

TRUTH, MEANING AND INERRANCY IN CONTEMPORARY EVANGELICAL THOUGHT

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In recent years there has been increasing interest in both academic and non-academic circles in the phenomenon of evangelical Christianity. So much interest has arisen among nonevangelicals that there has even been a desire to create a chair of evangelical theology at such universities as Harvard. Traditionally evangelicalism has been considered as of all one stripe by many of a more liberal persuasion. For example, it would be safe to say that many in the liberal camp have seen no essential difference between a school like Fuller Theological Seminary and a school like Dallas Theological Seminary (or even Bob Jones University). I would suggest, though, that once nonevangelicals begin to study evangelicalism in greater depth they will discover what evangelicals have known all along—viz., that there are many nuances and forms of evangelicalism. They range from the fundamentalist stance of Bob Jones University and Liberty Baptist College (and there are significant differences between those two schools and the forms of fundamentalism they represent) toward the right end of the spectrum to Fuller Theological Seminary with its form of evangelicalism toward the left end of the spectrum (and some within evangelicalism argue that Fuller no longer deserves the label of evangelical).

This divergence of perspectives within evangelicalism is perhaps nowhere seen so clearly as it is in regard to the way evangelicals handle the Bible: (1) There is the matter of divergent approaches within evangelicalism concerning the interpretation of Scripture, and (2) there is also great variety in regard to the perception of the inerrancy of Scripture. In this paper I shall set forth some of the divergent perspectives within evangelicalism on these issues as they involve hermeneutics in hopes that they will illumine for nonevangelicals in particular some of the intramural debates within evangelicalism on these issues. My intention is to be descriptive and not polemical, though it will not be altogether possible to avoid some evaluative comments on the positions presented. In particular, I think that the hermeneutical diversity within evangelicalism can be illustrated by focusing on three main issues: (1) the commitment to (or lack of commitment to) and understanding of literal hermeneutics; (2) the debate between dispensational and nondispensational theologies on proper interpretation and use of the OT; and (3) the debate over Biblical inerrancy. In each case I shall attempt to distinguish the camp within evangelicalism that is represented by the views being presented.

Probably one of the hallmarks of modern evangelicalism has been a commitment to literal-grammatical-historical hermeneutics. One has only to peruse course offerings and course syllabi from classes in hermeneutics in evangelical and fundamentalist schools to discern that the commitment is to literal hermen-

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eutics. Such thinkers want nothing to do with the new hermeneutic, the hermeneutic circle, and the like. Moreover, one also hears a great cry against any kind of spiritualizing or allegorizing hermeneutic that moves away from the literal, plain sense of Scripture to argue that the passage is really teaching some spiritual truth that is "suggested" by the literal words though not contained in them. With such a commitment to literal hermeneutics, one might suspect that evangelicals would interpret the Bible the same way and hold the same views on every doctrinal item, but this is far from the truth. For example, if one merely peruses the evangelical literature on the creation/evolution debate he finds a wide divergence of opinion. There are those who hold that the days of Genesis 1-2 are six literal 24-hour days, others argue that the days are age-days (i.e., each day represents eons of time), and still others claim that the days of Genesis 1-2 are pictorial-revelatory days (i.e., six literal days in which God revealed to Moses what he had done in possibly millions of years). These are not the only ways that evangelicals handle the creation/evolution issue¹ (e.g., some even take a theistic-evolution position). But the crucial point for this discussion is that all the views mentioned are held by people who call themselves evangelicals, and all of them claim to be interpreting the Bible literally, not figuratively. Clearly there is either great inconsistency in the application of literal hermeneutics or (much more likely) there is a vast divergence of opinion in regard to how literal hermeneutics is to be understood. Concerning the creation narratives and their interpretation, it would seem that the degree to which the Genesis narratives are taken at face value depends at least to some extent on the degree to which the interpreter feels he must accommodate his views to the findings of science. A cardinal rule in literal interpretation is to take the literal sense if it makes sense, but otherwise to go beyond the literal sense. What many in evangelical camps are saying today is that in view of the findings of science there is reason to assume that Genesis 1-2 does not contain statements of literal fact but symbolic statements about the origins of the universe and man.² Does such a handling of the text count as literal hermeneutics? Some deny that it does, but as I shall explain more carefully when discussing the dispensationalism/nondispensationalism issue (some of the same principal issues in regard to hermeneutics arise in both discussions), such interpretations are not necessarily disqualified as literal hermeneutics.

It should be obvious from the preceding that even in evangelicalism, which is so committed to literal hermeneutics, that commitment does not always give the same results when applied to a concrete passage or theological issue. Another divergence within evangelicalism is exemplified by debates between dispensation-

¹See for example *Christianity Today* 26 (October 8, 1982), which contained a series of articles on the creation/evolution debate. Articles were written from different perspectives, but the authors were evangelicals. See also the variety of perspectives on this issue in the following articles to be published from the ICBI Summit II papers: W. L. Bradley, "Trustworthiness of Scripture in Areas Relating to Natural Science"; G. L. Archer, "A Response to Trustworthiness of Scripture in Areas Relating to Natural Science"; H. M. Morris, "A Response to Trustworthiness of Scripture in Areas Relating to Natural Science."

²I am not suggesting that anyone who rejects a 24-hour, literal-day interpretation of Genesis 1-2 is doing so as an accommodation to science, for some argue against the view on exegetical grounds. My point is only that within evangelicalism many who reject such views do so at least in part to accommodate themselves to the findings of science.

alists and nondispensationalists. I should like to mention the divergence briefly now and handle it in more detail later. For many years there has been an ongoing debate within evangelicalism over covenant theology (or nondispensational theologies in general) and dispensationalism. In particular, dispensationalists have complained that nondispensationalists do not use literal hermeneutics but rather spiritualize, for they take many of the prophecies in the OT given to Israel and reinterpret them as having a spiritual fulfillment in the Church, thus canceling any distinctive future for ethnic Israel as a nation.³ On the other hand, some nondispensationalists say that they are interpreting literally and that they are merely following the practice of the NT writers' handling of the OT as evidenced in the use of Joel 2:28-29 in Acts 2:16-17, the use of Amos 9:11 in Acts 15:15-16, etc.⁴ Interestingly enough, some nondispensationalists adopt such a methodology but are hesitant to call it literal hermeneutics (some call it typological hermeneutics, whereas others call it figurative hermeneutics⁵). All of the groups involved are evangelical and generally committed to literal hermeneutics, but when it comes to this particular issue there is not even agreement among nondispensationalists as to whether they are interpreting prophetic portions of Scripture literally.

During the past few years I have had the privilege of working in fundamentalist circles. I have noticed certain tendencies in that camp with respect to the understanding and application of literal hermeneutics that are unlike anything I have seen consistently in use in other wings of evangelicalism. Initially, it must be noted that fundamentalists and evangelicals are committed doctrinally to the same basic items. Those who seek to drive a wedge between the two on doctrinal grounds are mistaken. Differences between the two camps are primarily in areas of personal lifestyle, attitudes, and methods of functioning in society. Furthermore I must add that the hermeneutical methodological items I shall mention are not necessarily typical of all fundamentalists. My only point is that I have never seen such handling of Scripture from any other segment of evangelicalism, and some of the items I shall mention seem somewhat prevalent among fundamentalists I have encountered. Such practices seem to move beyond literalism to a kind of hyper-literalism (for lack of a better term) or, as some unkindly call it, wooden-headed literalism. In particular the items I shall illustrate suggest at least one of the following three practices: (1) failure to pay close attention to the context in which a Biblical statement is made; (2) failure to recognize that certain words and phrases may be figures of speech or simply conventional uses of language and thus cannot be taken in their purely literal sense; and (3) failure to recognize that

³See for example C. C. Ryrie, *Dispensationalism Today* (Chicago: Moody, 1965) 90-96.

⁴See for example G. E. Ladd, "Historic Premillennialism," *The Meaning of the Millennium: Four Views* (ed. R. G. Clouse; Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1977) 20-21, 27, and the discussion of the use of OT prophecies by the NT authors in O. T. Allis, *Prophecy and the Church* (Presbyterian and Reformed, 1977 reprint) 134-159.

⁵See for example F. E. Hamilton, *The Basis of Millennial Faith* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1942) 38, which admits that literal interpretation of OT prophecies would support premillennialism and then opts for amillennialism instead. A. A. Hoekema, *The Bible and the Future* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979) 209-210, argues that the handling of Amos 9:11-12 in Acts 15:14-18 is an example of a prophecy being fulfilled figuratively. The NT interprets the OT in a nonliteral way. Hoekema then moves on to state that prophecies about the restoration of Israel may also be fulfilled antitypically (p. 211).

certain words and phrases are used in several senses in Scripture so that if one fails to distinguish the senses and reads all uses of the word or phrase univocally, he winds up with some rather strange interpretations. Several examples will suffice.

First, Gary Habermas has co-authored a book on the shroud of Turin. In addition he has published various articles on the resurrection. In response to an article that appeared in the *Fundamentalist Journal*⁶ he received some rather intriguing mail from some fundamentalist pastors. For example, one pastor, commenting on Habermas' references to the shroud, was confident that the man in the shroud could not be Jesus because the man in the shroud had long hair. In view of 1 Cor 11:14, he argued, we can be sure that Jesus is not the man in the shroud, for he would not disgrace himself with long hair.⁷ Another pastor⁸ was sure that the man in the shroud could not be Jesus because the man wore long hair and a beard, but he had an even more intriguing Biblical support for the view: "In that day the LORD will shave with a razor . . . the beard, and the hair of the feet: and it shall consume the beard" (Isa 7:20). Both responses fail to pay attention to the contexts in which the statements are uttered, and the second comment fails to understand that a figure of speech is being used by Isaiah. In addition, though a hallmark of literal interpretation is that one must be cognizant of the culture that surrounded the writing of any portion of the Biblical text, these fundamentalist pastors (supposedly committed to literal hermeneutics) simply ignored the cultural fact that a Jew living in Jesus' day would not likely be shaven or wear short hair.

Second, fundamentalists have been very exercised over the nonsexist Bible. I have heard some fundamentalists argue that the Bible ought to be left as is, for God has a right to say about himself whatever he pleases. And in Scripture God calls himself "he" and says that he is "Father," so it would seem that he is male. Such argumentation interprets Scripture overly literally, for it fails to recognize that it has been conventional in language to refer to God as "he," though not in an attempt literally to predicate male physical characteristics of him. Moreover, calling God "Father" does not predicate maleness of him but only likens his actions to those typically observed in human males who have the role of father. Thus the term "Father" is used metaphorically of God. Finally, analyzing the meaning of "he" and "Father" in relation to God in their most literal sense clearly bypasses other Biblical passages that suggest that God is spirit and has no body (thus removing some rather important aspects of maleness), not to mention those passages that refer to God as performing various functions, such as nurturing, that are typically associated with "mothering."

Finally, one fundamentalist pastor I have met has a rather interesting interpretation of the first chapter of John. The pastor's problem stems from failure to recognize the ambiguity in the phrase "the Word of God." Roughly, he equates

⁶G. Habermas, "Jesus' Resurrection: A Historical Investigation," *Fundamentalist Journal* 1 (September 1982) 18-21.

⁷Letter published in "You Said It," *Fundamentalist Journal* 1 (December 1982) 7.

⁸Habermas received a letter to this effect, which he showed me. The letter was not published in *Fundamentalist Journal* or any other forum.

the Word of God in the personal sense (Christ) with the Word of God in the written sense (the Bible), though not in any way with the sophistication of a Barthian theologian. Consequently he says that if one rejects Biblical inerrancy he also rejects Jesus Christ. The logic behind this statement, though faulty, is understandable. If Christ and the Bible are both equated as the Word of God in the same sense of "Word of God" (or if, at least, the two senses are thought to be interchangeable), then it becomes clear why a rejection of the Bible's inerrancy becomes a rejection of Jesus Christ. Furthermore his confusion causes him to interpret John 1 in such a way as to make it refer as much to the Bible as it does to Jesus Christ.

The preceding three examples are all produced from the conclusions of those who claim to be practitioners of literal hermeneutics. They are not meant to prove that such practices are true of all fundamentalists, but only to highlight some tendencies I have noted in my associations with fundamentalists. These phenomena are quite different from some of the other ways of handling Scripture by evangelicals that have been noted (e.g., the divergence in regard to interpreting Genesis 1-2). I suggest that everything presented heretofore is illustrative of the ferment and lack of agreement among evangelicals as to what constitutes literal hermeneutics and how it is to be applied, despite the fact that literal hermeneutics is supposed to be the hermeneutic of evangelicalism.

A second area for discussion involving hermeneutics as it involves evangelicals is the debate between dispensational and nondispensational theologies over hermeneutics. It is not my intent to set forth all the differences between such theologies but only to note the items that are particularly relevant to hermeneutics. Generally, nondispensational theologies claim that the Church in some form was in existence in the OT as well as in the NT. The OT Church was the people of Israel as a nation, but in the NT God is working among both Jews and Gentiles to form the Church.⁹ The outcome is that Israel as an ethnic nation has no distinctive future. Individual Israelites may be incorporated into the Church, but there is to be no distinctive future for the nation as a whole.¹⁰ Moreover, some nondispensationalists believe there will be no literal earthly kingdom during which Christ is physically present to reign on earth and during which Israel achieves her long-awaited and promised kingdom. Instead Christ's rule will be a purely spiritual rule over his Church. Other nondispensationalists claim that there will be a literal, visible, earthly, thousand-year reign of Christ, but the kingdom will have no particular Jewish flavor. Israel as a nation will have no prominence, but individual Israelites will receive salvation and be incorporated into the Church and be present in the kingdom.

A dispensational theology, on the other hand, takes a very different line. According to dispensationalism the Church was not present in the OT era in any sense. God is doing a new thing in the NT era. God has a distinctive program for national Israel and a distinctive program for the Church, and though there may be times when God is working with both simultaneously, nonetheless his programs for the two are distinct. In this present age God is calling out individual Jews to form, along with individual Gentiles, the Church. But this does not can-

⁹L. Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1968) 571, takes such a view.

¹⁰Hoekema, *Bible* 200-201; cf. also 139-147.

cel any of the promises made to national Israel in the OT about a kingdom. There will be a literal, physical, thousand-year reign of Christ on earth. While the Church will be present at that time, ethnic Israel will be saved prior to the kingdom and will be present as a nation as well. The kingdom will have both spiritual and socio-economic-political aspects as Israel realizes these items for herself. Thus while others will be present in the kingdom it will have a distinctively Jewish flavor.¹¹

What has been described above shows two divergent perspectives, but what are the hermeneutical differences that generate them? Traditionally dispensationalists have accused nondispensationalists of failing to practice literal hermeneutics in favor of allegorizing or spiritualizing OT prophecies and promises to refer to the Church. It is claimed that if only OT and NT passages would be interpreted literally, nondispensationalists would arrive at the same understanding dispensationalists have.

In response nondispensationalists justify what they are doing on several grounds. First, while there is some confusion on this matter among nondispensationalists (some claim they do interpret figuratively, others that they interpret typologically, and others that they interpret literally),¹² many nondispensationalists reply that dispensationalists are not consistent literalists either. After all they interpret figures of speech, and there are also examples in their writings of allegorizing interpretation despite their commitment to literal hermeneutics. Thus if the dispensationalist interprets nonliterally on occasion, he can hardly complain that others do the same as well occasionally. Second, it is argued that one must reinterpret certain OT passages in the light of the Christ-event. In other words, one does not begin to form his ecclesiology and eschatology from the OT and then go to the NT, but rather he must look first at the fulness of revelation in the NT and interpret the OT in the light of it.¹³ Both sides in the debate take seriously the truth of the progress of revelation. Nondispensationalists are simply saying that in view of that principle one must reinterpret the OT in light of the fullest understanding one has. Third, it is argued that in reinterpreting OT passages the exegete is simply doing what the NT writers do themselves. For example, NT writers gave an unforeseen and new meaning to OT passages when they used them in the NT in such cases as Acts 2:16-17/Joel 2:28-29, Acts 15:15-16/Amos 9:11, and Matt 2:15/Hos 11:1. If the NT writers did this, how can the exegete be faulted for following the divinely inspired pattern of the Biblical writers?¹⁴ Finally, it is argued that when one interprets the NT literally he finds that the Church has taken the place of OT Israel, for terms and descriptive phrases once applied to Israel in the OT are applied to the Church in the NT. For example, the Church is called the "seed of Abraham" in Romans 4, she is called a

¹¹See for example such descriptions of the kingdom in such dispensational works as L. S. Chafer, *Systematic Theology*, Vol. 4 (Dallas: Seminary Press, 1948); C. L. Feinberg, *Millennialism: The Two Major Views* (Chicago: Moody, 1980); A. J. McClain, *The Greatness of the Kingdom* (Chicago: Moody, 1968).

¹²See for example Hamilton, *Basis* 38; Hoekema, *Bible* 209-211.

¹³Ladd, "Historic" 27.

¹⁴Ibid., pp. 20-21.

"holy nation," a "royal priesthood," etc., in 1 Pet 2:9, and she is even referred to in Gal 6:16 as "the Israel of God."¹⁵ Anyone who bothers to interpret literally must recognize that those are designations for Israel that are being applied to the Church, and thus, it is argued, the Church has taken the place of Israel.

Unfortunately dispensationalists have not always paid close attention to what nondispensationalists are saying (the same is true in reverse as well). Instead some have tried to gloss over the obvious applications of OT terminology about Israel to the Church and have come up with some rather intriguing interpretations of NT passages that reinterpret OT verses. Moreover, some have been so intent to maintain an absolute distinction between God's dealings with Israel and his dealings with the Church that they have postulated some rather unusual theological notions. For example, John Walvoord wants to preserve the Jeremiah 31 and 33 "new covenant" exclusively for Israel. Thus when he reads Christ's words about establishing the new covenant in his blood or when he reads of the new covenant mentioned in Hebrews, he denies that such are references to the covenant of Jeremiah 31 and 33. Instead he postulates two new covenants: one for Israel (based on Jeremiah 31 and 33) yet to be fulfilled in her experience as a nation, and one for the Church.¹⁶

In spite of such handling of nondispensational arguments there are more moderate responses that can be made, and they point to different understandings of hermeneutics. In regard to the claim that dispensationalists also interpret figuratively since they interpret figures of speech, this claim embodies a confusion between phenomena of language and methods of interpreting language. Language contains plain speech and figures of speech, but this fact commits no one to any method of interpreting such language. Note in retrospect that this is the key point for the different understandings of the creation debate in relation to Genesis 1-2. Is the language of Genesis 1-2 figurative or literal? However one answers does not commit one to either a literal or figurative method of hermeneutics. On the other hand, a figurative method of interpretation is one that pays little attention to the meanings of words, grammar, context of the sentence, etc., whereas a literal interpretation emphasizes those items as it attempts to get at the author's intended meaning. It should be clear that one can interpret a figure of speech by a literal or a figurative method of interpretation, and the same is true with literal, plain language. Neither the dispensationalist nor the nondispensationalist interprets figuratively just because he interprets figures of speech any more than he interprets literally just by interpreting nonfigurative language.

Second, as to the matter of OT passages being reinterpreted in the NT, several things need to be noted. In none of the cases mentioned does the NT writer say that he did this reinterpreting and that all exegetes should handle all other OT prophetic passages in the same way, nor does he assert that using such a method cancels the meaning of the OT passage that it has in its OT context. Using a method does not teach it as correct any more than spelling cat "k-a-t" in "the kat is on the mat" asserts that such is the correct spelling for the word. Furthermore, if one substitutes the NT meaning for the OT meaning in its own context, he is ig-

¹⁵Hoekema, *Bible* 198.

¹⁶J. Walvoord, "Millennial Series," *BSac* 110 (July 1953) 193-205.

noring the demands of typology (both the meaning of the type and its antitype in their own contexts must be maintained at the same time that they bear their typological relation—maintaining the meaning in both cases is essential for the type-antitype relation) and actually creating some absurd situations. For example, in reference to the passages mentioned it should be quite obvious that the meaning of Hos 11:1 in Hosea cannot be canceled in favor of the reinterpretation given it in Matt 2:15, for Hos 11:1 refers not to some event future to Hosea that could have seen its fulfillment exclusively in the life of Christ but to a past historical event (the exodus). Thus if one ignores the meaning of the OT passage in its context and gives it the meaning of its NT reinterpretation, he cancels the meaning of a reference in Hos 11:1 to a past historical event. Evidently the OT passage has a double meaning: the one it has in its own context (which cannot be canceled), and the application of it that is given to it in the NT (dispensationalists committed to literal hermeneutics should not try to avoid the clear meaning of the NT passage by some kind of hermeneutical gymnastics). If this double fulfillment or double application concept is maintained it seems to do justice to both the OT and NT, interpreted literally, and it safeguards any distinctions between Israel and the Church that dispensationalists want to maintain without postulating new theological constructs such as a second new covenant. Finally, as to whether reinterpretation is the NT pattern, that is hardly the case either. When one notes the many prophecies of the first advent of Christ as used in the gospels and the use Paul makes in Rom 11:26-27 of Isaiah in regard to Israel's future, he finds that such examples are hardly cases of reinterpretation such as one finds in Acts 2/Joel 2. Thus it is not altogether clear that there is any single pattern of the NT use of the OT. As a matter of fact the NT writers use the OT in a variety of ways. The ways they use it can hardly serve as the determining factor for how modern-day exegetes should interpret every passage.

Finally, as to the application of OT designations for Israel to the Church, one must honestly answer that such is done. Such cannot be denied if one wants to interpret literally. However, what must be understood and can be seen with literal interpretation is that phrases and terms such as "Israel," "chosen people," "elect race" and "seed of Abraham" are used in Scripture in several senses, none of which cancels the import and meaning of the other senses. Those terms are used in an ethnic, biological sense to refer to national Israel, but they are also used in a typological sense to anticipate the Church and in a spiritual sense to refer to anyone properly related to God (whether he be in the Church, in Israel, or among the Gentiles). Once these different senses are recognized, one realizes that the passages frequently cited by nondispensationalists usually employ the spiritual sense of the terms, but that does not negate the national sense of the terms. Context will tell the interpreter what sense is in view. Thus the dispensationalist does not have to give up any of his theological beliefs about the distinctiveness of Israel and the Church nor his belief in a distinctive future for ethnic Israel, but neither does he have to play fast and loose with passages that clearly call the Church names and apply labels that are reserved for Israel in the OT. In fact literal hermeneutics demands recognizing the multiple senses of the terms and not glossing over the obvious cases in which they are applied in their spiritual sense to the Church.

The above discussion gives some of the flavor of the debate involving dispen-

sational and nondispensational theologies. Both groups qualify as wholeheartedly evangelical, but both clearly have divergent positions on hermeneutics that make for some major theological differences. Whether one accepts my resolution to the hermeneutical questions separating the two groups is a matter for further discussion. What seems clear at this point, though, is that there are some substantial differences among the two evangelical groups not only in theology but also in hermeneutics. Moreover, it is not simply a question of literal versus nonliteral hermeneutics but of the proper understanding and application of literal hermeneutics.

A third area in which hermeneutics becomes important is the whole matter of the contemporary debate over Biblical inerrancy. This discussion, however, goes far beyond mere discussions of what hermeneutic one will choose. Space limitations make it impossible to go into all the intricacies of the debate, but several hermeneutical items relevant to the inerrancy debate are worthy of note. First, there is debate over the meaning of inerrancy itself. Some define it in terms of whether Scripture fulfills its intended purpose to make men wise unto salvation. If it does, then it really is not critical if there are factual inadequacies in Scripture.¹⁷ Generally those who hold such a view prefer to talk in terms of Biblical authority or infallibility instead of inerrancy, though some still use the term "inerrancy" to speak of Scripture as fulfilling its intended function.¹⁸ On the other hand, many on both sides of the debate have argued that inerrancy must be defined in terms of truth.¹⁹ Once the issue of truth is raised, however, there is debate over how truth is to be understood: What is the proper theory of truth? In approaching this matter two major issues that are relevant to hermeneutics have arisen in contemporary discussions. The first deals with how truth is to be defined, Biblically or non-Biblically. For example, David Hubbard argues that the problem in current discussions over truth and error in Scripture is that too many are defining such terms on the basis of dictionary and modern usage, not on the basis of Scripture itself. If one were to do the latter, he would recognize that the Biblical understanding of error has nothing to do with lack of correspondence of statements to states of affairs obtaining in the world but rather focuses on wilful deception. In other words, according to Scripture whatever wilfully misleads or deceives is false.²⁰ Of course on such a view there can be factual inadequacies in the text of Scripture, but so long as the interpreter determines that the writer did

¹⁷See for example G. C. Berkouwer, *Holy Scripture: Studies in Dogmatics* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975) 182-184.

¹⁸S. T. Davis, *The Debate About the Bible* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1977), distinguishes infallibility from inerrancy. The Bible is inerrant if it makes no false or misleading statements on any topic whatever; it is infallible if it makes no false or misleading statements on any matter of faith and practice (p. 23). Davis affirms infallibility and denies inerrancy. D. Fuller, "Benjamin B. Warfield's View of Faith and History," *BETS* 11 (Spring 1968), holds to inerrancy but defines it so that it is basically equivalent to Davis' notion of infallibility.

¹⁹See for example P. D. Feinberg, "The Meaning of Inerrancy," *Inerrancy* (ed. N. L. Geisler; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1979) 287 ff., and the basic tenor of the article by D. Hubbard, "The Current Tensions: Is There a Way Out?," *Biblical Authority* (ed. J. Rogers; Waco: Word, 1977).

²⁰Hubbard, "Current" 167-168.

not intend to deceive the reader no rejection of inerrancy is legitimate. Moreover, it is also argued that the Biblical account of truth is *'emet*, "faithfulness," not correspondence to states of affairs.²¹ The upshot of such positions is that factual errors are admitted into the text of Scripture while the term "inerrancy" or "infallibility" is still applied to Scripture.

On the other side of the question, the basic position held is that inerrancy is not to be defined in terms of accomplishment of Scripture's intended purpose (such a definition is based on a pragmatic theory of truth) but rather in terms of correspondence or noncorrespondence to states of affairs (a definition based on a correspondence theory of truth). It is argued that the latter is the notion of truth common in everyday language, and it is the matter of correspondence to facts that really concerns us in regard to the Bible. After all, it is argued, why would one want to rest his eternal destiny on a book that is factually mistaken, even if those errors did not come as a result of wilful deception?²² Furthermore, as to Hubbard's concerns about the definition of error and truth in terms of scriptural teaching on those matters, I have argued recently²³ that his request is mistaken on a fundamental hermeneutical point. Put simply, one must distinguish between the meaning of a term and the meaning of a concept. When asking for the former, one seeks to determine the ways in which the term is used in language. When asking for the latter, one asks for an explanation of what the thing is—i.e., a definition of the concept (in relation to truth, this and this alone involves theories of truth). At stake in the inerrancy debate is not how the Biblical terms for truth and error are used in Scripture but rather what sort of thing truth is. That and that alone will help us in the search for the meaning of inerrancy as a concept. Hubbard's problem is that he has done a word study on "error" and "truth" in Scripture and suggested that his conclusions tell us the Biblical concept or theory of truth. But usage of a term is not the same as a theory about a concept. Arguing that Scripture uses "truth" and "error" to mean faithfulness and wilful deception respectively tells nothing about any theory of truth being taught or used in Scripture and thus does not teach anything about the meaning of the concept "inerrancy." Moreover, no theory of truth (e.g. correspondence, coherence, pragmatic) is taught in Scripture, though the correspondence theory seems to underlie the writing of Scripture—i.e., the writers seem to intend to tell us things that correspond to what happened historically, for example. Some holders of inerrancy disagree and argue that if the Biblical writers presupposed a particular theory and used it when they wrote, they also taught it as the proper theory.²⁴ On the contrary, though, such a suggestion founders on another hermeneutical point—viz., use of a theory of truth does not teach it any more than spelling cat

²¹Though he does not hold the view himself, A. Thiselton discusses it in *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, 3. 877.

²²See for example the discussion of the issues in N. L. Geisler, "The Concept of Truth in the Inerrancy Debate," *BSac* 137 (October-December, 1980) 327-339; *The Living and Active Word of God* (ed. M. Inch and R. Youngblood; Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1983) 225-236.

²³See my forthcoming "Truth: Relationship of Theories of Truth to Hermeneutics" in the volume of papers from the ICBI Summit II to be published by Zondervan.

²⁴Some who were at the ICBI Summit II responded to my suggestions with the objection mentioned.

"k-a-t" in "the kat is on the mat" teaches that "k-a-t" is the proper spelling for cat. If the mere use of improper grammar and improper spellings (as well as the use of a theory of truth) asserts them as true, then we are faced with the unwelcome conclusion that there are errors in Scripture since some writers used improper spellings and/or incorrect grammatical constructions. On the theory in question, the use of such improper grammar and spelling would involve the assertion that such are correct, and of course such assertions would be false, thereby introducing errors into Scripture. The appropriate way out of such a problem is simply to recognize that using a particular spelling, grammatical construction, or theory of truth does not teach or assert it as correct.

In sum, the preceding discussion over the meaning of inerrancy entails at least the following hermeneutical issues: (1) the distinction and interpretive importance of defining a term and defining a concept, (2) the hermeneutical procedures involved in determining whether a factual error is wilfully included in Scripture, and (3) the hermeneutical question of whether using a particular grammatical construction, spelling of a word, or theory of truth entails teaching it as correct.

A second issue surrounding truth deals with the matter of the precision or lack thereof of Biblical statements. Berkeley Mickelsen, for example, argues that the use of the term "inerrancy" is not helpful in discussions about the Bible because inerrancy is typically defined in terms of truth, but when one comes to Scripture he finds differing standards of truth and precision at work. Such standards differ among the Biblical writers, but they also differ from modern standards of precision and accuracy.²⁵ For example, when some Biblical writers quote the OT they give a verbatim citation, while others quote it more loosely. Likewise, in the matter of reporting numbers many of the Biblical writers appear to have used approximations and to have rounded off numbers. But then, the argument goes, how can one talk of truth in terms of formal accuracy, using modern conceptions of formal accuracy, when the Biblical writers did not use such standards? Inerrancy defined in terms of truth, therefore, is not a helpful concept.

On the other side of the debate, those who argue for the truth of Scripture in terms of correspondence to the facts have several replies. First, it is argued that if standards of truth and precision do vary (moot, indeed), one should simply state the different standards and then measure Scripture by them. If one cannot state such differing standards, then there is great reason to doubt that any difference actually exists. In either case inerrancy need not suffer. Second, as to the matter of loose quotes and approximations, Roger Nicole has argued that often in modern ordinary language we use approximations without being considered in error. For example, Nicole suggests that when someone is asked his age, he could give an answer that attempted to be precise down to the very number of seconds he has been alive. No one does so, but he is not accused of falsehood because of the approximation. The same should be true, argues Nicole, in regard to Biblical approximations.²⁶ Third, it is also argued that when reporting, for example, that the

²⁵A. B. Mickelsen, "The Bible's Own Approach to Authority," *Biblical Authority* (ed. J. Rogers; Waco: Word, 1977) 84-87.

²⁶R. Nicole, "The Nature of Inerrancy," *Inerrancy and Common Sense* (ed. R. Nicole and J. R. Michaels; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1980) 84.

sun rose or set, one is being scientifically incorrect. But the Bible is not a scientific treatise, and the writers simply used phenomenological language to report what they saw. We do the same thing every day without being accused of falsehood, so why should we accuse them of error or even of holding to different standards of truth and precision?²⁷ Finally, it has also been argued that before one accuses a Biblical writer of falsehood in regard to quoting of other writers or reporting of numbers, he must determine whether it is the habit of style of the writer to use approximations, etc., or whether his habit is to be precise and he has just failed in a particular case. It is urged that often we suspect the latter when in fact what is happening is the former.²⁸

The preceding discussion involves at least the following hermeneutical issues that are under debate by evangelicals in contemporary discussions: (1) interpretive procedures for determining when a writer is trying to be precise or when he is using an approximation, (2) interpretive procedures for determining different standards of truth and precision, (3) interpretive procedures for determining when phenomenological language is being used, not to mention procedures for determining whether the writer himself thought he was speaking with scientific accuracy or using phenomenological language, and (4) interpretive procedures for distinguishing one literary genre from another and one set of stylistic habits from another. All of these items have import for the inerrantist's claim that Scripture is true in the sense that its assertions correspond to the facts.

Many other interesting hermeneutical issues surround the inerrancy debate, such as the debate over appeal to the author's intended meaning in order to uphold the truthfulness of a Biblical assertion.²⁹ But space limitations do not permit the discussion of all such items. However, a brief discussion of one other item is surely in order. I am referring to the place of Biblical critical methods in interpreting Scripture. Much of the current stir in evangelical circles stems from the publication of Robert Gundry's recent commentary on Matthew. Gundry's study incorporates throughout the methods of redaction criticism, and it raises the whole issue of the legitimacy of such methods as redaction, source, and form criticism for evangelicals in interpreting the Bible. For many years the prevailing line among evangelicals has been that one must stay away from such methods entirely, for they result ultimately in a denial of the inerrancy of Scripture and they really do not help much in getting to the actual meaning of the text of Scripture. In recent years, however, evangelicals have been modifying their stance on these issues. Gundry's commentary is proving to be a battleground over such matters in that he uses redaction criticism, argues against the historicity of certain of the apparently historical items in Matthew's gospel, and yet maintains a belief in Bibli-

²⁷P. Feinberg, "Meaning" 300.

²⁸See my forthcoming article on truth to be published with the other papers from the ICBI Summit II for this point.

²⁹For some helpful insights into the debate over authorial intention see the forthcoming articles from the ICBI Summit II. Relevant articles are: E. E. Johnson, "Author's Intention and Biblical Interpretation"; E. D. Radmacher, "A Response to Author's Intention and Biblical Interpretation"; W. C. Kaiser, "A Response to Author's Intention and Biblical Interpretation." See also my discussion of the issue in "Non-cognitivism: Wittgenstein," *Biblical Errancy: An Analysis of Its Philosophical Roots* (ed. N. L. Geisler; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1981).

cal inerrancy. Briefly stated, Gundry's view is that, on occasion, for theological purposes Matthew embellishes an event beyond what actually happened—i.e., he mixes the historical with the unhistorical to make a theological point. A prime example is his handling of the birth narratives of Matthew 2. According to Gundry there actually was no star and there were no Magi who visited Christ. Matthew changed Luke's account of the visit of the Jewish shepherds to the visit of the Gentile Magi to stress the point that disciples from all nations will enter "into the circle of those who acknowledge Jesus as king of the Jews and worship him as God."³⁰ Matthew simply embellished the events of Christ's birth because in so doing he was better able to convey his theological point. Such a practice, argues Gundry, is not much different from the common midrashic and haggadic literary style of Matthew's day, a practice that his readers would have clearly understood.³¹ Once one understands what Matthew was doing and sees its affinities to midrash (Matthew does this throughout the gospel, not just in relation to the birth narratives), he recognizes that Matthew never intended to offer factual details when he spoke of the star and the Magi. Matthew did intend to teach something about Christ, and that he inerrantly did, but his inclusion of factually inadequate material does not count against the inerrancy of Matthew's gospel. In fact, Gundry later argues that "unhistorical embellishment can carry its own kind of truth alongside historical truth,"³² just as in the case of the Magi. Gundry explains:

Comparison with the other gospels, especially with Mark and Luke, and examination of Matthew's style and theology show that he materially altered and embellished historical traditions and that he did so deliberately and often. To admit this does not undermine a high view of Scripture so long as we properly measure the first gospel according to authorial intent. Matthew's intent was to tell the story of Jesus with alterations and embellishments suited to the needs of the church and the world at the time the gospel was written. We would feel uneasy to learn that he edited his materials so freely that they are historically unrecognizable. And continuing freedom to edit in his manner would lead to the wild growth of the apocryphal gospels and all kinds of open-ended speculation. But the canonizing of those writings that come from Matthew and his NT cohorts implies the sufficiency of Scripture, blocks the way to further editing of the materials in any authoritative manner, and makes the postapostolic task of Christian theology expository and applicative rather than creative.³³

Reaction to Gundry's proposals has been quite heated, as expected. In fact, reaction to the whole matter of using Biblical critical methods has been quite heated. Generally evangelicals have agreed that if one were to use such methods to conclude that Scripture does contain errors and thereby is just a totally human book, albeit a rather special one, he would have in effect placed himself outside the pale of evangelicalism. However, evangelicals continue to argue over how one

³⁰R. H. Gundry, *Matthew: A Commentary on His Literary and Theological Art* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982) 26. See also pp. 26-32.

³¹*Ibid.*, pp. 628-629.

³²*Ibid.*, p. 631.

³³*Ibid.*, pp. 639-640.

is to evaluate a person who uses such methods but still maintains a high view of Scripture. On the one extreme some evangelicals claim that use of Biblical critical methods of any sort in any way is mistaken and is grounds for questioning one's evangelicalism and commitment to Scripture.³⁴ On the other extreme are those evangelicals who seem to be adopting such methods with a vengeance. Though they are not applying their conclusions on the meaning of various texts to the larger issue of whether such conclusions necessitate a denial of inerrancy, their handling of Scripture in many ways seems indistinguishable from that of nonevangelicals who deny the inerrancy of Scripture. A more mediating position is to see Biblical critical methods as a tool that can help us gain insights into the meaning of Scripture but that must be used within the scope of other interpretive principles such as the demands of grammar, context and cultural situation of the writers. Moreover, such a position demands that the use of Biblical critical methods to undermine the inerrancy of Scripture is in fact an abuse of such methods.

As to Gundry, reactions have been mixed. His views were discussed in his presence at the national meetings of ETS in December 1982. Few present at those meetings seemed to agree with Gundry's conclusions, but there was great disagreement as to whether Gundry had gone so far that he had denied Biblical inerrancy by what he held, even though he claimed not to have done so. On the one hand, many seemed to think his conclusions denied Biblical inerrancy and that his methodology with its presuppositions inevitably leads to such a denial. They felt that some kind of statement should be included in the Society's doctrinal basis about hermeneutical methodologies deemed to be inimical to Biblical inerrancy. On the other hand, many felt (and the decision of the executive committee of the Society affirmed) that while Gundry's interpretations of Matthew were problematic and his conclusions about Matthew's style highly dubious, nonetheless if one so understood Matthew he could legitimately uphold Biblical inerrancy. Moreover, many who took such a view of Gundry's work argued that unless one could prove that there is some logical entailment between any Biblical critical method and the theological conclusion that Scripture has errors, the use of Biblical critical methods in itself could not be grounds for claiming that a person had left evangelicalism or denied inerrancy. Essentially what many are suggesting is that Gundry has not fallen into theological error but that his commentary, though in many respects a brilliant piece of scholarship, is just an example of bad hermeneutics.

In this study I have attempted to set forth some of the key issues under debate over hermeneutics on the contemporary evangelical scene. Clearly, evangelicalism is not a monolithic structure with views set in concrete on such items. There is much ferment within evangelicalism on these issues, and it will probably continue. It is also hoped that nonevangelicals will come to see that though the issues discussed and the positions taken by evangelicals are not necessarily those of nonevangelicals, nonetheless the intramural debates among evangelicals are both interesting and helpful intellectually to nonevangelicals in their discussions of the Bible and hermeneutics.

³⁴See for example H. Lindsell's chapter on the historical-critical method, which he labels the Bible's deadly enemy: H. Lindsell, *The Bible in the Balance* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1979) 275-302.