



Evangelicals and inerrancy

For long enough now it has been commonplace among mainstream Protestant theologians to deny the inerrancy of the Bible. In fact, they are not content merely to deny it. They must deny it almost as vehemently as Peter did His Lord, with cursing and swearing, as if even to entertain the thought cast grave doubts on one's sanity. For example, C.H. Dodd, referring to the evangelical doctrine of inspiration (and having, incidentally, misstated it) goes on to say, *"Any attempt to confront this theory of inspiration with the actual facts which meet us in the study of the biblical documents leads at once to such patent confusions and contradictions that it is unprofitable to discuss it."* And Karl Barth seems almost to glory in what he sees as the fallibility of Scripture, asserting that *"the vulnerability of the Bible, that is, its capacity for error, also extends to its religious or theological content"*. In fact to Barth it is the essence of the miracle of revelation that sinful and erring men speak the Word of God in fallible human words: *"If God was not ashamed of the fallibility of all the human words of the Bible, of their historical and scientific inaccuracies, their theological contradictions, the uncertainty of their tradition, and, above all, their Judaism, but adopted and made use of these expressions in all their fallibility, we do not need to be ashamed when He wills to renew it to us in all its fallibility as witness, and it is mere self-will and disobedience to try to find some infallible elements in the Bible."*

Evangelical denials of inerrancy

From such quarters, these remarks are predictable enough. It is very much more disturbing, however, to find denials of inerrancy coming from men who, until recently, were confidently regarded as evangelicals. Not that it is altogether new that some who have a relatively high view of inspiration should yet be reluctant to declare that the Bible is inerrant. This was the position of James Orr, who warned us to guard against *"any overstrained theory of inerrancy in historical detail"* and held that the Bible itself did not claim, nor did inspiration necessitate, an errorless record in matters of detail. This is the position now being advocated by an increasing number of evangelicals, a trend which is fairly fully documented in Harold Lindsell's book, *The Battle for the Bible*. We say "fairly fully" because Lindsell offers no evaluation of such British scholars as F.F. Bruce, Howard Marshall and R.P. Martin whose unqualified acceptance of radical critical procedure is now arousing widespread concern.

Lindsell's immediate concern is with the situation at Fuller Theological Seminary, Pasadena, California, which recently amended its doctrinal basis so as to allow men who do not believe in inerrancy to serve on the faculty. Daniel Fuller, son of the founder of the Seminary, is in fact typical of this kind of evangelical thinking. Professing to be thoroughly loyal to the doctrine of Scripture held by B.B. Warfield he goes on to propose that we must modify Warfield by distinguishing within Scripture between what is revelational and what is non-revelational. The revelational, according to Fuller, deals with the salvation. The non-revelational deals with such subjects as botany, palaeontology and cosmology. Revelational Scripture is wholly without error. Non-revelational is not, because in this area inspiration involved accommodation to the views of the original readers. George E. Ladd and Paul Jewett hold views identical with those of Fuller.

The abandonment of inerrancy is even more marked at the Free University of Amsterdam, famed for its associations with Abraham Kuyper and Hermann Bavinck and, until recently, a bastion of Calvinistic orthodoxy. It is probably fair to say that in the last few decades the primary concern of the faculty of the Free University has been with academic respectability and the attitude towards contemporary deviations from historical orthodoxy has become more and more conciliatory. The evolution is epitomized in G.K. Berkouwer, who, at a meeting of the Synod of the Reformed Church

some years ago, asked: *"Is there room in the Reformed Churches for persons — and I reckon myself among them — who at this stage of their reflection have great hesitations concerning the historicity of Adam?"* But Berkouwer's colleague, H.M. Kuitert is much more explicit. He declares that there are historical discrepancies in Scripture and holds that some things are reported in the Bible that did not happen the way they are told. He does not regard Genesis 1-11 as real history; Adam and Eve were not a literal and historical pair of people; and nothing is lost if we read the story of Jonah as fiction and not as history.

The interesting thing is not that such remarks are being made. By comparison with the fulminations of non-evangelical scholars like Briggs, Dodd, Barth and Barr, such statements are mild and almost reverent. What is disquieting is that these comments come from men who have been known as evangelicals and who see no reason why they should cease to be regarded as evangelicals merely because they no longer believe in biblical inerrancy.

It would be wrong, however, to dismiss this new evangelicalism without making some effort to understand its origins, because these men have not altered their position without reason. There are certain factors which, to *their* minds at least, make belief in inerrancy impossible.

The humanness of the Bible

They argue, first of all, that fallibility follows inevitably from the humanness of the Bible. If the words are spoken by fallible men, then they must be fallible because every product of man is sinful and errant. But this argument runs into two difficulties.

First, it forgets that there is nothing in the Scripture which is merely human without being, at the same time, divine. Every Scripture is God-breathed (2 Timothy 3:16); and, conversely, no prophecy of the Scriptures is a matter of private interpretation, personal views or individual initiative (2 Peter 1:20 f.). In the production of the Scriptures there is such a concurrence of the divine with the human that at every point it is true not only that *men* spoke but that *God* carried them (2 Peter 1:21).

Secondly, as Professor Murray pointed out in his valuable contribution to the symposium, *The Infallible Word*, this argument proves too much. If human fallibility absolutely precludes an infallible Scripture, we cannot have a single Scripture — not even one verse — which is inerrant. Every Scripture comes through human instrumentality and no passage — even the most spiritual — can be immune. The fallibility must affect not only those scriptures which deal with historical or scientific fact but equally those which deal with fundamental redemptive truth. On the other hand, if divine influence could assert itself at some points and suspend the operation of human fallibility when "spiritual truth" was being asserted, it is difficult to see why the same influence could not preclude error on less important matters. *"Human fallibility,"* concludes Professor Murray, *"cannot be pleaded as an argument for the fallibility of Scripture unless the position is taken that we do not have in the Scriptures content of any kind that is not marred by the frailty of human nature."* Curiously enough, Barth is quite happy to accept this paradoxical conclusion: *"To the bold postulate, that if their word is to be the Word of God they must be inerrant in every word, we oppose the even bolder assertion, that they can be at fault in any word, and have been at fault in every word, and yet they have still spoken the Word of God in their fallible and erring human word."* Bid this is surely to be deceived by one's own eloquence.

Revelational and non-revelational Scripture

The second factor which has led these evangelicals to deny the doctrine of inerrancy is the view already referred to that it is possible to distinguish between Scripture which is revelational and Scripture which is not revelational. This distinction itself can be defined in two slightly different ways. We may, in the first place, say that what the author *intended* to say — the message he is consciously delivering — is revelation, while what is non-intentional is not revelation but merely part of the scaffolding. For example, the intention of the first three chapters of Genesis is to teach the theological doctrine of creation, and any biology or geology which may be introduced is non-intentional and simply reflects the point of view of the writer's contemporaries. Similarly, Christ

intended only to teach the doctrines of the kingdom, and such remarks as He may have made on questions like the inerrancy of the Scripture and the authorship of certain books of the Old Testament were non-intentional and beyond the scope of His ministry. He, again, was simply acquiescing in the views of His contemporaries.

The trouble with this, at the most obvious level, is that there is every reason to believe that the writers of Scripture intended as their message those very details which the new evangelicals find unacceptable. There is no reason to believe that the six-day creation or the real, literal existence of Adam and Eve, were the framework rather than the content of the Genesis message. Similarly, the historical details of the patriarchal narratives were precisely what their writers intended to emphasize, tended to emphasize.

On another level, it is plain, as a matter of principle, that we cannot confine revelation to what the biblical author intended to say. Take, for example, our Lord's argument in Matthew 22:31-32:

"But as touching the resurrection of the dead, have ye not read what was spoken to you by God, saying, I am the God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob? God is not the God of the dead, but of the living."

It is very difficult to believe that it was the intention of the author of Genesis to teach at that point the doctrine of the resurrection. It is merely implicit in the language he uses. Yet the Lord accepts it as revelation. The principle involved here is stated very clearly by Peter when he tells us that the prophets enquired diligently what the spirit meant when He testified through them of the sufferings of Christ and the glory that should follow (1 Peter 1:10 f.). The apostle clearly did not believe that we could confine the revelation given in the Old Testament to what the writers consciously intended to say. Much of their message was far beyond even their own comprehension.

The other way of defining the difference between revelational and non-revelational Scripture is to distinguish between those parts which give the knowledge that makes men wise unto salvation and those which deal with matters of mere historical and scientific fact. But this, again, will not work. For one thing, it implies a doctrine of partial inspiration: those Scriptures which intrude into the areas of chronology and palaeontology are not inspired. How can this fit into the apostolic view that *no* Scripture is a matter of private interpretation and that *every* Scripture is God-breathed? Furthermore, it is impossible in practice to draw this distinction between matters of theology on the one hand, and matters of science and history on the other. Where does cosmology end and theology begin in Genesis One? And is the historicity of Adam, of Abraham and of the Exodus a matter of mere history and not of theology? Even more, is the empty tomb a matter of history or a matter of doctrine? Beyond this still, what confidence in the Scriptures can men retain by this procedure? If we find the Scriptures to be in error where we can check them against the knowledge available to us from other sources, what confidence can we have in them when they speak of matters on which we can apply no check? If they are fallible when they speak to us of earthly things, it seems absurd to have implicit trust in them when they speak of heavenly things.

The phenomena of Scripture

Which reminds us of the third and probably the most important reason for the rejection of inerrancy — the alleged phenomena of Scripture. These phenomena include inconsistencies and discrepancies between different accounts of one event; the literary form of some parts of the Bible; the way the New Testament quotes the Old; the way reports of our Lord's words vary so much in the different Gospels; and the way biblical statements contradict the conclusions of modern science.

The intriguing thing here is the complete change in evangelical procedure which this capitulation to the phenomena represents. Some of the characteristics of the Scriptures have always constituted a difficulty for our doctrine of inspiration, and it is forlorn to wish it were otherwise. Advancing knowledge will solve some of the problems and create some more, probably in equal proportions. But in the past, evangelicals have allowed their belief in inerrancy and their awareness of these difficulties to exist side by side. The new attitude is not due to any sudden mushrooming of the

discrepancies, but to the fact that these evangelicals have completely revised their view of the relative importance of two separate strands of evidence: What the alleged phenomena of Scripture say about it, on the one hand; and what Christ says about it on the other. They have decided that the phenomena must take precedence over the witness of the Lord. In a word, they have decided, as non-Evangelicals did long ago, that Christ was wrong about the Bible.

Let us be clear as to the extent of our Lord's error, if the new evangelical point of view is correct. He failed to detect the chronological, palaeontological and biological blunders in the Bible. He failed to detect the clear evidences of late date and composite authorship with regard to the Pentateuch and Isaiah. All that is grave enough. What is infinitely more serious, however, is that He completely failed to detect the religious, theological and even moral errors which are so painfully obvious to men like Barth. Is He still the way, the truth and the life? Or shall we now go on to revise not only our doctrine of Scripture but also our doctrine of Christ, in order to accommodate our new discovery: the religious, theological and moral fallibility of the Saviour?

Non-Evangelicals have lived happily with a fallible Christ for decades and, despite their protest to the contrary, the authority which He now exercises even over their theology is minimal. As Edward Norman pointed out in the first of his recent Reith Lectures, the distinctive content of Christianity has been drained away and secular idealism put in its place. The traditional hallmark of evangelicals, on the other hand, has been implicit submission to the authority of Christ. It is that hallmark which Fuller, Berkouwer, Kuitert and their colleagues no longer bear.

Donald MacLeod

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