

INERRANCY

Joseph W. Donahue

Preface

Following a one-year internship in North Carolina, I returned to my last year of study at Reformed Theological Seminary. The year was 1980, and as a student of theology under the care of presbytery, I had attended some of the most turbulent meetings our Synod had witnessed in many years.

It was in that setting that I was faced with an assignment for a course in Systematic Theology that allowed me to look more closely at the issue that was tearing our Synod apart. The assignment was to write a research paper, and my choice was the doctrine of Scripture, specifically the question of inerrancy. Considerable effort was put into the project, as was reflected in the length of the paper (nearly 40 pages).

With concerns that were raised during the 2007 meeting of Synod the thought occurred to me to pull it out of moth balls, bring it up to date, and make it available to members of my church, and perhaps others, who were perplexed over the controversy. The events that unfolded at the 2008 meeting, along with my appointment to the Erskine board, were further confirmation. For those who read, I trust that you will be better informed, and for those who have been *misinformed*, I hope that at least some obstacles to the acceptance of this teaching will be removed.

Joseph Donahue
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Introduction

“The Bible,” remarks Amy Orr-Ewing, “is a controversial book that evokes both devotion and derision.” In examining the challenges that post-modernism poses to Holy Scripture, she notes that ours is a culture that suspects all authority and rejects all meta-narratives. In fact, one would have to conclude that it is overtly *hostile* to authority. In illustrating this point, the author related two personal experiences. The first was the reaction of a student to a sermon in a large Oxford church, where, in private, he “tore into his host, shouting and swearing in anger at what he had heard.” His objection: the fact that anyone would have asserted himself as forcefully and persuasively about an idea. From his perspective, authority was perceived as a ‘malevolent force.’

The second illustration came from a questioner after an address she gave at the West Wing of the White House. The question was whether Islam could rightfully be called a peaceful religion. In reflecting on the experience, and the present climate in the West, she observed that “The globalized situation we find ourselves in means that post-modern questions of textual authority may well be asked interchangeably of the Bible and the Qur’an.” The term ‘fundamentalist’, whether applied to Christian or Muslim, evokes a negative reaction almost anywhere it is used. But “rather than exposing the pluralist dream for what it is,” she concluded, “9/11 and other terrorist activities have simply confirmed in the minds of many post-moderns that any serious commitment to a holy book is a dangerous thing.”¹

Indeed, ours is a generation that questions, and more often than not, *rejects* authority. Sadly, the mindset found within the church differs little from that of the world, as George Barna can readily attest. When one considers the numerous problems that confront the mainline denominations, it soon becomes apparent that many can be traced back to a breakdown of authority. The problem, however, is not with respect to authority structures within the church itself – bumbling bureaucracy, lack of communication between leaders and church members, or even defiance against the policies of the church. It is at a much more fundamental level.

In considering the gender issues that plague many sectors of the church, for instance – from women’s ordination, to the ordination of homosexuals and same-sex marriage – one finds a shifting of standards that corresponds largely to that within the culture at large. In spite of the fact that lip service is often given the Bible, the discussions that have taken place over the past few decades have seen its authority blatantly challenged and utterly disregarded.

¹ Amy Orr-Ewing, “Postmodern Challenges to the Bible,” in *Beyond Opinion: Living the Faith We Defend*, ed. Ravi Zacharias (Thomas Nelson, Nashville, 2007), Pp. 3, 6, 13.

The world finds itself in the dilemma of being without a fixed standard, a source of absolute authority, but the church has historically looked to the Scriptures as the Word of God, and therefore as possessing divine authority. While we may look to creeds and confessions for guidance, their authority is derived, and therefore secondary. That of the Bible, however, is primary.

But this perception came to be challenged, and the conclusion was eventually drawn that it differs little from any other book. Actually, the situation has been complicated because some insist that they believe, often very sincerely, that in some sense the Bible is the Word of God, but question its total truthfulness. In so doing they have unknowingly undermined its authority.

This compels us to ask, wherein lies its authority? The authority of the Bible is due to the fact that it has God as its ultimate author, and inasmuch as it does, it is true (to state it positively), and infallible or inerrant (speaking negatively). It is in this respect that its authority has been challenged. Either the truthfulness of the Bible has been blatantly denied, or it has been redefined so as to make it meaningless.

At the 2008 meeting of the General Synod of the Associate Reformed Presbyterian Church many were shocked to see an old controversy, one that was thought to have been resolved nearly thirty years ago, reintroduced. The inerrancy of Scripture was heatedly debated in the late 1970s, but recent developments have brought it back into the spotlight. Following considerable debate, the Synod affirmed that the Bible, “being God-breathed, is the Word of God written, infallible in all that it teaches, and inerrant in the original manuscripts.” As the ‘official’ position of the church, it was determined that this statement should be incorporated into the ordination vows for those holding office in the church, as well as the *Manual of Authorities and Duties* for Synod employees.

We rejoice in this affirmation, lamenting only that circumstances were such that it had to be made. The importance of this issue cannot be overstated; much is at stake (this point will be developed further in the conclusion).

The thesis of this paper is that the Bible is the infallible (that is, *inerrant*) Word of the Living God, that the Church has always believed as much, and that this is the teaching set forth in the Scriptures, and by Christ Himself. Before actually attempting to prove this, however, a few other matters need to be discussed.

The Historic Context

First of all we need to place the discussion in its historical context. This, hopefully, will help to clarify the true nature of the debate. The issue has been somewhat obscured because a false backdrop has been erected, the appearance given that hairs are being split over matters of little importance, or that it is merely a matter of semantics, or that in speaking of inerrancy, we are imposing new and divisive ideas on the church.

The controversy is not new; it did not appear out of the blue. It first surfaced over a hundred years ago, and was reintroduced in the 1970s. Gordon Clark wrote that the “battle for the Bible in this 20th century (plus the previous decade) may be schematized into three periods.”¹ He went on to break them down into the Briggs era and his expulsion from the Presbyterian Church (1893); that of the Auburn Affirmation (1924);² and the then present phase which centered around personalities like Jack Rogers and Harold Lindsell.³

Rogers himself offers the following observations:

“Between the years 1892 to 1926, the consensus of the Princeton Theology prevailed in the Presbyterian Church U.S.A. as the official interpretation of Scripture in the Westminster Confession. Since 1927 this interpretation has not been officially binding. Yet it has never been officially repudiated. Rather, it has been largely ignored. There has been no restudy of Scripture in the Westminster Confession since the literary debate between B. B. Warfield and C. A. Briggs near the end of the nineteenth century. The aftermath of that debate has left the impression that the Princeton Theology and the Westminster Confession can rightly be identified.”⁴

¹ Gordon Clark, The Concept of Biblical Authority (Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, Phillipsburg, New Jersey, 1980), p. 1.

² The *Auburn Affirmation* was a document composed in 1924 by a committee of eleven individuals, and signed by 1274 ministers of the PCUSA. It challenged the right of the General Assembly to impose the ‘Five Fundamentals’ as a test of orthodoxy on its members.

³ Jack Rogers was Professor of Theology at San Francisco Theological Seminary, serving previously as Professor of Philosophical Theology at Fuller Theological Seminary. He also served a term as Moderator of the General Assembly of the PCUSA. Harold Lindsell served on the faculty at Northern Baptist Seminary (Chicago), and Fuller Theological Seminary before succeeding Carl Henry as editor of *Christianity Today*. He also served a term as moderator of the Southern Baptist Convention. Both of these names were prominent in the debate in the 1970s.

⁴ Jack Bartlett Rogers, Scripture in the Westminster Confession (Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, Grand Rapids, 1967), p. 437.

We should note that by ‘Princeton Theology’ he is referring to the doctrine of inerrancy which was articulated at Princeton at the end of the nineteenth century, and had been adopted by the PCUSA.

This is where Rogers comes in. Picking up where Briggs left off, he contends that inerrancy is *not* a viable position, and that it was not the historical view of the Church (at least as reflected in the Westminster Standards). Rogers, however, is joined by others calling themselves ‘evangelical’ who share his views, including a number of well known individuals and scholars.¹ He is a key figure in the debate, however, and his work commands considerable respect. John Gerstner even comments that, “the most extensive and scholarly study ever made of the Confession is undoubtedly Jack Roger's massive, erudite, able, and influential study. . . .”² Certainly it stands out with that of B.B. Warfield as *one* of the most important. One might contend that, with it, the controversy that raged at the beginning of the twentieth century had been resurrected.

The question, *What occasioned the debate*, is important for our understanding. H.D. McDonald, in his Theories of Revelation: An Historical Study, contends that the issue first arose in the conflict between science and religion. He writes:

“The second half of the nineteenth century witnessed a change within the Church in its valuation of the Bible. Prior to the year 1860, the idea of an infallible inerrant Scripture was the prevailing view. . . . Apart from the Quakers, ‘the doctrine of unerring literal inspiration was almost everywhere held in the strictest form.’ Such indeed was the view of the Bible before the change of zeitgeist brought about by the appearance of Darwin's evolutionism.”

Due to the impact of science, the general esteem of the Bible was undermined. As he explained, “The plain fact is that the idea of an inerrant Bible was being discarded.”³

Rogers too has something to say about the origins of the debate. Quoting from E.D. Morris, he writes, “There are no traces of debate upon this question in the Westminster Assembly, nor is it probable that the hypothesis of errancy find advocates of any

prominence on British soil prior to the rise of English Deism in the succeeding century.” Rogers himself goes on to assert that the problem was formed in the beginnings of the

¹ The propriety of using the term ‘evangelical’ to identify many of these, however, is questionable, and has been called into question by both liberals and conservatives. Gerald Sheppard in an article in the Union Seminary Quarterly Review spoke of the difficulty in being able to distinguish their ‘evangelicalism’ from neo-orthodoxy. “The paradox that Barth, Brunner, Cullmann, and Eichrodt provide more attractive models at Fuller for an ‘evangelical’ approach to Scripture than do the fundamentalists . . . has yet to find resolution.” USQR Vol. XXII, no. 2 Winter ‘77, Pp. 89, 90.

² John Gerstner, “The View of the Bible Held by the Church” in Inerrancy, ed. Norman Geisler (Zondervan Publishing House, Grand Rapids, 1979), p. 397.

³ H.D. McDonald, Theories of Revelation: An Historical Study 1700-1960 (Baker Book House, Grand Rapids, 1979), p. 197

scientific era following the Westminster Assembly, and particularly in relation to 18th century deism.¹

Whereas in Great Britain the controversy was introduced by a frontal attack from science and philosophy, its presence in North America came through much more subtle means. It was largely through higher criticism that we were first exposed to it, and the personality mostly responsible for doing so was C.A. Briggs. The problem was brought to the attention of American Presbyterians through the case of W. Robertson Smith in the Free Church of Scotland. Smith, who had been appointed as professor of Old Testament at Aberdeen in 1870, stirred controversy through his writings, especially in the views he expressed about the Bible.

American Church historian Lefferts Loetscher explains that the issue was brought before the Church here through the Presbyterian Review which was co-edited by Briggs (who represented the 'New School' tradition) on the one hand, and by men such as Hodge and Warfield on the other (who represented the "Old School" tradition).² Between the years 1881 and 1889 a series of eight articles were published, which, as Loetscher points out, "first brought home to the Presbyterian Church - and to some other areas of evangelical America also - the higher criticism." Two other vehicles through which he expressed his views were a book titled Whither (published in 1889), and in his inaugural address in 1891. In the latter, which was titled "The Authority of Holy Scripture," he seemed to equate the value of the authority of the Bible with that of the Church and human reason. There was much uncertainty as to what was actually intended. He went on to list six 'barriers' to the operation of divine authority in the Bible, among which were verbal inspiration, inerrancy, miracles, and predictive prophecy.

The result of having openly expressed his views as he did was that in 1893 he was charged with heresy and removed from the Presbyterian ministry. The net effect of the debate and resulting actions of the church was that the doctrine of inerrancy became the official position of the Church (PCUSA).³

In the last quarter of the 20th century the issue was resurrected in North America within a number of churches and institutions, with resolution for some coming only by withdrawing from their church communions and forming denominations that shared a common conviction about the Bible. The formation of the Presbyterian Church in

America is a notable example. Others, however, chose to remain within their denominations with the conviction that change was possible. These included, among others, the Southern Baptist and Missouri Synod Lutherans. But the Associate Reformed Presbyterian Church was not to be excluded in the discussion.

¹ Rogers, *ibid*, p. 305.

² Lefferts A. Loetscher, The Broadening Church (University of Pennsylvania Press, Philadelphia, 1964), Pp. 28-30.

³ see Loetscher, *ibid*, Pp. 56, 61, and 94.

At the 1977 meeting of the General Synod the Florida Presbytery memorialized Synod to “require that those teaching Bible (at Erskine College and Seminary) will personally affirm and teach the Scriptures as the infallible and inerrant Word of God.”¹ This was adopted by the synod. It would seem that the conservative cause had gained a real victory! This was not to go uncontested, however, as was soon to be found out when the Erskine board of trustees met in July. The report of the Board, as printed in the Associate Reformed Presbyterian, opened with the following remarks: “The Erskine College board of trustees July 15 accepted actions of the General Synod ‘as being advice and recommendations’ rather than directions, and promise to ‘consider each of these recommendations upon its merits within the due framework of the board’s process.’” Further, the board voted to express to the Synod “its inability to comply with the directive to require that those teaching Bible will personally affirm and teach the Scriptures as the infallible and inerrant Word of God.” A statement of the seminary faculty to the board stated in part:

“the theory that the Bible is inerrant is only one of several views of Scriptural inspiration, and adherence to this particular theory is not a necessary consequence of subscription to the standards of the ARP Church, and the view that the scripture is inerrant is not a theory which is personally held to or affirmed by any member of this faculty.”²

The faculty of the College also presented a statement to the Board with members of the departments of Bible, Religion, and Philosophy saying that to insist on inerrancy “is idolatry, the worship of the work of our own minds.” With all of this having been said and done, at least two inflammatory issues had been ignited and would plague the Church for years to come: that of the relationship of the Seminary and College to the Church (its Board of Directors having affirmed its autonomy), as well as that of the doctrine and its application in the church itself.

At the meeting of the 1978 General Synod Florida Presbytery again presented a memorial. Whereas that of the previous year pertained primarily to teachers at the college and Seminary, this one went beyond that and included everyone in office! It stated: “We affirm the historical position of our Church which is that the Scriptures are without error in all that they affirm . . . ,” and that the second ordination vow be revised to read, “Do you reaffirm your belief in the Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments, as originally given, to be without error in all that they affirm?”¹ The issue was debated on the floor of the assembly and a substitute motion was adopted that postponed it indefinitely.

¹ Minutes of Synod, 1977. Compare with the 1880 Assembly of the PCUSA - “At a period when acknowledged religious teachers, holding high positions in Christian institutions in Europe are disseminating doctrines which are calculated to undermine the authority of the Holy Scriptures, we deem it appropriate, that this General Assembly urge upon the professors in our seminaries, to see to it that they do, by no means, even indirectly, give countenance to these fundamental errors.” Loetscher, p. 28.

² The Associate Reformed Presbyterian, July 1977.

¹ Minutes of Synod, 1978.

Significant also was Synod's withdrawal of its application to NAPARC after having been repeatedly rejected because of uncertainty concerning the Church's stand on scripture.²

During debate some argued that in making their vows in the past, the term 'infallible' was adequate. "Why change it?" was the cry. The answer given by vice-moderator Reynolds Young was direct and to the point: "Simple affirmation of our traditional stand in adherence to the Westminster Standards is not sufficient because the definition of the word infallible has been changed."³

Misunderstandings or not, the issue was dead for another year - at least as far as the 1978 meeting of Synod was concerned. But much was to transpire during the course of the next twelve months! One was the arrival on the scene of an organization called the *Alliance of Loyal Laity* which published a newsletter to inform and involve the laity of the Church in the life of the church. Its origin was clearly prompted by the debate over inerrancy.

Another event was a meeting in February of that year which was intended to reconcile the two sides. Forty people participated - twenty representing each side - who had been selected by a committee directed by the Executive Board of Synod. A statement was adopted and signed by all but two, but was so general to be of no real help in resolving the issue.

A third matter of greater consequence was the bringing of charges against two members of the Erskine faculty by Rev. Tom Fincher. The charges, of course, pertained primarily to their position on Scripture. The two were cleared of the charges by Catawba Presbytery, which in turn brought charges against Rev. Fincher and his Session for, among other things, disrupting the peace of the Church. Rev. Fincher and his Session carried an appeal to the 1979 Synod, as well as a complaint against those he originally sought to prosecute. Synod voted (128-101) not to sustain the complaint which prompted Fincher to drop his appeal and to resign as a Pastor in the ARP Church. The appeal of his

Session was sustained by Synod and the case was closed. It was on that day that the Synod affirmed the following resolution:

"Be it resolved that the General Synod of 1979 affirms the Old and New Testaments to be the inspired Word of God and to be without error in all it teaches."

The meeting of the 1980 Synod saw its way around such heated conflict by simply reaffirming the resolution of the previous year, and things remained relatively quiet for the next thirty years.

² See The Presbyterian Journal, June 21, 1978, p. 6.

³ Associate Reformed Presbyterian, June 1978, p. 4. we discuss the terms in an appendix.

Having provided something of the context of the present discussion, we proceed to establish our thesis. In so doing, we will focus on two fundamental concerns: first, the historical understanding of the Bible as held by Christians and in the Church, and secondly, Biblical and theological considerations.

HISTORICAL CONSIDERATIONS

In the discussions that have ensued within the Associate Reformed Presbyterian Church it has been argued by some that the doctrine of inerrancy is a novelty, only recently introduced into the church, and that it is alien and divisive. When the issue was being debated in the late 1970s, for instance, sentiments were expressed on the floor of synod to the effect that a father or grandfather had served faithfully as a minister in this denomination, having been ordained many years in the past, but for whom inerrancy was never put forth as a test of orthodoxy. Only recently, it has been insisted, has anyone insisted that adherence to this teaching should be made normative in the church. Those who insist that there is historic precedence for it justify their claim only by reading it into the record of history something that was not there.

But is this the case? Is the doctrine of inerrancy a novelty, or can it be said that it reflects the historic teaching of the church? The weight of evidence suggests that it does, and that the consensus that has prevailed for the past two thousand years is that the Bible is without error. We will attempt to demonstrate this in what follows.

Before proceeding, however, we must offer a disclaimer. By insisting that the church has historically maintained a belief in inerrancy we are not saying that it has always believed it with the same degree of understanding and clarity as it does today, and it certainly did not articulate it with the terminology employed by present day evangelicals. To attack our thesis by saying that Augustine, as one example, never spoke of verbal-plenary inspiration or the inerrancy of the autographs is to attack a straw man. As with most other dogmas, clear articulation of the belief came only after an implicit conviction was challenged. One of the points of dispute in the debates over the trinity in the 16th century (Calvin vs. Servetus), for example, was that the pre-Nicene fathers never used the term ‘trinity’ (see appendix: *Mere Semantics?*). That the term was not in use before Nicaea, however, does not mean that the fathers did not believe that God was three-in-one. The belief had not yet been given explicit articulation, but was there nonetheless!

General Observations

According to historian John Gerstner, “Inerrancy has been the classic view of Scripture throughout church history. To view it as the brain child of seventeenth century Protestant scholasticism or the *de novo* creation of the ‘Old Princeton’ school is to distort history.”¹ However, while Dr. Gerstner’s credentials as an historian are well known, his defense of inerrancy would lead some to presume that his conclusions were biased. That

¹ John Gerstner “The View of the Bible Held by the Church: Calvin and the Westminster Divines”, in Inerrancy ed. By Norman Geisler (Zondervan Publishing House, Grand Rapids, 1979), p. 385.

being the case, I would like to appeal to others who, in addition to possessing indisputable academic credentials, have no sympathies for the doctrine in question.

After having gone to great lengths to demonstrate that the doctrine of inerrancy “can scarcely be maintained,” and that in their personal knowledge and judgments, the authors of Scripture were “in many matters hesitating and defective, or even wrong,” James Orr would nonetheless affirm that in their view of the Bible, the advocates of inerrancy “stand undeniably, in their main contention, in the line of apostolic belief, and of the general faith of the church”²

The testimony of Oxford historian C.J. Cadoux is similar. In speaking of certain beliefs that have been jettisoned by many Christians (for which he commends them), he writes:

“The most signal of these abandoned beliefs is that in the inerrancy of Scripture, which was accepted by Christendom with practical unanimity from the second century to the nineteenth. . . . The fact that belief in Biblical inerrancy was not incorporated in any formal creed was due not to any doubt as to its being an essential item of belief, but to the fact that no one challenged it Now had you presented the most moderate and best assured findings of modern criticism to Aquinas or even to Calvin, he would have certainly have cried out that this was tantamount to dissolving the foundations of the faith.”³

He has previously made the claim that “Calvin . . . on the whole ranks as a supporter of belief in Biblical inerrancy.” A few lines later he refers to the change in the beliefs of the Church as a “truly extraordinary turnover.”

Similar views have been expressed by liberal Catholic sources. John Warwick Montgomery cites Father Burtchaell, from his work, Catholic Theories of Biblical Inspiration Since 1810:

“Christians inherited from the Jews the belief that the biblical writers were somehow possessed by God, who was thus to be reckoned the Bible’s proper author. Since God could not conceivably be the agent of falsehood, the Bible

must be guaranteed free from any error. For centuries the doctrine lay dormant, as doctrines will: accepted by all, pondered by few. Not until the sixteenth century did inspiration and its corollary, inerrancy, come up for sustained review. The Reformers and Counter-Reformers were disputing whether all revealed truth was in Scripture alone, and whether it could dependably be interpreted by private or by official scrutiny. Despite a radical disagreement on these issues both groups preserved in receiving the Bible as a compendium of inerrant oracles dictated by the Spirit. Only in the 19th

² James Orr, “Revelation and Inspiration” The Living God: Readings in Christian Theology, ed. Millard J. Erickson (Baker Book House, Grand Rapids, 1973), p. 253.

³ Cecil John Cadoux, The Case for Evangelical Modernism (Willett, Clark and Company, Chicago, 1939), Pp. 66-68.

century did a succession of empirical disciplines newly come of age begin to put a succession of incontinent queries to exegetes. . . . After all this, considerable dexterity was required of any theologian who was willing to take account of the accumulation of challenging evidence, yet continued to defend the Bible as the classic and inerrant Word of God.”¹

The same is conveyed in the New Catholic Encyclopedia. It states:

“The inerrancy of Scripture has been the constant teaching of the Fathers, the theologians, and recent Popes in their encyclicals on Biblical studies. It is nonetheless obvious that many Biblical statements are simply not true when judged according to modern knowledge of science and history.”²

While statements like these may not be proof positive that this view actually prevailed in the church for the past two thousand years, they certainly undermine the suggestion that only a ‘fundamentalists’ would claim that they did, or that they were new to our generation.

The Testimony of History

Thus far we have offered little more than summary statements, sweeping generalizations, about the church as a collective whole. Is there specific evidence that might confirm the conclusions that have been offered? We offer a very brief survey of a few representatives figures and Churches.³

Notable Christians Consider what the following fathers have said.

Irenaeus who lived in the second century said that the writers of Scripture “were filled with perfect knowledge on every subject.”¹ Harold O.J. Brown states that although he did not formulate them in so many words, he anticipated the later concepts of the sufficiency and inerrancy of Scripture. “The apostolic tradition,” according to Irenaeus, “leads us back to the presentation of those who wrote the Scriptures, the Apostles, whose testimony is totally free of all untruth.”²

¹ John Warwick Montgomery, God’s Inerrant Word (Bethany Fellowship, inc., Minneapolis, 1974), p. 21.

² The New Catholic Encyclopedia, cited by Harold Lindsell, The Battle for the Bible (Zondervan Publishing House, Grand Rapids, 1977), p. 55.

³ For a more in depth look into this matter see: Inerrancy, ed. Norman Geisler, chapters 12-13; God’s Inerrant Word, ed. John W. Montgomery, chapters 2-4; Battle For the Bible, chapter 3.

¹ Ibid., p. 49.

² Harold O.J. Brown, Heresies: Heresy and Orthodoxy in the History of the Church, (Hendrickson Publishers, Peabody, Mass., 1984), p. 81. He references *Against Heresies* 3.5.1.

Chrysostom was concerned to emphasize that there was no contradiction in the narratives of the Gospels - even though there is divergence.³

Jerome had a very high view of Scripture as well, stating that “every phrase or syllable or point in Holy Scripture is full of meaning.” Lindsell remarks that he recognized the existence of human faults such as grammatical errors in the writers of the Bible, yet he was careful to “guard himself against any dangerous inferences that might be drawn from this admission.” He then quotes him as saying, “For myself, whenever I note a solecism or any such irregularity, I do not find fault with the Apostle, but constitute myself his champion.”⁴

Augustine is also very clear in his estimation of Scripture. "The faith will totter," he said, "if the authority of the Holy Scriptures loses its hold on men." "We must surrender ourselves to the authority of Holy Scripture, for it can neither mislead nor be misled."⁵ Another famous statement that is later quoted by Aquinas is worth reproducing here as well. In a letter to Jerome he writes . . .

“Freely do I admit to you, my friend, that I have learned to ascribe to those books which are of canonical rank, and only to them, such reverence and honor that I firmly believe that no single error due to the author is found in any of them. And when I am confronted in these books with anything that seems to be at variance with truth, I do not hesitate to put it down either to the use of an incorrect text or to the failure of a commentator rightly to explain the word or to my own mistaken understanding of the passage.”⁶

Luther refers to this letter in a sermon on John 16, adding, “St. Augustine has put down a fine axiom - that only Holy Scripture is to be considered inerrant.”¹

Although the meaning of such a statement would seem to be quite clear, Jack Rogers claims that Augustine did not at all intend to convey any notions of inerrancy. In an interview in the Whittenburg Door he attacks Lindsell’s use of this passage.² One can not go to a dictionary to learn what a word means, he insists, he must go to the historical context in which it was used - “and we did.” “And what did you find?” he was asked. He then proceeded to draw the picture and concluded, “Now that's the context and in that context Augustine writes to Jerome and says, ‘I believe the Scriptures do not err!’” To his rather innocuous answer/interpretation the interviewer replied, “What you really mean is that Lindsell is correct!”

³ Lindsell, p. 52.

⁴ *ibid.*, p. 53.

⁵ *ibid.*

⁶ *ibid.*, p. 54.

¹ Quoted by Montgomery, God’s Inerrant Word, p. 68

² The Wittenburg Door Feb/Mar 1980.

Roger's next remark's are informative as to the kind of thinking that is prevalent today:

“Wait a minute! What's Augustine talking about? Is he talking about technical information? Is he talking about science and astronomy, as Lindsell is? Absolutely not! Augustine says the Biblical authors never intentionally told anybody a lie about a moral issue. The context is moral, not scientific.”

The same line of thought is later applied to Calvin in his condemnation of Servetus. With Rogers, the issue is, “did they (the Biblical writers) deliberately lie to us?” Obviously neither Calvin nor Augustine believed that they did, and in that sense, and in that sense only, could it be said of these that they believed in inerrancy. One looks in vain, however, to find such a distinction in these men.³

Of Aquinas it has been said, “He consciously affirmed the inerrancy of Scripture as a fundamental assumption for the theological enterprise.” He himself asserted that “It is heretical to say that any falsehood whatsoever is contained either in the Gospels or in any canonical Scripture.”⁴

In spite of diligent efforts to do so, the attempt to make the early Church Fathers advocates of an erroneous Bible is a dead end street.

Considerable discussion has taken place with respect to the Reformers. In today's theological climate it is consistently objected that those advocating inerrancy have abandoned the views of Luther and Calvin, opting instead for Aristotelian scholasticism, while

those holding ‘contemporary’ views are the ones who stand in their tradition. But the facts say otherwise.

For a general sense of how Luther perceived the Bible, consider the following statements:

“Natural reason produces heresy and error. Faith teaches and adheres to the pure truth. He who adheres to the Scriptures will find that they do not lie or deceive.' 'Scripture cannot err.' 'The Scriptures have never erred.' 'Scripture agrees with itself everywhere.' 'It is certain that Scripture cannot disagree with itself.' 'It is impossible that Scripture should contradict itself; it only appears so to senseless and obstinate hypocrites.' 'Whoever despises a single word of God does not regard any as important.' 'Therefore it is true, absolutely and without exception, that everything is believed or nothing is believed. The Holy Spirit does not suffer himself to be separated or divided so that he should teach and came to be believed one doctrine rightly and another falsely.’”

³ We will discuss the definition of ‘error’ in the next section dealing with theological considerations.

⁴ Robert Preus, “The View of the Bible Held by the Church”, *Inerrancy*, ed. Norman Geisler (Zondervan Publishing House, Grand Rapids, 1979), p. 370.

Elsewhere he is quoted as saying, “The Holy Scriptures are the Word of God, written and (I might say) lettered and formed in letters, just as Christ is the eternal Word of God veiled in the human nature.” Again, “It is cursed unbelief and the odious flesh which will not permit us to see and know that God speaks to us in Scripture and that it is God’s Word, but tells us that it is the word merely of Isaiah, Paul, or some other mere man, who has not created heaven and earth.”¹ Robert Preus, who compiled these statements, also indicates that for Luther the word order as contained in Scripture was intentionally arranged by the Holy Spirit.

In spite of the above, Luther is often appealed to as holding views that are more consistent with those of ‘contemporary’ theologians. John Montgomery cites J.K.S. Reid as asserting that for Luther, “Scripture is not the Word of God, but only witness to the Word,” and Brunner as insisting that Luther refused to identify “the letters and words of the Scriptures with the Word of God.”² In response to sentiments like these, Dr. Preus writes:

“Although Luther, like his predecessors and immediate followers, rarely spoke of inspiration as such, he said in literally hundreds of instances that Scripture is the Word of God, that God speaks through Scripture, and that

God is the author of Scripture. There is no way in which one can anachronistically interpret Luther as advancing some sort of pre-liberal notion that the Bible merely *contains* the Word of God or pre-Bartian notion that God in some way makes the words of men (in Scripture) *His* Word.”¹

In addition to claims like those just cited, Montgomery presents three basic objections that have been given to finding inerrancy in Luther. These include his ‘looseness’ in translating the Scriptures, his ‘critical’ approach to them, and, perhaps most seriously, his challenging the canonicity of certain books. To each of these the author offers a response, including an acknowledgement that Luther was, at points, deficient in some of his views.² But with regard to his statements about the canon, he insists that Luther’s canonical deficiencies do not negate his belief in inerrancy. “One must distinguish,” he notes, in citing Adolf Hoenecke, “between the *extent* of the canon and the *inspiration*

¹ Preus, *ibid.*, Pp. 377-380. Also one might consider the statements cited by Dr. Montgomery on p. 66ff. of his work.

² Montgomery, *ibid.*, Pp. 66, 69. These views contradict the assessment of Harnack, who wrote that Luther “confounded the word of God and the Sacred Scriptures,” and did not “break the bondage of the letter. Thus it happened that his church arrived at the most stringent doctrine of inspiration.” Cited by Montgomery, p. 69.

¹ Preus, *ibid.*, p. 377.

² Montgomery, *ibid.*, Pp. 70 - 84. In a footnote the author cites the German philosopher Gotthold Lessing in praising Luther, when he wrote: “In such reverence do I hold Luther, that I rejoice in having been able to find some defects in him, for I have been in imminent danger of making him an object of idolatrous veneration. The proofs that in some things he was like other men are to me as precious as the most dazzling of his virtues.” p. 93, n.60.

of the books which are canonical.”³ For Luther, the extent of the canon was an open question; a deficiency on his part. But by way of analogy, that Roman Catholics are mistaken in their understanding of the canon does not detract from the fact that they have historically viewed the books they do recognize as canonical being without error.

Most of the critics focus on Luther’s actual use of the Scriptures, to the exclusion of the many clear affirmations he made about them. With this in mind we might distinguish his *general view* of Scripture from his actual *use* of them. “Even if the worst could be shown concerning Luther’s treatment of the Bible in practice,” quips Montgomery, “it would be manifestly unfair to use this to negate his repeated asseverations that he believed in an inerrant Scripture;” where would any of *us* be if our practice were allowed to erase our profession!⁴ Apart from the assumption that Luther viewed the Bible to possess infallible authority,

“How else can we explain his unshakeable appeal to Scripture in his debates with the Romanists such as Eck, or his reliance on Scripture when, at Worms, the Emperor himself thundered against him and his very life hung in the balance? How else can we make sense of his concentration on the single scriptural phrase, ‘This is my body,’ when in dialogue with Zwingli at the Marburg colloquy?”⁵

Gordon Clark quotes J. Theodore Mueller as ‘rebuking’ the liberals appeal to Luther:

“When church historians ascribe to Luther merit as having established the Schriftprinzip, that is, the axiomatic truth that Holy Scripture is the sole principle by which divine truth is truly and unmistakably known, they do this in full justice to the Wittenberg Reformer, whose alleged ‘liberal attitude’ toward Scripture theological liberals, contrary to historical fact, in vain are trying to demonstrate.”¹

When we go beyond Luther and consider how his immediate followers viewed the Bible, the contrast with modern thinking becomes even more stark. Harold Brown points out that while the doctrine of inerrancy has been attributed to 19th century Calvinists, “It was the early orthodox Lutherans – Flacius, Chemnitz, and Gerhard – who worked out in the fullest possible way the implications of their understanding of inspiration.”² He notes that the Formula of Concord was drafted only sixty years after Luther posted his Ninety-five Theses (and only 31 years after his death), and that Lutheran theology soon committed itself to an explicit doctrine of verbal inspiration. “Only their conviction that the Bible is verbally inspired and absolutely trustworthy,” he insists, “can explain their self-confidence in erecting immense and theoretical doctrinal structures with such astonishing

³ *ibid.*, p. 85 (emph. Added).

⁴ *ibid.*, p. 70.

⁵ *ibid.*, p. 68.

¹ Clark, *The Concept of Biblical Authority*, p. 8.

² Brown, *ibid.*, p. 349.

rapidity and facility.” Again, “the doctrine of verbal inspiration became the indispensable theoretical foundation for all subsequent developments in Lutheranism.”³

The strength of their convictions about the authority of the Bible is seen in the fact that many of the early Lutherans went to the extreme of attributing inspiration to the vowel points of the Hebrew text. This was first done by Matthias Flacius, but Johann Gerhard, ‘the dean of orthodox Lutheran theology’ (1582-1637), adopted it in his Loci Theologici as well (identified by Brown as the *magnum opus* of orthodoxy).⁴ For Gerhard, the words of Scripture are the words of the Holy Spirit, and if they are God-breathed, then the Biblical writers were mere amanuenses or secretaries. [see note]

To the charge that these scholars may be dismissed as ‘more Scholastic than Lutheran,’ Brown asserts that nothing could be further from the truth: “Where early Lutherans and Calvinist differed was not with regard to the authority of Scripture or its inerrancy, but with respect to the role of the Holy Spirit in making that authority known and convincing to the Christian – the internal testimony.”¹

Calvin without question held an extremely high view of Scripture. John Gerstner lists a number of references that he made regarding the Bible. The Scriptures are the . . .

‘sure and infallible record,’ ‘the inerring standard,’ ‘the pure Word of God,’ ‘the infallible rule of his holy truth,’ ‘free from every stain or defect,’ ‘the inerring certainty,’ ‘the certain and unerring rule,’ ‘unerring light,’ ‘infallible Word of God,’ ‘has nothing belonging to man mixed with it,’ ‘inviolable,’ ‘infallible oracles.’

He goes on to comment that although he does not employ the noun ‘inerrancy’ he makes ample use of the adjectival form ‘inerring.’² Certainly the high esteem he had is apparent in his comments on such passages as II Timothy 3: 16 and II Peter 1: 19-21.

Yet there are other passages that incline some to believe that Calvin did not hold to inerrancy; some, as Murray puts it, that cannot be dismissed with a wave of the hand.³ These will not be touched on here because others have adequately handled them and there is simply not time or space to recount their results in detail.⁴ E.A. Dowey has dealt at

³ *ibid.*, p. 347.

⁴ *ibid.*, p. 348. Brown points out that while contemporary evangelicals repudiate the notion of mechanical dictation, terms like ‘dictation’ and ‘secretary’ were frequently used among early orthodox protestants. “It is important to remember,” he adds, “that ancient and medieval secretaries contributed more to the final version of their texts than do modern secretaries typing from a Dictaphone.” p. 465 n.8

¹ *ibid.*, p. 349

² Gerstner, in Inerrancy, p. 391.

³ John Murray, Calvin on Scripture and Divine Sovereignty (Baker Book House, Grand Rapids, 1978), p. 12.

⁴ In addition to Dr. Gerstner’s discussion of Calvin in Inerrancy, one might consider that of J.I. Packer in God’s Inerrant Word. Kenneth Kantzer, who Murray claims has furnished us with “what is perhaps the

lengths with Calvin and he concludes that “there is no hint anywhere in Calvin's writings that the original text contained any flaws at all.”⁵

The Westminster Divines

But what of the Westminster Divines? They too has occasioned considerable debate. C. A. Briggs denied that they viewed the Scriptures as inerrant, and Warfield even accuses him of trying to place them within the liberal camp!⁶ Jack Rogers is another who has denied that they held to anything like inerrancy, contending that to read inerrancy into the Westminster Confession of Faith is ahistorical, drawing them “into a controversy to which its authors were not a party.” He asserts, “To contend that the Westminster Confession teaches the inerrancy of the scripture because it does not assert that there are errors in the scripture is to impose a modern problem on a pre-scientific statement.”¹

Often reference is made to quotations by Richard Baxter and Samuel Rutherford to bolster their argument. These suggestions are amply refuted by Warfield and others.² On the contrary, consider the following samples of their views. Edward Calamy writes,

“There is not a word in it, but breathes out God, and is breathed out by God. It is (as Irenaeus saith) ... an invariable rule of faith, an unerring and infallible guide to heaven.”³

Warfield quotes Cornelius Burgess in part as saying, “If Solomon mistooke not, (and how could hee mistake in that which the Spirit himself dictated unto him).”⁴ John White spoke of the Sacred penmen as being holy men, “inspired and guided in that work and wholly, by the Spirit of God.”⁵

One last statement from Dr. Rogers will conclude our thoughts on the Westminster Assembly. Although he rejected Warfield’s assessment of the Westminster divines, he would, nonetheless, assert that “The peculiarity of contemporary Neo-Reformation interpretation is that, while Warfield’s views regarding the Reformers have been restudied and questioned, his views regarding the Westminster Divines have been widely, if not tacitly, accepted.”⁶

most complete induction of the evidence drawn from the wide range of Calvin's works,” was compelled to conclude that Calvin did, in fact, believe that the Bible was inerrant.

⁵ Murray, *ibid.*, p. 11.

⁶ Benjamin Brekinridge Warfield, The Westminster Assembly and its Work (Oxford University Press, London, 1931), Pp. 262 - 263.

¹ Rogers, p. 306-307

² Warfield, p. 269f.

³ *ibid.*, p. 209

⁴ *ibid.*

⁵ *ibid.*, p. 207.

⁶ Rogers, p. 40.

Inerrancy within Presbyterianism

Inerrancy came to acquire the status of the ‘official’ position of the main body of Presbyterians in North America during the late nineteenth century. Rogers remarks that the aftermath of the Warfield-Briggs debate “left the impression that the Princeton theology and Westminster Confession can rightly be identified.”⁷ Lefferts Loetscher (whom Rogers refers to as “*the* historian of this period of Presbyterian history”) confirms this as well. In speaking of the ‘Portland Deliverance’ of 1892, he says that “this was an effort to declare the rigid doctrine of inspiration taught by the Hodge-Warfield article to be official Church dogma, under the supposition that it had always been such.”⁸ The

Deliverance states in part:

“Our Church holds that the inspired Word, as it came from God, is without error. . . . All who enter office in our Church solemnly profess to receive them (i.e. the sacred Books) as the only infallible rule of faith and practice. If they change their belief on this point, Christian honor demands that they should withdraw from our ministry.”¹

In the following year the General Assembly reaffirmed this statement, adding that it “has always been the belief of the Church.” Again, during the Assembly of 1894, it was denied that this was a new definition of dogma. Loetscher declares, “The position taken by the Hodge-Warfield article a dozen years before was now unambiguously declared to be the Church’s official teaching.”² And again later in his book he says, “The Church officially took its stand for Biblical inerrancy . . .”³ That this did not remain so goes without saying, but when initially confronted with the impact of Higher Criticism, the Church took its stand on inerrancy.

What has been stated above with respect to the old PCUSA holds as well for the Southern Presbyterian Church. One only has to consider the writings of such leaders as Dabney, Breckinridge, Thornwell and others to see this. In arguing that revelation, and in particular inspiration, is necessary for there to be an objective standard, Thornwell asserted,

“The issues involved in this controversy are momentous. It is not a question about words and names; it is a question which involves the very foundations of Christianity. These insidious efforts to undermine the authority of the Bible and to remove an external, infallible standard of faith, however disguised in the covert of philosophy, are prompted by a deep and inveterate opposition to the doctrines of the cross. The design is to destroy the religion, and hence the fury of the efforts against the citadel in which it is lodged. It is

⁷ Ibid, p. 437.

⁸ Lefferts Loetscher, The Broadening Church (University of Pennsylvania Press, Philadelphia, 1964), p. 56.

¹ *ibid.*

² *ibid.*, p. 61

³ *ibid.*, p. 94.

not the casket, but the jewel, that has raised all the clamour of rancorous opposition; and when men cry, Down with the Bible! the real meaning of their rage is, Away with Jesus and his cross!”⁴

Elsewhere he writes:

“The directions of the Apostles were founded upon the obvious principle that one truth cannot contradict another; and therefore whatever contradicted the

Scriptures, which were known to be truth, carried upon its face the impression of falsehood”

The Scriptures, he says, “are necessarily and infallibly true.”¹ And again:

“Any real inconsistency with fact is evidentially fatal to the plea of inspiration. A record pretending to this high character which should contain anachronisms or geographical mistakes, which should blunder in its political or social allusions, reason could not hesitate to brand with the stigma of forgery.”²

It can hardly be disputed that the doctrine of inerrancy was afforded an important place in the larger Presbyterian bodies in the United States. The same, however, is true of those of lesser constituencies, the ARP Church being no exception. In an address published in the Centennial History titled “What the Associate Reformed Church Stands For,” James Moffatt included verbal-plenary inspiration as one of its historic beliefs. To reject this, he insisted, would lead to the probability that the Bible is a book full of errors. “But,” he continues, “God so put the seal and superintendence of his inspiration upon all that the writer expressed in his unique way that his writing became the inerrant vehicle of God's truth.”³

But does this actually reflect the teaching of the ARP Church historically, or are we conveniently reading into history things that was not there?

In support of this, one thinks of an answer given by James Fisher and Ebenezer Erskine in Fisher's Catechism. Their names are important because they were two of the founding fathers to whom ARPs trace their origins. The question had to do with the ‘excellency and usefulness of the Scriptures.’ Among other things, they insisted, they are “the unerring compass to guide to the haven of glory.”⁴ This was also reflected in

⁴ James Henley Thornwell, Collected Writings Vol. III, (Presbyterian Committee of Publications, Richmond, 1881), p. 155.

¹ *ibid*, p. 193.

² *ibid*, Pp. 206-207.

³ James Moffatt, The Centennial History of the Associate Reformed Presbyterian Church 1803-1903 (Prepared and published by order of the Synod, Charleston, 1905), p. 695.

⁴ James Fisher and Ebenezer Erskine, Fishers Catechism, (Presbyterian Board of Education, Philadelphia, 1925), p. 21.

one of the earliest documents of their history.

When Erskine and his colleagues seceded from the Church of Scotland, one of the steps that was taken was the establishment of a *Judicial Testimony*, the purpose of which was “to let the world see what they own and acknowledge, and upon what foundation they

desired to stand.” It was stressed by later Seceders (in 1827) that “That Testimony was not a new standard, but a declaration of the genuine sense of the already received standards, and an application of them to the prevailing errors and corruptions” “Such is the Testimony which was judicially enacted and published by those who seceded from the Established Church of Scotland.”¹

These words were composed by the divines of the Associate Synod of the Original Seceders in 1827. “But,” they continued, “we apprehend that we are called on to attempt the application of the principles laid down in that Testimony to evils which have arisen since it was compiled, or to the new shape which former evils have recently assumed,” and in so doing, their claim was that they brought “forward nothing which can either attract or startle by its novelty, and consequently nothing which requires from us a formal or laboured proof.”² The ‘evils which had arisen’ were the challenges to orthodox Christian doctrine that arose with the Age of Reason (Enlightenment).

The following is an excerpt from their testimony. We pick up with point four, which asserts the inerrancy of Scripture. The third point was in opposition to the Deists who denied that the Scriptures are the Word of God.

“4. In opposition to those who maintain that the sacred penmen had no full or particular inspiration, but were so left to themselves that they might err as to matters of less importance, and that their reasonings from facts and doctrines are often inconclusive, --- **we declare,**

That all Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and that the sacred penmen, in committing these holy oracles to writing, were under the infallible direction of the Holy Spirit, both with respect to matter and language.

"In support of this statement we would urge, that although the inspired penmen wrote agreeably to their respective talents for composition, and although this accounts for the diversity of style throughout the Scriptures, yet in all that they wrote, as inspired, they were infallibly directed, not only as to the sentiments to be expressed, but also as to the phraseology best adapted to express these sentiments: That we cannot conceive how supernatural doctrines,

¹ A Testimony to the Truths of Christ: Synod of the Original Seceders (Glasgow, 7th edition, 1862 (1st ed. 1827), Pp. 58.

² *ibid*, p. 4.

with which they had no prior acquaintance, and future events, of which they could form no conjecture could be conveyed to the minds of men accustomed to think in words, but by admitting that they were suggested to them in

language dictated by the Spirit; and that it is still more inconceivable how they could have written intelligibly on subjects above their comprehension, when revealed, had not the language as well as the matter been furnished to them by inspiration: Nor is inspiration less necessary in the plainest historical narrative; for, while profane history has for its object only the civil and political benefit of individuals and nations, the inspired historians propose a much higher aim -- the advancement of salvation in subserviency to the glory of God in Christ, -- an aim which requires a manner of thinking and writing peculiar to itself.

“We further observe, that to suppose that they might err in matters of less importance, or to affirm that their reasonings are often inconclusive is to undermine the authority of the Bible, as it throws a suspicion over the whole, by leaving the mind in an uncertainty what to admit as truth, and what to reject as error: That these suppositions throw an injurious reflection upon the wisdom of God; for though the avowed design of Scripture is to rescue men from error, yet, according to these sentiments, the means are not adequate to the ends, but are, in many respects, calculated to increase instead of removing the evil: That they are injurious to His holiness, since, according to them, God has given to His creatures a rule of faith and manners calculated in many respects to lead them into error; And that they are not less injurious to His veracity, since they suppose that writings sanctioned by His authority, and claiming infallibility on that account, may, notwithstanding, be mingled with error and falsehood.”¹

What is striking about this statement is not merely that it reflects the views of ARPs at a very early date (their insistence was that it reflected those of the founding fathers!), but that it articulates the position of inerrancy more explicitly than is found in many contemporary Evangelical circles! With testimony like this, not to speak of the instruction provided by Erskine and Fisher, it is no wonder that Moffatt would insist that the ARP Church has always stood for Inerrancy, and little wonder that Thornwell would describe the Seceder church as the purest in all of Scotland!

The Seceder Church, however, was not the only Scottish church that stood firmly on this teaching. In writing of the Free Church of Scotland, Alec Vidler points out that at the time of the Disruption (1843), “the authority not only of Bible but of the Westminster Confession was regarded as unshakeable . . . by Moderates as well as by Evangelicals.” He goes on to say that “It was not until the beginning of the third quarter of the century that the issue came to a head in Scotland through the case of William Robertson Smith.” Elsewhere he indicates that traditional views were until this time unchallenged!²

¹ *ibid*, p. 102-103.

² Alec R. Vidler *The Church in an Age of Revolution* (Penguin Books, London, 1971), see Pp.169-173.

Ian Murray also writes of developments within Scottish Presbyterianism in the last quarter of the nineteenth century. In responding to the suggestion that the doctrines of verbal inspiration and inerrancy were new to the church in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, he would write, “in Scotland, as elsewhere, that suggestion is untrue.” In making his point he cites Carnegie Simpson, whom he describes as ‘no friend of inerrancy.’ Regarding the higher criticism and the views that came to stand in opposition to inerrancy, “It was absolutely new.” “Traditional views as to the history, the authorship, and even the verbal inerrancy of the Bible,” he insisted, “had remained unchallenged in the Scottish church since the Reformation.”¹

Why the Silence?

In concluding this section on the historical aspect of the debate we need to consider an important question: If the view we have espoused reflects the beliefs of historic Christianity, why the silence? Why was it not stated more clearly by the early Fathers, the Reformers, the Creeds and Confessions of the Church?

On the one hand, the answer is simply that they had no occasion to do so. The issues that led to the development of the doctrine did not arise until relatively recent times. We saw this in connection with the Seceder church in Scotland in the early 19th century. It was Deism and ideas that were given birth during the Enlightenment that were cited as the reason for the affirmation – according to them a *reaffirmation* in more precise terms – of their core beliefs, which included the inerrancy of the Bible. The authority of the Bible had not been seriously challenged, at least not in the manner that came with the rise of modern science and higher criticism. As Dr. Cadoux insisted, “The fact that belief in Biblical inerrancy was not incorporated in any formal creed was due not to any doubt as to its being an essential item of belief, but to the fact that no one challenged it.”²

On the other hand, the doctrine was never discussed; no one attempted to call attention to it because it was *assumed*. Presuppositions are rarely discussed; they are axiomatic, and therefore taken for granted. George Duncan Barry, who, like Cadoux, has no sympathy for it, said as much when he wrote:

“The fact that for fifteen centuries no attempt has been made to formulate a definition of the doctrine of inspiration of the Bible testifies to the universal belief of the Church that the Scriptures were the handiwork of the Holy Ghost. It was, to our modern judgment, a mechanical and erroneous view of inspiration that was accepted and taught by the Church of the first centuries,

¹ Ian H. Murray *A Scottish Christian Heritage* (The Banner of Truth Trust, Edinburgh, 2006), p. 373.

² Cecil John Cadoux, *ibid*, p. 66-68.

seeing that it ruled out all possibility of error in matters either of history or of doctrine.”¹

The historian Adolph Harnack notes that in the early church the need had not arisen for it to clarify its understanding of the authorities on which it relied.² As the church never published a decree regarding the extent of Scripture (canon), “it also failed to publish one concerning its characteristics.” But, “freedom from error was generally deduced from inspiration, and it was, as a rule, referred to the very words.”³ “With the complete elaboration of the conception of canonical books, every other description applied to them gave way to the idea of their divinity.”⁴

Indeed, the terms ‘inerrant’ and ‘inerrancy’ do not have the pedigree that others employed by the church have enjoyed. But in reflecting on the introduction of seemingly novel terminology in articulating our doctrine of Scripture – words like *verbal-plenary*, *infallible*, *inerrant*, etc., and of the seemingly complex nature of the doctrine itself – eg. *inerrant in the autographa*, the question of *what constitutes an error*, etc., we must make allowance for the fact that the development of dogma is an ongoing and progressive undertaking that will never be brought to completion until the church militant becomes the church triumphant. (This is taken up in an appendix.)

¹ George Duncan Barry, cited by Lindsell, p. 45.

² Adolph Harnack, History of Dogma Vol. III (Dover Publications, Inc. New York, 1961), p. 191.

³ *ibid*, p. 205.

⁴ *ibid*, p. 199. But “To the two testaments a unique authority was ascribed. They were the Holy Scriptures κατ ἐξοχην; every doctrine had to be proved out of them.” p. 192

While an historical consensus is important, it is not decisive in determining what we are to believe. For this we go to the Scriptures themselves. The question before us, then, is, What is the Biblical teaching *about* the Bible? Does it actually teach the doctrine being debated in the church today?

We now turn to the theological formulation of our doctrine.

THEOLOGICAL FORMULATION

Preliminary Matters

In attempting to formulate one's beliefs it is essential that consideration be given to two closely related matters: that of one's theological and philosophical *presuppositions*, and secondly, to *method*.

With regard to the first, the naturalistic presuppositions that were often found in classic liberalism ruled out any kind of meaningful communication between God and man. One thinks of the six 'barriers' to the operation of divine authority in the Bible C. A. Briggs cited in his Inaugural Address. These included verbal inspiration, miracles, and predictive prophecy. If, however, we proceed on the assumption that God not only exists, but condescends to involve Himself in the affairs of men (including intervening through the miraculous), then it is possible for Him to reveal himself objectively to us. This includes both general and special revelation, the latter including predictive prophecy which is often given with minute precision (as with Isaiah's reference to Cyrus).

In addition to the naturalistic assumptions of classic liberalism, many within the Neo Orthodox camp assume that human language is an unfit vehicle for the communication of God's truth to man - at least not verbal and propositional truth. In writing about the adequacy of human language for revelation, J. I. Packer alludes to Emil Brunner, who posits a "false antithesis that make God's method of self-disclosure analogous to the non-verbal communication of Harpo Marx."¹

We assume that while God is transcendent, He stoops to our level, having made us in such a manner as to allow for meaningful communication. Dr. Packer explains:

¹ J. I. Packer "The Adequacy of Human Language" in *Inerrancy*, ed. Norman L. Geisler (Zondervan Publishing House, Grand Rapids, 1979), p. 205

“The opening chapters of Genesis teach us that human beings were created in God’s image, and proceed on the basis that both a sense of God and a language in which to converse with Him were given to men as ingredients in, or perhaps preconditions of, the divine image from the start. By depicting God as the first language user, Genesis shows us that human thought and speech have their counterparts and archetypes in Him. . . . The key fact is the theomorphism of created man, whom God made as a language user, able to receive God’s linguistic communication and to respond in kind.”²

The second concern we would address pertains to method. The question here is, How does one arrive at his theological position? How does one determine whether he believes the Bible to be inerrant or possessing the possibility of error?¹

Some insist that we take a purely inductive approach: “Go directly to the 'phenomena' of Scripture and see if it accords with the 'facts' of reality. If it does then one is warranted in believing that it is inerrant. But if it does not, then one can conclude otherwise.” This was clearly the method of C.A. Briggs. In reacting to those who proceed from the *assumption* that the Scriptures are inspired, and therefore inerrant, he writes:

“Indeed, this arbitrary claim for deductions and consequences is one that no true critic or historian ought to concede; for by so doing he abandons at once the right and ground of Criticism, and the inductive methods of historical and scientific investigation, and sacrifices his material to the dogmatist and scholastic. . . . It will not do to antagonize Critical theories of the Bible with Traditional theories of the Bible, for the critic appeals to history against tradition, to an array of facts against so-called inferences. . . . It is significant that the great majority of professional Biblical scholars in the various Universities and Theological Halls of the world . . . demand a revision of traditional theories of the Bible, on account of a large induction of new facts from the Bible and history. . . . We do not deny the right of dogmatism and the *a priori* method, nor the worth of tradition, but we maintain the equal right of criticism and the inductive method.”²

In this Briggs is followed by many others, some of a more evangelical bent. Dewey Beegle, for instance, opts for the inductive approach. In criticizing the deductive method he writes:

“If we try to hold to the teaching of Scripture in preference to the phenomena, are we not saying in effect, ‘Determine the Biblical writers’ doctrine of inspiration from what they say, not what they do?’ The true Biblical view of inspiration must account for all the evidence of Scripture. The peril of the view of inerrancy is its rigidity and all-or-nothing character. If only one of

² *ibid.* Pp. 214 , 219

¹ It is important to note that the question is *not* how we know that the bible is ‘inspired’ or that it is the ‘Word of God’. To that question the Confession of Faith points us to the internal testimony of the Holy Spirit (1. 5). As we will see, inerrancy *presupposes* this.

² C.A. Briggs The Presbyterian Review Vol. II, July 1881 Pp. 556 - 558

the illustrations discussed in this chapter (of alleged error he has provided) is correct, the doctrine is invalidated.”³

On the other hand there are those who contend that a purely inductive approach is inadequate. In an unpublished paper titled ‘Inductivism, Inerrancy, and Presuppositionalism,’ Greg Bahnsen critiques a discussion between Daniel Fuller and Clark Pinnock regarding the exposition and defense of Scriptural inerrancy. This discussion was in the form of letters published in the Christian Scholar’s Review.

A considerable portion of his critique pertains to the second thesis that emerged from their discussion, namely: “Inductivism and empirical apologetics are independent of presupposition commitments, letting neutral reason and critical thinking control the knowing process from beginning to end.” At the heart of his objection is the mistaken impression of neutrality that lies behind this approach. One is never, he argues, without prior commitments. “Inductive empiricism is not a philosophically neutral or problematic tool by which evangelical apologetics may proceed,” he asserts.¹ To back this up he makes ten very compelling points.

In concluding his remarks about the claim to neutrality he writes:

“As a matter of fact no man *is* without presuppositional commitments. As a matter of philosophical necessity, no man *can be* without presuppositional commitments. And as a matter of Scriptural teaching, no man *ought* to be without presuppositional commitments.”²

He then attempts to clarify the question of how one should arrive at an acceptable doctrine of Scripture.

“Is this doctrine *about* Scripture to be formulated on the basis of what Scripture says about itself (and thus presuppositionally), or rather do we take the phenomenological approach of handling the various Biblical phenomena and claims (among which are the problem passages) inductively with a view to settling the question of scripture's inerrancy only in light of the discovered facts of empirical and historical study?”³

He goes on to elaborate that the Bible makes a large set of indicative claims - e.g. that David was once king in Israel, that Jesus was born in Bethlehem, that salvation is by God's grace, etc. But he continues, “among this set is to be found certain self-referential

³ Dewey Beegle “Inerrancy and the Phenomena of Scripture” (from The Inspiration of Scripture), cited in The Living God: Readings in Christian Theology, ed. Millard J. Erickson, p. 308

¹ Greg Bahnsen, “Inductivism Inerrancy, and Presuppositionalism” (an abridged version of paper presented to the 28th Annual Meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society at Westminster Theological Seminary: December 28, 1976), p. 8

² *ibid*, p. 15

³ *ibid*, p. 16

statements about the whole (e.g., ‘Thy Word is truth,’ ‘the Scripture cannot be broken,’ ‘all Scripture is inspired by God’) etc.” The question then is, how is the question of inerrancy to be answered: by examining each of the indicative claims one by one, or, by settling on the truth of these special self-referential assertions and then letting them control our approach to all the rest? He concludes, “The statements of Scripture about Scripture are primary and must determine our attitude toward all the rest.”¹

This was essentially the approach taken by B. B. Warfield at Princeton in the last century. For him the doctrine of Scripture set forth *in* Scripture is that of verbal inspiration, and by inference, inerrancy. This conviction governs one’s whole approach to doing theology. One might attempt to *defend* the Scriptures against charges of error by an appeal to the ‘evidence’, but it is because we accept their claim to inspiration - and because Christ and the apostles affirmed them as such - that such an attempt would even be made.

“Along with many other modes of commending and defending it,” he explains,

“the primary ground on which it has been held by the church as the true doctrine is that it is the doctrine of the Biblical writers themselves. . . . It is the testimony of the Bible itself to its own origin and character as the oracles of the Most high, that has led the Church to her acceptance of it as such....”²

In addition, he proceeds to point out that for the one who would reject these teachings, his first task is to demonstrate that they are not what is taught in the Bible itself. The bulk of his book is spent demonstrating that it is. Chapter three is titled ‘The Biblical Idea of Inspiration,’ and in it he spends thirty five pages providing detailed exegetical support to demonstrate his claim. In chapter six he devotes over fifty pages to expounding the phrase ‘God-inspired Scripture.’ Chapter seven involves another fifty pages considering the formulas used in the New Testament to introduce passages from the Old: ‘it says,’ ‘Scripture says,’ ‘God says.’ He closes with nearly the same amount of material about the oracles of God.

He speaks elsewhere more directly to the question of method.

“The importance of keeping in mind the principle in question arises rather from the importance of preserving a correct logical method. There are two ways of approaching the study of the inspiration of the Bible. One proceeds by obtaining first the doctrine of inspiration taught by the Bible as applicable to itself, and then testing this doctrine by the facts as to the Bible as ascertained by Biblical criticism and exegesis. ... The other method proceeds by seeking the doctrine of inspiration in the first instance through a comprehensive induction from the facts as to the structure and contents of the Bible, as ascertained by critical and exegetical processes, treating all these facts as co-factors of the same rank for the induction.”

¹ *ibid*

² Benjamin Breckinridge Warfield, The Inspiration and Authority of the Bible (Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1970), p. 173/4

His assessment is that the former is “a good logical procedure . . . the *only* logical and proper mode of approaching the question (emph. added).” If the other approach is taken, by which the ‘phenomena’ of Scripture alone are given priority, “it would be difficult to arrive at a precise doctrine of inspiration.”

“The importance of proceeding according to the true logical method may be illustrated by the observation that the conclusions actually arrived at by students of the subject seem practically to depend on the logical method adopted. . . . If we start from the Scripture doctrine of inspiration, we approach the phenomena with the question whether they will negate this doctrine, and we find none able to stand against itBut if we start simply with a collection of the phenomena, classifying and reasoning from them, it may easily happen with us, as it happened with certain of old, that meeting with some things hard to understand, we may . . . so approach the biblical doctrine of inspiration set upon explaining it away.”¹

He illustrates the problems inherent in the inductive method by the use of several analogies. Examining the ‘phenomena’ of Scripture for the purpose of arriving at a doctrine of Scripture is like attempting to arrive at a doctrine of creation, not from what the Bible itself says about creation, but “from the facts obtained through a scientific study of creation.” He makes the same argument with the doctrine of man and of justification, and then . . .

“It is precisely similar to saying that Mr. Darwin’s doctrine of natural selection is to be determined not solely by what Mr. Darwin says concerning it, but equally by what we, in our own independent study of nature, find to be true as to natural selection.”²

Our method, then, is to begin with the Scriptures, and the claims they make for themselves. But what claims do they actually make?

¹ Warfield, *Inspiration and Authority*, p. 223/3

² *ibid*, p. 204f.

The Testimony of Scripture to Itself

It is our contention that the doctrine of inerrancy finds its genesis, not in the ivory tower of the theologian, but in the Bible itself. It is taught indirectly, by way of inference, but also through the direct statements of Jesus and the apostles.

Jesus' Use of Scripture

With Jesus and the Apostles the Scriptures are held in the highest esteem. Jesus could say, "Thy Word is truth" (*Jn. 17:17*). That this would include the inscripturated Word can hardly be doubted. In another place he declares that the Scripture cannot be broken (*Jn. 10: 35*). Again, in the Sermon on the Mount, he said, "Till heaven and earth pass away, not one jot or tittle shall pass from the Law, till all be fulfilled" (*Mt. 5: 18, 19*).

But apart from statements such as these *about* the Scriptures, it is instructive to note the use they made *of* them. One is struck first with the frequency of usage. Roger Nicole suggests that by a conservative count, at least 295 separate references to the Old Testament are to be found in the New, 224 of them being direct citations introduced by a definite formula. It is estimated that they make up 4.4 percent of the New Testament.¹ The mentality of the Biblical writers was a Bible mentality. They were men of the Book! Jesus decried the appeal to the authority of men and traditions; for him the Scriptures were normative (see *Mark 7: 8-13*).

Another aspect of their use of Scripture was the manner in which they introduced passages from the Old Testament to which they made reference. Often a passage was introduced with simply, "God says." In some passages the Scriptures are spoken of as if they *were* God! In others God is spoken of as if He were the scriptures.² Examples include Romans 9:17; Galatians 3:8; Matthew 19:4,5; Hebrews 3:7; 1:6; and Acts 4:24,25; 13:34, 35.

A third characteristic that distinguished their use of the Scriptures was the way they used them in argumentation.³ In some cases, such as Matthew 10:34, 35, or John 10:34-35, the whole argument rests on a single word. Roger Nicole provides some twenty four

¹ Roger Nicole, "New Testament Use of the Old Testament", *Revelation and the Bible*, ed. Carl F.H. Henry, (Baker Book House, Grand Rapids, 1958), p. 137.

² See B. B. Warfield 'It says,' 'Scripture says,' 'God says' in *The Inspiration and Authority of the Bible*, p. 299

³ Paul D. Feinberg, "The Meaning of Inerrancy", *Inerrancy*, p. 286

examples of this.¹ In other cases the argument is based on the tense of a verb (*Mt.22: 32*).

¹ Nicole, *ibid*

In Galatians 3:16 it is number that Paul cites in order to make his point. It is inconceivable that such meticulous care would have been afforded the Scriptures had they not been conceived as the very Word of God, and as such a source of infallible truth.

In addition to direct statements and the use made of the Scriptures by Jesus and the apostles, inerrancy is derived by inference from the doctrine of inspiration. The importance of this doctrine for inerrancy cannot be overstated. As we will see later on, it is precisely at this point that the real problem is often to be found. Ultimately the question is not whether one believes in inerrancy, but whether he believes in *inspiration* as it is taught in scripture!

The Doctrine of Inspiration

Let's begin with a definition,² a statement of the doctrine. In the words of Benjamin Warfield: "the church has held from the beginning that the Bible is the Word of God in such a sense that its words, though written by men and bearing indelibly impressed upon them the marks of their human origin, were written, nevertheless, under such an influence of the Holy Ghost as to be also the words of God." Again,

"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 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."³

He elsewhere explains that inspiration involves an "extraordinary supernatural influence" exerted by the Spirit of God on the human authors. That it is 'extraordinary' distinguishes it from the ordinary work of the Spirit (though supernatural) in the conversion and sanctification of believers.⁴

The Biblical doctrine depicts the writings of Scripture as 'God-breathed' - the product of the creative breath of God (*II Tim. 3:16*). This term gives expression to the source of Scripture, but also the intimate nature of the process by which they were delivered.

Peter would write that "No prophecy of Scripture is a matter of private interpretation, for no prophecy ever came by the will of man, but, being carried along by the Holy Spirit, men spoke from God." The negative indicates what did *not* happen: the authors were not

² Others have defined it as "the inward work of the Holy Spirit in the hearts and minds of chosen men who then wrote the Scriptures so that God got written what He wanted." Harold Lindsell *Battle for the Bible* p. 30; "that divine combination of prompting and control that secures precise communication of God's mind by God's messenger." J. I. Packer *Inerrancy* p. 199; "the influence of the Holy Spirit on the minds of selected men which rendered them organs of God for the infallible communication of (that) revelation." R. A. Finlayson in *Revelation and the Bible*.

³ Warfield, p. 173, 131

⁴ *ibid*, p. 420

expressing their own opinions when they wrote. Positively, men spoke from God (corresponding roughly to Paul's *God-breathed*) being 'carried along' by the Spirit. The phrase 'being carried along' is placed first in the sentence for emphasis: "being carried along, men spoke . . ." Adding to what Paul wrote, Peter indicates that the Holy Spirit was responsible for the Scriptures being God-breathed. He 'carried them along'. The word is *phero* (φέρω) - to bear, carry, move, drive. It was used by Luke to describe the ship Paul was in as it was driven by the storm (*Acts 27:15, 17*).¹

Again, Dr. Warfield's words are worth noting:

"We seem safe in inferring that the gift of Scripture through its human authors took place by a process much more intimate than can be expressed by the term 'dictation', and that it took place in a process in which the control of the Holy Spirit was too complete and pervasive to permit the human qualities of the secondary authors in any way to condition the purity of the product as the Word of God. . . . The Biblical writers do not conceive of the Scriptures as a human product breathed into by the Divine Spirit, and thus heightened in its qualities or endowed with new qualities; but as a Divine product produced through the instrumentality of men."²

To what has been said must be added the insistence that the Spirit's superintendence extends to the whole of Scripture. This is sometimes referred to as plenary inspiration. To say this means that it extends to all sixty-six books. This stands in contrast with some who would suggest that certain books were inspired, while others were produced with only a natural providential and gracious assistance of God. In addition, it extends to every *aspect* of their writings - as opposed to the claim that a dichotomy exists within Scripture. It has been taught that some portions of the Bible are (for lack of better terms) 'secular' while others are 'sacred,' some spiritual and the rest natural. The one pertains to the moral and spiritual elements, i.e. doctrines that relate to the nature and purposes of God, the other to historical and biographical elements and those that are deemed 'scientific'. Lastly, it extends to the words themselves (verbal inspiration) - as opposed to the insistence that only the writers were inspired or that inspiration extends only to their thoughts.¹

We should pause here for a moment because 'partial inspiration' is a virus that infects many within the church, some without even realizing it. Appeal is often made to a perceived purpose behind the Scriptures that renders parts authoritative and others not. "The Bible was given to make us wise unto salvation," it is said, "not to give us technical information about the universe." Its purpose is to make us saints, not scientists!

¹ Even C. H. Dodd acknowledges that these words "seem to deny the human element in prophecy, and so perhaps by implication claims infallibility for it." The Authority of the Bible (Harper & Brothers, New York, 1929) p. 25 n.8

² Warfield, p. 152

¹ Even James Orr, who, as we will see, rejected the doctrine of inerrancy, nevertheless insisted that "If there is inspiration at all, it must penetrate words as well as thought, must mould the expression, and make the language employed the living medium of the idea to be conveyed." From Revelation and Inspiration, cited in The Living God: Readings in Christian Theology (Baker Book House, Grand Rapids, 1973) p. 250.

While there is obviously an element of truth in this, it is only a half-truth. Not only do the Scriptures themselves not allow for such a distinction, but from a practical standpoint it becomes impossible to maintain. Where does one draw the line? If matters of science are not necessarily inspired, and therefore subject to error, how do we define science? Do we confine these restrictions to the ‘hard’ sciences, like biology or chemistry, or do they include the ‘soft’ sciences, like psychology? If the latter are included, what does that imply about the psychological teachings of the Bible, such as those concerning human depravity? With respect to historical information, it is important to remember that Redemption itself is couched in history, and cannot be separated from it. However, the distinctions themselves become moot when advocates of this view acknowledge that even the ‘religious’ elements are tainted. “We should also bear in mind that not only the historical and cultural perspectives of the Biblical writers was limited,” acknowledges Donald Bloesch, “but also their theological and ethical ideas.”²

The bottom line is that once distinctions like this are introduced, man becomes the final arbiter of truth. When this comes to pass, either he arbitrarily (when expediency dictates) chooses what to accept or reject, or, admitting that he lacks omniscience, concludes that ultimate reality is unknowable. Montgomery is to the point when he writes:

“Precisely at this logical watershed the argument fails, and must always fail. From the incarnational perspective of the Bible itself, all dualisms of ‘spiritual’ and ‘secular’, however defined, are rejected. The epistemological theme of Scripture is not ‘the Word disembodied’ or ‘the Word’ (like Ivory soap?) ‘floating spiritually’, but ‘the Word *made flesh*.’ . . . Only the naïve specialist really believes that science is qualitatively different from geography,

or geography from history, or history from ethics, or ethics from theology. (Quoting Ernest Cushing) ‘Sciences are not separate things, but only divisions in the sense that a man’s hands, feet, eyes, etc., are parts of a whole. A distinction between hand and wrist is useful, but who shall say just where hand stops and wrist begins.’”¹

Apart from pragmatic considerations like these, we are reminded that the teaching of Scripture is that *all* Scripture is God-breathed (πασα γραφη θεοπνευστος). Thus, the church defines its teaching in terms of ‘verbal-plenary’ inspiration.

² Donald G. Bloesch, Essentials of Evangelical Theology, Vol I (Harper and Row, San Francisco, 1978), p. 68.

¹ John Warwick Montgomery, God’s Inerrant Word (Bethany Fellowship, Minneapolis, 1973) p. 25/6.

A Necessary Inference

At this point we are compelled to draw certain inferences. Because God is Truth and knows all truth, one would expect that what he would communicate would also be true! Further, because he is all-powerful, he is *able* to do so! In the words of Geerhardus Vos:

“If God be personal and conscious, then the inference is inevitable that in every mode of self disclosure He will make a faultless expression of His nature and purpose. He will communicate his thought to the world with the stamp of divinity upon it.”²

Years earlier John Gill made a similar assertion. He argues that proof that the scriptures are a perfect and complete standard of faith and practice is to be ascertained, “First, from the author of them, who is God.” He goes on: “Since God is the author of them, who is a perfect being, in whom is no darkness at all; not of ignorance, error, and imperfection; they coming from him, must be free from everything of that kind.”³ This line of reasoning is consistent among those advocating the doctrine of inerrancy.⁴

Challenges to the Conclusion

This would seem to be an unassailable argument. But is it? Are we correct in making such an inference? It certainly has not gone unchallenged, and in at least a couple of ways.

First of all, apart from the validity of the argument, there are those who would seemingly protest *any* attempt to establish a dogma by use of rational inferences.

While adamantly rejecting the doctrine of inerrancy, William Hordern, president of the Lutheran Theological Seminary in Saskatoon, Canada, seems to actually accept the validity of the argument. He notes that for many centuries “it was taken for granted that what God reveals is information that can be put into rational propositions like any other knowledge.” Having said this, he goes on to acknowledge that if God does reveal Himself in this manner, “we almost have to accept the view that the revelation is infallible.” He goes on to summarize the argument of Victor White, a Roman Catholic theologian whose

² Geerhardus Vos, Biblical Theology (Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., Grand Rapids, 1954), p. 20.

³ John Gill, A Body of Practical and Doctrinal Divinity (first ed. 1769), p. .

⁴ Clark Pinnock - “Inerrancy is a necessary, not merely an optional, inference from the Biblical teaching about inspiration. It is an intrinsic property and essential characteristic of the inspired text. This deduction from inspiration is proposed because it is one drawn by Jesus Christ and his apostles.” A Defense of Biblical Infallibility (Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, Philadelphia, 1973) p. 10. Norman Geisler - “The doctrine of inerrancy is the only valid conclusion from two clearly taught truths of Scripture: (1) the Bible is the very utterance of God; (2) whatever God affirms is completely true and without error. Anyone familiar with the basic laws of reasoning can readily see that one and only one conclusion follows from these two premises, namely, whatever the Bible affirms is completely true and without error.” cited in Inerrancy, p. 310. These are reflective of countless others.

argument stresses the necessity of *verbal* inspiration. His assessment: “This is a strong argument. If we grant the premise that God has imparted to man certain information that is necessary for salvation, the rest follows with stunning logic.” How, then, can its conclusions be evaded? His answer: “The strongest answer is to challenge its basic premise - that what God reveals is information.”¹

This is the approach typically taken by those in the Neo Orthodox camp, as well as some who, while not completely identifying themselves with it, are quite sympathetic. Several features of their position need elaboration.

First of all, the place afforded logic in theological discussion is called into question. In an effort to discredit inerrancy, it is argued that it is the sterile fruit of the scholasticism that emerged in the second phase of the Reformation. According to Jack Rogers,

“The Old Princeton tradition has its roots in the scholasticism of Turretin and Thomas Aquinas. This tradition is a reactionary one developed to refute attacks on the Bible, especially by the science of biblical criticism. The demand for reason prior to faith in the authority of the Bible seems wedded to a prior commitment to Aristotelian philosophy.”²

While some saw this period as the golden age of Protestantism, others insist that it “ossified the vitality of the sixteenth century.”¹ It ‘scholasticized’ Christianity, reducing it to a formal set of beliefs and divested the Word of God of its power by reducing it to the level of a written document, little more than a theological treatise. While some would conclude that the scholastics were simply ‘more scholastic,’ its critics charge that they virtually deified logic at the expense of experience and personal piety.

Much of twentieth century theology, however, has been in reaction to this ‘dependence’ on human reason. In an article titled “Special Divine Revelation as Rational,” Gordon Clark notes that “. . . the typical philosophic position of the twentieth century is not so much to be designated skepticism as outright irrationalism.” He goes on to explain that this mind-set spilled over into the discipline of theology, coming through Soren Kierkegaard and being adopted by many (if not most or all) in the Neo Orthodox camp.²

Most contemporary theology downplays formal logic, allowing little room for the fundamental principle of antithesis. Clark cites Kierkegaard, for example, as stating that it makes no difference whether a man prays to God or to an idol - providing he prays passionately. It doesn’t matter what you believe, as long as you sincerely believe it! Kierkegaard is not alone. It is almost the exception rather than the rule to find post-

¹ William Horden, *The Case for a New Reformation Theology*, cited in *The Living God*, p. 179/80. Note that part of White’s argument is that in addition to an infallible Bible is the need for an infallible *interpretation*, as offered by the church.

² Jack Rogers, from *Biblical Authority* as cited by Norman Geisler in *Inerrancy*, p. 308

¹ John Gerstner’s descriptive summary of the opposition view in *Inerrancy*, p. 386

² Gordon Clark, “Special Divine Revelation as Rational,” in *Revelation and the Bible*, ed. Carl F.H. Henry (Baker Book House, Grand Rapids, 1958), p. 35f.

moderns who would insist that Jesus is the only ‘way’ to God: other faiths are equally valid; all that matters is faith; ignore that contradictions that exist between them.

In addition, in this scheme faith is often reduced to an subjective existential experience, divorced from objective facts. R. A. Finlayson calls attention to a remark made by Martin Heineken to the effect that, “he who means to establish an objective certainty only confuses the issue,” and a similar statement attributed to Kierkegaard that “only the truth that edifies is truth for thee.”³

As a fair representative of the Neo Orthodox school of thought, the views of Emil Brunner are instructive. Gordon Clark insists that he disregards the distinction between truth and falsity. For him, religious ‘truth’ is incomprehensible, and the language used to communicate it may or may not be true.⁴ “Brunner argues that ‘straight line inferences’ must be curbed,” he observes, “We dare not follow our principles to their logical conclusions.” Citing Brunner himself, “It becomes unmistakably clear that what God wills to give us cannot be truly given in words, but only by way of a hint God can, if he wishes, speak his Word to man even through false doctrine.”¹ R. A. Finlayson points to a similar statement: “At some points, the variety of Apostolic doctrine, regarded purely from the theological and intellectual point of view, is an irreconcilable contradiction.”²

The view of revelation and the Bible that has emerged from this movement is, accordingly, problematic. Horden offers the following summary of how contemporary theologians typically view them:

“Modern theologians have presented a new understanding of the nature of revelation. This view has been most adequately summarized by saying that what God reveals is not propositions or information -- what God reveals is God. In revelation we do not receive a doctrine or some esoteric piece of information that man’s wisdom could not have discovered. In revelation we are brought into a living relationship with the person of God. *God’s Word never consists of black marks on the pages of a book called the Bible*; God’s Word is the living Word which he speaks through the Bible and to which man must respond.

“The Bible is the indispensable medium of God’s revelation; it alone records the events through which God was revealed. . . . But *we may read the Bible from cover to cover and never hear the Word of God*. On the other hand, at any moment God may use a word of the Bible to speak His Word to our hearts.” [emph. Added throughout]

³ R.A. Finlayson, “Contemporary ideas of Revelation” in Revelation and the Bible, p. 229.

⁴ As we noted earlier, human language is often deemed an inadequate medium of communication when it comes to ‘religious’ truth. Cf. our preliminary remarks at the beginning of this section.

¹ Gordon Clark, God’s Hammer: The Bible and its Critics, (The Trinity Foundation, Jefferson, Maryland, 1982), p. 37/82 Finlayson, *ibid.*, p. 225.³ William Horden, The Case for a New Reformation Theology, cited in The Living God, p. 184, 187, 183

² Finlayson, *ibid.*, p. 225

“The Holy Spirit must illuminate the heart of the reader if he is to hear the Word of God in the Scriptures. . . . If the Word of God is heard only where and when the Holy Spirit illuminates the receiver of revelation, then it is not crucial whether or not the propositions involved are inerrant. . . .”³

It is with this in mind that, as we noted a moment ago, he would insist that the strongest answer to the logic of inerrancy is to challenge its basic premise - that what God reveals is information.

As seen in these remarks, there is a sharp antithesis between the Word of God and the words of the Bible. This view is often expressed by saying that the Bible *contains* or *becomes* the Word of God. In the words of Karl Barth, “It is quite impossible that there

should be a direct identity between the human word of holy Scripture and the Word of God, and therefore between the creaturely reality in itself and as such and the reality of God the Creator.”¹ Brunner expressed himself similarly when he wrote, “It is therefore impossible to equate any human words, any ‘speech-about-Him’, with the divine self-communication.”² And John Baillie’s remarks are expressive of so many within this movement: “In the last resort, it is not information about God that is revealed, but God Himself.”³

A couple of problems stand out here. The first is that revelation becomes non-rational and non-propositional. There is no real content to the ‘Word of God’. J. I. Packer remarks that it creates a “false antithesis that makes God’s method of self-disclosure analogous to the non-verbal communication of Harpo Marx.”⁴ The second problem is that in His revelation, we are confronted with an infallible disclosure of God to man, but that disclosure is preserved in the form of a fallible written record. (Of course it is moot whether the content is infallible if content doesn’t matter in the first place!)

In response, the doctrine of the Church is, and always has been, that the Bible *is* the Word of God. James Orr brought this out in 1910 in his work, Revelation and Inspiration. He begins with the proposition that if a revelation has been given, it is natural and reasonable to expect that a record will be preserved in some permanent and authoritative form. But he goes on . . .

“We have now found that the line between revelation and its record is becoming very thin, and that, in another true sense, *the record*, in the fulness of its contents, *is itself for us the revelation*. There are parts of the revelation . . . which never existed in any but written form. But the record as a whole is the revelation - God’s complete word - for us.”⁵

³ William Hordern, The Case for a New Reformation Theology, cited in The Living God, Pp. 184, 187, 183

¹ Karl Barth, from Vol. II, Church Dogmatics, cited by John Frame, God’s Inerrant Word, p. 194

² Emil Brunner, *ibid.*

³ John Baillie, The Idea of Revelation in Recent Thought, cited by Finlayson p. 225.

⁴ J. I. Packer, p. 204 Inerrancy.

⁵ Orr, The Living God, p. 235

The Bible does not *contain* the Word of God, the words contained therein *are* the Word of God. They are God-breathed, as is affirmed in the doctrine of verbal inspiration.

Secondly, while not every aspect of our faith can presently be explained or fully comprehended (*Rom. 11:33 Isa. 55:8-9*), it is a rational faith, and logic is an appropriate and necessary tool for the theologian. As Dr. Van Til has pointed out, the law of contradiction as we know it, is simply the expression of the internal coherence of God's nature. It is an aspect of reality, and to suggest that it can be discarded in pursuit of the truth is absurd.

Paul warned Timothy to avoid “godless chatter and contradictions of what is falsely called knowledge” (*1 Tim 6:20 RSV*). The word translated ‘contradictions’ is antithesis (*αντιθεσεις*), and the principle of antithesis is an absolute necessity if we are to test the spirits to discern truth from error (*1 Jn. 4:1-3*). It is not only legitimate, but necessary that we believe, not only the things expressly set forth in Scripture, but those that may be deduced by “good and necessary consequence.”

Thirdly, one can not know God without knowing *about* Him and specific details of His will for our lives. Thus the importance of the concept of ‘propositional’ revelation.

The argument that challenges the concept of verbal-propositional revelation and the use of logic in understanding the true nature of the Word of God is wholly inadequate. But the question remains, is the inference we have drawn valid? To return to the statement of William Horden we cited at the beginning of this section, the argument which derives infallibility/inerrancy from inspiration involves ‘stunning logic’, which, as he suggests, can be avoided only by denying the basic premise: “that what God reveals is information.”

In spite of any comfort we may draw from an endorsement like this, the fact remains that the inference is challenged, and for a couple of reasons. First, most (if not *all*) who reject inerrancy insist that, rather than deductive arguments, our approach to the subject should be inductive (see discussion about method above). Never mind the validity or soundness of the argument. The point, they say, is that we are using the wrong *type* of argument.

Secondly, although it is not always stated, there is at least an implicit challenge to the logic in our deductions. To be sure, most challengers do not deal with the mechanics of the argument itself, but the implication is that it is flawed. On the one hand, C. A. Briggs asserted that “this arbitrary claim for deductions and consequences is one that no true critic or historian ought to concede.”¹ He does not challenge the validity of the argument, but its *soundness*, in that he does not accept the premise of verbal inspiration.

¹ Briggs, *ibid*, p. 556

Others, however, challenge the *validity* of the argument. The critique one usually encounters goes something like this:

God is utterly trustworthy, but the same need not be said of a book which comes through the instrumentality of fallen man. Since the argument for inerrancy is essentially one of cause and effect (a perfect cause necessitates a perfect effect), the objection seems to be that it amounts to a non sequitur: It does not follow that a book whose ultimate author is God is necessarily infallible. The fallacy is in assuming that since God is the ultimate cause, He is therefore the *only* cause. The result of doing so is that ‘second causes’ (which are fallible) are ignored or disregarded.

The objection centers around the role of man in the process. God has chosen to employ fallible human beings to preserve His message for posterity. In so doing, He has left the door open to error. One has only to think of the ‘gossip’ game where someone whispers a secret in another’s ear, and it is passed around a circle. By the time it gets to the end it is hardly recognizable! In principle, it is argued, this is the danger inherent in the process.

Paul Feinberg cites Donald Bloesch from his work Essentials of Evangelical Theology to the effect that the Bible is not the *immediate* Word of God, but rather comes through the human medium.¹ R. A. Finlayson similarly cites John Baillie as saying, “In what is given of God there can be no imperfection of any kind, but there is always imperfection in what we may be allowed to call the ‘receiving apparatus’.”² We will illustrate with several important examples.

In his classic work Revelation and Inspiration, James Orr correctly notes that inerrancy is derived by means of deduction from the doctrine of inspiration. However, he insists that if it is to be retained, it must be taken on faith, because it can not be defended rationally. “At best,” he asserts, “such inerrancy can never be demonstrated with a cogency which entitles it to rank as the foundation of a belief in inspiration.” Later he poses the question: “Does the Bible itself claim, or inspiration necessitate, such an ‘errorless’ record in matters of minor detail?”³

“Very commonly it is argued by upholders of this doctrine that ‘inerrancy’ in every minute particular is involved *in the very idea* of a book given by inspiration of God. This might be held to be true on a theory of verbal dictation, but it can scarcely be maintained on a just view of the actual historical genesis of the Bible. One may plead, indeed, for a ‘supernatural providential guidance’ which has for its aim to exclude all, even the least, error or discrepancy in statement, even such as may inhere in the sources from which the information is obtained, or may arise from corruption of anterior documents. But this is a violent assumption which there is nothing in the Bible really to support.”

¹ Inerrancy, p. 281

² Revelation and the Bible p. 222

³ The Living God, p. 245, 251

He goes on to add that this view cannot be sustained “even on the assumption of a ‘verbal’ inspiration.” In effect, it dies the death of a thousand qualifications: “The theory may be stretched by qualifications, admissions, and explanations till there is practically little difference between the opposite views.”

However, as he goes on to elaborate, the underlying assumptions that compel him to make these conclusions begin to surface. The Scriptures were . . .

“. . . written in human languages, whose words, inflections, constructions, and idioms bear everywhere indelible traces of human error. The record itself furnishes evidence that the writers were in large measure dependent for their knowledge upon sources and methods in themselves fallible, and that their personal knowledge and judgments were in many matters hesitating and defective, or even wrong.”¹

These words appeared in 1910. Nearly twenty years later C. H. Dodd echoed his sentiments with even greater clarity in The Authority of the Bible. After stating the traditional position with reasonable accuracy, he proceeds to develop the argument we have outlined above. In the expression “the Word of God,” he insists, there “lurks an equivocation.” What we really encounter in the Bible are the imperfect (i.e. *fallible*) words of men. “Not God,” he insists, “but Paul is the author of the epistle to the Romans.” “The importance of this fairly obvious and elementary distinction,” he concludes,

“is that it exposes the fallacy of arguing from an admission that the Bible is ‘the Word of God’ to the conclusion that it must possess God’s own infallibility. The words of a man, assuming that they are the deliberate expression of his meaning, command just that measure of authority which we recognize in the man himself.”²

At about the same time, Karl Barth went so far as to described the traditional view as a sort of Biblical docetism. Docetism was an ancient heresy that denied the full humanity of Christ. The term comes from the Greek, *dokeo*, which means ‘to seem’ or ‘appear’. Christ only *appeared* to be human. When applied to the Bible, he was saying that those who adhere to the traditional understanding of the Bible make virtually no allowance for the human element: it only *appears* to be there. This, of course, is a caricature. The tradition-al doctrine insists on both the human and divine elements in balance, in much the same manner as found in Christ Himself. Nonetheless, he would write:

“The men whom we hear as witnesses speak as fallible, erring men like ourselves. What they say, and what we read as their word, can of itself lay claim to be the word of God, but never sustain that claim. . . . The prophets

¹ *ibid*, p. 252

² Dodd, *ibid*, p. 26/7 “My present purpose,” he explained, “is simply to clear out of the way of the argument the chimerical idea that we may seek in the Bible, or indeed anywhere else, an expression of the mind of God so direct and so independent of human mediation that it could claim infallible authority over against all other means of apprehending truth.”

and apostles as such, even in their office, even in their function as witnesses, even in the act of writing down their witness, were real, historical men as we are, and therefore sinful in their action, and capable and actually guilty of error in their spoken and written word.”¹

E. J. Young recalls an illustration Emil Brunner used in pointing to the influence of the human element when he compared it to a record player: We hear the voice of the singer, but we also hear the scratching of the record.² If the ‘scratching’ is understood as nothing more than traces of his personality that are present in the text, the point is acceptable, but by it he had much more in mind. In fact, as we have already noted, in his thinking the words of the Bible are to be distinguished altogether from the Word of God! The equation of the two is “actually a breach of the second commandment: it is the deification of a creature, bibliolatry.”³

Response

First, we would challenge the logic employed in this argument. That the human element is prominent throughout the Scriptures is beyond dispute, and has been given due recognition by virtually everyone who has participated in the discussion. But the issue here is not the human element per se. It is the assumption that **the human element inevitably leads to error**. “To err is human,” we are told, and as John Warwick Montgomery suggests, “The stark phrase ‘to err is human’ has been repeated so often and so uncritically through the centuries that . . . it has unjustifiably been raised to the level of a metaphysical principle.”⁴ He cites Catholic theologian Bruce Vawter to the effect that “A human literature containing no error would indeed be a contradiction in terms, since nothing is more human than to err.”⁵

In response, note that while men often err, they do not err *necessarily*. R. C. Sproul puts the question as follows: “Can we take the proverbial maxim, ‘To err is human’ and treat it as a tautology which can be reversed to say, ‘to be human is to err?’” The answer is clearly *no*. Again, he explains that the term ‘fallible’ is descriptive of an *ability*, not an act, and while fallen men are certainly *prone* to err, “to say that men are fallible is to say that they are capable of error, not that they *must* err, or that they *always* err.”⁶

E. J. Young calls attention to the latter thought. Not only do men not err necessarily, they do not err perpetually. If so, it would follow that “not merely part of the Scripture

¹ Barth, Church Dogmatics, cited by R.C. Sproul in God’s Inerrant Word, p. 256.

² E.J. Young, Thy Word is Truth (Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., Grand Rapids, 1957), p. 231.

³ Robert Reymond, Brunner’s Dialectical Encounter (Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1967), p. 16.

⁴ Montgomery, God’s Inerrant Word, p. 33

⁵ *ibid*, p. 42, n. 36

⁶ Sproul, *ibid*, p. 256

would partake of fallibility, but all . . . Like a leech that cannot be removed, human fallibility attaches itself to all Scripture without exception.”¹

Furthermore, the fallacy in Barth’s accusation that conservatives are guilty of docetism has often been pointed out. He himself believed that Christ’s humanity did not prevent Him from being sinless in spite of the fact that He was truly human! Having called attention to this, Dr. Sproul quips, “Christ’s sinlessness no more cancels his humanity than does inerrancy cancel the Biblical writer’s humanity.”²

Having responded to the logic of the argument from human fallibility, we must now speak to the theological error implied throughout. The error lies in mistaken notions about the nature of inspiration.

If, as the Scriptures assert, the authors were ‘moved along’ by the Holy Spirit, if they themselves (*the writings*, not the authors) are God-breathed, then the words therein are nothing less than the Word of God; *God’s words*. The real point of dispute is not with inerrancy per se, but with the doctrine of verbal inspiration. If, the human element notwithstanding, we allow that inspiration extends to the words themselves, that the Spirit of God mysteriously but directly superintended the process, then we must allow, and should expect, that the finished product would bear the stamp of divine authority.³

Orr’s remark to the effect that inerrancy could be accepted only if the theory of verbal dictation could be maintained is blatantly false. The Bible has dual authorship; the human and the divine. The one does not cancel out the other. While we may not comprehend *how* such a process could occur, we must allow that it *could* and *did*. There is an element of mystery in all of God’s dealings, and it is presumptuous for us to think that our ability to fully comprehend something is requisite to its truth. We allow for such a mystery in the person of Christ, the living Word, and should not deny as much to the Scriptures, the written Word.

While Barth’s accusation of Biblical Docetism lacks warrant, we would not be far from the truth in countering with the charge of Biblical Arianism! In fact, in the New Oxford Review, Edith Black, accuses those who reject inerrancy on the grounds of limitations in the human authors of holding a *Nestorian* view of Scripture. Nestorius, as she reminds us, could not imagine the divine and human natures (of Christ) “co- existing

¹ Young, *ibid*, p. 74

² God’s Inerrant Word, p. 256

³ The doctrine of verbal inspiration - that inspiration extends to the very words, and not merely the ideas, has been ably defended again and again and should need no proof from us. Note however that the term God-breathed suggests, not only God as the source - the Scriptures being the product of the breath of God, but the intimate nature of the process. God the Spirit was intimately involved throughout the process. Paul alluded to the things he spoke, “not in words taught by human wisdom, but in those taught by the Spirit,” and the Spirit speaking in them directed both what was said and how it was said.” I Cor. 2:13 / Mt. 10:19-20

in the same person in such a way that every thought and act of Jesus could be said to be divine and human at the same time.” She goes on,

“The authors (Rogers and McKim) display the same Nestorian tendency in their treatment of the question of inerrancy. They do not view the Holy Spirit as working in confluence with the human intellect of the inspired author in such a way that the written product is both divine and human at the same time - divine in its inerrancy and human in its means of expression. They claim, instead, to be able to separate the infallible divine message from the fallible human words which convey it.”¹

B. B. Warfield cites an analogy evidently used in his day to illustrate the corrupting influence of the human authors:

“As light that passes through the colored glass of a cathedral window, is light from heaven, but it is stained by the tints of the glass through which it passes, so any word of God which is passed through the mind and soul of a man must come out discolored by the personality through which it is given, and just to that degree ceases to be the pure word of God.”

To this he responded:

“But what if this personality has itself been formed by God into precisely the personality it is, for the express purpose of communicating to the word given through it just the coloring which it gives it? What if the colors of the stained glass window have been designed by the architect for the express purpose of giving to the light that floods the cathedral precisely the tone and quality it receives from them? What if the word of God that comes to His people is framed by God into the word of God it is, precisely by means of the qualities of the men formed by Him for the purpose, through which it is given? When we think of God the Lord giving by His Spirit a body of authoritative Scriptures to His people, we must remember that He is the God of providence and of grace as well as of revelation and inspiration, and that He holds all the lines of preparation as fully under His direction as He does the specific operation which we call technically, in the narrow sense, by the name of ‘inspiration.’”²

It is imperative that the premises of the argument not be misstated. The truthfulness of Scripture does not come merely because God is the ultimate author of the Bible. Rather, since, not only is God the primary cause, but was directly and intimately, albeit mysteriously, involved in the actions of the second causes (fallible men), it must inevitably be true.

¹ Edith Black, “Nestorian View of Scripture”, in *New Oxford Review*, January/February, 1981.

² *Inspiration and Authority*, p. 155/6

To this we add one brief disclaimer. While we reject the fallacy that to be human necessitates error, we also reject the opposite extreme - that the human authors were in themselves infallible in their knowledge. ¹

The Definition of Inerrancy

There is, however, one important matter that, unless it receives at least some consideration, renders all that has just been said without much value. What exactly is inerrancy? What does the term mean, or imply?

First of all it needs to be stated most emphatically that the controversy is not between those who hold to ‘infallibility’ and those who adhere to ‘inerrancy’. This is discussed at length in an appendix that follows (*see Mere Semantics?*). Inerrancy simply means “with-out error,” or, to put it positively, “Wholly true in all that it affirms.” (Paul Feinberg) It is “in perfect accord with the truth.” (E. J. Young) At the heart of the matter, however, is the problem of having to state what an error is, a task that is anything but simple. The tendency is to go to one extreme or the other.

On the one hand, ‘error’ can be defined in too narrow a sense, with some scholars attempting to define it exclusively along moral and ethical lines. The authors of Scripture did not err in the sense that they did not engage in willful and deliberate deception, we are told. “Without error” means “being free from lying and fraud.”

In describing the position taken by G.C. Berkouwer, Donald Bloesch writes that inerrancy “connotes not impeccability, but indeceivability, which means being free from lying and fraud.” ¹ In like manner, David Hubbard says that error “theologically must mean that which leads us astray from the will of God or the knowledge of his truth.” ² In an interview in the Whittenburg Door, Jack Rogers also defined it in this manner: “The issue is did they deliberately lie to us? . . . the Biblical authors never intentionally told anybody a lie about a moral issue.” (This remark led the one interviewing him to ask, “O.K. for willful mistakes, but what about mistake mistakes?”) ³

¹ E.J. Young was emphatic in making this point. “We are, of course, far from maintaining that the human writers of the Scriptures were of themselves infallible in their knowledge. . . . It may be that Moses, Isaiah, John and Paul were all men whose views of astronomy are today outmoded. Probably they held opinions on many other matters which would now be regarded as out of date. The Bible, however, is not simply the work of Moses and Isaiah, John and Paul. If it were, what a jumble of confusion and error it would be!” Thy Word is Truth, Pp. 80, 102-103

¹ Donald G. Bloesch, *Essentials of Evangelical Theology*, Vol. I (Harper and Row, San Francisco, 1978), p. 67

² Gordon Clark, The Concept of Biblical Authority (Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co., Phillipsburg, New Jersey, 1980) p. 21.

³ Jack Rogers, Whittenburg Door interview, Pp. 13, 21

Gordon Clark also challenges Hubbard's attempt to evade the obvious meaning of the term. Responding to his ridicule that appeal is often made to the dictionary for definition, Clark notes first that *Webster's* defines it as, "Belief in what is untrue . . . a moral offense, sin . . . an act involving a departure from truth or accuracy." "Hence," he observes, "people who use ordinary English, if they think that the Bible departs from the truth, say that it contains error." He goes on to drive the point home:

"Since the Bible is a book, we do not say that the Bible sins. If the term error . . . is restricted to overt sinful actions, obviously the Bible cannot be accused of error, because books do not sin. But if error includes any departure from truth, then a book can assert erroneous propositions."⁴

The definitions mentioned above are too narrow, and evade the real issue of the truthfulness of Scripture. The other extreme is to define it too broadly, making it include more than is warranted.

What about "mistake mistakes"? What exactly would constitute a mistake or error in the sense that would render the Bible 'errant'? Would spelling or grammatical errors? What about false statements or lies (i.e. Job's friends, Satan)? What of imprecision in recording historic events, or the use of phenomenological language ('the sun rose')? What of 'misdirected' quotations (i.e. *Mt. 27: 9*), or perhaps 'looseness' in quoting from another source, or the use of round numbers or figurative language? What of inexactness in multiple accounts when harmony is concerned? What of the incorporation of uninspired sources into the Biblical text? Would this not imply that the Bible contains a mixture of divinely inspired words with those of fallible human authors leaving 'pockets' of uninspired and fallible material within the text of the Bible? Or what of the many alleged contradictions in the Bible, either of a theological nature (e.g. "God is not a man that he should repent" / "God repented"), or others of an historical nature (i.e. numbers and chronology)?

Often the issue is confused because of overstatement (deliberate or otherwise), sometimes almost to the point of caricature. When, for instance, Donald Bloesch makes the accusation that "a view of error is entertained that demands literal, exact, mechanical precision . . . the extra biblical criterion of scientific exactitude," or that it is demanded by proponents of inerrancy that the Scriptures be "factually accurate in the modern historical sense,"¹ he has engaged in misrepresentation.

The concerns we have raised demand that any definition or 'error' or 'inerrant' be adequately qualified. The Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy (Article XIII) is helpful at this point:

"We deny that it is proper to evaluate Scripture according to standards of truth and error that are alien to its usage or purpose. We further deny that inerrancy is negated by Biblical phenomena such as a lack of modern

⁴ Clark, *ibid.*

¹ Bloesch, p. 66, 67 It is important to understand that, while we uphold the historical accuracy of the Bible, no one has suggested that its authors approached the subject as modern biographers or historians might.

technical precision, irregularities of grammar or spelling, observational descriptions of nature, the reporting of falsehoods, the use of hyperbole and round numbers, the topical arrangement of material, variant selections of material in parallel accounts, or the use of free citations.”

This document, especially the ‘Articles of Affirmation and Denial’, is extremely helpful in attempting to clarify what is and is not intended when we speak of error.

We might define ‘error’ as the “condition of being wrong, mistaken, or incorrect.” An error is a “departure from truth,” (G. Clark) and to say that the Bible is without error is to say that “it is not false, mistaken, or defective.” (H. Lindsell) Having said this, we could probably not improve on the definition of ‘inerrancy’ as crafted by Paul Feinberg:

“Inerrancy means that when all facts are known, the Scriptures in their original autographs and when properly interpreted will be shown to be wholly true in everything that they affirm, whether that has to do with doctrine or morality or with the social, physical, or life sciences.”²

The Autographa

In addition to clarifying the meaning of our terminology, it is also necessary that we make an important qualification. In setting forth our doctrine of inerrancy, it is understood that inerrancy is restricted to the autographa; it was they that were immediately inspired. This is a necessary qualification because some have argued for the infallibility, not only of manuscripts in the original languages, but of translations as well. Philo said as much of the Septuagint, some Roman Catholics of the Vulgate, and some Protestants of the vowel points in the Tanach. In spite of noteworthy scholars who have advocated this (including Owen and Turretin), the majority view as reflected in church history is that infallibility is to be restricted to the originals.¹

The problem we face is that we do not possess the originals, and no one questions that errors have crept into the text through the process of copying. This is seen as a fatal weakness to the doctrine. As far back as 1881 C.A. Briggs drew attention to this:

“We will never be able to attain the sacred writings as they gladdened the eyes of those who first saw them, and rejoiced the hearts of those who first

² Inerrancy, p. 294

¹ Greg Bahnsen points out that H. P. Smith and C. A. Briggs claimed that this idea was created by ‘modern scholastics’. To the contrary, he provides considerable documentation that proves otherwise. In a letter to Jerome, Augustine said of perceived errors, “I decide that either the text is corrupt, or the translator did not follow what was really said, or that I failed to understand it.” Similarly, Richard Baxter wrote: “No error or contradiction is in it (Scripture), but what is in some copies, by failure of preservers, transcribers, printers, and translators.” See “The Inerrancy of the Autographa” in Inerrancy Pp. 151f., 156.

heard them. If the external words of the original were inspired, it does not profit us. We are cut off from them forever.”²

Countless others have joined him in attacking this provision. The absence of an original makes the doctrine irrelevant, we are told! It is depicted as being intellectually dishonest, and nothing less than an ‘apologetical cop-out.’ Bahnsen cites Brunner as saying that it is “useless, idolatrous, and untenable.” Others suggest that by falling back on this ‘exception’ the doctrine dies the death of a thousand qualifications. In the words of James Orr, “The theory may be stretched by qualifications, admissions, and explanations till there is *practically* little difference between the opposite views.”³

“Amazing indeed is the cavalier manner in which modern theologians relegate this doctrine of an inerrant original Scripture to the limbo of the unimportant,” lamented E. J. Young. Discovering that it is possible for men to be blessed of God without an errorless text, he went on, “men rush to the conclusion that therefore an infallible Bible is unnecessary and unimportant.”⁴

The issue, however, is not irrelevant. For one thing our present texts were not taken out of thin air; they are anchored in an original. Dr. Van Til illustrates this with the analogy of a bridge that crosses a river. The river may have risen to the point that the waters cover the bridge. In attempting to cross, one may not actually see the bridge, but its presence is what makes the crossing possible.¹

Furthermore, the ‘original’ is to an amazing degree accurately preserved in the Bible we possess today, and our ‘copies’ can be said to be ‘inerrant’ to the extent that they conform to them. Greg Bahnsen demonstrates that for Biblical personalities, including Christ and the apostles, who made use of previously given Scriptures, the copies they had in their possession were assumed to be adequate and authoritative (cf. our discussion about Jesus’ use of Scripture).

“Because Christ raised no doubts about the adequacy of the Scriptures as His contemporaries knew them, we can safely assume that the first-century text of the Old Testament was a wholly adequate representation of the divine Word originally given.... The respect that Jesus and His apostles held for the extant Old Testament text is, at base, an expression of their confidence in God’s providential preservation of the copies and translations as substantially identical with the inspired originals.”²

Dr. Bahnsen would go on to assert that the doctrine of ‘original inerrancy’ “permits doubts only about the *identification* of the text - doubts that can be allayed by textual

² Briggs, *Presbyterian Review*, p. 573/4

³ Orr, *ibid*, p. 252

⁴ Young, *ibid*, p. 89

¹ Cornelius Van Til, *Introduction to Systematic Theology* (Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co., 1976), p. 153

² Bahnsen, *ibid*, Pp. 161 (159f.)

critical methods. In this case God's Word remains innocent until proven guilty."³ To this we would add that it is not irrelevant that those who ridicule the restriction of inerrancy to a lost autographa themselves devote considerable energy to textual criticism! If the autographa is irrelevant, why bother!

Hermeneutics

One last concern that must be addressed in connection with the doctrinal portion of our study pertains to the interpretation of the Bible. Four years after the Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy was drafted, a second meeting was convened in which its sequel, The Chicago Statement on Biblical Hermeneutics, was produced. "While we recognize that belief in the inerrancy of Scripture is basic to maintaining its authority," its authors affirmed, "the values of that commitment are only as real as one's understanding of the meaning of Scripture."⁴ This is why Paul Feinberg included in his definition of inerrancy the phrase, "Scripture, *when properly interpreted* will be shown to be wholly true in everything that they affirm."

Moises Silva speaks to the close connection between inerrancy and hermeneutics when he writes:

"...one can hardly speak of inerrancy without getting involved in hermeneutics. And yet, an exceedingly important caveat is necessary here, for while the two concepts are closely related or even inseparable, they are also distinct. For inerrancy to function properly in our use of Scripture, an adequate hermeneutics is a prerequisite. But that is a far cry from suggesting that the doctrine of inerrancy automatically provides us with the correct hermeneutics, except in the rather general sense that it precludes any interpretation that suggests that God lies or errs."¹

The importance of hermeneutics is also recognized by the opponents of inerrancy. In fact, William Hordern perceives hermeneutics as something of an Achilles heel for the one holding inerrancy. At the least, it renders the issue moot, for . . .

"An objective revelation is not inerrant until it is inerrantly received. The subjective receiver of revelation is an indispensable link in the chain. If there is to be inerrant revelation of propositions, the hearer would have to be as inerrant as the speaker.... The fact that they may have issued from the speaker 'infallibly' is irrelevant unless they come into the understanding of the hearer meaning precisely what the speaker meant by them."²

³ *ibid*, p. 184

⁴ Preface to Chicago Statement on Biblical Hermeneutics.

¹ Moises Silva "Old Princeton, Westminster, and Inerrancy" published in Inerrancy and Hermeneutics, ed. Harvie Conn (Baker Book House, 1989), p. 74, cited by Tony Stiff.

² Hordern, p. 182/3

He goes on to make note of the obvious, that the Bible is understood differently by different people, and then concludes, “Roman Catholicism does not solve this dilemma by its claim (of infallibility). It only shifts the problem from the Bible to the church.”

This claim merits little response. Poor eyesight may hinder one from effectively using a ruler, but it does not diminish the accuracy of the instrument itself. It is, however, possible that many of the problems encountered in the Scriptures are *imposed* on them by the interpreter. As Hordern correctly observes, those entrusted with the task of interpreting the Bible are fallible, with the result that there *are* differences of interpretation on significant points. But again, the limitations of the interpreter do not render the source itself errant.

The interplay between hermeneutics and issues that arise in Biblical studies has led to a variety of responses. On the one hand, the attempt to harmonize Scripture with the ‘realities’ of life has, on occasions, led to faulty hermeneutics. As one example, the allegorical method was developed in an attempt to make the meaning of Scripture palatable to a more skeptical audience. On other hand, there are instances in which the ‘realities’ of life have acted as a *corrective* to a faulty hermeneutic. While insisting that science must not be permitted to fix the content of revelation, Carl Henry has suggested that “it is welcomed as a negative check against false exegesis.”¹

In conclusion, we are reminded that, for all our limitations, hermeneutics is not a hit or miss approach to the sacred writings. While it is true that there are many interpretations of the Bible, there is but one *correct* understanding. We approach the Scriptures with the understanding that they *can* be understood, as is maintained in the doctrine of perspicuity. In addition to the anointing we receive of the Holy Spirit, there are fundamental principles which, when observed with due diligence (*I Tim. 2:15*), will generally lead to a correct understanding of the text. It simply does not follow that fallible interpreters imply a fallible text.

¹ cited by Hordern, p. 183. The controversy over the views of Galileo come to mind here.

CONCLUSION

I would like to close with two questions. The first is simply, *What should be done with the issue of inerrancy?* Certainly much of the effectiveness of the Church has been hampered by the amount of time and energy spent arguing over it. How the Church handles this matter is therefore of vital importance! But should we simply ignore it, hoping that it will eventually go away? Should we attempt to neutralize it in some fashion? Or, should we confront it - face it head on and stand on our convictions?

The approach of the old PCUSA was essentially the first. In attempting to maintain unity within the denomination it has been said that they did so, “not by resolving their differences, but by ignoring and absorbing them.”

“Between the years 1892 to 1926, the consensus of the Princeton Theology prevailed in the Presbyterian Church U.S.A. as the official interpretation of Scripture in the Westminster Confession. Since 1927 this interpretation has not been officially binding. Yet it has never been officially repudiated. Rather, it has been largely ignored.”

Dr. Loetscher goes on to reflect that “there was an increasing tendency to think of the Church as a kind of business corporation chartered to do the Lord's work.” He further adds that the “subordination of questions of truth . . . to efficiency of operation carries a recognizable suggestion of pragmatism.”¹ The results of following such an approach are all too obvious today!

Others would attempt to *neutralize* the issue by insisting that it is merely a matter of semantics, calling perhaps for a moratorium of some sort with regard to the use of terminology that is thought to be divisive. The problem with this is that the issue is not (*primarily*) one of semantics. Consequently, it will do nothing toward resolving the problem by changing or redefining the terms we use.²

¹ Loetscher, Pp. 8, 59.

² Cf. Clark Pinnock, *Inspiration and Authority: A Truce Proposal for the Evangelicals*, Theological Student's Fellowship. His proposal: “It seems to me, in view of the serious disadvantages the term inerrancy presents, that we ought to suspend it from the list of preferred terminology for stating the evangelical doctrine of Scripture.” Since the term ‘inerrancy’ has become divisive, let avoid it. (see appendix) “Brothers who draw the inference of inerrancy ought not condemn those who do not.” But if

As we have repeatedly said, the issue is of immense importance; much is at stake. It must be confronted and resolved, not by means of church politics, through resolutions or

memorials, but through study and understanding, and by acting with integrity.¹

The second question is as inevitable as the first: *What difference does it make?* Or, to put it somewhat differently, *What is at stake?* Are we splitting hairs over matters of little importance? The answer: no, *much* (if not everything) is at stake!

For starters, to say that the Word of God is fallible leaves a cloud hanging over God Himself. In their Judicial Testimony, the Seceders not only stated positively what they believed about the Scriptures, but expressed in negative terms the implications of its denial. To suppose that “they might err in matters of less importance, or to affirm that their reasonings are often inconclusive . . .” they insisted,

“. . . is to undermine the authority of the Bible, as it throws a suspicion over the whole, by leaving the mind in an uncertainty what to admit as truth, and what to reject as error: That these suppositions throw an injurious reflection upon the wisdom of God; for though the avowed design of Scripture is to rescue men from error, yet, according to these sentiments, the means are not adequate to the ends . . . , they are injurious to His holiness . . . and they are not less injurious to His veracity, since they suppose that writings sanctioned by His authority, and claiming infallibility on that account, may, notwithstanding, be mingled with error and falsehood.”

As noted, the veracity of God himself is called into question. If He is the ultimate author of Scripture, and they are found to be untrue, where does that leave him?

Secondly, there is the question of authority. The foundation for Biblical authority is not only in the fact that God is its author, but that because He is its author, it speaks truth! As Gordon Clark has observed, “if the Bible is not inerrant, either it is not God's Word, or God has the authority to tell us what is not so.”²

the inference is valid, can we avoid it? Are the laws of logic arbitrary, to be employed when convenient but avoided if perceived as divisive?

¹ It is unavoidable that the question of ethics comes into consideration as we discuss this issue. We are compelled to ask, how, for instance, the PCUSA (and its institutions) have gone from its heights to where it stands today? The answer, in part, is that men did not act with integrity – academically or morally. We find an example in C.A. Briggs, the great spokesman for the higher critical movement. In the book detailing his heresy trial, Carl Hatch informs us that at his inauguration and prior to his address, he was requested to submit to a pledge required of newly appointed teachers at all Presbyterian seminaries. “This involved,” he noted, “making a public declaration of belief in the Holy Scriptures as the only infallible rule of faith and practice.” But, he continues, “Little did the unsuspecting assembly realize that in less than five minutes, all that had been professed would be repudiated.” [The Charles A. Briggs Heresy Trial] Much the same could be said of other denominations and institutions – including the ARP Church!

² Clark, The Concept of Biblical Authority, p. 2.

Closely related to this is the manner in which that authority is applied. We often say that the Bible is the only infallible rule of faith and practice. Consider the implications for both of these. In matters of ‘faith’ (belief) we are confronted with the relationship of the doctrine of Scripture to other doctrines. Simply put, it is foundational! All of our beliefs are built upon the foundation of the Word of God. If its authority is brought into question (by allowing the possibility that it is a fallible and errant book) the entire edifice is in danger of collapsing.

While there are individuals who do not profess belief in inerrancy who have remained orthodox in their faith, and while, on the other hand, there are some who are rigid in their advocacy of it and have embraced heresy (eg. Jehovah’s Witnesses), there is a very real danger that abandonment of it will result in deviation from the truth. This was the thesis Harold Lindsell developed in the 1970s in his book The Battle For the Bible. Embracing a doctrine of an errant Bible, he argued, “will lead to disaster down the road.” It will have the effect of “undermining belief in the full orbbed truth of the Bible . . . and will lead finally to apostasy.” His book provides substantial documentation of churches, individuals, and institutions that seemed to follow that pattern.¹

Such statements, often derided as the ‘domino theory’, may seem extreme on the surface, and have not gone unchallenged. They clearly need to be qualified. Orr insisted that it was “a most suicidal position for any defender of revelation to take up.”² While not completely rejecting the idea, Kenneth Kantzer pointed out that “there is 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.”³ Carl F.H. Henry reinforces this contention, but makes an important addition:

“The claim by young evangelicals that to reject inerrancy does not automatically drive one to repudiate other evangelical doctrines is wholly right. The real question is whether, once Scriptural errancy is affirmed, a consistent Evangelical faith is maintained thereafter only by an act of will rather than by persuasive epistemological credentials.”⁴

Rejection of inerrancy does not *logically* imply that one will also waver at other points. The problem, however, is that there are no epistemological restraints to *prevent* him from doing so,⁵ and given the propensity of human nature to seek the path of least resistance, the all too conspicuous pattern Lindsell documents compels us to approach

¹ Harold Lindsell, *ibid*. But the ‘domino theory’ has been advocated by others as well.

² Orr, *ibid*, p. 244.

³ Christianity Today, April 21, 1978, p. 21.

⁴ Christianity Today, May 7, 1976, p. 25. Dewey Beegle is a case in point. His book Scripture, Tradition, & Infallibility is a frontal attack on biblical infallibility. Infallibility, he argues, applies only to God and Christ “in all essential matters of faith and practice Scripture is authentic, accurate, and trustworthy.” But he never identifies what this core of beliefs consists of, and at one point defended Willi Marxsen (professor of New Testament at the University of Munster), who was charged by the Evangelical Church of Westphalia with heresy because of his denial of the resurrection of Christ.

⁵ As Pinnock reminds us: “The central problem in contemporary theology is neither theism nor ecclesiology, but epistemology.” Defense of Biblical Infallibility, p. 4

the matter with utmost caution. Pinnock's remark ring especially true here: "Limited inerrancy is a halfway house on the road to unlimited errancy."

In addition to matters of 'faith' we say that the Bible is our infallible rule of 'practice'. Here again our view of the trustworthiness of the Scriptures is often decisive. Much of the debate over the ordination of women, for instance, has come down to a question of its truthfulness. The writings of Paul K. Jewett are evidence of this. He has, on occasions, acknowledged that Scripture prohibits the practice, but when asked to reconcile his position with the teachings of Scripture simply replies that the Bible was in error. Paul was simply expressing *his* opinion, one that was shaped by his culture. In a panel discussion one evening during the meeting of Synod (around 1980) a woman making an appeal for women's ordination stated that the second chapter of Genesis was wrong, and that someone had to come along and write chapter one to correct it (the assumption being that the first chapter was more congenial to the cause of women!).

The 'other' gender discussion that has forced its way into several mainline denominations (notably the PCUSA), namely same-sex marriage and the ordination of homosexuals, follows essentially the same path. Although some make a feigned appeal to Scripture, the issue ultimately comes down to a rejection of its authority. One thinks of Nancy Hardesty and Letha Scanzoni, whose 1974 work All We're Meant to Be: A biblical Approach to Women's Liberation, helped launch the evangelical feminist movement. In their defense of evangelical feminism the influence of Paul Jewett was evident when it came to Biblical authority. But in time they announced their lesbianism and were compelled to conclude that, because of his human limitations, Paul's writings were wrong about that as well.

Robert A. J. Gagnon is Associate Professor of New Testament at Pittsburgh Theological Seminary. In a response to a book by David Myers and Letha Scanzoni in which they defend the homosexual cause he notes that at least on paper, most mainline denominations acknowledge some authority in the Bible. But in the discussion that has become so divisive in his denomination (PCUSA) it is, for all practical intents and purposes, given no voice.

In his paper he offers two personal anecdotes to illustrate his point. The first involved published remarks from a book he co-authored with Dan O. Via. He writes,

"Via began his essay by asserting: "I take the Bible to be the highest authority for Christians in theological and ethical matters." However, later in his response, after he had read my essay, Via made no attempt to rebut what he referred to as my "accumulation of biblical texts condemning homosexual practice," even though at a number of points my arguments anticipated and refuted the exegetical results of his essay. He simply concluded: "I maintain, however, that the absolute prohibition can be overridden regardless of how

many times it is stated. . . .” In the end, Via’s initial acknowledgement that the Bible was the “highest authority” carried no decisive weight in his hermeneutical deliberations and created no special burden of proof on his part. The acknowledgement turned out to be mere window dressing.”

The other personal anecdote involved remarks that came at a debate at Erskine College in September of 2004. They came from David Bartlett, academic dean and professor of preaching at Yale Divinity School. Dr. Gagnon relates that Bartlett began with a half hour presentation that set forth the case that the Bible sanctions homosexual unions. He then followed with thirty minutes presenting the opposite view, and then explained:

“When Prof. Bartlett got up for a 15-minute rebuttal he conceded: “For me it is not about Scripture anyway.” He sat down after using only a few minutes of his allotted time, making no attempt to rebut the case against his interpretation of Scripture that I had made.”

His conclusion:

“What these anecdotes illustrate is that the mainline denominations that move to support committed homosexual unions will ultimately have to give up any pretense in their official statements to treating Scripture as the highest authority in matters of faith and practice. The highest authority will now be whatever is ‘existentially engaging and compelling’ to the individual interpreter; in other words, one’s own subjective experience.”¹

We have gone to great lengths to make the point that there are profound ramifications to the view one takes of the Bible. There is much at stake! The future direction we as a church will take will be determined largely by where we stand on this issue. Given the example of our ‘big sister’ (the PCUSA), we should proceed with utmost caution. After a lengthy discussion of the place historically afforded the Bible in the Church, Robert Preus concluded with the observation that the most important lesson we learn from history is that “the quality of theology in the church - and the church lives by its theology - although it may descend below the level of its view of Scripture, will rarely rise *above* it.”²

¹ Robert A.J. Gagnon, “Why the disagreement Over the Biblical Witness on Homosexual Practice: A Response to Meyers and Scanzoni, *What God has Joined Together*” in *Reformed Review* Autumn, 2005, Pp. 19-130.

² Preus, *Inerrancy*, p. 382.

APPENDICES

Progress of Doctrine

From the very beginning the church has been challenged to contend earnestly for the faith once and for all delivered to her. However, ‘the faith’ - as a body of beliefs - while unchanging, is not a static entity. As Harold Brown explains, for many centuries the church held to a “naïve view of the fixity of doctrine.” By this he means that it came as “a kind of fixed body of doctrine delivered in a single block.” This was challenged, in part by the Reformation, but even more so in the nineteenth century. The notion of progress and change inherent in Darwin’s theory was also applied to ideas in the philosophy of Hegel. While both of these worldviews are seriously flawed, the principle that life is dynamic and characterized by change is valid, and students of the Bible understand their task in this light.¹

There is historical development in doctrine, somewhat analogous to that found in the Scriptures themselves. The difference is that it is the *revelation* of doctrine that is given progressively in Scripture, where it is *interpretation* that is of concern to us. The task of the church is, as Paul described it, to pursue “the unity of the faith, and the knowledge of the Son of God, to a mature man, to the measure of the stature which belongs to the fullness of Christ.” This comes through the collective study of God’s Word, which in turn produces the collective wisdom of the church. It is not enough that we possess an inerrant book; we must be faithful stewards of the treasure entrusted to us. It must be interpreted accurately. But we must also approach it with the understanding that, as expressing the wisdom of the eternal God, we will never plumb its depths to the fullest. The task will never be completed in the present age, but the history of the church is the history of God’s people making progress in the direction of the ‘mature man’.

The challenge the church faces might be compared with someone looking at an object through a telescope, making constant adjustments, in an effort to sharpen the focus. And typically, focus comes by way of contrast. This is true of our physical vision, as well as what we see through the mind’s eye. Unfortunately it has been largely through conflict that this has come about. Brown elaborates this point when he writes:

“It is a simple and undeniable historical fact that several major doctrines that now seem central to the Christian faith - such as the doctrine of the trinity and the deity of Christ - were not present in a full and well-defined form until the fourth or fifth centuries. . . . If they are true, then they must always have been true; they cannot have become true in the fourth or fifth century. But if they are both true and essential, how can it be that the early church took centuries to formulate them? The answer lies of course in the assertion that they were *implicit* in Christian faith from the beginning, even though they did not become *explicit* until considerably later.”

¹ Harold O.J. Brown, Heresies and Orthodoxy in the History of the Church (Hendrickson Publishers, Peabody, Mass. 1984), p. 24.

He goes on to suggest that one of the values of heresy, which sometimes appears older than orthodoxy, is that it suggests that the orthodox doctrine, against which it reacts, was already present, though not expressly articulated.¹

There is, then, progressive development in the understanding of the truths of God's Word. In his work, Studies in Theology, Benjamin Warfield treats this subject at length. It is worth a closer look, allowing, as much as possible, for him to speak for himself.²

Dr. Warfield describes the theological task of the church as a 'progressive science.'

"We have heard much in these last days of the phrase 'progressive orthodoxy,' and in somewhat strange connections. Nevertheless, the phrase itself is not an inapt description of the building of this theological house. Let us assert that the history of theology has been and ever must be a progressive orthodoxy."

But what does this mean?

"Progressive orthodoxy implies that first of all we are orthodox, and secondly that we are progressively orthodox, that is, that we are ever growing more and more orthodox as more and more truth is being established."

He is careful to explain that the progress does not consist of the addition of new material with which the theologian is to work. The raw material with which the theologian works is God's self-disclosure to us in Scripture, and to it there is nothing to be added. All that is needed is in our possession, and has been from the beginning. It is merely a matter of interpreting the data before us.

In this it is analogous to other sciences.

"All the facts of psychology, for instance, have been in existence so long as mind itself has existed; and the progress of this science has been dependent on the progressive discovery, understanding, and systematization of these facts. All the facts of theology have, in like manner, been within the reach of man for nearly two millenniums; and the progress of theology is dependent on men's progress in gathering, defining, mentally assimilating, and organizing these facts into a correlated system. . . . Since the close of the canon of Scripture, the intellectual realization and definition of the doctrines revealed in it, in relation to one another, have been, as a mere matter of fact, a slow but ever advancing process."

As to the nature of the work, it may be compared to the construction of a house or building, a figure employed by Paul in his description of the advancement of the church into the truth. Another metaphor is that of an artisan engaged in weaving a tapestry.

¹ *ibid*, p. 20

² Benjamin Warfield Studies in Theology (), Pp. 74-79.

“God gives us the truth in single threads which we must weave into the reticulated texture, all the threads are always within our reach, but the finished texture is ever and will ever continue to be before us until we dare affirm that there is no truth in the Word which we have not perfectly apprehended, and no relation of these truths as revealed which we have not perfectly understood, and no possibility in clearness of presentation which we have not attained.”

There are several features that characterize the work. First of all, progress is purposeful; it moves in the direction of a goal.

“When we speak of progress our eyes are set upon a goal. And in calling theology a progressive science we unavoidably raise the inquiry, what the end and purpose is towards an ever increasing fitness to secure which it is continually growing.”

While the goal is knowledge of the truth of God, there are pragmatic concerns as well.

“The truths concerning God and His relations are, above all comparison, in themselves the most worthy of all truths of study and examination. Yet we must vindicate a further goal for the advance of theology and thus contend for it that it is an eminently practical science. The contemplation and exhibition of Christianity as truth, is far from the end of the matter. This truth is specially communicated by God for a purpose, for which it is admirably adapted. That purpose is to save and sanctify the soul.”

Another characteristic is advancement. Progress (*noun*) comes when we progress (*verb*) beyond previous accomplishments. In terms of the progress of doctrine, once a truth has come to light and is firmly established, once a foundation has been laid, we build on it. To use a current expression, we don't keep reinventing the wheel. “The progressive men in any science are the men who stand firmly on the basis of the already ascertained truth.”

In illustrating the point he says that engineers engaged in constructing a cathedral do not repeatedly go back and redo the work of their predecessors. “If the temple of God's truth is ever to be completely built, we must not spend our efforts in digging at the foundations which have been securely laid in the distant past, but must rather give our best efforts to rounding the arches, carving the capitals, and fitting in the fretted roof.” He qualifies this by acknowledging that men are fallible, and mistakes are made on occasion.

“There are abuses no doubt to be reformed; errors to correct; falsehoods to cut away. But the history of progress in every science and no less in theology, is a story of impulses given, corrected, and assimilated. And when they have been once corrected and assimilated, these truths are to remain accepted.”

Another characteristic of progress is limitation.

“Progress brings increasing limitation, just because it brings increasing knowledge. And as the orthodox man is he that teaches no other doctrine than that which has been established as true, the progressively orthodox man is he who is quick to perceive, admit, and condition all his reasoning by all the truth down to the latest, which has been established as true.”

To advance in the sense of clarifying more and more of the truth necessarily involves the *exclusion* of ideas that have been proven false. Theological controversy in one sense involves a process of elimination. As we have already acknowledged, there are many interpretations of the Bible, but only one that is correct!

He likens the cumulative effect of centuries of struggle over the truth to ripened fruit, but insists that the process is not yet complete . . .

“Thus the body of Christian truth has come down to us in the form of an organic growth; and we can conceive of the completed structure as the ripened fruit of the ages, as truly as we can think of it as the perfected result of the exegetical discipline. As it has come into our possession by this historic process, there is no reason that we can assign why it should not continue to make for itself a history.”

Great progress has been made in unfolding the truths of God’s Word; much gold extracted from the mine. In so doing, many crucial issues have been resolved. As our author himself observed, Augustine determined for all time the doctrine of grace, Anselm the doctrine of the atonement, Luther the doctrine of forensic justification. But as time goes on and as we probe deeper into the Word, new issues will surface that require attention, and new terminology will be introduced to articulate the convictions that emerge from the discussion. The question of the authority of the Bible is one of those, and one on which a clear consensus has emerged. With the coming of the Age of Reason and modern science, and the challenges they have posed to the church, the implicit testimony of the church in bygone days has become explicit in our day.

One is reminded of the lyrics of James Russell Lowell’s great hymn,

“Once to every man and nation, comes the moment to decide;
In the strife of truth with falsehood, for the good or evil side . . .

New occasions teach new duties, time makes ancient good uncouth;
they must upward still and onward, who would keep abreast of truth.”

Mere Semantics?

A Case Study in
Calvin's Use of Theological Jargon

Introduction One of the problems confronting us in the debate over Scripture is that of terminology. It is often said, "I do not object to the terms 'infallible' or 'infallibility' but I am uncomfortable with 'inerrant' or 'inerrancy.'"

Given the integrity of many who have voiced such concerns, we are compelled to ask, Is it possible that much of the problem amounts to little more than semantics? Have we created a *shibboleth* of our own (Judges 12:6) that has become a stumbling block to Christian fellowship? Are we wasting time and creating division by insisting on one particular term when another would suffice?

First, there is nothing inherently sacred about the word ‘inerrant’. Words are a means of communication. If this particular word is unnecessary or if a better can be found, there is no reason to insist upon its use.

Secondly, it is the author’s opinion that, ideally speaking, the word *infallible* is the better of the two, simply because it is the broader of the two. It is more comprehensive in meaning, embracing the concept of inerrancy. Regardless, however, of whether it is better, it clearly does not stand in opposition to those terms indicating inerrancy, as is often suggested.

However, one of the reasons for insisting on the use of the term *inerrant* is that the term ‘infallible’ has been divested of much of its meaning. It is not uncommon for individuals to insist that they believe the Bible to be an infallible rule of faith and practice, but allowing at the same time for the possibility that it is errant, and in some cases actually providing examples of alleged mistakes. The debate, then, is not between those who hold to ‘infallibility’ and those who hold to ‘inerrancy.’ The terms are not antithetical. In fact, they are, for all practical purposes, virtually synonymous.

Since we are debating the meaning of words, we might ask, how do the ‘experts’ define them? Answer: in their definition of the word ‘infallible’ virtually all dictionaries (I am aware of no exceptions) include the concept of inerrancy. In addition to occasional allusions to the Roman Catholic doctrine of papal infallibility, the word means ‘unfailing’ and ‘unerring’. Consider, for example, the definition offered in the 1828 edition of Webster’s Dictionary:

“Infallible: 1. Not fallible; not capable of erring; entirely exempt from liability to mistake; applied to persons. No man is infallible; to be infallible is the prerogative of God only. 2. Not liable to fail, or to deceive confidence; certain; as infallible evidence; infallible success.”

Nearly a century earlier, in his classic Dictionary of the English Language (1755), Samuel Johnson defined the word as “Privileged from error; incapable of mistake; not to be misled or deceived; certain.”

Webster’s Third New International Dictionary (1964) is typical of lexicons that incorporate synonyms in their definition: “inerrable, inerrant, unerring: infallible describes that which is exempt from possibility of error or mistake or that which is errorless (*no mathematician is infallible: he may make mistakes*). Inerrable and inerrant are erudite synonyms for infallible sometimes used in its stead to escape connotations arising from the discussion of papal infallibility.”

More recent additions to the list of sources include works like the Wordsmith English Dictionary which gives as the meaning of infallible, “incapable of error, not liable to error or failure; extremely reliable.” In addition, there are online resources like *Wiktionary*, to which the meaning “without fault or weakness; incapable of error or fallacy” is assigned.

As these sources bring out, the element of inerrancy is consistently included in the definition of ‘infallible’. Consequently, it is difficult to understand why one would be willing to make use of one term but not the other.

When applied to the Bible, *unfailing* refers more to the DYNAMIC aspect of the Scriptures - they will not fail to accomplish what was intended for them (*Isaiah 55*). We cling to this promise when we proclaim the Gospel to the nations: God’s Word will not return void! *Unerring* refers to the more STATIC aspect - that of being the rule, the norm, the standard, the canon. In speaking of the Bible as the ‘infallible rule of faith and practice’ the emphasis is clearly on this aspect. In what sense can it be said, for instance, that a *rule* is unfailing. It does not seek to accomplish anything per se; it simply provides a standard by which something is judged. In that sense it cannot err.

While the terms are very close, there are, however, different nuances of meaning. The Bible *cannot* err, and in that sense it is infallible. The Bible *does* not err, and in that sense it is inerrant.

But again, does it matter? Are words really that important? The problem is not new. Calvin faced it in the 16th century in discussions regarding the trinity and other technical terms associated with the nature of the godhead, one of the primary disputants being Michael Servetus. In *Luther’s Ghost in Spain (1517-1546)*, John E. Longhurst describes how the debate progressed:

“On the subject of the Trinity, the discussion almost immediately bogged down in a wrangle between Servetus and Calvin over authorities. Servetus maintained that the word ‘Trinity’ had never appeared in the writings of the Church fathers before the Council of Nicaea in the fourth century. If the early fathers had implicitly recognized any distinctions in the Divine Essence, they went no farther than to imply three special modifications in the same single Essence; they certainly did not recognize the existence of three equal and distinct Persons in the same single Being.”¹

This provides some of the backdrop for the material we find in the *Institutes*.² After identifying God as infinite and spiritual, Calvin goes on to discuss the Trinitarian nature of the godhead. At this point problems arose because some challenged the use of the terminology employed by the church - terms like ‘person’ and ‘trinity’. He begins:

Now, although the heretics rail at the word ‘person,’ or certain squeamish men cry out against admitting a term fashioned by the human mind, they cannot shake our conviction that three are spoken of, each of which is entirely God, yet that there is not more than one God. What wickedness, then, it is to disapprove of words that explain nothing else than what is attested and sealed by Scripture!

¹ John E. Longhurst, *Luther’s Ghost in Spain (1517-1546)* (Coronado Press, Lawrence, Kansas, 1969), p. 61.

² John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, The Library of Christian Classics: Vol. XX, ed. John T. McNeil, translated by Ford Lewis Battles, (The Westminster Press, Philadelphia, 1977), Book one, chapter 13.

It would be enough, they say, to confine within the limits of Scripture not only our thoughts but also our words, rather than scatter foreign terms about, which would become seedbeds of dissension and strife. For thus are we wearied with quarreling over words, thus by bickering do we lose the truth, thus by hateful wrangling do we destroy love.”

He continues by saying that to confine ourselves to words found only in the Bible to the exclusion of theological terms coined by scholars is unreasonable. But, he queries,

“. . . what prevents us from explaining in clearer words those matters in Scripture which perplex and hinder our understanding, yet which conscientiously and faithfully serve the truth of Scripture itself, and are made use of sparingly and modestly and on due occasion?”

He goes on to note that there are numerous instances of this, insisting that there are times when the church is ‘utterly compelled’ to make use of terms like ‘trinity’ and ‘person’.

“If anyone, then, finds fault with the novelty of the words, does he not deserve to be judged as bearing the light of truth unworthily, since he is finding fault only with what renders the truth plain and clear?”

Continuing . . .

“However, the novelty of words of this sort (if such it must be called) becomes especially useful when the truth is to be asserted against false accusers, who evade it by their shifts. . . . Thus men of old, stirred up by various struggles over depraved dogmas, were compelled to set forth with consummate clarity what they felt, lest they leave any devious shift to the impious, who cloaked their errors in layers of verbiage. Because he could not oppose manifest oracles, Arius confessed that Christ was God and the Son of God, and, as if he had done what was right, pretended some agreement with the other men. Yet in the meantime he did not cease to prate that Christ was created and had a beginning, as other creatures. The ancients, to drag the man's versatile craftiness out of its hiding places, went farther, declaring Christ the eternal Son of the Father, consubstantial with the Father. Here impiety boiled over when the Arians began most wickedly to hate and curse the word *homoousios*. . . . Who would dare inveigh against those upright men as wranglers and contentious persons because they became aroused to such heated discussion through one little word, and disturbed the peace of the church? Yet that mere word marked the distinction between Christians of pure faith and sacrilegious Arians.”

He then cites similar concerns that arose with Sabellius, and reiterates that it was out of necessity that ‘the upright doctors’ developed the terminology that came to be part of the church’s vocabulary.

“If, therefore, these terms were not rashly invented, we ought to beware lest by repudiating them we be accused of overweening rashness. Indeed, I could wish they were buried, if only among all men this faith were agreed on: that

Father and Son and Spirit are one God, yet the Son is not the Father, nor the Spirit the Son, but that they are differentiated by a peculiar quality.”

He will go on to point out that we should exercise caution and grace in the demands we place on others when it comes to insisting on the use of certain terms.

“Really, I am not, indeed, such a stickler as to battle doggedly over mere words. . . . And this modesty of saintly men [he has just provided examples of tolerance exercised by some of the fathers] ought to warn us against forthwith so severely taking to task, like censors, those who do not wish to swear to the words conceived by us, provided they are not doing it out of either arrogance or frowardness or malicious craft.”

But, he cautions . . .

“. . . let these very persons, in turn, weigh the necessity that compels us to speak thus, that gradually they may at length become accustomed to a useful manner of speaking. Also let them learn to beware, lest, when they have to resist Arians on the one hand and Sabellians on the other, while indignant that the opportunity to evade the issue is cut off, they arouse some suspicion that they are disciples either of Arius or of Sabellius.

He concludes the section with these words:

“Indeed, if anxious superstition so constrains anyone that he cannot bear these terms, yet no one could now deny, even if he were to burst, that when we hear ‘one’ we ought to understand ‘unity of substance’; when we hear ‘three in one essence,’ the persons in this trinity are meant. When this is confessed without guile, we need not dally over words. But I have long since and repeatedly been experiencing that all who persistently quarrel over words nurse a secret poison. As a consequence, it is more expedient to challenge them deliberately than speak more obscurely to please them.”

The last two sentences pose a challenge to us. We have every right to be suspicious of those who avoid the vocabulary that the church has developed in its effort to articulate the truth with clarity and precision. Is there a ‘secret poison’ they harbor? If one believes the *substance* of a teaching, why hesitate to affirm it with the terms that most precisely characterize it? The last line challenges us to use, and insist on the use of, the least ambiguous terms available to us. If we believe the Bible to be the Word of God, absolutely true, without error, let’s affirm it in the clearest possible manner.

A Sampling of Definitions

The Wordsmyth English Dictionary

1. incapable of error. 2. not liable to error or failure; extremely reliable. 3. of the pope, incapable of fallacy or error in expounding Roman Catholic doctrine on faith or morals.

Wiktionary Without fault or weakness; incapable of error or fallacy

He knows about many things, but even he is not infallible. The pope is infallible.

Webster's Revised Unabridged Dictionary (1913 ed.)

1. Not fallible; not capable of erring; entirely exempt from liability to mistake; unerring; inerrable. *Dryden*.
 2. Not liable to fail, deceive, or disappoint; indubitable; sure; certain; as, infallible evidence; infallible success; an infallible remedy.
 3. (R. C. Ch.) Incapable of error in defining doctrines touching faith or morals.

The Encyclopaedic Dictionary, revised edition of 1897: Infallible - a. (Fr.) 1. Not fallible; free or exempt from liability to erring; unerring. 2. Affording certainty or assurance; indubitable; incontrovertible.

Funk and Wagnalls New Standard Dictionary of the English Language (1934)

1. Exempt from error of judgment, as in opinion or statement. 2. Exempt from uncertainty or liability to failure; conclusive.

Thorndike - Barnhart High School Dictionary 1. Free from error; that cannot be mistaken; 2. absolutely reliable; sure

Standard College Dictionary (1968) *adj.* 1. Exempt from fallacy or error of judgment, as in opinion or statement. 2. Not liable to fail; unailing; sure: an infallible remedy. 3. In Roman Catholic doctrine *n.* One who or that which is infallible.

The New Century Dictionary (1927) I. not fallible, exempt from liability to error, as persons, the judgments, pronouncements, etc. II. Absolutely trustworthy or sure, unfailing in operation, certain or indubitable

The American Heritage College Dictionary (1993) *adj.* incapable of erring; incapable of failing; certain

Websters New Encyclopedic Dictionary (2002) *adj.* 1. incapable of erring, not liable to be misled, deceive, or disappoint 2. Certain 3. Incapable of error in defining doctrine and touching faith and morals

Webster's Third New International Dictionary (unabr.) (1964) *adj.* 1. Not fallible; incapable of error; unerring 2. Not liable to mislead, deceive, or disappoint: sure, certain, indubitable 3. Incapable of error in defining doctrines touching faith or morals. Syn - inerrable, inerrant, unerring: infallible describes that which is exempt from possibility of error or mistake or that which is errorless (no mathematician is infallible: he may make mistakes). . . . Inerrable and inerrant are erudite synonyms for infallible sometimes used in its stead to escape connotations arising from the discussion of papal infallibility. Etc.

New Webster's Dictionary (1992) *adj.* incapable of error | never failing

The Oxford English Dictionary (1933) 1. Not liable to be deceived or mistaken, incapable of erring. 2. Not liable to fail. a. not liable to prove false, erroneous or mistaken b. not likely to fail in actions or operations

The Oxford Universal English Dictionary (1937) Infallible - not fallible
1. Not liable to be deceived or mistaken, incapable of erring. 2. Not liable to fail; unfailing; sure; certain. 3. One who or that which is infallible.

Shorter Oxford Dictionary (1933) same as above

The Random House Dictionary of the English Language *adj.* 1. Not fallible; exempt from liability to error, as persons, their judgment, pronouncements, etc. 2. Absolutely trustworthy or sure: an infallible rule. 3. Unfailing in effectiveness or operation; certain: an infallible remedy. 4. Roman Catholic Church: immune from fallacy or liability to error in expounding matters of faith or morals by virtue of the promise made by Christ to the church. - *n.* 5. An infallible person or thing.

The Compact Oxford English Dictionary of Current English
adj. 1 incapable of making mistakes or being wrong. 2 never failing; always effective.

Cambridge International Dictionary of English (Advanced Learner's Dictionary)
adj. never wrong, failing or making a mistake: Even the experts are not infallible.

The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language (Fourth Edition. 2000)

ADJECTIVE: 1. Incapable of erring: *an infallible guide; an infallible source of information.*
 2. Incapable of failing; certain: *an infallible antidote; an infallible rule.* 3. *Roman Catholic Church* Incapable of error in expounding doctrine on faith or morals.

Encarta World English Dictionary

1. not erring: incapable of making a mistake 2. incapable of failing: certain not to fail
 3. unerring in doctrine: incapable of being mistaken in matters of doctrine and dogma

Merriam Webster's Online Dictionary

1 : incapable of error : unerring <an *infallible* memory> 2 : not liable to mislead, deceive, or disappoint : certain <an *infallible* remedy> 3 : incapable of error in defining doctrines touching faith or morals

Allen's Synonyms and Antonyms (1817 / 1949) Infallible a.1. Inerrable ®, unerring, oracular (fig.); unperceivable

Crabb's English Synonyms "In French infallible signifies the quality of being free from the liability of error."

Webster's Dictionary of Synonyms Infallible - inerrable', inerrant', 'unerring', come into comparison when they mean incapable, or manifesting incapability, of making mistakes or errors."