

THE  
PROCEEDINGS  
OF THE  
CONFERENCE  
ON  
BIBLICAL  
INERRANCY  
1987

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# THE INERRANCY OF SCRIPTURE

Robert Preus

This study is an approach to the problem of the inerrancy of Scripture as it concerns the church today. The attempt is to present a position that agrees with Scripture's testimony concerning itself and with the historic position of the Christian church. At the same time the attempt is made to be timely and to take into account contemporary issues raised by modern Biblical theology. I shall try to delineate and clarify what is meant by the inerrancy of Scripture, what is the basis of this doctrine, and what are its implications. It is not our purpose to become involved in the technicalities that have often obscured the doctrine or to traverse the labyrinth of intricate discussion that frequently belabors studies of this basic theological truth.

Indeed, a brief treatment such as we are about to give cannot possibly solve the many hermeneutical and isagogical problems that touch upon the inerrancy of Scripture. Yet hermeneutical and isagogical concerns cannot be avoided in a study of this nature. Therefore we have endeavored to lay down general principles concerning these matters which will comport with the inerrancy and sole authority of Scripture. Our procedure will be as follows: we shall begin with a very general definition (thesis) of inerrancy, a definition that will express the conviction of the orthodox church from her beginning to the present time. We shall next explain and justify our definition with a series of subtheses or corollaries. Finally, we shall with a series of adjunct comments attempt to relate the inerrancy of Scripture to hermeneutical principles and other concerns so as to clarify just what is included in the inerrancy of Scripture and what is not.

## Thesis

In calling the sacred Scriptures inerrant we recognize in them (A), as words taught by the Holy Spirit (B), that quality which makes them overwhelmingly (C) reliable witnesses (D-E) to the words and deeds of the God who has in His inspired spokesmen and in His incarnate Son disclosed Himself to men for their salvation (F).

This definition is very general, seeking as it does to fit all the Biblical data (for example, the bold language of prophecy and of adoration, the promises concerning the world to come for which human experience offers only imperfect and insufficient analogies, the expressive and indispensable anthropomorphisms and anthropopathisms used of God, the symbolic use of numbers and other referents in books like Daniel and Revelation, etc.). The definition also

agrees, however, with what the church catholic has believed and confessed through her entire history. We offer a few typical examples to bring out this fact.

Augustine, *Epist. 82*, to Jerome: "Only to those books which are called canonical have I learned to give honor so that I believe most firmly that no author in these books made any error in writing . . . I read other authors not with the thought that what they have thought and written is true just because they have manifested holiness and learning!"

Thomas Aquinas, *In Joh. 13, lect. 1*: "It is heretical to say that any falsehood whatsoever is contained either in the Gospels or in any canonical Scripture."

Luther (*W*<sup>2</sup> 15, 1481): "The Scriptures have never erred." (*W*<sup>2</sup> 9, 356): "It is impossible that Scripture should contradict itself; it only appears so to senseless and obstinate hypocrites."

Turretin, *Instituio Theologiae Elencticae* (Genevae, 1688), I, 79: "We deny that there are any true and real contradictions in Scripture. Our reasons are as follows: namely, that Scripture is God-breathed (2 Tim. 3:16), that the Word of God cannot lie or be ignorant of what has happened (Ps. 19:8-9; Heb. 6:18) and cannot be set aside (Matt. 5:18), that it shall remain forever (1 Peter 1:25), and that it is the Word of truth (John 17:17). Now how could such things be predicated of Scripture if it were not free of contradictions, or if God were to allow the holy writers to err and lose their memory or were to allow hopeless blunders to enter into Scriptures?"

*Brief Statement*: "Since the Holy Scriptures are the Word of God, it goes without saying that they contain no errors or contradictions, but that they are in all their parts and words the infallible truth, also in those parts which treat of historical, geographical, and other secular matters. (John 10:35)"

*Dei Verbum* of Vatican II (See *Verbum Domini*, 44, 1 [1966], p. 8; also *The Documents of Vatican II*, ed. by Walter M. Abbott, S.J. [New York, 1966], p. 119): "Therefore, since everything asserted by the inspired authors or sacred writers must be held to be asserted by the Holy Spirit, it follows that the books of Scripture must be acknowledged as teaching firmly, faithfully and without error the truth which God wanted to put into the Sacred Writings for the sake of our salvation."

Harold Lindsell's book, *The Battle for the Bible*, p. 107: Board of Trustees of Fuller Seminary: "The books which form the canon of the Old and New Testaments as originally given are plenary inspired and free from all error in the whole and in the part. These books constitute the written Word of God, the only infallible rule of faith and practice."

Such statements written under different circumstances and at different times evince the remarkable unanimity on this matter which obtained in the church throughout her history. The statements also indicate or infer the following six corollaries which will serve to delineate and further explain our definition.

### **Corollary A**

Our "recognition" of the truthfulness of the written Word of God is not primarily intellectual: it takes place in the obedience of faith. The truthfulness and reliability of the Scriptures is an article of faith.

### **Corollary B**

The basis of inerrancy rests on the nature of Scripture as God's Word. Inerrancy is an inextricable concomitant of inspiration. Our conviction is that since Scripture is truly and properly speaking God's Word, it will not deceive nor err. Admittedly this is an inference here (as in the case of the doctrine of the Trinity or the two natures of Christ), but it is a necessary inference, which both Christ and the apostles drew. (See not only John 10:34; Mark 12:24; Matt. 5:18-19 but also Christ's and the apostles' use of the Old Testament; they simply cite it as unconditionally true and unassailable.)

### **Corollary C**

Our recognition of the reliability of the witness of Scripture is graciously *imposed* on us by the Spirit of God and this through the power of Scripture itself.

### **Corollary D**

The nature of inerrancy is essentially twofold. First, Scripture does not contradict itself (formal inerrancy). Second, Scripture does not lie or deceive or err in any assertion it makes (material inerrancy). In other words, the holy writers, moved by the Spirit of God, infallibly achieve the intent of their writing. This is what is meant when we say that Scripture is a reliable witness to the words and deeds of God. Of His people God demands in the Second and Eighth Commandments that they tell the truth; of His prophets and apostles, that they do not lie. God will not countenance lying and prevarication (Prov. 14:5; 19:22; Ps. 63:11; Jer. 23:25 ff.; Zeph. 3:13; Acts 5:3; 1 John 2:21, 27). And God Himself will not lie or deceive (Prov. 30:6-7; Num. 23:19; Ps. 89:35; Heb. 6:18). In His written Word He will not break or suspend that standard of truth which He demands of His children. Thus we hear frequently from God's inspired witnesses the claim that they do not deceive, that they are not mistaken, that they tell the truth (Rom. 9:1; 2 Cor. 11:31; Gal. 1:20; 1 Tim. 2:7). The whole impact of entire books of the Bible depends on the authoritative and truthful witness of the writer. (John 21:24; 1 John 1:1-5a; 2 Peter 1:15-18)

It is obvious that such a position on the nature of Biblical inerrancy is predicated on a correspondence idea of truth which in part means this: declarative statements (at least in those Biblical genres, or literary forms, which purport to be dealing with fact or history) of Scripture are, according to their intention, true in that they correspond to what has taken place (for example, historical statements), to what obtains (for example, theological affirmations and other affirmations concerning fact), or to what will take place (for example, predictive prophecy). It really ought to go without saying that with all its different genres and figures of speech, Scripture, like all cognitive discourse, operates under the rubrics of a correspondence idea of truth. (See John 8:46; Eph. 4:25; 1 Kings 8:26, 22:16, 22 ff.; Gen. 42:16, 20; Deut. 18:22; Ps. 119:163; Dan. 2:9; Prov. 14:25; Zech. 8:16; John 5:21-32ff.; Acts 24:8, 11; 1 Tim. 1:15; note, too, the forensic picture which haunts all of Scripture—for example, such concepts as witness, testimony, judge, the Eighth Commandment, etc.; John 21:24.)

To speak of inerrancy of purpose (that God achieves His purpose in Scripture) or of Christological inerrancy of Scripture is indeed relevant to the general question of inerrancy, but may at the same time be misleading if such a construct is understood as constituting the nature of inerrancy—for then we might speak of the inerrancy of Luther's Small Catechism or of a hymn of John Wesley, since they successfully achieve their author's purpose.

✓ The first purpose of Scripture is to bring us to faith in Christ (John 20:31; 2 Tim. 3:15). Involved with this prime purpose of Scripture is the doctrine of the Christocentricity of Scripture (Old Testament as well as New Testament). Such Christocentricity has a soteriological purpose. Only when I understand that Scripture and Christ are for me will I understand the Scriptures themselves (or the inerrancy thereof). But to say that Scripture is inerrant only to the extent that it achieves its soteriological purpose is a misleading position if it is made to be identical with inerrancy or confused with it. How does Scripture achieve its saving purpose? By cognitive language, among other things. By presenting facts, by telling a history (Old Testament as well as New Testament). To say that there is a purpose in Scripture but no intentionality (that is, intent to give meaning) in the individual books or sections or verses, or to maintain that Scripture is inerrant in its eschatological purpose but not in the intentionality of its individual parts and pericopes would not only be nonsense, reducing all Scripture to the level of some sort of mystical utterances, but would be quite un-Scriptural (Luke 1:1-4, etc.). The eschatological purpose of Scripture does not mitigate or vitiate or render trivial and unimportant the cognitive and factual content of assertions (and the truth of assertions) throughout the Scripture, but requires all this (Rom. 15:4). And on the other hand, formal and material inerrancy does not threaten or eclipse the Christological purpose of Scripture but supports it. Nor does such a position (formal and material inerrancy) become tantamount to reading Scripture atomistically. Language is a primary structure of lived experience and cannot be studied in isolation from it. Because the language of imagery in Scripture may not always be adequately analyzed or ever completely exhausted implies neither that it is meaningless (positivism) nor that it is errant ("Christian" positivism). Not orthodoxy but neoorthodoxy has a positivistic, wooden theory of language.

### **Corollary E**

✓ Inerrancy is plenary or absolute. 1) It pertains not only to the substance of the doctrines and narratives in Scripture, but also to those things which are nonessential, adjunct, *obiter dicta*, or things clearly assumed by the author. 2) It covers not only the primary intent of the various pericopes and verses but also the secondary intent (for example, a passing historical reference within the framework of narrative, such as that Christ was crucified between two thieves, that wise men visited Him at His birth, that Joshua led the Children of Israel into Canaan, that Ruth was a Moabitess, Nimrod a hunter, etc.), not only soteriological, eschatological, and religious intent and content of Scripture but also all declarative statements touching history and the realm of nature.

There are various reasons for this strict position. 1) The New Testament cites

what might often be considered to be passing statements or negligible items from the Old Testament, accepting them as true and authoritative (Matt. 6:29; Matt. 12:42; John 10:35). Jesus accepts the basic framework of the Old Testament history, even those aspects of that history which seem unimportant to many today, for example, Sodom and Gomorrah (Luke 17:27), Lot's wife turning to salt, the murder of Abel (Luke 11:51), Naaman (Luke 4:27). The New Testament does not recognize *levicula* (minor details) in the Old Testament (Rom. 15:4; 2 Tim. 3:16). 2) The primary intent of a passage or pericope is often dependent on the secondary intent(s). For instance, the Exodus as a deliverance of God depends on the miraculous events connected with it. 3) If errors of fact or contradictions are admitted in minor matters recorded in Scripture (matters that do not matter [?]), by what right may one then assume that there is no error in important or doctrinal concerns? How does one determine what matters are important? And does not, after all, everything pertain at least indirectly to doctrine (2 Tim. 3:16)? In other words, to maintain that "things which do matter" in Scripture (doctrinal matters) are inerrant and "things which do not matter" (nondoctrinal matters) are errant is both arbitrary and impossible to apply.

### **Corollary F**

There is great comfort and practical importance to the doctrine of Biblical inerrancy. Because God is true and faithful, the reader of Scripture can have the assurance that he will not be deceived or led astray by anything he reads in God's Word, Holy Scripture. Such a practical concern must also be emphasized in our day. Any approach to Scripture or method of interpretation which would make of Scripture something less than trustworthy is sub-Christian and does not take Scripture at its own terms. It must also be borne in mind that the truthfulness of Scripture is never an end in itself, but serves the saving purpose of Scripture.

### **Adjuncts To The Doctrine of Biblical Inerrancy**

1. Inerrancy does not imply verbal exactness of quotations (for example, the words of institution, the words on Jesus' cross). The New Testament ordinarily quotes the Old Testament according to its sense only, sometimes it only alludes to a pericope or verse in the Old Testament, sometimes there are conflation. In the case of extra-Biblical citations we ought to assume that the holy writer stands behind and accepts the truth of his quotation unless the context would indicate otherwise (see 2 Chron. 5:9, 8:8 where there are citations from documents which say that a situation obtains "to this day," that is, when the original document was written).

2. Inerrancy does not imply verbal or intentional agreement in parallel accounts of the same event. For instance, the portrayal of creation in Gen. 1 and in Job 38 are radically different because of a radical difference in the aim of the author. Again, the different evangelists write about our Lord from different vantage points and out of different concerns: therefore their accounts will differ

not only in details (as in the case of any two or three witnesses of the same event) but in aim. Moreover, it must be clearly recognized that incomplete history or an incomplete presentation of doctrine in a given pericope is not false history or a false presentation.

3. Scripture is replete with figures of speech, for example, metonymy (Luke 16:29), metaphor (Ps. 18:20), personification (Matt. 6:4), synecdoche (Luke 2:1), apostrophe, hyperbole (Matt. 2:3). It should go without saying that figurative language is not errant language. To assert that Scripture, by rounding numbers and employing hyperbole, metaphors, and so forth, is not concerned about precision of fact (and is therefore subject to error) is to misunderstand the intention of Biblical language. Figurative language (and not modern scientifically "precise" language) is precisely the mode of expression which the sacred writers' purposes demand. To imply that figurative language is *ex hypothesi* meaningless or that it cannot convey information—truthful and, from its own point of view, precise information—is the position of positivism, not the result of sensitive exegesis (for example, "Yanks slaughter Indians" is a meaningful and precise statement). How else does one speak of a transcendent God, of His epiphanies and revelations, than in metaphors and figures of speech? De-metaphorize, deanthropomorphize, and you are often not getting closer to the meaning of such expressions, but losing their meaning. Figurative language, then, meets all the canons necessary for inerrancy: (1) that statements perfectly represent the author's meaning; (2) that statements do not mislead the reader or lead him into error of any kind; and (3) that statements correspond to fact when they purport to deal with fact, and this is the case of poetry as well as in the case of straight narrative.

It must be added at this point that when we interpret or read Scripture we identify ourselves with the writers, not only with their *Sitz im Leben* and their use of language but with their entire spirit and their faith (which is more important, 1 Cor. 2:14-16). We not only understand them cognitively, but we feel and live and experience with them; we commit ourselves to what they teach and say; we become totally involved. To stand back dispassionately and assess and criticize as a modern man would criticize Shelley or Shakespeare or Homer is to fail to interpret Scripture.

4. Scripture uses popular phrases and expressions of its day, for example, bowels of mercy; four corners of the earth; Joseph is called the father of Christ. No error is involved in the use of such popular expressions. See Ps. 7:9, 22:10.

5. In describing the things of nature Scripture does not employ scientifically precise language, but describes and alludes to things phenomenally as they appear to our senses: for example, the fixity of stellar constellations and the magnitude of the stars (Is. 13:10; Judg. 5:20; Job 38:31; Amos 5:8; Job 9:9); the sun and moon as lights and the implication that the moon is larger than the stars (Gen. 1:16) [It is larger from our vantage point]; the earth as motionless in a fixed position (Eccl. 1:4; Ps. 93:1); the sun as going around the fixed earth (Eccl. 1:5; Matt. 13:6; Eph. 4:26); note that in the Hebrew Bible there is even

a phrase for the rising of the sun: *mizrach shemesh*, which means "east," Ps. 50:1). Phenomenal language also explains why the bat is classified with birds (Lev. 11:19; see Lev. 11:6; Ps. 135:6). Such a classification offers no attempt to be scientific.

Many things in the realm of nature are spoken of in poetic language: the spreading out of the heavens (Is. 40:22; Job 9:8), the foundations of the earth (Job 38:6), the pillars of the earth (Job 9:6) and of heaven (Job 26:11), the ends of the earth (Ps. 67:7, 72:8). Note that there is much apostrophe and hyperbole (Mark 4:31) when Scripture speaks of the things of nature.

In none of the above instances is inerrancy threatened or vitiated. The intention of the passages cited above is not to establish or vouch for a particular world view or scientific explanation of things. Because the language is not scientific does not imply that it is not true descriptively.

6. Certain alleged literary forms are not compatible either with the purpose of Scripture or with its inerrancy. For instance, in principle, strictly scientific, strictly historical, or salacious literary forms cannot be reconciled with the serious, practical theological purpose of Scripture. Specifically, any literary genre that would in itself be immoral or involve deceit or error is not compatible with Biblical inerrancy and is not to be found in Scripture, for example, myth, etiological tale, midrash, legend or saga according to the usual designation of these forms. None of these genres fits the serious theological purpose of Scripture. Thus, we do not find Scripture presenting material as factual or historical when in truth it is only mythical. (2 Peter 1:16ff.; 1 Tim. 1:4, 4:7; 2 Tim. 2:4)

Apart from the above strictures any form of ancient literature is hypothetically compatible with Biblical inerrancy, for example, allegory (Gal. 4) and fable (Judg. 9:8-15), provided the genre is indicated directly or indirectly. At the same time it does no violence to inerrancy if the language of folklore or mythical elements serves as a means to clothe a Biblical author's presentation of doctrine (for example, "helpers of Rahab" in Job 9:13; "Leviathan" in Job 3:8 and in Ps. 74:12-15; Idumea as inhabited by centaurs, satyrs, and other strange creatures [Is. 34:14], meaning that Idumea will be devastated so that only such animals can live there). We do the same today if in a sermon a pastor refers to a "dog in a manger." As for the midrash, there is no reason to maintain that Scripture cannot employ midrashim any more than other literary forms. In many cases midrash approaches parable in form and purpose. However, the fanciful examples of midrash with the indiscriminate admixture of truth and error and the production of pure fiction to stress a certain lesson is not compatible with the historical character and the inerrancy of Scripture.

7. Biblical historiography. (1) Some Biblical writers use and cite sources for their history. We must assume that the Biblical author by the way in which he cites sources believes that these sources speak the truth, that they are reliable sources; and therefore he follows them. The contrary contention is certainly possible, but it must be proved in individual cases (implicit citations, see 2 Sam.). In the case of explicit citations (the words of a character in a history) we assume the truth of the matter cited, but this again depends on the intention

of the historical writer. We can assume the truth of the matter cited only if the holy writer formally or implicitly asserts that he approved it and judges to be true what he asserts in the citation. (See Acts 17:29.)

(2) Historical events are not described phenomenally as are the data of nature.

(3) The historical genre employed by Scripture is apparently a unique form. As it cannot be judged according to the canons (whatever they may be) of modern scientific historiography, it cannot be judged by the mythological and legendary or even historical forms of ancient contemporary civilizations; for example, we take the ancient Babylonian and Ugaritic accounts of creation as pure myth, but quite clearly the Biblical account cannot be taken as such.

(4) Chronology and genealogies are not presented in Scripture in the full and orderly manner in which we might present a chronicle or family tree today. Scripture often spreads out time for the sake of symmetry or harmony, *hysteron proteron* is often employed, and also prolepsis (John 17:4, 13:31). Again, genealogies often omit many generations. (See 1 Chron. 26:24, where Moses, Gershom, Shebuel are given, covering a period of perhaps more than 400 years; or Heb. 7:9-10, where Levi is said to be in the loins of Abraham, his father, when Melchisedec met him; thus any ancestor is the father of all his descendants.)

8. We must grant that there is often a *sensus plenior* in Scripture pericopes in the sense of 1 Peter 1:10-12. That is to say, the writer of Scripture is not in every respect a child of his time, conditioned by his own cultural milieu, but he often writes for a later age. However, we cannot countenance the Roman Catholic notion of *sensus plenior* which finds in passages of Scriptures fuller meanings which are disparate and different from the intended sense of the passages. We hold only to a profounder and sometimes more distinct sense than the writer may have perceived as he expressed himself. This has serious implications relative to the New Testament use and interpretation of the Old Testament; the New Testament does not misinterpret or do violence to the Old Testament when it interprets. *Sensus litteralis Scripturae unus est* does not imply that the sacred writer understands the full divine implication of all his words.

9. Pseudepigrapha. Pseudonymity in the sense of one writer pretending to be another in order to secure acceptance of his own work is illicit and not compatible with inerrancy. That the motives for such action may be construed as good does not alter the fact that fraud or forgery has been perpetrated. The fact that such a practice was carried on in ancient times does not justify it nor indicate that the practice was considered moral. When in ancient times a pious fraud was found out and the authenticity of a work disproved, the work itself was suspect. (See *Fragmentum Muratorianum*, 5, where the *finctae* letters of Paul to the Laodiceans and the Alexandrians were not accepted by the church for that very reason.)

Pseudonymity must be carefully delimited. Pseudonymity is deliberate fraud (for any reason whatsoever). It has nothing to do with anonymity. Nor would it be pseudonymity if a later writer culled under inspiration all the wisdom sayings

of Solomon, gathering them into a volume and presenting them for what they are, Solomon's wisdom. His contemporaries know that Solomon has not written the book, but understand the sayings and the wisdom to be Solomon's (similar to this, we have the words of Christ in the Gospels). In such a case no deception is involved. In the case of the pastoral epistles such a conclusion could not be assumed by any stretch of the imagination. The letters were written to give the impression that they come directly from Paul, claiming his authority. If they were not in fact Pauline, a deception has taken place, a successful deception until lately.

10. Etymologies in Scripture are often according to sound and not (obviously) according to modern linguistic analysis. This fact does not affect inerrancy. The ancients are not thinking of etymologies in the modern sense.

11. The inerrancy and the authority of Scripture are inseparably related. This fact has been consistently recognized by orthodox theologians, who have often included inerrancy and authority under the rubric of infallibility. Without inerrancy the *sola scriptura* principle cannot be maintained or practiced. An erring authority for all Christian doctrine (like an erring Word of God) is an impossible and impracticable contradiction in terms.

12. In approaching the Scripture as children of God who stand under the Scriptures; we shall do well to recall and observe two basic principles of our Fathers: (1) Scripture is *autopistos*, that is to say, we are to believe its utterances simply because Scripture, the Word of God, makes these utterances (inerrancy is always to be accepted on faith!), and we are to believe without the need of any corroborating evidence. This applies to statements about God, but also to statements about events in history. (2) Scripture is *anapodeiktos*, that is, self-authenticating. It brings its own demonstration, the demonstration of the Spirit and of power. Again no corroborating evidence for Biblical assertions is necessary or sought for. Now *sola scriptura* means all this; and it means as well that there are no outside criteria for judging the truthfulness or factual content of Scriptural assertions (for example, neither a modern scientific world view nor modern "scientific historiography"). We accept the assertions of the Scripture on faith. For instance, the fact that the creation story or the flood or the story of Babel has some parallels in other Semitic and ancient lore gives no right to conclude that these accounts in Scripture are mythical (any more than we have the right to conclude that Christ's resurrection is not historical because there are mythical resurrections in history). Such an interpretation would involve a violation of the *sola scriptura* principle. At the same time it is possible that a changed world view (for example, our modern view as opposed to the Newtonian view of absolute space and time) will open for consideration a new interpretation of a Biblical pericope, although it can never determine our interpretation of Scripture.

It is particularly important to maintain the above principles in our day in view of the tendency to allow extra-Biblical data (particularly historical and archaeological data and opinions) to encroach on the absolute authority of Scripture.

## The Trojan Horse: Historical Critical Method

The most important theological issue facing the evangelical Christians today as they seek to uphold the full inerrancy of Scripture centers in the use of the historical-critical method. The question is: May a genuine Christian, who believes that the Sacred Scriptures are the very Word of God and who is committed totally to the divine authority and inerrancy of Scripture, use the historical-critical method to understand, interpret, and apply the Scriptures? This crucial question can be answered only when we know two things. First, we must know what the historical-critical method is. And to know what any method is we must have a clear picture of its goals and its presuppositions. Second, we must determine whether the method as such denies or undermines the authority and inerrancy of Scripture.

So we ask, what is the historical-critical method? As far as I have been able to determine by examining the works of scores of scholars using the method a brief definition might run as follows. The historical-critical method is a way of studying Scripture by using all the criteria of scientific historical investigation. The method analyzes the text of Scripture in terms of language, literary form, redaction criticism, as well as historical, archeological, and other relevant data. The purpose of the method is not merely philological, or linguistic: to learn the intended meaning of texts and verses of Scripture. The over-arching purpose is historical: to discover the history and background of the form and content of any given portion or unit in Scripture and to trace that history of the given unit through every step of its development until it finds its way into the text of Scripture as we have it. This procedure, essential to the method, would apply to any story recorded in the Old Testament, any parable or discourse of Jesus, any action or miracle of our Lord, to any pericope in all of Scripture. The over-arching purpose, the ultimate goal, of the method is therefore to assess the historicity or factuality or truthfulness of the text of Scripture itself, to find the word or event behind the text, to find out what *really happened*, or to discover the historical origin of what is recorded in Scripture.

It is easy, I believe, to see some of the assumptions underlying this method of approaching Scripture. Assumptions regarding revelation, regarding Scripture, and regarding history. The method was first conceived and worked out in the eighteenth century by scholars who either denied that Scripture was such a divine revelation and so also its authority and inerrancy, as had been understood by historic Christianity.<sup>1</sup> They furthermore believed that all history has lived out according to principles of universal correspondence, analogy, uniformity within history; and all historical records including Scripture must be criticized according to such principles. Far reaching changes have taken place in the method over the past two hundred years—e.g., form criticism, redaction criticism, etc. have been invented—but the same assumptions underlie the use of the method today by all reputable and consistent practitioners of it.

Perhaps it is necessary at this point only to mention the devastating results of this method. Exegetes using the method have denied the historicity of all God's

activities recounted in Scripture until the time of Abraham, they have denied the authenticity of many of Christ's sermons and discourses, they have denied His deity and every miracle performed by Him. Regin Prenter, a relatively conservative dogmatician, who uses the method, frankly says, "That it is the Creator himself who is present in Jesus' humanity has always been an impossible idea of historical-criticism. Therefore historical-criticism necessarily collides with everything in the tradition concerning Jesus which ascribes to him such divine majesty."<sup>2</sup>

Now why does the historical-critical method of interpreting Scripture come to such diverse, contradictory conclusions, and to conclusions so totally destructive of our Christian faith? Because it is a bad method. Because its assumptions regarding revelation, Biblical authority, and history are wrong and contrary to Scripture. Because it has set wrong goals for itself. And because, ultimately, it does not understand the nature of what it is dealing with, the sacred Scriptures themselves.

Any method of doing anything is determined by the subject with which the method deals. That is always true, whether we think of a method of managing a corporation, a method of cutting meat, a method of researching historical data, or a method of reading a book. If this is true, then the nature of Scripture as God's revelation of Himself and His will cannot be ignored or discounted at any point by any method seeking to deal with Scripture in terms of its *form* or *content*. Scripture's form is its revelatory character as God's Word. Scripture's content is God Himself—He is the one spoken of everywhere in Scripture—God, His will and actions of judgment and grace among people. In the nature of the case one cannot use the same method for reading, understanding, and applying Scripture that one uses for understanding any other human book which recounts merely human events and ideas. For instance, a historical-critical method is quite adequate and proper for understanding and analysing Caesar's *Gallic Wars*. The historian will immediately recognize, according to his principles of universal correspondence and analogy within history, that Caesar is a responsible and serious witness to events and a good historian in terms of his day. The critic will therefore accept Caesar's statement that his army built an elaborate and complicated bridge and crossed the River Rhine. But the critic will recognize Caesar's limitations as he comments on the flora and fauna of Britain and Caesar's *tendenz* as he speaks of his great victories over the barbarians.

But Scripture, though written by inspired men and reflecting their style of writing, thought forms, and convictions, is not a human book or record like Caesar's *Gallic Wars*. The Spirit of God is the author of Scripture, and the Spirit does not have *tendenz* which may be corrected according to any theory concerning continuity and analogy within history. Furthermore, unlike Caesar's *Gallic Wars*, which deals with the activities of Caesar, a man, the Scriptures witness to the mighty acts of God, acts which transcend space, time, secondary causes, historical analogy, and everything else within our created order. The reader of Scripture, as he confronts the content of Scripture, God Himself and

His mighty acts, can only accept the witness of the Spirit who testified through the writings of prophets and apostles to these revelations of God's judgment and grace.

Does the historical-critical method deny Christian theology? It most certainly does. Specifically it undermines the organic, cognitive foundation of all our theology, the sacred Scriptures, and as a result is at odds with every specific Biblical rule of interpretation. Let me illustrate with a few points.

1. We Christians believe in the unity of Scripture, in the analogy of Scripture. Scripture agrees with itself in its witness to Christ and the Gospel and in all its doctrine. But listen now to the historical critic on this matter. "The assertion of a doctrinal unity of the Biblical witnesses has been made impossible by the work of critical historical research."<sup>3</sup>

2. We Christians believe in the divine origin of Scripture. But listen to the historical critic on this matter. "The advent of modern natural science and historical research showed that the Bible is not inerrant in the sense of the doctrine of verbal inspiration. The historical-critical and later the history of religions methods of research investigated even the Biblical writings and showed that they originated in the same manner as other source documents of religion. These new research methods showed also that there are a great many points of similarity between Biblical religion and the other religions, similarities which are most naturally explained by the assumption that Biblical religion has been influenced by non-Biblical religions. All of this was a fatal blow to the orthodox conception of the Bible."<sup>4</sup>

3. We Christians believe that Scriptures are absolutely reliable and authoritative. But listen to the historical critic on the matter. "In the Bible we know there is no unity of doctrine, no one theology, no single line of interpretation, not even agreement on what the facts are . . . The historical-critical method . . . opened our eyes to pluralism, divergent trends, historical conditionedness and relativity, and also theological contradictions in the Bible."<sup>5</sup>

Who are these men I quoted? Radicals? Modernists? Not at all. Well respected Lutheran theologians who use the *historical-critical method*. And their root error in every case is that they insist on principle that Scripture *must be approached like any other purely human, historically conditioned book*. Listen to another Lutheran historical critic make this position crystal clear. "The historicity of the Bible, that is, the conditioned character of its contents, a conditioned-ness which makes them dependent upon all kinds of human limitations and situations in precisely the same way as the legacies of all sorts of historical traditions, is an assumption of modern criticism throughout."<sup>6</sup>

What arguments are used by those in evangelical circles who favor the use of historical-critical methodology? Let me mention a few and reply to them.

1. The historical-critical method is better than our older approach to Scripture because it makes the fullest use of all the tools available to the scholarly exegete. This argument is simply contrary to the facts. Conservative exegetes today, who reject the historical-critical method, use all the scholarly tools helpful to their work, lexicons, archeological finds, extra-Biblical historical data, and

the like. What they object to is not scholarship, but an unscholarly, sub-Christian method of using the tools of scholarship.

2. Another argument. "In and of itself so-called 'historical-critical' methodology is neutral."<sup>7</sup> This argument sounds humble and innocuous, but it is utterly false. The presuppositions underlying the method which I mentioned earlier make the historical-critical method anything but neutral. I might add that almost all historical-critical scholars agree with me on this point. Gerhard Ebeling says, "It leads only to obscuring the nature of the problem when the critical historical method is held to be a purely formal scientific technique, entirely free of presuppositions."<sup>8</sup>

But we are told we can use the method with evangelical presuppositions. This is not possible. Take away the radical, sub-Christian presuppositions of the method and replace them with the evangelical Biblical presuppositions regarding Law and Gospel, the Christocentricity of Scripture, the power of the Word, the divine origin and authority and inerrancy of Scripture, and you have destroyed the historical-critical method entirely.

3. Third, it is argued that the historical-critical method enables us to understand better what God says to us through Scripture. This argument is unclear because one does not know what it *means* to say that God speaks *through* Scripture. Does it mean that the very words of Scripture are the very words of God? Or does it mean that God somehow speaks to us through Scripture as He speaks through other media, e.g. Law, Gospel, history, nature, culture? But apart from its ambiguity the claim is false and incredible. At best the historical-critical method *ignores* the fact that the Bible is the utterly truthful and authoritative Word of God. How then can such a method help us to understand what God says to us in Scripture?

4. Finally, it is argued that the historical-critical method is used in the service of the Gospel and somehow helps us better to find the Gospel in Scripture and use it. This claim is absurd on many counts. Surely we do not *need* the method to find the Gospel in Scripture and apply it. For the Gospel message, which was proclaimed before the New Testament was written, existed and was well understood also before the advent of historical criticism. Furthermore, how can a method which ignores or rejects the divine origin and authority of Scripture, which is our only source of the Gospel, help us better to understand the Gospel as God's Word of reconciliation and pardon to us? I would insist that in fact the historical-critical method does the very opposite of what champions claim for it. It hinders us from getting to the Gospel of Scripture and undermines the Gospel itself by undermining confidence in the only divinely authoritative source we have for the Gospel today, the sacred Scripture.

Let there be no mistake about this. A method which at any point can cast doubt on the authenticity of the words and discourses and even the miracles and saving acts of our Lord will never enhance the preaching of the Gospel in the church.

It is for the sake of the Gospel therefore that I would urge every evangelical teacher, pastor, and layman to avoid the historical-critical method as such as

the great heresy of our day. For the Gospel itself is at stake. The heart of the Gospel is Christ, our prophet, priest, and king. And He was no higher critic. He bowed to the written Word. Through His ministry the inerrant Scriptures ruled supreme. He in whom dwelt all the fulness of the Godhead drew all His doctrine from Scripture alone. And when He taught or quoted or applied Scripture there is never evasion, hesitation, or qualification. He says, "It is written." And what follows is unconditionally true and authoritative. We honor our Savior today by emulating His confidence in the divine origin and message of Scripture, not by using a method which assumes that Scriptures are merely human writings which teach contradictory theologies and contain errors. And as followers of Christ, saved by Him and committed utterly to His Gospel of reconciliation as revealed in Scripture, we will never, never tamper with that divine and saving Word of Scripture.

### Notes

1. This is an a priori. Listen to C. H. Dodd, a conservative practitioner of the method, on the subject of the "Time-Relativity of Prophecy" (*The Authority of the Bible*, London: Nisbet & Co. Ltd., 1955, 127-8), "This inseparable interweaving of the eternal and the temporary in an historical revelation has important corollaries in the philosophy of religion, which we must not here consider. All this means further that we must always allow for limitation and error in the prophets. It should hardly be necessary to state so obvious a proposition, but the doctrine of inspiration has been so confused by the demand for inerrancy that it is necessary. No one not blinded by a superstitious bibliolary could possibly accept for truth, as they stand, many elements in Old Testament prophecy . . . It is unnecessary to multiply examples. Any theory of the inspiration of the Bible which suggests that we should recognize such utterances as authoritative for us stands self-condemned. They are relative to their age. But I think we should say more. They are false and they are wrong." cf. also Edgar Krentz (*The Historical-Critical Method*, Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1975, p. 30.) "It is difficult to overestimate the significance the nineteenth century has for biblical interpretation. It made historical criticism the approved method of interpretation. The result was a revolution of viewpoint in evaluating the Bible. The Scriptures were, so to speak, secularized. The biblical books became historical documents to be studied and questioned like any other ancient source. The Bible was no longer the criterion for the writing of history; rather history had become the criterion for understanding the Bible."

2. Regin Prenter, *Creation and Redemption* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1967) p. 433.

3. Wolfhard Pannenberg, *Basic Questions in Theology* (London: SCM Press, 1970) I, 194.

4. Prenter, *op. cit.*, p. 90.

5. Carl Braaten, *Dialog*, 1973, Oct. p. 180.

6. Walter E. Rast, *Tradition, History and the Old Testament* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1972) Forward ix. cf. Hans-Joachim Krauss, *Geschichte der historisch-kritischen Erforschung des Alten Testaments* (Neukirchen: Verlag der Buchlandlung des Erziehungsvereins, 1969) p. 249 *passim*.

7. *Faithful to Our Calling, Faithful to Our Lord*. An Affirmation in two Parts by the Faculty of Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, Missouri. St. Louis, 1973, I, p. 41.

8. Gerhard Ebeling, *Word and Faith* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1963) p. 22ff.

## RESPONSE: William E. Hull

Pondering the address by Robert Preus, "The Inerrancy of Scripture," prompts comment in three areas.

### I.

The first concerns the "two natures" of Scripture, or what might be called the divinity and the humanity of the Bible. Note how Preus, in the first major section of his paper, addresses almost entirely the Godward side of Holy Writ. To him, the sacred Scriptures are "words taught by the Holy Spirit" whose inerrancy is "plenary or absolute," extending both to formal consistency and to material content, both to the substance of doctrine and to nonessential assumptions, both to the primary intent of the authors and to the secondary intent of passing references. Preus rightly calls this a "strict position," one which permits him to affirm a total or unqualified view of inerrancy that recognizes no minor details. One finishes the first major section of his presentation with the strong impression that, for our author, reading the Bible is tantamount to a direct, unmediated encounter with the very Word of God.

While such an emphasis, in and of itself, may be salutary, the question which we must ask is whether it conveys in balanced fashion a comprehensive view of the reality of Scripture. One would hardly know from this presentation that the Bible is full of obscure terminology that lexicographers are still struggling to decipher. Or that the most exalted epistles of Paul contain passages of tortured syntax that almost defy translation even by skilled grammarians. Or that our best available manuscripts of the Bible have a host of variants that no method of textual criticism, however conservative, has been able to resolve. Or that many key parts of the Bible, such as the synoptic Gospels, reflect countless divergences in parallel accounts which the most devout inerrantist scholars cannot fully harmonize. In short, Preus has a great deal to say in his major thesis and six corollaries about those features of the bible regarding which one may make absolute affirmations, but almost nothing to say about those features of the Bible which permit only ambiguous approximations.

What has happened here, I suggest, is that Preus has chosen to magnify the divine nature of the Bible, what he will later describe as its autonomous, self-authenticating character. But in so doing, he has neglected to emphasize its human nature as a witness to God's Word earthly language. There is much in Preus about the surpassing "treasure" given in Scripture, and rightly so, but little about the "earthen vessels" in which God was pleased to accommodate His self-disclosure (II Cor. 4:7). His presentation does not prepare us for the spiritual frailty of the inspired writers confessed so poignantly, for example, in the Psalms of Lament. Nor does it prepare us for the confession of the Apostle

Paul that he both knew in part and prophesied in part (I Cor. 13:9, 12).

My primary problem with this imbalance is theological. Christianity arose as an incredible exception to the dominant religions of its day. It offered a fresh alternative especially to the other-worldliness that had infected both Jewish apocalypticism and Hellenistic gnosticism. The scandal that became the glory of Christianity was its deep descent into historical contingency. The incarnation by which "the Word became flesh" (Jn. 1:14) was a radical condescension or "emptying" (*kenosis*) described so eloquently by Paul in Philippians 2:5-11. I find little *kenosis* in Preus' doctrine of Scripture. In his Bible, God seems to be speaking primarily from the heights rather than from the depths, out of the pure transcendence so coveted by apocalypticists and gnostics rather than out of lowly ambiguity so celebrated by the earliest Christian evangelists. For Preus, divine revelation seems always to be clear, unmistakable, and self-evident, which, to a point, is well and good. But, in this paper at least, it seems to lack the anguish, the pathos, the irony that characterized the preaching of the apostles.

I would express concern at this point because ours is a day ripe for other-worldly understandings of religion. Living in an atmosphere of meaninglessness nourished by everything from cultural banality to the threat of nuclear holocaust, many are eager to embrace a modern version of apocalypticism or gnosticism, especially if it is offered in Christian garb. Without intending to do so, is it possible that the "strict" view of inerrancy presented by Preus plays unwittingly into the hands of those who frantically seek an immediate experience of transcendence, and that it does so by implying that such may be had merely by opening the pages of Scripture? One way to avoid that unintended distortion is to develop a doctrine of Scripture which emphasizes that, in the Bible, divine revelation entered deeply into the human situation rather than escaping from it, participating gladly in the limitations of our humanity without thereby becoming captive to them.

## II.

By developing an absolutist premise in the first section of his paper, Preus is forced to devote the second major section to a number of "adjuncts" which qualify his strict view of inerrancy. I count at least ten characteristics of the Bible which he would exclude from the totalist claims made earlier: (1) verbal exactness of quotations; (2) verbal or intentional agreement in parallel accounts; (3) the rounding of numbers; (4) the employment of hyperbole, metaphor, and other figures of speech; (5) the use of popular phrases and expressions of the day; (6) the absence of scientifically precise language; (7) the use of the language of folklore or mythical elements; (8) the non-use of the canons of modern scientific historiography; (9) the presentation of chronology and geneologies in ways that expand or compress time; (10) the derivation of etymologies not in accordance with modern linguistic analysis.

This decalogue of disclaimers could, of course, be expanded by Preus or by anyone familiar with the standard literature in this field. But rather than try to build an even higher wall to hedge the theory of inerrancy, we may turn imme-

diately to the practical problem of utilizing a doctrine which requires so much elaborate effort to explain its many exceptions. A pastor in the pulpit or on an outreach visit has no time to enter into such nuanced discussion, nor does Preus imply that such should be done. But without making allowance for such complex qualifications, does not the doctrine of inerrancy appear to claim more than its own advocates espouse? Again, how many dedicated, Bible-believing laypersons, not to say ministers, are competent to understand for themselves, and to interpret for others, these "adjuncts" to Preus' theory? My own suspicion is that a seminary education is required to grasp the intricacies of this part of his paper.

Lurking behind this practical problem is a theoretical issue of even greater moment. Historians of the doctrine of Scripture are aware that the classic view of inerrancy contained far fewer concessions than those enumerated here by Preus. Indeed, in a famous passage Dean Burgon insisted that the perfection of Scripture must extend to every word, every syllable, every letter down to the Hebrew vowel points! Only a century ago, it was common for inerrantists to defend the historicity of the creation accounts in Genesis by using Bishop Usher's chronology, or to explain the language of the Bible by a theory of "Holy Ghost Greek," or to champion the late Byzantine "Textus receptus" of Robert Stephanus (1550) as the standard for all translation. As we might expect, such discredited notions are nowhere to be found in the paper by Preus. Which is to say that the doctrine of inerrancy is not some simple, timeless conviction occupying high ground above the vicissitudes of history. Rather, it is a complex, fluid theory that has changed significantly throughout the course of its development, perhaps never more so than in recent years.

But we must press this point one step further. Whence cometh the changes that make President Preus' position on inerrancy in the twentieth century so different from that of Dean Burgon's in the nineteenth century? Almost without exception they have come, not at the initiative of inerrantists themselves, but as reluctant concessions by inerrantists to the findings of scholars using the historical-critical method; e.g., the work of Deissmann and Robertson on Koine Greek, or the work of Westcott and Hort on textual recensions. Taken as a whole, the history of inerrancy is flawed by a fall-back psychology. Nor can holders of this view ever know when some fresh concession may be required in the future similar to those which have been made in the past. Surely we need a doctrine of Scripture that is on the offensive rather than on the defensive, one that welcomes rather than begrudges the assured findings of modern Biblical scholarship.

### III.

The final section of Preus' paper, consisting of a spirited attack on the "historical/critical method," raises for us afresh the age-old question of the relation of faith and reason. Throughout its long history of missionary expansion, Christianity has been forced to respond repeatedly to fundamentally new ways of thinking. This was true in all four of the great eras of church history, and in the first three of these periods the theologians cited with approval by Preus led

in reformulating orthodox doctrine to accommodate fresh modes of understanding. (1) In the Patristic Period (A. D. 200-500), Augustine led in the shift from Jewish to Hellenistic thought. (2) In the Medieval Period (A. D. 500-1500), Aquinas led in the shift from Platonic to Aristotelian thought. (3) In the Reformation Period (A. D. 1500-1700), Luther led in the shift from traditional to existential thought.

Before going farther, let us note that in every one of these cases the emerging epistemology was condemned as unfit for Christian use. The Judaizers bitterly opposed the Hellenization of the Gospel as early as the ministry of Paul. Thomas Aquinas was roundly criticized by the Dominicans for tampering with the Augustinian theology that had dominated the church for centuries and was condemned as a heretic by the archbishops of both Paris and Canterbury shortly after his death. Luther, of course, was excommunicated from the church for daring to set his solitary convictions against the massive structures of established authority in a way that redefined the meaning of individualism. But in every case change was not only inevitable, it eventually came to be accepted as a gift of God by which to give fresh expression to orthodox doctrine. The church finally learned that faith could be put in new forms without diluting its substance. History suggests that it is the responsibility of the church to take the initiative in responding to new ways of knowing so that unbelievers will not have to first adopt alien or outdated ways of thinking in order to grasp the meaning of Christ.

Which brings us to the Modern Period, born in the Enlightenment of the eighteenth century. Here the great shift in epistemology was from classical to critical modes of thought, from deductive to inductive reasoning, from theoretical to empirical assumptions. Many theologians have arisen in this era, especially in the period from Schleiermacher to Barth, who have attempted to do for Kant and Hegel and other tutors of the modern mind what Augustine and Aquinas did for Plato and Aristotle. But Preus, if I understand him alright, will have none of it. For him, there is simply not any Christian way to think critically about the faith as moderns have learned to do about everything else, hence there is no way to utilize the historical-critical method as a tool for studying the Bible. Apparently, scientific historiography as a means of doing Christian theology is as foreign to Preus as the Platonism of Augustine was to Tertullian or the Aristotelianism of Aquinas was to Bonaventura, or the existentialism of Luther was to Eck.

Perhaps the broader issue here is that of Christ and culture, a debate made familiar in our day by H. Richard Niebuhr. In the church's witness to the world, are we to set Christ *above* culture, *in* culture, or *against* culture (defining "culture" here to encompass the great intellectual traditions of Western civilization)? The inerrantist position espoused by Preus seems to favor the "Christ against culture" stance, especially in its insistence that one of the dominant modes of modern inquiry cannot be used to investigate the Bible. In times past, the "Church against culture" stance has sometimes proved useful as a corrective position but seldom enduring as a normative position. Preus will have to judge for himself whether he is correctly defining the scandal of the Gospel by de-

manding that moderns trained to think about reality in a critical/scientific/objective fashion lay aside that mindset if they would come to faith in Christ through the Scriptures.

For myself, I am prepared to discharge the theological task accepted by the church in earlier ages, that of taking the initiative to fashion an eternal yet contemporary Gospel out of the thought forms of this age, so that those who confront Christ may take offense only in His cross and not in the anachronistic categories by which He is presented. After thirty-five years of working daily with the historical/critical method as one tool in the reverent study of Scripture, I am convinced that it can be made a servant of Christ as much as a Platonism or Aristotelianism in ages past. At the same time, I respect and honor those who refuse to use it because they feel that it competes with the unhindered ministry of the Holy Spirit in their hearts.

In strange ways the use of this "secular" method, developed in part by unbelievers, is similar to the equally controversial issue in the time of Paul of eating meat that had first been offered to idols. Can we not all heed the admonition of the Apostle in addressing that issue and apply his wisdom to this issue which now divides us?

The faith that you have, keep between yourself and God; happy is he who has no reason to judge himself for what he approves. But he who has doubts is condemned, if he eats [i.e., practices Biblical criticism], because he does not act from faith; for whatever does not proceed from faith is sin. (Romans 14:22-23).

## **RESPONSE: Paige Patterson**

Dr. Robert Preus has made a monumental contribution to the evangelical cause through both scholarship and statesmanship. Therefore, I count myself fortunate to be able to respond to his excellent presentation. Since I find myself in agreement with his position, the nature of my response will be to anticipate possible objections to his paper.

### **The Bible and Inerrancy**

First, there is the question as to whether or not the Bible itself teaches its own inerrancy. Dr. Preus has presented the case for believing that the Bible does suggest its own perfections. This is true both in principle (the commandments for truthfulness among God's people) and in the assertions of its writers regarding the truthfulness of their respective messages. Others are convinced that the Bible does not teach its own inerrancy and that inerrantists have used poor logic and weak hermeneutics in alleging that it does.

As I have suggested elsewhere (see response to Pinnock), inerrantists need

not be "bullied" from their confidence on this issue. While all readily admit that the word "inerrancy" does not appear in the Bible, it is also true that this proves nothing at all. The creeds of Chalcedon and Nicea are not found in the Bible in the precise verbiage of the councils. This is not to say, however, that the essential elements of Nicean and Chalcedonian christology are absent from the Scriptures. To state that the Chalcedonian or Nicean formulations and the Chicago Statement On Biblical Inerrancy are not found in the Bible is hardly a striking insight. To conclude further that Nicean and Chalcedonian christology or inerrancy is, therefore, not taught in Scripture is a non-sequitur. The Bible does teach that Jesus is *homoousia* with the Father and with us even though it employs different language to do so. Nicean and Chalcedonian formulations are useful summarizations for biblical christology. And the Bible does teach its own inerrancy in its own wonderfully variegated language. Our definitions of inerrancy are attempts to summarize briefly, or sometimes at greater length to systematize what the Bible says about itself. In any case, we do not argue for use of the word "inerrancy" but rather for the concept that God spoke in Scripture, superintending the human authors in such a fashion that the latter wrote the word of God without error. Only the most determined hermeneutical gymnastics can distort *The Baptist Faith and Message* statement on the Scriptures to mean anything else. "It [The Holy Bible] has God for its author, salvation for its end, and truth, without any mixture of error, for its matter."

Recent attempts have been made to argue that the authors of the New Hampshire Confession of 1833, which serves as the foundational document for *The Baptist Faith and Message*, were making a philosophical distinction between "form" and "matter." It is alleged that

The "matter" of the Bible is its saving content or substance. The "form" of the Bible is the literary verbal construction of its message of salvation.<sup>1</sup>

The problems with such a thesis are manifold. First, this definition of "form" and "matter" reverses the definitions of the Greek philosophers who popularized the terms. Second, no evidence is provided to show that this is, in fact, what the framers of the New Hampshire Confession were thinking. Attributing to them indulgence in this kind of philosophical subtlety without providing supporting evidence is unconvincing, especially since they were preparing a confession for the common people in the churches. Third, every reason exists for believing that "matter" to those early Baptists meant "content," not in part, but in whole.

If my thesis is accurate, then the question arises: Where did our forefathers get such an idea? While not denying the impact of previous confessions, it seems clear that they arrived at such a conclusion exegetically, i.e., they believed that the Bible taught that the Word of God was "truth without mixture of error."

This is precisely the position of inerrantists today. Not only are they convinced that the Bible teaches its own inerrancy, but they also note the example of the way in which Jesus responded to the Old Testament. They further note

the way other biblical authors allow themselves to be bound by the authority of acknowledged Scripture.

For example, Peter argues that no prophecy of Scripture is of private origin. Instead, holy men of God were moved to speak God's word (2 Peter 1:20-21). Then in the third chapter of 2 Peter, he admits that Paul has written some difficult passages. However, Peter laments that some had "distorted" Paul's writings just as they had "the other Scriptures." This attitude presents a high view of Scripture similar to the inerrancy view.

By both example and sufficient declaration, the authors of Scripture do seem to hold a view of Scripture virtually identical to the view of modern inerrantists. This is not just an "inerrancy of purpose," which Preus identified as an inadequate perspective, but an inerrancy of word as Jesus Himself seems to indicate in Matthew 22:41-44.

While the Pharisees were gathered together, Jesus asked them,  
Saying, What think ye of Christ? whose son is he? They say unto him, The son of David.

He saith unto them, How then doth David in spirit call him Lord, saying,  
The Lord said unto my Lord, Sit thou on my right hand, till I make thine enemies thy footstool?

The point here is the inspiration of one word, the word "Lord." Note also the confluent nature of revelation. David said the word "Lord" but it was *en pneumati*, by means of the Spirit that David is able to say this.

### The Problem of Qualifications

Dr. Preus has defined inerrancy. He has then proceed to qualify precisely what he means by inerrancy with a series of affirmations and denials. Common reaction of non-inerrantists is to object to the "complicated" nature of the "theory of inerrancy." Some allege that the whole idea dies the death of a thousand qualifications. Once inerrancy has been qualified it comes to mean nothing at all or at least to be indistinguishable from other "high views" of the Bible.

In answer to the charge that the definition is too complicated, inerrantists reply that the fault for most of the complications of the subject lies with non-inerrantists. Most inerrantists in the Southern Baptist context are perfectly content with the statement on the Bible as it stands in *The Baptist Faith and Message*. The problem arises when theologians begin alleging "error" in the Bible. In reaction, evangelicals say the Bible is "inerrant." The matter becomes more complicated still when a series of questions is asked of inerrantists concerning such things as phenomenal language in the Bible. Inerrantists then respond with full statements such as The Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy. Finally, having utterly failed to dislodge inerrantists from their confidence in Scripture, non-inerrantists dismiss the whole storm as a "tempest in a tea pot" and walk away saying that the idea of inerrancy "died the death of a thousand qualifications."<sup>2</sup>

Strangely, this is the same argument which arose concerning theism in John

Wisdom's now famous parable of the divine gardener. Or take the case of the famous rabbit which was once the focus of Oxford philosophical discussion. This special rabbit was invisible, intangible, inaudible, weightless, and odorless. Qualified in such a way, does the rabbit have any real existence?<sup>3</sup> All of this terminates in Anthony Flew's question, "What would have to occur or to have occurred to constitute for you a disproof of the love of, or the existence of, God?"<sup>4</sup>

My point is this. Christian non-inerrantists do not admit such reasoning as valid evidence for dismissing God from the universe or from our faith. They do not, as a result of such assaults on theism, cease to argue for God's existence. Neither do they beg the question saying, "Well, God is a lion. Do not try to defend Him; just turn Him loose!" They argue for God not in order to protect Him but in order to demonstrate to unbelievers that no breach of intellectual honesty must occur in order to believe. The same is true of the Bible.

If theists in general are not persuaded by such positivistic arguments about God, then it will not do for them to marshal the same arguments against the idea of inerrancy. Of course, we must qualify what we mean by "inerrancy" and what we mean by "God." That does not eliminate either idea. Neither does it unduly complicate the perspicuity of the idea.

### **Pseudonymity**

Dr. Preus provides us with a fine discussion of the question of the pseudonymity of the books of the Bible. He notes carefully that pseudonymity must be carefully distinguished from anonymity. He obviously rejects the modern idea that pseudonymity was a perfectly acceptable literary stratagem in the first century. One can add that Paul himself objected to this practice, obviously knowing that the attachment of a man's name to some document when, in fact, he was not involved at all, was immoral. Evidently, a pseudonymous letter purporting to be from Paul had arrived at Thessalonica. Paul clearly does not approve.

Now we beseech you, brethren, by the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, and by our gathering together unto him. That ye be not soon shaken in mind, or be troubled, neither by spirit, nor by word, nor by letter as from us, as that the day of Christ is at hand. 2 Thessalonians 2:1-2.

Misrepresentation is always wrong. Letters purporting to be from Paul, if pseudonymous, cannot be received as the word of God. This does not, however, rule out the use of amanuenses. Beginning with untruth, one seldom arrives at truth.

### **The Historical-Critical Method**

Dr. Preus also addresses himself to the alleged "neutrality" of the historical-critical method. Gerhard Ebeling's testimony cited by Preus should be sufficient evidence to alert us to the lack of neutrality in this approach. To this warning we

must add the admission of the early historical-critical scholars. Gerhard Maier quotes Johann Semler as follows.

The root of the evil (in theology) is the interchangeable use of the terms "Scripture" and "Word of God."<sup>5</sup>

Here there is no disguise. The purpose of the historical-critical method is to discern the canon within the canon. The Scriptures are not God's word; they only contain God's word. The task of the interpreter is to do precisely as Bultmann suggested. He must jettison the mythological husk and savor the kernel of God's word. How can this formidable task be achieved? Gerhard Maier again cites W. G. Kuemmel in an answer which is typical of historical-critical scholars.

The more a text points to the historical revelation of Christ, and the less it has been changed by thoughts from outside of Christianity or through later Christian questioning, the more surely it must be counted as belonging to the normative canon.<sup>6</sup>

This search for a canon within the canon, for the *true* words of Jesus, for the reconstruction of what *actually* happened, for the kernel of truth hidden in the trappings of mythological husks, is anything but the assured result of scientific research. One can use scientific methodology at some points while still arriving at the desired result if a sufficient number of presuppositions are allowed to intrude. This is precisely what has transpired among most practitioners of an historical-critical method.

### Conclusion

In July of 1976, Noel Wesley Hollyfield, Jr., presented to the faculty of Southern Baptist Theological Seminary a Master's thesis entitled *A Sociological Analysis of the Degrees of "Christian Orthodoxy" Among Selected Students in the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary*. The thesis was approved by G. Willis Bennett, E. Glenn Hinson, and Henlee Barnett on August 26, 1976. The results of Hollyfield's research are alarming, and his thesis should be read by every interested Southern Baptist. For example, among Ph.D. students thirty-six percent were not able to say "Jesus is the Divine Son of God and I have no doubts about it." Only fifty-two percent could say that the devil definitely or at least probably exists. Many other questions of Baptist faith received similarly disturbing responses.<sup>7</sup> Maybe the questions were not prepared properly. Perhaps the survey was skewed. Or maybe it was just a bad year. Perhaps all of the above is true, though the three competent readers did not refer to any such problems. Even so, the results of this analysis ought to send us scurrying to our prayer closets for direction and forgiveness. The thesis clearly reveals a serious loss of confidence in the veracity of the Bible.

My purpose here is not to assault our mother seminary with its wonderful heritage and able faculty. My purpose here is just to say that something has

gone wrong with Southern Baptists and its symptoms popped to the surface in Hollyfield's thesis. I find it hard to believe that even non-inerrantists on the faculty at Southern greeted the results of Hollyfield's research with anything other than grave concern. The question then is this: Where did we go wrong? My contention is that we opened the door for this situation when we dismissed the perspectives of James P. Boyce and A. T. Robertson regarding the Sacred Scripture. We erred when we embraced uncritically the presuppositions of higher criticism.

On November 25, 1887, Charles Spurgeon wrote a tragic letter from Menton where he was recuperating. The letter said in part,

Many do not believe that this "new theology" exists to any degree worthy of notice. I know that it does, and cannot but wonder that any should question it. Of course those who think all is well think me a needless alarmist. Another section is first of all for peace and unity, and hopes that the erring ones will come right; and therefore they are grieved to see the matter ventilated.

Others hope to purge and save the Union. All my best desires go with these; but I have no hope of it. Essentially there is no doctrinal basis to begin with, and many believe this to be a great beauty. "Down with all creeds" seems to be their watchword.

Protests failing, I left; and this has caused more enquiry than a thousand papers would have done. I do not see that I could have done else. Others might not lie under such a compulsion till they have tried to mend matters and have failed as I have done. With no confession of faith, or avowal of principles, there is nothing to work upon; and I do not see the use of repairing a house which is built on the air.

Spurgeon's fears for the Baptist Union were not without foundation. The effectiveness of the Union was choked by the noxious fumes of unbelief. Spurgeon's description of affairs within the Baptist Union and the various proposed solutions has a contemporary ring. However, we have not gone that far as Southern Baptists. But the evidences all say that we are on that same road. God help us to stop, turn around, return to the faith of our fathers and hear Isaiah as he says, "here is the way, walk ye in it."

### Notes

1. Roy Honeycutt. "Biblical Authority: A Treasured Heritage!" *Review and Expositor*. vol. 83, no. 4, (Louisville: Economy Printing Concern, Inc., Fall, 1986), p. 616.
2. Roy Honeycutt. "Biblical Authority: A Treasured Heritage!" *Review and Expositor*. vol. 83, no. 4, (Fall, 1986), p. 608.
3. John Hick. *Philosophy of Religion*. (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1963), pp. 95-96.
4. Anthony Flew. *New Essays in Philosophical Theology*, p. 79.
5. Gerhard Maier. *The End of The Historical-Critical Method*. (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1974), p. 15.

6. Gerhard Maier. *The End of the Historical-Critical method*. (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1974), p. 18.

7. Noel Wesley Hollyfield, Jr. *A Sociological Analysis of the Degrees of "Christian Orthodoxy" Among Selected Students in the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary*, Unpublished Master's Thesis presented to the faculty of Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, July 1976, p. 70.