

THE HISTORY OF THE FUTURE— OR WHAT SHOULD WE DO NOW?

L. RUSS BUSH*

The merchant was new in the valley and had built two sheds to collect firewood for sale in the winter. Since he was new in the area, he had no idea how cold the winter would be. So he sent his apprentice up the mountain to talk to the hermit, who knew a lot about nature.

The apprentice came back all fired up: "Boss, the hermit says the winter will be very cold!"

"Good," thought the merchant. "Let us build another shed."

After filling up the new shed, the merchant sent his apprentice up again to make sure he was adequately prepared. The apprentice came back even more excited than the first time:

"Boss, the hermit says the winter will be very, very cold!"

Up went another shed. And it was filled even faster.

This time the merchant was so impatient he decided to go himself to talk to the hermit.

"Hermit! What will the winter be like?"

Without a word, the hermit went to a ledge overlooking the valley. After a long look he turned and said, "Coming winter, worst I've ever seen!"

"But how do you know?"

"Easy. Men in valley gather much wood."

I. NO ONE KNOWS THE FUTURE

All we can do is look at current signs and statistical indicators. Signs and indicators, however, are not based on the actual future but on the present, and on the information we have at present, which is in fact only an interpretation of the present and the recent past.

The difficulty of predicting the future based on current statistical trends can be seen from a simple example: Statistical trends say that, at their present rate of decline, Methodists and Presbyterians will be extinct by the middle of the next century. But surely this will not actually be the case.¹ Trends are only current indicators. They speak of the past and the present but not necessarily of the future.

* Russ Bush, vice president for academic affairs and dean of the faculty at Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary, Box 1889, Wake Forest, NC 27587, delivered this presidential address at the 46th annual meeting of the ETS on November 17, 1994, in Lisle, IL.

¹ Some trends, however, seem to foretell a real future. For example, statistical trends show that if present growth rates continue, there will be more Muslims than Jews in the United States

Nevertheless we act in the present (based on the information we have). From our actions consequences follow. We are living and making the history of the future. What we teach and do today will be what future Christians consider to be their heritage. The principles we adopt, the critical methods and assumptions we accept, the hermeneutical methods we follow, and the selections of data we highlight will be considered as the foundations by those who follow us. Be not so ready to innovate, to seek the new merely for the sake of newness.

Methods and assumptions have consequences. For example, German post-Enlightenment higher-critical methods and naturalistic assumptions in Biblical studies have had specific consequences. Three of the most common modern critical assumptions and working hypotheses are (1) a community model of Biblical authorship (as opposed to a prophetic model), (2) an evolutionary development of theological ideas in the Bible instead of a fixed body of propositional truth, and (3) the production of Scripture by pious response to divine revelation rather than directly by revelation. Each of these assumptions replaces the supernatural with the natural.

To my mind, without the prophetic model the doctrine of Biblical inerrancy tends toward meaninglessness. (By "prophetic model" I mean the theory or explanation that God revealed his Word [which originally came in various verbal and nonverbal forms] to divinely chosen individuals, who then by means of the supernatural inspiration of the Holy Spirit wrote this revelation accurately in ordinary human words and culturally sensitive sentences that nevertheless correctly conveyed the divine message to the original hearers, producing a truthful literary text that preserves the authentic revelation from God and that also correctly describes the history and context of that original revelation according to the style and manner of each writer.) This idea of a special, divinely directed author (an individual who wrote the words of Scripture as God intended for them to be written) is what modern critics deny. But without a prophet who was responsible for a factually truthful text, all traditional theories of Biblical authority fail.

The Bible for many has become like the United States Constitution—a source of acceptable, foundational tradition, yet at the same time a living document subject to considered amendment and continual reinterpretation. Higher critics do not believe that we have lost the autographs of Scripture. Rather, they do not believe there is or ever was any such thing as an autograph. Biblical texts are considered to be versions, multi-edited reinterpretations of traditions in light of new situations.² I think all of these ideas and more should be examined in the classroom. The classroom is the test bed for ideas, but it is not the laboratory. The church is the laboratory. This is where the real results are seen.

by the year 2010. On the other hand it is easy to misinterpret even real trends. W. J. Bennett recently published *The Index of Leading Cultural Indicators* (Simon and Schuster, 1994). His statistics show that alcohol and drug use are declining but that violent crime, abortion rates and suicide rates are rising. Does this mean we are eliminating drug use by killing ourselves off? I am afraid some people may have argued for certain positions in Biblical theology with equally shallow readings of the textual evidence.

² I recently read a manuscript by someone who claimed to believe in Biblical inerrancy, who affirmed the *Chicago Statement* and another conservative denominational confession of faith, but

II. WHAT THE STUDY OF SCRIPTURE HAS PRODUCED

1. *What has higher criticism produced?* Some good things, including an industry of theological research and writing, a vast database of analytical reference tools, and a scholarly community within the modern university devoted to religious studies.³ Today we have a competent cultural analysis of the ancient world and much better linguistic tools than in the past. Higher-critical scholars have certainly produced much of great value (though evangelical contributions are also significant).

But critical methods also have fostered liberal theology, and this has destroyed the simple faith of the centuries and devastated modern Church life. I am well aware that secularism has many roots. More factors than critical methodologies have been at work in the modern Church. I also know, however, that evangelical churches have more successfully resisted modern secularization, whereas churches with liberal theology have not done as well.

But let us bring this discussion a bit closer to home.

2. *What has Reformed theology produced?* Historically it produced modern Europe (I mean that in the most positive sense). The Reformers gave us sound theology as well as cultural, political and scientific advance. Literal methods of interpretation overcame medieval allegorical methods, but higher criticism arose (at least in part) from the strict application of literalism.

Freedom is good, and Reformed theology's mind was captive only to the Word of God. But individualism arose from freedom, and the body of Christ was divided.⁴ Sovereign-grace proponents too often have found it difficult to

who nevertheless argued that the book of Joshua was composed for young King Josiah. The content of the canonical story may have been a revision of some ancient traditions, he mused, but its original audience and intended applications were to the circumstances and situations of Josiah's day. In his proposal there was an oral tradition that had evolved over time. There was then an edited version of this tradition written for an historical setting many years later. The main character, Joshua, was not in all of the original traditions but was added by the religious writers in order to tie the various traditions together into one story. The purpose of this written version was not to provide accurate history about Joshua and the conquest of the land but was to provide moral and spiritual guidance to Josiah in the later historical context specifically. If it did that successfully, it supposedly could be said to have divine authority. Then over time other revisions to the written versions of these traditions were made as new situations arose. Each version had its own divine authority. Due to the loss of the temple in AD 70 (or for some other historical cause) the regular updating process was halted, and the current version at that time supposedly became the basis of what we now call the canonical text. This commentator suggested that we should read the canonical text not as "accurate history" but as "true moral story." Moreover we should seek the "spirit of inspiration" as we make relevant applications to our setting, thus continuing the authentic process of Biblical inspiration. Under this model, however, there is no autographic text. Indeed, there never was. Inerrancy advocates, therefore, have no text to which to appeal. Inerrancy (if used at all as a descriptive word) properly applies only to God's current moral word but not to the original historical text produced by a Spirit-led writer. This version theory has a continually changing text, a correctable text. In this community-authorship model, the Bible is a reliable moral guidebook but not a propositionally truthful revelation.

³ This was Schleiermacher's contribution in Berlin. See D. H. Kelsey, *Between Athens and Berlin* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993) 13.

⁴ The division that concerns me is not believers versus unbelievers. The division that "doctrinal purity" has produced is between true believers.

issue an evangelistic appeal, much less support world missions. The famous resistance William Carey faced ("Sit down, young man! If God decides to save the heathen, He will do it without your help or mine!"⁵) arose from those committed to Reformed theology. Fortunately this extreme conclusion is not so common today as it has been in the past.

3. *What has dispensationalism produced?* Good things like the Bible conference movement and many books refining prophetic studies. Dispensationalism offers a straightforward hermeneutic, a system of interpretation that fascinates laypeople and attracts large crowds to Christ and to Bible-believing churches. The concept and widespread use of study Bibles come from this tradition, and such Bibles are now used by many Christians of various theological persuasions. Believers are thrilled by the design of history and clear sense of providence set forth by dispensationalist theology.

But also out of this theology has arisen a nondenominational, independent, church-and-mission movement that has great difficulty relating to the larger body of Christ. Clearly it is difficult to claim that dispensationalism is the faith of the Church through the centuries. It is a relatively new emphasis in theology (which, by the way, does not automatically make it wrong, but it does locate the burden of proof). The focus on prophecy has produced many extremists. And, to speak frankly, dispensationalism has often fostered mistrust of those who do not use its shibboleths. For some the mark of liberalism has been the denial of a pretribulation rapture. Fortunately this is not as much the case today as it has been in the past.

4. *What have Catholicism and Orthodoxy produced?* Historical continuity, great art, the preservation of many moral and theological traditions, and a visible presence for Christianity in the eyes of the world—just to mention a few things.

But both groups seem to have preserved temple-style worship and liturgy centered around costumed priests and elaborate ceremonies rather than synagogue-style worship, personal faith, the priesthood of every believer, and a commitment to religious liberty. The Orthodox, more than the Catholics, have preserved true doctrine. And the Orthodox seem to have a stronger emphasis on community and personal faith. But the medieval territorialism of both groups continues to hinder evangelical mission work today, and both groups seemingly are failing to reach or relate effectively to the new generations of modern people. For many today, Orthodox and/or Catholic religion has become a burden. On the other hand, hopefully we may be seeing changes here as well.

5. *What has denominationalism produced?* Certainly we have seen clarifications of many doctrines, and denominations unquestionably produce a strong sense of loyalty to the local church. But denominationalism also

⁵ See H. L. McBeth, *The Baptist Witness* (Nashville: Broadman, 1987) 185.

divides the body of Christ, produces state-Church systems, and promotes exclusive and conflicting missions.

How can we all read the same Bible and yet conclude so differently? How we interpret the Bible is at least as important as our creedal statements about the authority and the inspired character of the Bible. Where is the unity of the body of Christ? Why does culture play so great a role in Christian ethics? Why can we not agree on the so-called women's issues, on baptism, on the nature of the Lord's supper (the body and blood of Christ), or on the interpretation of prophecy? We have been unable to settle these and similar issues at the scholarly level. I find also that we have few satisfactory hermeneutical methods for lay interpreters. Or at least we have not taught them very well. As teachers and Christian leaders, can we make any real progress on these problems? What history will we make for future ministers? I say let the chips fall where they may. But let us at least chop some wood rather than merely sit around thinking about it.

III. SOME TENTATIVE SUGGESTIONS

I have four comments (suggestions) and one final five-part affirmation regarding the way of truth.

1. *We must teach so that our students can teach what they have been taught.* Theological elitism is self-satisfying, but it is not the teaching method of Jesus, who explained everything to his disciples and then gave them the great commission to make disciples by baptizing and teaching all that he had commanded. We have not properly taught a class unless our students can teach others what we have taught them in that class.⁶

The classroom is in so many ways unlike a church that we often fail to provide an effective bridge for our students. Fine distinctions in grading seem to me to be built upon academic mythology and seldom measure significant differences in ministry competence. We need more mentoring, more attention to individual achievements, and less bell-curve grading and trick questions on exams.

2. *We must recognize and emphasize the historical character of divine revelation.* People must be taught the narrative, the content, the historical facts that make up the Bible. We must not assume they know this already.

People cannot apply what they do not know. Moreover, our task really is not application. We cannot make every possible application. We will fail if we succeed. Nothing is less helpful than a sermon trying to mention every possible application of the text.

⁶ Some teachers love to show off their knowledge, but too often their students never learn to teach others what they are hearing (I do not say "learning"). This is common, but this is wrong and ineffective. To teach people to teach may require some changes in teaching methodology. As one example, I have begun to give exams in which I expect students to use their academic resources as they might in a real world situation.

Sermons should faithfully expound the meaning of the Biblical text. Tell the story or explain the teaching. Suggest a few generic applications perhaps, but let God's Spirit be free to apply God's Word. Trust God in this. If the people truly understand the text, the Holy Spirit will make the application clear. And when he does, the application will be personal and specific to each person's real needs.

3. *Allegory and typology, as valuable as they may be in certain contexts, are not the hermeneutical answer.* These methods have too few accepted controls, and they lead ordinary people to think that the really important meanings in the Bible are hidden from them. This is a result similar to that produced by modern criticism. Theological elitism, however, is not the direction in which we should lead the Church. If the Bible is mystery and puzzle and hidden meanings, then it is not a revelation by any definition I can accept.

4. *Literalism also fails.* Literalism leads to prophetic extremes. For example, the Armageddon lake of blood statistics (Rev 14:20) become incredible when taken literally: two hundred miles of blood four feet high, up to the horses' bridles. How many gallons of blood is that? Over and over I hear this described, but seldom is it preached as a figurative description.⁷

Literalism also confuses theology. For example, at the last supper Jesus said, "This is my body." Look at how this has been handled by Catholics versus Lutherans versus Baptists, and so on.

Moreover I find that literalism confuses the laity. Hats and hair, foot-washing, fasting, food laws, slavery—how do we know which Biblical details are significant and relevant to our faith and practice? How should I preach on that verse in Numbers 31 that only says "and thirty and six thousand beeves"? Do I preach on the quantity of the cattle, the purpose of the cattle, the keepers of the cattle, the owner of the cattle? The problem is not whether this verse is literal. I assume that it is. The problem is: What does it mean? Why is it there?

5. *The way of truth.* I do not claim to have all the answers. I am struggling with these issues just like many of you. The following suggestions, however, seem to me at least to be a portion of the way of truth.

(1) Biblical inerrancy cannot be easily defended in the midst of central and dominant affirmations of a nonexistent text, nor with definitions like "when all the facts are known we will find the [nonexisting] autographic text to be true." Believers may accept this, but most modern people hear this sort of language only as a loophole, a back door that covers all factual emergencies. Instead, we must say that the teaching affirmations of the properly understood Biblical text we have now are without theological error. The Bible when properly interpreted is also factually true and divinely authoritative.

⁷ Last year as I stood on the mound of Megiddo I heard this preached again, and I saw people look at the place itself, that broad valley extending beyond our line of sight. They asked me, "How can this be true?" Their literalism actually threatened their faith.

Textual problems and other hermeneutical difficulties should be noted (especially if they seriously affect the meaning, or if they raise questions about factual truths), and we may need to say (when we are dealing with a difficult passage) that we need more information on some problems. But we should not put our emphasis on these problems and include them as featured elements of every confessional affirmation. When we do so, we can qualify ourselves to death.

Certainly we speak to an academic audience with more nuanced precision than we use with a lay audience. I am simply suggesting that we should not define our views so defensively that we raise more doubts by our definitions than we can resolve. We should not say, "It's all true except for all of those many parts we still hope to be able to explain some day." Any doubting person will only hear us as if we were admitting that we are believing against the evidence.

(2) In my view, the autographs have not been lost. We often say this, and some people think we are criticizing the early Church leaders for carelessness or something. When correctly conceived, the so-called autographs are in fact the authentic canonical text. There is no essential difference between an accurate copy and an original.

Most of the significant problems we have with the doctrine of Biblical inerrancy are not problems arising from disputed textual variants. Rather, they are interpretive problems caused by well-established texts. It is utter foolishness from the standpoint of effective witness to a hostile audience to hide inerrancy in the mist of a long-lost authorial autograph and by implication suggest that all problems would disappear if we only had the original text.

Let us fight the battle and set forth our case on the basis of the authentic canonical text. While scholarly work continues, we are very close to establishing this text. This true, canonical and inspired text has not been lost. God's Word has been preserved. When we read our reconstructed texts today we are reading the original words of inspired Scripture, and we can on the basis of our current text know the truth.⁸

(3) Admittedly the Bible is in some ways hard to understand. Because it is an ancient book, we must teach—really teach—people how to study

⁸ Textual variants are usually points of uncertainty between options. They are not usually evidence that the original words were forever lost. Scholars are working on details that are problematic due to the ancient nature of our text and the lack of a clear understanding of all methods of transmission through the centuries. But our affirmations outshine our continuing points of doubt, obscurity, or remaining misunderstanding. It is the properly understood affirmations of the authentic canonical text that are true, and for all practical purposes we have that text, and for the most part we can interpret it correctly. I have no interest in promoting relic worship, and thus I have no special need for, nor do I want, an original handwritten manuscript from the prophet's or apostle's hand. All I need is an accurate copy, and for all practical purposes we have that. If we had more it could be counterproductive, given human propensity for idolatry. Not only that, but what if the Vatican Museum had an original Pauline manuscript, and what if a medieval monk had added a few "clarifying" phrases? The autograph itself would then be subject to a textual dispute. Or what if Paul himself had produced an early draft of Romans that differed from his final authenticated and thus canonical text? In every case, the authentic canonical text is what we want.

and understand it for themselves, remembering that they do not normally have access to all the good reference works that most scholars depend upon. Cultural situations change. But moral standards do not change. Theological truths do not change.

I contend that we must teach a grammatical, literary, historical, theological method of interpretation. This is divine truth we are dealing with, and thus there are profundities and spiritual teachings that only are seen through prayerful and Holy-Spirit-led understanding. But this reflective theological level grows directly from literary genres, from the historical presentation of factual truth, from the explanatory power of syntax and grammar.

(4) Laypeople must be taught the how and why of their Christian faith. Why in preaching do we so often read a text, point out only some obvious details about it, deliver a long exhortation, and then call that an exposition? It is nothing of the sort. Exposition is a theologically based explanation or it is nothing. Biblical narratives were written in order to be orally repeated. We must insist that ministerial students hear this word.

Preaching must be revitalized. We need real Biblical-historical story retelling. Our children no longer even know the major Bible stories. Narrative homilies, character studies, systematic development of authentic intentional themes: This is the content of preaching that the current generation has missed.

(5) Finally, but most importantly, Scripture must saturate us as teachers and Christian leaders. The example of our Lord is more than clear. Jesus sat with the rabbis at the age of twelve and discussed the teachings of the Bible with them. (I am impressed that Jesus could do this, but I am equally impressed with rabbis who took time for theological dialogue with a twelve-year-old boy.)

Jesus resisted temptation by using Scripture. In Nazareth he interpreted his ministry by referring to Scripture. His constant reference was to Scripture in his dialogues with the religious leaders. He turned to Genesis time and again, and to the prophets, and to the Psalms. He claimed that the teachings of these writings pointed to him. He was their fulfillment. He was the incarnation of the Word of God.

Perhaps this is most clearly seen on the cross. Jesus died with Scripture on his lips: "I thirst" (John 19:28) was spoken so that Scripture might be fulfilled. "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me" is Ps 22:1. (I think Jesus was intending to call attention to the entire Psalm—which is by no means the cry of despair this verse in isolation is so often said to be.) Even his very last words—"Into your hands I commit my spirit"—are from Ps 31:5.

Jesus is our guide, the author and finisher of our faith, the way and the truth. He is also our life. Lord, grant us understanding. Enable us to know the truth so that we might teach others. For it is in thy name alone that we approach the throne of grace! Amen.