40]

⁸ Gordon-Cornwell Theological Seminary has this *opening declaration* in its statement of faith: “The sixty-six canonical books of the Bible as originally written were inspired of God, hence free from error. They constitute

controversy that ensued built on the grounds laid by the self-style fundamentalists of the late C19th, and before that by the 'Protestant orthodoxy' of the C17th. John Perry observes that "In some cases this particular view of the Bible is almost the central tenet of the faith." [Perry, 2001] Consequently, the Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy, in the strongest terms,

affirms this inerrancy of Scripture afresh, making clear our understanding of it and warning against its denial. We are persuaded that to deny it is to set aside the witness of Jesus Christ and of the Holy Spirit and to refuse that submission to the claims of God's own Word which marks true Christian faith. We see it as our timely duty to make this affirmation in the face of current lapses from the truth of inerrancy among our fellow Christians and misunderstanding of this doctrine in the world at large.⁹

Similarly, Evangelical theologian Clark H. Pinnock declared in 1978 that

in Fundamentalist theology belief in biblical inerrancy is nothing less than a *defining assumption* For evangelical theology, belief in biblical inerrancy and belief in biblical authority have been very closely connected, and therefore the inerrancy debate touches upon what many people feel is the basis of authority and religious certainty. [Pinnock, 1978, 65]

the only infallible guide in faith and practice." [http://www.gordonconwell.edu/about/basis_faith.html] Even more explicit is the statement of the Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy: "The authority of Scripture is a key issue for the Christian Church in this and every age. ... The following Statement affirms this inerrancy of Scripture afresh, making clear our understanding of it and warning against its denial. We are persuaded that to deny it is to set aside the witness of Jesus Christ and of the Holy Spirit and to refuse that submission to the claims of God's own Word which marks true Christian faith. We see it as our timely duty to make this affirmation in the face of current lapses from the truth of inerrancy among our fellow Christians and misunderstanding of this doctrine in the world at large." [<http://www.reformed.org/documents/icbi.html>] Article XIX does qualify this somewhat: "We deny that such confession is necessary for salvation. However, we further deny that inerrancy can be rejected without grave consequences both to the individual and to the Church." In his 'Foreword' to John Woodbridge's book on *Biblical Authority*, Kenneth S. Kantzer summarises: "Dr. Woodbridge and most conservative Evangelicals ... are convinced that biblical authority is at stake. Inerrancy means that the Bible tells only the truth – God's truth. If the Bible were not inerrant, the believer would either not know whether anything in the Bible were true or else he would have to have some way of distinguishing between what is true and trustworthy and what is not true and, therefore, is unworthy of our trust. The Christian would be driven to pick and choose from the Bible what comes to us with divine authority." [Kantzer, 8f.]

⁹ Article XIX explains this further: "We affirm that a confession of the full authority, infallibility, and inerrancy of Scripture is vital to a sound understanding of the whole of the Christian faith. We further affirm that such confession should lead to increasing conformity to the image of Christ. We deny that such confession is necessary for salvation. However, we further deny that inerrancy can be rejected without grave consequences both to the individual and to the Church."

Protestant Orthodoxy

First, however, it is worth seeing this in the light of developments within Protestantism – even though, of course, ‘inerrancy’ is not limited to Protestant churches. The German Reformer, Martin Luther states:

The fact that it became necessary to write books reveals that great damage and injury had been done to the Spirit. Books were thus written out of necessity and not because this is the nature of the New Testament.” [quoted by Paul Althaus, *The Theology of Martin Luther* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1966), 73n2.]

For him the heart of scripture is the promise of the gospel that is brought to expression in the Christ-event. Scripture’s authority is not of a juridical kind; it is not essentially a book of legal doctrines, inerrant reports, or devotional materials. Scripture conveys instead the life-giving Word of salvation in Christ to those who accept it through faith. Authority in matters of faith, then, rests on the gospel of scripture, not on the creeds and councils of the church as such or on the hierarchical offices, papacy and episcopacy. The Word of scripture alone is to be believed and accepted as finally valid with respect to the concerns of faith and salvation.

The Reformers of the early C16th thus stressed *sola scriptura*. But this principle was understood differently from its use in later Protestantism. Luther, for instance, made a fundamental distinction between the books of the bible by applying *a christological canon of interpretation*: the gospel of free grace and justification: “Whatever does not teach Christ is not yet apostolic, even though St. Peter or St. Paul does the teaching.”¹⁰ Hence he developed a “cannon within the canon”, with the epistle of James, that strawy epistle as Luther described it, being condemned to the flames.¹¹ This, Braaten argues,

is not something that Luther brought to the biblical text out of his subjective experience. Rather, it is to be found as the clear center of the main books of Scripture itself. [Braaten, 63]

¹⁰ Martin Luther, ‘Prefaces to the Books of the Bible’, *LW* 35:225-411 (396).

¹¹ Ernst Käsemann, ‘The Canon of the New Testament and the Unity of the Church’, in *Essays on New Testament Themes*, trans. W.J. Mantague (London: SCM Press, 1964), cited in Carl E. Braaten, 63.

By the time of David Hollaz this distinction had been lost, and his undifferentiated view of the books of the bible finally triumphed and today survives in Protestant fundamentalism and the more conservative strands of Evangelicalism.¹²

The canon which was open and flexible in Luther's thinking became closed and rigid in the circles that inherited the doctrine of scripture in Protestant orthodoxy. During this later period, there was a concern to have a complete doctrine of scripture, partly due to pressure from the Roman Catholic side which could appeal to a full-fledged doctrine of papal authority.¹³

It was also, Braaten continues, in part due to an internal development in which

Luther's stress on the material content of Scripture – justification through faith alone – was relegated to the status of a true doctrinal proposition, along with others which could be proved from Scripture. In this development the doctrine of the inspiration of Scripture enjoyed a great inflation in the works of the dogmaticians, both Lutheran and Reformed.

Thus there comes a shift away in the account given of the authority of scripture. For the C17th orthodox Protestant dogmaticians, scripture is authoritative because of its divine inspiration and inerrancy, following from the Holy Spirit's complete charge of the production of the scriptural production [this is sometimes expressed through 'dictation' theories – David Hollaz: “All the words, without exception, contained in the Holy Manuscript, were dictated by the Holy Spirit to the pen of the prophets and apostles.”]¹⁴

*Benjamin Breckinridge Warfield (1851-1921)*¹⁵



¹² See Heinrich Schmid, *The Doctrinal Theology of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, trans. Charles A. Hay and Henry E. Jacobs (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House Press, 1899), 80-91.

¹³ Braaten, 66.

¹⁴ Cited in Schmid, *Doctrinal Theology*, 45. Migliore, 1991, 43: “They insisted that every book, every chapter, every verse, every word was directly inspired by God.”

¹⁵ B.B. Warfield was the principal of Princeton Theological Seminary from 1887-1921, succeeding A.A. Hodge to the Charles Hodge Chair, before the split in 1929 that resulted in the formation of Westminster Seminary and the Orthodox Presbyterian Church.

[For various articles by Warfield, see www.Igmarshall.org/warfield_index.html]

Moreover, inerrantists may take something of their rise from Warfield, but what is particularly interesting about Warfield's approach is that it is more guarded, nuanced, and subtle than many of the accounts frequently given of the doctrine of inerrancy. Moreover, he tend to use the terms 'inspiration', 'infallibility',¹⁶ and 'trustworthiness' (which may or may not amount to the same thing as 'inerrancy'). Finally, he realises that, at best, 'inspiration' is a *background belief* and not itself a focus of belief. So he can argue that

inspiration is not the most fundamental of Christian doctrines, nor even the first thing we prove about Scriptures.¹⁷

- Divine Authority

Nonetheless, for him plenary inspiration is the foundation of biblical authority, of the 'divinity' of scripture. He provides the following brief definition of what he means (and he claims the Reformed churches mean) by 'inspiration':¹⁸

Inspiration is that extraordinary, supernatural influence (or, passively, the result of it,) exerted by the Holy Ghost on the writers of our Sacred Books, by which their words were rendered also the words of God, and, therefore, perfectly infallible.

Accordingly, scripture's "authority rests on its divinity and its divinity expresses itself in its trustworthiness".¹⁹ This, Warfield avers, is the view of the bible itself:

¹⁶ Warfield, 'Inspiration and Criticism': the scriptures are "absolutely infallible".

¹⁷ Benjamin B. Warfield, 'The Real Problem of Inspiration', in *The Living God: Readings in Christian Theology*, ed. Millard J. Erickson (Baker Book House, 1973), 279. Warfield claimed that he did not found or base his Christian faith and belief on the plenary inspiration of the bible: "Let it not be said that ... we found the whole system upon the doctrine of plenary inspiration. We found the whole Christian system on the doctrine of plenary inspiration as much as we found it upon the doctrine of angelic existences" [*The Inspiration and Authority of the Bible*, 2nd ed. (Nutley, N.J.: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1948), 210]. Contrast this with the potential in J.I. Packer's claim: "The problem of authority is the most fundamental problem that the Christian Church ever faces. This is because Christianity is built on truth: that is to say, on the content of a divine revelation" [*Fundamentalism and the Word of God*, 41]. Similarly Harold Lindsell wants something more than what Warfield seems to be permitting: "I am of the opinion that this is a watershed question" [23]. Perry claims that consequently, "Therefore, a certain view of the Bible supersedes (or at least exists alongside) the Bible itself as the foundation of evangelical Christianity."

¹⁸ Warfield, 'Inspiration and Criticism'.

¹⁹ Cited in Stahle. "The Biblical books are called inspired as the Divinely determined products of inspired men; the Biblical writers are called inspired as breathed into by the Holy Spirit, so that the product of their activities

We do not adopt the doctrine of the plenary inspiration of Scripture on sentimental grounds, nor even, as we have already had occasion to remark on a priori or general grounds of whatever kind. We adopt it specifically because it is taught us as truth by Christ and His apostles, in the Scriptural record of their teaching, and the evidence for its truth is, therefore, as we have also already pointed out, precisely that evidence, in weight and amount, which vindicates for us the trustworthiness of Christ and His apostles as teachers of doctrine. Of course, this evidence is not in the strict logical sense 'demonstrative'; it is 'probable' evidence. It therefore leaves open the metaphysical possibility of its being mistaken. But it may be contended that it is about as great in amount and weight as 'probable' evidence can be made, and that the strength of conviction which it is adapted to produce may be and should be practically equal to that produced by demonstration itself.

The notion of the 'plenary' inspiration has to do with the fact that the inspiring action of God extends through them as writers to the product as biblical text:

That it is such an influence as makes the words written under its guidance, the words of God; by which is meant to be affirmed an absolute infallibility (as alone fitted to divine words), admitting no degrees whatever – extending to the very word, and to all the words. So that every part of Holy Writ is thus held alike infallibly true in all its statements, of whatever kind.²⁰

- Divine and Human – Concursus

Inspiration involves God's work through human activity to communicate a distinctively supernatural product, the mode of which is inscrutable.²¹ In inspiration, or as Warfield

transcends human powers and becomes Divinely authoritative. Inspiration is, therefore, usually defined as a supernatural influence exerted on the sacred writers by the Spirit of God, by virtue of which their writings are given Divine trustworthiness. ... What it says of Scripture is, not that it is 'breathed into by God' or is the product of the Divine "inbreathing" into its human authors, but that it is breathed out by God, 'Godbreathed,' the product of the creative breath of God. In a word, what is declared by this fundamental passage [viz., 2 Tim. 3:6] is simply that the Scriptures are a Divine product, without any indication of how God has operated in producing them. No term could have been chosen, however, which would have more emphatically asserted the Divine production of Scripture than that which is here employed." [Warfield, 'Inspiration']

²⁰ Warfield, 'Inspiration and Criticism'.

²¹ Warfield, 'Inspiration and Criticism': The confession of the inspiration of the scriptures "purposely declares nothing as to the mode of inspiration. The Reformed Churches admit, that this is inscrutable. They content themselves with defining carefully and holding fast the effects of the divine influence, leaving the mode of divine action by which it is brought about draped in mystery."

preferred to call it ‘concurvise expiration’, human authors are sovereignly employed by God who works

confluently in, with and by them, elevating them, directing them, controlling them, energizing them, so that, as His instruments, they rise above themselves and under His inspiration do His work and reach His aim. The product, therefore, which is attained by their means is His product through them.²²

For Warfield this inspiration is not to be seen as working mechanically and therein reducing the author to an automaton, as happens in the notion of dictation. This, he says, “The Reformed Churches have never held” to,²³ and to charge him of saying this, he retorts, would be to assume “that what is human cannot also be divine, and that wherever the human enters there the divine disappears.”²⁴ He at least is suggesting a potentially useful *compatibalism* through which divine and human can be held together in the event of the composition of the scriptures.²⁵ The event of inspiration may loosely, then, be compared to the incarnation – Christ’s being fully God and fully man.

[T]he Scriptures are the joint product of divine and human activities, both of which penetrate them at every point, working harmoniously together to the production of a writing which is not divine here and human there, but at once divine and human in

²² Warfield cited in Rachel Stahle, ‘Scriptural Authority in the Theology of B.B. Warfield’, *Modern Reformation* 5 (1996), <http://www.modernreformation.org/mr96/mayjun/mr9603authority.html>. Carl F. H. Henry writes, “Inspiration is a supernatural influence upon the divinely chosen prophets and apostles whereby the Spirit of God assures the truth and trustworthiness of their oral and written proclamation.” [*God, Revelation and Authority*, vol. 4, *The God Who Speaks and Shows* (Waco, Texas: Word Books, 1979), 129]

²³ Warfield, ‘Inspiration and Criticism’.

²⁴ Cf. ‘Inspiration and Criticism’: “Even those special theologians in whose teeth such an accusation has been oftenest thrown (e. g., Gausson) are explicit in teaching that the human element is never absent. The Reformed Churches hold, indeed, that every word of the Scriptures, without exception, is the word of God; but, alongside of that, they hold equally explicitly that every word is the word of man. And, therefore, though strong and uncompromising in resisting the attribution to the Scriptures of any failure in absolute truth and infallibility, they are before all others in seeking, and finding, and gazing on in loving rapture, the marks of the fervid impetuosity of a Paul – the tender saintliness of a John – the practical genius of a James, in the writings which through them the Holy Ghost has given for our guidance. Though strong and uncompromising in resisting all effort to separate the human and divine, they distance all competitors in giving honor alike to both by proclaiming in one breath that all is divine and all is human. ... It is all human - every word, and all divine. The human characteristics are to be noted and exhibited; the divine perfection and infallibility, no less.”

²⁵ Warfield, ‘Inspiration’: “That the Scriptures are throughout a Divine book, created by the Divine energy and speaking in their every part with Divine authority directly to the heart of the readers, is the fundamental fact concerning them which is witnessed by Christ and the sacred writers to whom we owe the New Testament. But the strength and constancy with which they bear witness to this primary fact do not prevent their recognizing by the side of it that the Scriptures have come into being by the agency of men. ... The Scriptures, in other words, are conceived by the writers of the New Testament as through and through God's book, in every part expressive of His mind, given through men after a fashion which does no violence to their nature as men, and constitutes the book also men's book as well as God's, in every part expressive of the mind of its human authors.”

every part, every word, and every particular.... On the other hand, no quality inconsistent with either divinity or humanity can be found in any portion or element of Scripture.²⁶

It is practically important for Warfield to affirm the humanness of the writers, since “the marks of its human origin are ineradicably stamped on every page of the whole volume.”²⁷ But, even more than that, it is theologically important: “When the Christian asserts his faith in the divine origin of his Bible, he does not mean to deny that it was composed and written by men or that it was given by men to the world. He believes that the marks of its human origin are ineradicably stamped on every page of the whole volume. He means to state only that it is not merely human in its origin.”

Throughout the whole preparation of the material to be written and of the men to write it; throughout the whole process of the gathering and classification and use of the material by the writers; throughout the whole process of the actual writing, - he sees at work divine influences of the most varied kinds, extending all the way from simply providential superintendence and spiritual illumination to direct revelation and inspiration.

The analogy of the Incarnation also applies to the infallibility of the Scriptures. Warfield observes that in the Bible,

the human factors have acted as human factors, and have left their mark on the product as such, and yet cannot have fallen into that error which we say it is human to fall into, because they have not acted apart from the Divine factors, by themselves, only under their unerring guidance.²⁸

²⁶ Warfield, ‘The Divine and Human in the Bible’, in *Selected Shorter Writings of Benjamin B. Warfield*, Vol. II, John E. Meeter, ed. (Nutley, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co., 1973), 547.

²⁷ B.B. Warfield, ‘The Divine Origin of the Bible’. “It ascribes to the authors such an attending influence of the Spirit in the process of writing, that the words they set down become also the words of God; and the resultant writing is made not merely the expression of Paul's or John's or Peter's will for the churches, but the expression of God's will.” [The Authority and Inspiration of the Scriptures’]

²⁸ Warfield, ‘The Biblical Idea of Inspiration’, in *Selected Shorter Writings of Benjamin B. Warfield*, Vol. I., John E. Meeter, ed. (Nutley, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co., 1973), 74-5. Yet Warfield observes that it is important to recognise the partiality of the analogy: “But the analogy with Our Lord's Divine-human personality may easily be pressed beyond reason. There is no hypostatic union between the Divine and the human in Scripture; we cannot parallel the ‘inscripturation’ of the Holy Spirit and the incarnation of the Son of God. The Scriptures are merely the product of Divine and human forces working together to produce a

Consequently, the basis of asserting that the Bible is concurrently divine and human is God's transcendence and immanence in all his activity. Even in the prophetic books and specific biblical references to authorship, both the finite and the infinite are mentioned as equally plausible; thus, Scripture itself recognises their inseparability and together their inspired validity.

It should not be thought, though, that the biblical authors became temporarily superhuman, either, while the Holy Spirit was upon them. Paul's confession in Romans 7 could easily disprove that notion. It can be safely maintained, however, that in his sovereignty God had equipped each writer for the task.

[T]he apostles were not given this supreme authority as legislators to the Church without previous instruction in the mind of Christ, without safeguards thrown about them in the prosecution of their task, without the accompanying guidance of the Holy Spirit.²⁹

This conception of divine superintendence, however, is distinguished from that of both the 'inspiration' of the poet and what is normally professed under the doctrine of providence as 'guidance'. Instead, the inspiration of the biblical writers is supernatural (comes from God, not themselves), extraordinary (not ordinary process of inspired writers),

For providence is guidance; and guidance can bring one only so far as his own power can carry him. If heights are to be scaled above man's native power to achieve, then something more than guidance, however effective, is necessary. This is the reason for the superinduction, at the end of the long process of the production of Scripture, of the additional Divine operation which we call technically

product in the production of which the human forces work under the initiation and prevalent direction of the Divine: the person of Our Lord unites in itself Divine and human natures, each of which retains its distinctness while operating only in relation to the other. Between such diverse things there can exist only a remote analogy; and, in point of fact, the analogy in the present instance amounts to no more than that in both cases Divine and human factors are involved, though very differently. In the one they unite to constitute a Divine-human person, in the other they cooperate to perform a Divine-human work. Even so distant an analogy may enable us, however, to recognize that, as, in the case of Our Lord's person, the human nature remains truly human while yet it can never fall into sin or error because it can never act out of relation with the Divine nature into conjunction with which it has been brought; so in the case of the production of Scripture by the conjoint action of human and Divine factors, the human factors have acted as human factors, and have left their mark on the product as such, and yet cannot have fallen into that error which we say it is human to fall into, because they have not acted apart from the Divine factors, by themselves, but only under their unerring guidance." ['Inspiration']

²⁹ Warfield, 'The Authority and Inspiration of the Scriptures', in *Selected Shorter Writings*, Vol. II, 539.

‘inspiration.’ By it, the Spirit of God, flowing confluent in with the providentially and graciously determined work of men, spontaneously producing under the Divine directions the writings appointed to them, gives the product a Divine quality unattainable by human powers alone. Thus these books become not merely the word of godly men, but the immediate word of God Himself, speaking directly as such to the minds and hearts of every reader.³⁰

Warfield, and Archibald Alexander Hodge also, did concede that the biblical writers were at times “dependent for their information upon sources and methods in themselves fallible, their personal knowledge and judgment were in many matters hesitating and defective or even wrong.” They also recognized that “inspiration does not suppose that the words and phrases written under its influence are the best possible to express the truth, but only that they are an adequate expression of the truth. Other words and phrases might furnish a clearer, more exact, and therefore better expression....”³¹

- Oracular Propositions

This process of the inspiration of the authors, then, is acclaimed to be oracular: “Christendom has always reposed upon the belief that the utterances of this book are properly oracles of God.”³² Moreover, it is propositional –³³ revelation is the unveiling of the saving truths of

³⁰ Warfield, ‘Inspiration’.

³¹ Archibald A. Hodge, Benjamin B. Warfield, "Inspiration," *Presbyterian Review*, II (1881), 238, 256.

³² Benjamin Breckinridge Warfield, *The Inspiration and Authority of the Bible* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1948), 107. Cf. Warfield, ‘Inspiration’: “‘It is written,’ attest primarily its indefectible authority; the designation of it as ‘oracles’ and the adduction of it by the formula, ‘It says,’ attest primarily its immediate divinity. Its authority rests on its divinity and its divinity expresses itself in its trustworthiness; and the New Testament writers in all their use of it treat it as what they declare it to be – a God-breathed document, which, because God-breathed, as through and through trustworthy in all its assertions, authoritative in all its declarations, and down to its last particular, the very word of God, His ‘oracles.’” “The men who spoke from God are here declared, therefore, to have been taken up by the Holy Spirit and brought by His power to the goal of His choosing. The things which they spoke under this operation of the Spirit were therefore His things, not theirs. And that is the reason which is assigned why “the prophetic word” is so sure. Though spoken through the instrumentality of men, it is, by virtue of the fact that these men spoke “as borne by the Holy Spirit,” an immediately Divine word.” [‘Inspiration’]

³³ Carl F.H. Henry asserts that divine revelation takes the form of “rational communication conveyed in intelligible ideas and meaningful words, that is, in conceptual-verbal form.” [*God, Revelation, and Authority*, 6 vols. (Waco, Tx.: Word Publishers, 1976-1983), 2:12; cf. 3:455] God, in turn, is revealed “in the whole canon of Scripture which objectively communicates in propositional-verbal form the content and meaning of all God’s revelation.” [2:87] Norman Geisler argues: “One can safely say that the normal and consistent New Testament usage of ‘truth’ is of truth in the cognitive, propositional sense ... any passage where truth is used in reference to a person can be understood as meaning a person who speaks the truth or one Whose word can be trusted.” [‘The

God without which these truths would remain unknown.³⁴ So Charles Hodge, for instance, asserted that

Revelation is the communication of truth by God to the understandings of men. It makes known doctrines. For example, it makes known that God is ... that Christ is the Son of God; that he assumed our nature; that he died for our sins, etc. These are logical propositions.³⁵

Speaking of Warfield, Kelsey writes,

Saving faith necessarily includes belief that certain doctrines are true. Since it is important that the belief be utterly confident, the truths must be utterly trustworthy. That creates the need for an utterly trustworthy authority determining what those doctrines are. And scripture is, for the Protestant, that authority.³⁶

- Without Error

Warfield famously challenged to be shown “just one indisputable error”, and proclaimed that “Not a single case of error can be proved.”³⁷ A new period in the controversy over biblical inerrancy began when thinkers like Warfield committed themselves to the legitimacy of external verification.³⁸ “By all means let the doctrine of the Bible [inerrancy] be tested by the facts and let the test be made all the more, not the less, stringent and penetrating because of

Concept of Truth in the Inerrancy Debate’, *Bibliotheca Sacra* 137 (1980), 327-336 (333)]

³⁴ Warfield, ‘The Real Problem of Inspiration’: “the Biblical writers are trustworthy as doctrinal guides. If they are trustworthy teachers of doctrine and if they held and taught this doctrine, then this doctrine is true, and is to be accepted and acted upon as true by us all.”

³⁵ Charles Hodge, ‘The Theology of the Intellect and that of Feelings’, in *Essays and Reviews* (New York: Robert Carter & Bros., 1857), 609f.

³⁶ Kelsey, 1975, 29. According to Donald G. Bloesch, an approach to scripture such as Geisler’s “actually serves to undermine biblical authority by making the truth of Scripture contingent on scientific corroboration.” [*Holy Scripture: Revelation, Inspiration, and Interpretation* (Downer’s Grove: Inter Varsity Press, 1994), 298] Perry comments, “While Geisler may sincerely intend to follow his own advice and ‘get his view about the Bible from the Bible,’ doing so is perhaps not as straightforward as he imagined. His view of truth bears the unmistakable marks of Hobbesian ancestry.” According to Bloesch, “In biblical perspective the true is the spiritually and redemptively transformative. For moderns the true is that which can be empirically verified. ... The biblical conception of truth makes a place for the factual but insists that the factual neither exhaust the meaning of truth nor constitutes the essence of truth.” [*Holy Scripture*, 191]

³⁷ Warfield, ‘Inspiration and Criticism’. Clark Pinnock claims that “if contradiction exists our doctrine of scripture is overthrown” [*The Scripture Principle*, (1985), 147].

³⁸ Woodbridge admits that Warfield “probably did overemphasize the apologetic value of evidences for the truth of Scripture (in comparison with John Calvin’s approach)” [Woodbridge, 137]. On a popular website an evangelist makes an apologetic justification from, among many other things, the truthful predictiveness of the bible [Rick Wade, ‘The Inspiration of the Bible’, <http://www.probe.org/docs/inspiration.html#note4>]

the great issues that hang upon it.”³⁹ But, he placed so many restrictions and conditions on the kind of error he would accept that he made it virtually impossible for anyone to provide that one fatal flaw.

No single error has as yet been demonstrated to occur in the Scriptures as given by God to His Church. And every critical student knows, as already pointed out, that the progress of investigation has been a continuous process of removing difficulties, until scarcely a shred of the old list of ‘Biblical Errors’ remains to hide the nakedness of this moribund contention. To say that we do not wish to make claims ‘for which we have only this to urge, that they cannot be absolutely disproved,’ is not to the point; what is to the point is to say, that we cannot set aside the presumption arising from the general trustworthiness of Scripture, that its doctrine of inspiration is true, by any array of contra-dictory facts, each one of which is fairly disputable. We must have indisputable errors—which are not forthcoming.⁴⁰

Charles Hodge, father of A.A. Hodge, developed a principle for dealing with the possibility of detecting an error in a slightly different way. He said it would be like finding a speck on the face of the Parthenon, but that that speck did not distract from the fact that the whole was gloriously constructed from marble.⁴¹ His reasoning led him to speak of “discrepancies which without our present means of knowledge, we are unable to satisfactorily explain”. In other words, they only appear to be discrepancies because we do not have the

³⁹ Warfield, 283.

⁴⁰ Warfield, *The Inspiration and Authority of the Bible* (Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co., 1970).

⁴¹ *Systematic Theology* I, 170. According to Jack B. Rogers and Donald K. McKim, the Parthenon illustration shows Hodge “was able to dismiss such problems as minor.” [*The Authority and Interpretation of the Bible: An Historical Approach* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1979), 286] However they also feel Hodge somewhat contradicts himself by elsewhere insisting on the Bible’s inerrancy in all matters. John Woodbridge, however, disagrees and claims that “Hodge was apparently arguing that even if one should suppose that there were minor errors (which Hodge himself did not allow), that should not keep an inquirer from contemplating ‘the sacred Scriptures filled with the highest truth.’” [*Biblical Authority: A Critique of the Rogers/McKim Proposal* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 1982), 131] John Perry disputes both readings: “In fact, both positions seem to miss the heart of the illustration. According to Hodge, it is still true to say the Parthenon is built on marble ‘even if here and there a speck of sandstone’ is found. In other words, it is still true to say the Bible is inerrant even if ‘one sacred writer says ... twenty-four thousand, and another says that twenty-three thousand, men were slain.’ Such an error is so minor that it does not even ‘count’ as violating the Bible’s inerrancy. This interpretation of the illustration is further confirmed by Hodge’s next sentence in the passage, in which he states that even if there are no satisfactory explanations for these discrepancies, the Bible still meets his definition of inerrancy. What is more, it should be clear that Hodge was certainly not troubled by these errors—no more than would the builder of the Parthenon have feared that structure’s collapse due to specks of sandstone in its foundation. The difficulty Woodbridge and Rogers have in understanding Hodge seems due to the fact that in the time since Hodge wrote, inerrancy has come to mean only ‘detailed inerrancy.’ If, when Hodge described the Bible as ‘free from all error’ he had in mind, not detailed inerrancy, but some other form of inerrancy, his position becomes clear. However, contemporary writers, such as Woodbridge, insist that Hodge was a detailed inerrantist.”

whole picture, but will one day be explained. He did not accept the possibility that the 'errors' in the bible were real ones.⁴²

Warfield and A.A. Hodge, however, took the possibility of errors a little more seriously while proceeding to lay down certain impregnable conditions: in particular, the necessity of showing an error to have existed in the original autographs.⁴³ For them, the original autographs were inerrant. It was with the copyists, Hodge avers, that errors crept into the text:

There are in the Bible apparent discrepancies which can easily be reconciled by a little explanation; and there may be real contradictions in our copies, which may be owing to the mistakes of transcribers. Now, when such things are observed, there should not be a hasty conclusion that the book was not written by inspiration, but a careful and candid examination of the passages, and even when we cannot reconcile them, we should consider the circumstances under which these books have been transmitted to us, and the almost absolute certainty, that in so many ages, and in the process of such numerous transcriptions, mistakes must necessarily have occurred, and may have passed into all the copies extant.⁴⁴

The critic of the doctrine of biblical inerrancy could only prove her case by locating errors in the original texts. But since they were lost, the critic could never gain access to them in order to prove her case. Of course, the questions that need to be put to this are obviously those of how we can (1) call the *extant biblical texts* (the bible as we have it now) 'inerrant' or even reliable; and (2) what theological use it is, then, to even call the original texts inerrant. According to Hodge, the admission of the *inerrancy of the original autographs only* does not undermine the infallibility of the bible as it is currently possessed.

But, looking at the question from a different perspective, the crux for Warfield and A.A. Hodge is, in any case, not so much how many errors can be found but the *nature* and

⁴² See Woodbridge, *Biblical Authority*, 130.

⁴³ In addition to the condition of original autographs, Warfield and Hodge demanded that four other criteria be met; namely, an error must be the professed intent of the author, it cannot be attributed to a difference in form as long as the same basic truth is conveyed; an alleged error, must be shown to be incapable of being harmonized with other statements; and it must be indisputable as opposed to a difficulty open to future resolution. Armed in this manner Warfield and Hodge were able to ward off the onslaught of all attackers. Historical and geographical errors fell to the first and fourth conditions. Internal inconsistencies, such as the place and phrasing of the Sermon on the Mountain in Matthew and Luke were disposed of under the second and third conditions. And so forth.

⁴⁴ A.A. Hodge, 'Review of Woods on Inspiration', *The Biblical Repertory and Theological Review* 3 (Jan. 1831), 10.

purpose of each biblical writing. After all, the liberal interpreters are not usually obsessed with the number of errors they can find. They may even shy away from the term “error” because it takes no account of the intent of the author.

- The *Telos* of Inspiration

Warfield, unlike other advocates of the divine inspiration of the scriptures, is attentive to the fact that it is not the scriptures themselves that are the end of divine revelation, but that they are a means to revelation’s end. They are, he says, “a mode of the redemptive revelation of God”.⁴⁵ They play

a part of the redemptive revelation of God; not merely as the record of the redemptive acts by which God is saving the world, but as itself one of these redemptive acts, having its own part to play in the great work of establishing and building up the kingdom of God.

Some Critical Questions About Inerrancy

Pinnock:⁴⁶

The inerrancy debate is not just a scholastic interchange on trivial questions stemming from overbelief. It is a struggle within conservative Protestantism to discover how best to respond to the challenge of modernity, and in particular its skeptical attitude toward the unique authority and relevance of Holy Scripture.

Indeed, there are two very practical reasons for the heated discussions and debates that have taken place on the issue – the *apologetic task* of displaying (to everyone of ‘sound’ mind and reason) the *universal* authority of the bible as scripture; and the *dogmatic task* of assuring the believer of the trustworthiness of the primary documents of the Christian faith.⁴⁷ The

⁴⁵ Warfield, ‘Inspiration’.

⁴⁶ Pinnock, 1978, 66.

⁴⁷ External authority in this case refers not just to an objective standard, but ultimately to the divine; rejection of external authority constitutes a sinful rejection of God’s authority in favour of one’s own. “Reason in its legitimate role submits to authority and accepts mysteries and even apparent paradoxes by faith when it is convinced on the basis of rational evidence that the authority is valid.” Indeed, without external authority, reason is crippled. For Warfield, “the authority must be infallible or it is not a supernatural authority, and if it is

important question, however, is how far it is a useful and appropriate way of describing the scriptures.

(1) The Logic of Inerrancy

(1a) *Vicious Logical Circularity*: This affects the apologetic manoeuvre – God does not lie and speaks a true Word; God inspires the biblical writers to tell the truth (2Tim. 3:16); and therefore the bible is truthful and free from error. Quite simply the atheist could not accept the premises, and therefore the conclusion – thus, there is no solid or foundational *external* basis on which to base biblical authority other than on the *basis of itself* (in other words, its reasons for being claimed to be authoritative are *internal* to the text and the tradition that accepts the authority of that text).

There is a sense in which this is to be expected – Christian theology is the explication of the logic of revelation, and revelation is self-authenticating. Consequently, someone like Warfield is concerned less with ‘proving’ the doctrine, and that on apriori grounds, than with discovering the doctrine inspiration aposteriori. Moreover, in a related point, the bible is *scripture* for a community of believers, those who have been touched by it. Inerrancy makes authority a theme articulatable *wholly without reference to scriptural performance* by this community. So Carl E. Braaten declares that

The result was the divinization of the biblical texts, the ascription of attributes which nearly rival the attributes of the Almighty. ... The authority of the Scriptures possess in orthodoxy is of an authoritarian kind, commanding blind faith and obedience. This is so because it is affirmed that they are to be believed not because of *what* they say, but purely *because* they say it. The Scriptures are endowed with causative authority.⁴⁸

This perspective, of course, then has trouble with placing the Holy Spirit in the process of opening the bible as authoritative scripture to contemporary readers. Colin E. Gunton observes that

not supernatural authority we are left in the uncertainty of our own relativity, and skepticism must at last reign in the domain of the intellect.”

⁴⁸ Braaten, 67.

much of the history of the doctrine of inspiration is in large measure an attempt to equate inspiration and revelation in such a way that the text in some way or other replaces or renders redundant the mediating work of the Spirit.⁴⁹

In contrast, Gunton continues,

the question of the revelatory authority of the Bible can be answered only in the light of a careful relating of that which the Bible gives, and that in the reader which responds.⁵⁰

(1b) *A Priori Deductive Logic*: In order to be apologetically convincing, therefore, grounds have to be sought *outside* of, or *external* to, the text. But, the actual logic of inerrancy, according to Pinnock in 1985, is itself dependent upon extra-biblical principles:

On the one hand, Warfield claimed to follow the inductive approach in arriving at his doctrine of Scripture and disowned a priori conceptions, but then, when he sought to define inspiration, he lapsed into strongly deductive arguments to prove why something that was inspired would have to be perfectly errorless. His powerful desire to see the Bible in a certain way overpowered the empirical support for his favored view. ... The deductive tendency that would see inerrancy as a necessary corollary of inspiration works against honestly facing up to the data, both in the case of the claims themselves and in respect of many of the phenomena of the text. What we have to say, instead, is that inerrancy is not precisely claimed by the Bible for itself and must be regarded as a possible implication no which persons disagree.⁵¹

(2) Historical Critical Considerations

The way that historical critical questions are asked and answered depends on the type of inerrancy being propounded –

- ‘Full inerrancy’ or ‘detailed inerrancy’ cannot accept the historical-critical methods as usable for an understanding of scripture [the bible is inerrant *in all matters* it speaks of – history, geography, science, ethics, theology]⁵²

⁴⁹ Gunton, 1995, 66.

⁵⁰ Gunton, 1995, 65. Loughlin, 48: “scripture as such only functions when embedded within a tradition of pious use it both informs and is informed by.”

⁵¹ Clark H. Pinnock, *The Scripture Principle* (London, et al.: Hodder & Stoughton, 1985), 58f.

⁵² Harold Lindsell claims that even though “the Bible is not a textbook on chemistry, astronomy, philosophy, or medicine [note that he does not mention ‘history’] ... when it speaks on matters having to do with these or any other subjects, the Bible does not lie to us. It does not contain any error of any kind” [Lindsell, 1976, 18].

- ‘Limited inerrancy’ – the methods are useful for less important or trivial matters only [scripture is inerrant only on those matters it professes to speak of – those things vital for salvation – e.g., theology, ethics, history].

There is often a rather tortuous attempt to ‘reconcile’ apparent contradictions and difficulties, lest they be seen as real [Garden of Eden; Temple cleansing; etc.], by supporters of biblical inerrancy.⁵³ Inerrancy has to work hard at, but has no inherent way of coping with, the diversity of biblical genres primarily because ‘inerrancy’, as will be argued below, is a category appropriate to *propositional* material (or statements of fact). Many of these attempts at harmonising the biblical materials are intended to retain a ‘high’ view of scripture that does justice to the Word spoken in scripture, while in practice they are reductionist (and by implication ‘low’ treatments of scripture) because they do not take enough account of the humanness of the texts (other accounts of inerrancy are not reductionist in this sense but are still reductionist in other senses, as will be seen below)⁵⁴ – context, language, conceptual borrowings, development, and so on. And, of course, it is these human authors that, so the theory goes, God was pleased to speak through – thus, theologically, the humanness of the authors is as important as the divine source of their inspiration.⁵⁵

(3) Propositions and (In)Errancy

⁵³ Perry: “the constraints of modern philosophy caused evangelicals to care so much about detailed inerrancy that all apparent difficulties must be reconciled, no matter how great the exegetical sacrifice.” [Perry, 2001, 29] Earlier in the paper Perry claimed this of Norman Geisler: “Geisler sees his ability to provide plausible explanations for these seeming errors as vital to defending the Bible’s authority.” [2] Perry equally complains that “Lindsell’s concern for inerrancy goes beyond his concern for its exegetical implications.”

⁵⁴ Kurt Anders Richardson: “The most curious reductionism performed upon scripture is conservative evangelical in type. While maintaining robust soteriological and miraculous claims for the scriptures the purpose of theological exposition is confined to historical limits in the effort to combat naturalist historicism as well as spiritualized readings of the text. This results in a kind of ‘supernaturalist historicism.’” [‘Blessed Rage for a Supernatural Text: The Doctrine of Inspiration and the Religious Use of Scripture’, http://home.apu.edu/CTRF/papers/2001_papers/kurt.html]

⁵⁵ Inerrancy and literal interpretation have often gone hand and hand as mutually reinforcing. So Gallup polling in 1990, for example, revealed that more Americans as a whole (31%) believe that “the Bible is the actual word of God and is to be taken literally, word for word” than believe (24%) that “the Bible is the inspired word of God. It contains no errors, but some verses are to be taken symbolically rather than literally.” [George Gallup, Jr., and Robert Bezilla, *The Role of the Bible in American Society* (Princeton: Princeton Religious Research Center, 1990), 6] Among evangelicals in the USA, a more recent survey of *Christianity Today* readers showed that 70% held that “if we believe in an inerrant Scripture, we must take the creation stories of Genesis 1 and 2 as literal history,” and 63% believed that “creation science is a legitimate scientific theory that ought to be taught in schools on an equal footing with standard approaches to biology and geology.” [Unpublished *Christianity Today* readership survey report, Sept. 14, 1992, cited in Noll, 231f.]

(3a) *Observing Genres*: ‘Inerrancy’ is, a misleading concept that is not very revealing of what the scriptures are. Indeed, where it misleads is in the manner of its conceptuality – it applies to propositional statements (statements of ‘fact’), and misapplied to other kinds of statements. So inerrancy-talk is already making a limiting prejudgment about what kind of thing scripture is – a sourcebook of true statements.

The Calvinist ‘Federal theology’ of Johannes Coccejus (1669), for example, read the bible as a book of history and a series of interconnected covenants, and thus the authority of the bible rests on the meaning of the historical events which the bible reports.⁵⁶ The authoritative aspect of the bible, then, is its “stateable content” [Kelsey, 1975, 29], more specifically albeit not exclusively, the doctrines it teaches. And “believing the Bible” came to be linked most importantly with believing the doctrines or the history that such thinkers concluded the bible itself teaches.

The Bible [in this perspective] is to be taken as authority not because of *what* it says, or because of the transforming *effect* it has on human life, but simply because its words are identified without qualification with God’s words.⁵⁷

In this, however, the scripture becomes but one more singular text, the (literal) meaning of which is transparent and singular also which is understood as its historical reference, in a wholly positivistic manner. As Hans Frei argues, this represents the modern invention of the literal sense as *purely* referring to a historical domain, which, as such, is accessible only by an extra-biblical historical science.⁵⁸ Loughlin argues that “From the eighteenth century onwards, scripture will increasingly be considered a querulous site wherein to find the remains of what really happened; but what *really happened* is known to science, not scripture.”⁵⁹ And it was then that serious doubts were raised about the reliability of scripture to tell us anything about the historical (scripture came to be seen as distorting the

⁵⁶ Others seem to attribute to the bible a view of it being a kind of inerrant/infallible *sourcebook* of doctrine and ethics, as if all we need to do is learn to read the bible and, ‘hey presto’, the Truth falls out of it. So R. Albert Mohler, Jr., President of the Southern Baptist Seminary, argues that “we know that God is a God of truth, and that He has given us right answers to the most critical issues of our faith and life. Our task is to bring our thinking in line with the biblical revelation.” [‘When We Talk About Heresy . . . Let’s Be Honest’, <http://www.sbts.edu/mohler/FidelitasRead.php?article=fidel029>]

⁵⁷ Migliore, 44.

⁵⁸ Hans Frei, *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative: a Study in Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century Hermeneutics* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1974), 75-85.

⁵⁹ Loughlin, 47.

past). This form of textual reductionism, then, ironically bore the seeds of the liberal historical critical method within itself.⁶⁰ Moreover, Donald Bloesch points out against the inerrantism of Norman Geisler, that theologically “Such a position actually serves to undermine biblical authority by making the truth of Scripture contingent on scientific corroboration”.⁶¹

Martin Scharlemann, former president of Concordia Seminary after its split, sent shock waves through the Missouri Synod in 1958 by raising the basic issue and suggesting an alternate perspective on the question of what the scriptures do. “An insistence on the inerrancy of Scripture,” he stated, “oversimplifies the whole process of communication.” Biblical revelation is given on an “I-Thou” basis, and in many different literary forms, and for this reason “to talk about inerrancy in this kind of communication is to reduce the Bible to less than it proposes to be.”⁶² ‘Inerrancy’, he is here arguing, reduces the bible to one specific

⁶⁰ Grenz: “Christians thinkers did not set out to silence scripture. Rather, the Bible’s loss of voice came as an unintended result of well-intentioned persons who sought to recover the Bible and save theology in the wake of the Enlightenment. The irony of this situation is that in a sense scripture caught laryngitis from its would-be physicians.” [in Grenz and Franke, 2001, 58f.] Liberal theologians, for example, resulted in the bible no longer being “read as text but as record – as an inspiring chronicle of human religious experience. Hence, more important than the text itself were the religious experiences – the encounters with God – that lay behind the text and to which the biblical writings bore witness. As this shift in focus happened, any idea of the biblical *text* as such being ‘voice’ soon became eclipsed by the apparent Babel of the variegated intonations lying behind the text.” [60] Grenz sees “the conservative alternative” as equally guilty since theologians of this persuasion “differed from their liberal colleagues only in degree, not in substance. These folks simply had a higher estimation of the amount of the ‘real history’ that was reflected in the biblical documents. Like the quest for the religious experiences that lay under the text, the attempts to reconstruct the underlying history treated the Bible as a problem rather than a solution. As a result, the voice of scripture was stifled as the Bible became the means to discover something more interesting than the text itself. In short, conservative biblical scholars often joined cause methodologically with their liberal colleagues, while differing radically with them over the results of that method.” [60f.] “What many apparently failed to see, however, is how their efforts actually could engender the opposite result. In effect, the scholastic theological agenda meant that the ongoing task of reading the Bible as text was superseded by the publication of the skilled theologian’s *magnum opus*. If the goal of theological inquiry was to extrapolate the system of propositions the divine Communicator had inscripturated in the pages of the text, it would seem that systematic theology could – and eventually would – make the Bible superfluous. Why should the sincere believer continue to read the Bible when biblical truth – correct doctrine – is more readily at hand in the latest systematic compilation offered by the skilled theologian? Why read, that is, for any reason except to determine for oneself that the theologian’s conclusions are indeed biblical truth – that this theologian had captured the one, true biblical system of doctrine?” [62f.]

⁶¹ Donald Bloesch, *Holy Scripture: Revelation, Inspiration, and Interpretation* (Downer’s Grove: IVP, 1994), 298. Richardson, 2001: “the text became a supernatural artefact, a resource for supernatural and therefore authoritative evidences of God’s true involvement in human history along with the distinct declaration of God’s will for humanity. This occurred much along the familiar lines of a scientific proposition, given the data of the text and the facts of proper understanding.” Richardson continues a little later in his paper, that evangelicalism “opted for dimensions of description that invariably boxed God into the very narrow criteria of knowledge it was trying to refute.”

⁶² Martin Scharlemann. ‘The Inerrancy of Scripture’, delivered to the faculty of Concordia Seminary and reprinted later in *Missouri Today* (May, 1969), 18-20. Under pressure, Scharlemann felt obliged to withdraw his views in 1962 and thus explains his succession to the presidency, a post which he later relinquished due to

model (the propositional) and misses much (indeed *most*) of what the bible is and does as *scripture*.

Richard J. Coleman argue that

There have been long periods in the history of the church when biblical inerrancy has not been a critical question. It has in fact been noted that only in the last two centuries can we legitimately speak of a formal doctrine of inerrancy.⁶³

Kevin Vanhoozer, however, makes a valid point by warning that “it is important to remember that doctrines arise only when there is a need for them.” Yet what Coleman is hinting at is usefully developed in John Perry’s article – that the inerrancy principle is ‘modern’ not only in the sense that it is an articulation of the notion of biblical authority for a modern age with modern concerns, but that, and more radically, that it is the *product* of modern philosophical developments and therefore a modern *misunderstanding of what biblical authority is* and entails.⁶⁴

(3b) *The Being and Act of Revelation*: With accounts of revelation being dominated by models of revelation as propositional inerrancy comes to separate what God gives (revelation) from God’s own Self. God’s Being is not, so to speak, *in* God’s Act. The theological consequences of this are: firstly, that God remains in some way apart from and behind the scriptural texts (*deus absconditus*); and secondly, that the text even comes to stand *in the place of* the God who is absent from it, and therefore ironically is accorded an exalted place of *being divine* for us (this has probably something to do with the understanding of the term ‘Word of God’ pre-eminently with the scriptures rather than primarily with the Incarnate One).⁶⁵

physical exhaustion. G. Earnest Wright: “The Bible does not present us with doctrine ... and the attempt to make it do so is to misuse it..” [*The God Who Acts* (London: SCM, 1952), 107]

⁶³ Coleman, 1975, 296.

⁶⁴ Perry: “modernity assumed that only those claims based directly on unquestionable foundations should be believed. This made it appear critical to evangelicals that the Bible meet this standard, that it qualify as an unquestionable foundation *according to modernity’s definition of ‘unquestionable.’* ... The evangelical inerrancy cannot be *resolved*. But it can be *dissolved*.” [Perry, 2001, 3]

⁶⁵ Warfield’s Christological emphasis operates as something of a critique of this particularly theologically problematic account of inerrancy: “Christ Jesus alone is its chief cornerstone. He is its only basis; he, its only head; and he alone has authority in his Church.” [‘The Authority and Inspiration of the Scriptures’] The problem, though, is that he still tends to reduce the scriptures to facts and law, and thus it has a particular kind of (rather externalised) authority: “All the authority of the apostles stands behind the Scriptures, and all the authority of Christ behind the apostles. The Scriptures are simply the law-code which the law-givers of the

(4) Christological Considerations

While some accounts of biblical inerrancy seem almost to deny the human input altogether (and are therefore prone to a form of *docetism*) many are keen to recognise it, and an illustration is then usually drawn with the incarnation. Just as the humanity of Christ (Christ as man) was enabled to be sinless by the Godness of Christ (Christ as divine), the writing of the human authors was enabled to be kept sinless/free-from-error by the divine inspiration. However, in response it should be recognised that the absolute sinlessness of Christ was a particular case, and that consequently a direct parallel with is not possible without a further supportive theological step – that step is provided by the doctrine of providence [but why, it could be asked, did these writers, encountering God’s revelation as they claimed to have done, remain wholly obedient to the divine leading, whereas humanity in Adam, encountering God’s revelation in the Garden, did not?].

(5) The Doctrine of Providence

God’s governance takes on several forms in the formation of the scriptures:

- (1) the authors were inspired to record the divine record
- (2) God preserved the original record and caused it to be collected and canonised
- (3) the canon was preserved, and the original texts were preserved as far as was necessary for salvation [modern textual criticism can both do much to reconstruct the original text and demonstrate that the manuscripts that earlier translations of the bible were based on were very close to the originals, apart from the odd *trivial* difference].

But what kind of doctrine of providence is this? In the biblical narratives there is frequently a strong sense that the sinfulness of humankind has disrupted the correspondence (or the obedience) of human action with divine action. And yet this account of inerrancy has to make its case by strongly advocating that these human writers were utterly obedient to the divine leading (‘divine superintendence’ is often the phrase used by ‘inerrantists’).

Moreover, there is something odd in suggestions that inerrancy is important today when the text that is currently possessed (and further corrupted by translation) is only *infallible* but not *inerrant*.⁶⁶

Finally, this is an account of the providential guidance of God in the matter of scriptural formation that is read into the process of the biblical composition, collection and canonisation so as to maintain a theory of an inerrant text (and that theory itself rests upon, at the very most, the rather flimsy and specially pleaded reading of the 2Tim 3:16 text).

What this all amounts to is something approaching (and in the accounts of some inerrantists, falling into) an equation of revelatory authority and control, of power over contingency to rightly order/control the outcome. The question is whether this is appropriate of the God of the *crucified* Jesus (we will ask what this entails later in the course). N.T. Wright's observations suggest that authority-talk needs to be rethought with respect to the manifest authority of God.

We discover, as we look at the Bible itself, that God's model of authority is not like that of the managing director over the business, not like that of the governing body over the college, not like that of the police or the law courts who have authority over society. There is a more subtle thing going on. God is not simply organizing the world in a certain way such as we would recognize from any of those human models. He is organizing it—if that's the right word at all—through Jesus and in the power of the Spirit. And the notion of God's authority, which we have to understand before we understand what we mean by the authority of scripture, is based on the fact that this God is the loving, wise, creator, redeemer God. And his authority is his sovereign exercise of *those powers*; his love and wise creations and redemption. ... God is not a celestial information service to whom you can apply for answers on difficult questions. Nor is he a heavenly ticket agency to whom you can go for moral or doctrinal permits or passports to salvation. He does not stand

⁶⁶ In this connection, it is somewhat ironic to hear Warfield rhetorically ask: "When we give due place in our thoughts to the universality of the providential government of God, to the minuteness and completeness of its sway, and to its invariable efficacy, we may be inclined to ask what is needed beyond this mere providential government to secure the production of sacred books which should be in every detail absolutely accordant with the Divine will." ['Inspiration']

outside the human process and merely comment on it or merely issue you with certain tickets that you might need. Those views would imply either a deist's God or a legalist's God, not the God who is revealed in Jesus Christ and the Spirit. And it must be said that a great many views of biblical authority imply one or other of those sub-Christian alternatives.

Authority is not the power to control people, and crush them, and keep them in little boxes. The church often tries to do that—to tidy people up. Nor is the Bible as the vehicle of God's authority meant to be information for the legalist. We have to apply some central reformation insights to the concept of authority itself. It seems to me that the Reformation, once more, did not go quite far enough in this respect, and was always in danger of picking up the mediaeval view of authority and simply continuing it with, as was often said, a paper pope instead of a human one. Rather, God's authority vested in scripture is designed, as all God's authority is designed, to liberate human beings, to judge and condemn evil and sin in the world in order to set people free to be fully human. That's what God is in the business of doing. That is what his authority is there *for*. And when we use a shorthand phrase like 'authority of scripture' that is what we ought to be meaning. It is an authority with this shape and character, this purpose and goal.

The concept of inerrancy so secures the continuity of the tradition that the community of readers become subject to its authority. Yet at what cost? The fact that inerrancy can sound a dominating and passifying score suggests there may be a serious theological problem with it and the deafening loudness of its demands. And so with critical exploration it becomes indeed distinctly possible to argue that it does underplay theological elements that should create complexifying discordances to its perceived straightforwardly harmonious sense of its own legitimacy. As such the concept in large measure struggles to constrain the idolatrous freezing of tradition as a deposit of presence without reserve, making for a muscular conception of God (able to overcome, set aside, ignore..., the authors' frailties in order to secure the pure Word) and purified eschatological moment that leads to its possessors wielding a muscular and eschatologically purified (at least in terms of the *propositional*

component) conception of the continuity of their voices with God's own in relation to the world. How could it function in any way otherwise when it practically imposes a singular meaning on the range of diverse material, and thus refuses to be attentive to diversity, culture and the humanity involved in the witness of the scriptures?

In this way, then, inerrancy comes to function as something like an ideology – inattentive to its own contingency, and stabilising the believer's voice, advancing the power of groups by subverting the potential for other groups being able to make truth-claims. In this regard, scripture becomes a weapon of power rather than the cross-shaped guide in radical self-transgression and self-dispossession. Consequently, it takes its place within the models Migliore finds theologically distasteful:

Thus, while Christian theology takes issue with the Enlightenment assumption that the only true authority is that of the independent and isolated self..., it nevertheless engages in its own critique of oppressive authority, including versions of such authority that appear in doctrines of Scripture.⁶⁷

The doctrine of inerrancy comes to look distinctly like the provision of the kind of muscular *securing* of authority against the vicissitudes of historical contingency, human frailty and so on, and while it frequently proves to be attractive as an absolute guarantee that parallels certain notions of papal infallibility, it remains theologically questionable as a result – and therefore, the provision, in this instance, of seriously false comfort.⁶⁸ In this respect, whatever the attention given to claims for the presence of the humanity of the writers, there is a significant sense in which much of our humanity has been problematically displaced (and our sinfulness prematurely made absent). Whatever is meant by 'inspiration' and 'authority' in relation to the scriptures it cannot entail a denial of our very time-bound, and fragile humanity.

Conclusion

⁶⁷ Migliore, 43. 42: "Occasioned by the modern crisis of authority, but under the primary impulse of the gospel, it has been a major effort of modern theologians to divest theology of authoritarian ways of thinking about God, the church – and Scripture."

⁶⁸ Migliore, 44: "a church with an infallible teaching office or an infallible Bible no longer allows Scripture to work as liberating word in its own way." Colin Gunton: "Since Hegel's time, theology has been dominated by quests for different forms of immediacy." [A *Brief Theology of Revelation*, 3]

Interpretation and authority questions can never be too far apart. Yet, in its trying to separate them, ‘inerrancy’ often (but not always) inspires almost a ‘take-it-or-leave-it’ mentality. Anthony and Richard Hanson tell of an early Gnostic writer, Apelles, who on discovering that all the animals known to humanity could not possibly fit into Noah’s Ark if it was of the dimensions recorded, drew the conclusion that “The story is an invention; therefore Scripture is wrong.” [Cited in Hanson and Hanson, 1980, 40]

Many inerrantists have a more subtle and sophisticated scriptural hermeneutic (way of interpreting) than that *in practice* (a ‘detailed’ or ‘full inerrantist’ may have problems here though) – Vanhoozer, for instance, distinguishes “literal truth from ‘literalistic truth’” [the Apelles example would then apply to the latter but not to the former].

And yet *in its theory* inerrancy creates a certain impression of what the scriptures are and what they do. *So, as well as the various theological problems that it seems to build on, ‘inerrancy’ is a misleading concept that is not very revealing of what the scriptures do.* Indeed, as mentioned earlier, where it misleads is in its conceptuality, and a limited conceptuality it is with respect to the variety of genres within the bible – it “refers to a central and crucial property of the Bible, namely, its utter truthfulness”. [Vanhoozer] In other words, it applies to propositional statements (statements of ‘fact’, statements that can be true or false), and can then only be misapplied to other kinds of statements. So inerrancy-talk is already making a limiting prejudgment about what kind of thing scripture is – a sourcebook of true statements/information (doctrinal and/or historical). Vanhoozer makes this point in the following manner:

In the final analysis what was new about the Princetonians’ view of Scripture was not their understanding of the Bible’s truthfulness but rather their particular view of language and interpretation, in which the meaning of the biblical text was the fact – historical or doctrinal – to which it referred. Their proof-texting was more a product of their view of language and interpretation than of their doctrine of Scripture.

For Vanhoozer, then, “The question of meaning should precede the question of truth.” Put another way, we need to understand what kind of literature we are reading at any particular moment before we even attempt to ask about its potential ‘inerrancy’, facticity, or truthfulness.⁶⁹ Questions of the revelatory authority of the bible can be answered only in the

⁶⁹ He continues: “The older term to express biblical authority – infallibility – remains useful. Infallibility means

light of a careful relating of that which the bible gives, and that in which the reader responds.⁷⁰ In other words, we cannot appropriately impose a ready-made notion of authority to the scriptures and still claim to be speaking of the authority of the scriptures.⁷¹ As Gunton wisely counsels,

we should seek not to impose some alien form upon them, but to take seriously the form in which they reach us. ... If, then, we are to understand the texts as they have come down to us, this must be the primary focus of our attention.⁷²

But the problem is deeper than one of mere mistaking the diversity of literature types within the scriptures – while there are different types of models of inerrancy, they tend to assume a certain understanding of God, text and world that is theologically problematic. In so doing, and in seeking to locate the authority and nature of scripture in some realm that does not make good sense of the text, the implication is that doctrines of inerrancy in this form *do not take the bible seriously*.

The problem with all such solutions as to how to use the Bible is that they belittle the Bible and exalt something else. Basically they imply—and this is what I mean when I say that they offer too low a view of scripture—that God has, after all, given us the wrong sort of book and it is our job to turn it into the right sort of book by engaging in these hermeneutical moves, translation procedures or whatever. They

that Scripture never fails in its purpose. The Bible makes good on all its claims, including its truth claims. God's Word never leads astray. It is important to recall that language may be used for many different purposes, and not to state facts only. Inerrancy, then, is a subset of infallibility: when the Bible's purpose is to make true statements, it does this too without fail. Yet the Bible's other speech acts – warnings, promises, questions – are infallible too." Bloesch pushes this further by noting the variations in the bible's presentation of 'truth'. "For moderns the true is that which can be empirically verified. ... The biblical conception of truth makes a place for the factual but insists that the factual neither exhaust the meaning of truth nor constitutes the essence of truth." [Bloesch, 1994, 191] Vanhoozer's and Bloesch's perspective call into question that of, for example, Norman Geisler who unguardedly announces that "One can safely say that the normal and consistent New Testament usage of 'truth' is of truth in the cognitive, propositional sense [A]ny passage where truth is used in reference to a person can be understood as meaning a person who *speaks* the truth or one whose *word* can be trusted." [Norman Geisler, 'The Concept of Truth in the Inerrancy Debate', *Bibliotheca Sacra* 137 (1980), 328, 332]

⁷⁰ Colin Gunton: "much of the history of the doctrine of inspiration is in large measure an attempt to equate inspiration and revelation in such a way that the text in some way or other replaces or renders redundant the mediating work of the Spirit." [*A Brief Theology of Revelation: The 1993 Warfield Lectures* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1995), 66]

⁷¹ Brian J. Walsh: "The Bible is only received authoritatively in terms of a certain view of authority that we bring to the text. ... It is too often the case that what is authoritative is not really the Bible at all but the particular theology that is brought to the Bible and rules magisterially over the text." ['Reimaging Biblical Authority', *Christian Scholar's Review* 26 (1996), 206-220 (209)]

⁷² Gunton, 1985, 135.

imply that the real place where God has revealed himself—the real locus of authority and revelation—is, in fact, somewhere else; somewhere else in the past in an event that once took place, or somewhere else in a timeless sphere which is not really hooked into our world at all out touches it tangentially, or somewhere in the present in ‘my own experience’, or somewhere in the future in some great act which is yet to come. ... My conclusion, then, is this: that the regular views of scripture and its authority which we find not only outside but also inside evangelicalism fail to do justice to what the Bible actually is—a book, an ancient book, an ancient narrative book. They function by tuning that book into something else, and by implying thereby that God has, after all, given us the wrong sort of book. This is a low doctrine of inspiration, whatever heights are claimed for it and whatever words beginning with ‘in-’ are used to label it.⁷³

⁷³ N.T. Wright, ‘How Can the Bible Be Authoritative?’, *Vox Evangelica* 21 (1991), 7-32, available http://www.ntwrightpage.com/Wright_Bible_Authoritative.htm, accessed 18-01-07. It is clear that Warfield, for instance, wanted to avoid past-centered approaches that do not take seriously the presence of the canonical text: “Thus in every age God speaks directly to every Christian heart, and gives us abounding safety to our feet and divine security to our souls. And thus, instead of a mere record of a revelation given in the past, we have the ever-living word of God; instead of a mere tradition however guarded, we have what we have all learned to call in a unique sense ‘the Scriptures.’” [‘The Authority and Inspiration of the Scriptures’]

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