

METHODOLOGICAL UNORTHODOXY

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Is unorthodoxy limited to doctrine or does it also include methodology? Or, to focus the question: Is there ever a time that one should be disqualified from an organization committed to inerrancy (such as the Evangelical Theological Society) because his theological method is inconsistent with his conscientious claim to believe in inerrancy?

I. METHODOLOGY EXAMINED

We will limit our discussion to the doctrine of inerrancy, although the same reasoning could be applied to other doctrines.

1. *Is confession a sufficient test for orthodoxy?* Let us consider the question: Is conscientious confession of the doctrine of inerrancy solely in terms of what the confessor takes it to mean a sufficient grounds for determining orthodoxy on this doctrine?¹ We suggest that the answer to this is negative for several reasons.

First, making conscientious confession of inerrancy the only test of orthodoxy is tantamount to saying that sincerity is a test for truth. But as is well known even the road to destruction is paved with good intentions (Prov 14:12).

Second, a statement does not mean what the reader takes it to mean to him. It means what the author meant by it. If this is not so, then a statement can mean anything the reader wants it to mean, including the opposite of what the author meant by it. If this were the case then neo-orthodox theologians and liberals could also belong to ETS, since many of them believe that the Bible is inerrant in some sense (usually in its purpose).

Third, no theological organization has integrity without some objective, measurable standard by which its identity can be determined. In the case of ETS the standard is the stated doctrine of inerrancy: "The Bible alone, and the Bible in its entirety, is the Word of God written and is therefore inerrant in the autographs." But if anyone can take this statement to mean that the Bible is true in any sense he wishes—as long as he believes it sincerely—then our organization has no doctrinal integrity.

So we conclude that sincerity is an insufficient test for orthodoxy. In addition to sincerity there must also be conformity to some objective standard or norm for

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¹It is assumed, however, that a conscientious confession is a necessary condition for membership in ETS even though it is not a sufficient condition.

orthodoxy, for truth is conformity with reality.² And without such conformity one is not truly orthodox, regardless of his confession to the contrary. Our Lord made it clear that mere confession of him was not enough, for he denied those who confessed "Lord, Lord" but did not "do the will of the Father" (Matt 7:21). Likewise, saying "I believe, I believe" (in total inerrancy) is not sufficient. One's beliefs must truly conform to the fact that all of Scripture is true before he is considered orthodox on this point. So it is not mere subjective confession but objective conformity that is the sufficient test for orthodoxy.

2. *Are there unorthodox methods?* By doctrine we mean what one believes, and by method we mean how one arrives at this belief. The question, then, is this: Can one's method be contrary to his doctrine? Can one deny *de facto* (in fact) what he affirms *de jure* (officially)? If so, then would not the methodology he utilizes undermine or negate the theology he confesses?

Let us take some examples. The first two cases will be taken from Church history, and then three examples from contemporary evangelicalism will be used.

(1) The Averroian double-truth method. Thirteenth-century followers of Averroes were condemned for holding a double-truth methodology whereby they could confess the truth of revelation at the same time they held truths of reason that contradicted it.³ Should an Averroian belong to the ETS? That is, should one belong to ETS if he holds that the Bible is wholly true from the standpoint of faith, yet from the standpoint of reason he also holds many things to be true that contradict truths of Scripture? I should hope we would say "no," simply because this methodology contradicts the theology (i.e., bibliology) he confesses. Despite the fact that they could confess revelation to be inerrant, Averroians held things to be true (by reason) that were contradictory to this revelation. Thus the alleged confession to inerrancy is actually negated by other beliefs, and the denial of inerrancy flows logically from their method.

(2) The allegorical method. How about Origen? He confessed the inspiration of the Bible. In fact he can be understood as believing the inerrancy of Scripture, for he said:

That this testimony may produce a sure and unhesitating belief, either with regard to what we have still to advance, or to what has been already stated, it seems neces-

²That truth involves conformity to reality is argued in our article, "The Concept of Truth in the Inerrancy Debate," *BSac* (October-December 1980) 327-339, reprinted in *The Living and Active Word of God* (ed. M. Inch and R. Youngblood; Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1983) 225-236. The 1982 "Chicago Statement on Hermeneutics" has a clear and succinct statement on this point: "WE AFFIRM that the Bible expresses God's truth in propositional statements, and we declare that biblical truth is both objective and absolute. We further affirm that a statement is true if it represents matters as they actually are, but is an error if it misrepresents the facts. WE DENY that, while Scripture is able to make us wise unto salvation, biblical truth should be defined in terms of this function. We further deny that error should be defined as that which willfully deceives" (Article VI).

³In 1277 Siger of Brabant and followers were condemned by the Church for teaching that "things are true according to philosophy but not according to the Catholic faith, as though there were two contradictory truths." See "Averroism," *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church* (ed. F. L. Cross and E. A. Livingston; Oxford: University Press, 1974) 116.

sary to show, in the first place, that the Scriptures themselves are divine, i.e., were inspired by the Spirit of God.⁴

On the other hand Origen claimed that to take the story of Adam and Eve as literal is absurd and contradictory.⁵ He believed this because he adopted an allegorical methodology. Could an Origenian, then, belong to ETS? I should hope not, because his methodology is contrary to his theology—that is, while he confesses a belief in total inerrancy his actual beliefs (resulting from his allegorical method) do not conform to an adequate understanding of total inerrancy, for he denies the truth of some parts of Scripture. In short, his methodology undermines his bibliology. He claims to believe what the Bible presents as true, but as a matter of fact he does not believe everything in Scripture.

The same logic could be applied to a modern allegorist—for example, a Christian Scientist. There is no reason that Christian Scientists could not sincerely confess to believe the ETS statement of inerrancy. Yet by their allegorical method they deny the humanity of Christ, the historicity of the resurrection, and many other Biblical teachings. Let us ask again: Should we allow a Christian Scientist to join ETS? If not, is it not because his methodology is inconsistent with his confession? Does he not, in effect, take away with his left hand (hermeneutically) what he confesses with his right hand (bibliologically)?

Now let us discuss three contemporary examples: Jack Rogers, Paul Jewett and Robert Gundry. Let us ask whether their methodology is consistent with their theology (particularly their bibliology). All three of these men confess to a belief that the Bible is the inspired Word of God. At least two of them deny that there are any errors in the Bible (Rogers and Gundry), and one (Gundry) belongs to ETS.

(1) Jack Rogers believes that the Bible is wholly true. He even went so far as to say that he was “in agreement with the view of inerrancy set forth in the Chicago Statement on Inerrancy [1978].”⁶ However, Rogers really denies inerrancy and allows for the possibility of factual mistakes in the Bible.⁷ Would we allow Rogers to join ETS? If not, why not? If so, then the ETS statement is vacuous, for it would be possible to believe that the Bible is without error and yet that it has errors in it. Again, is not the reason for excluding Rogers that he denies in practice what he confesses in theory? He has a theological procedure that allows him to believe that the Bible is true, even though not all statements in Scripture need to represent things as they really are—that is, some statements in Scripture may be mistaken.

Indeed, Rogers disavows the classic statement of inspiration: “What the Bible

⁴Origen, *De Principiis* 4.1.1, in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, Vol. 4 (ed. A. Roberts and J. Donaldson; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1957).

⁵*Ibid.*, 4.1.16-17.

⁶Cited in *Christianity Today* (September 4, 1981) 18.

⁷Rogers is able to claim that the Bible is wholly true and yet it may contain some mistakes because he redefines “error” to mean what misleads rather than what is mistaken. See the article in n. 2 for a refutation of this position.

says, God says."⁸ This means that the Bible could affirm what God denies. So if there is significant content in the ETS statement, then someone like Jack Rogers should not be included in its membership.

(2) Paul Jewett is another case in point. Jewett claims to believe in the inspiration of the Bible. He also acknowledges that the apostle Paul affirmed that the husband is the head of the wife (1 Cor 11:3). However, argues Jewett, Paul is wrong here—that is, God does not affirm what the apostle Paul affirms here. Indeed, God denies it, for according to Jewett the truth of God is that the husband is not the head of the wife as Paul affirmed him to be.⁹

What implications does Jewett's view have for inerrancy? Simply this: He has denied in principle the classic statement of inerrancy: "What the Bible affirms, God affirms." For he believes this is a case where Scripture affirms as true that which is not true. If Jewett is right, then in principle when the interpreter discovers what the Bible is saying he must still ask one more very significant question: "Hath God said?"

In view of this denial that "what the Bible says, God says," surely we would not allow Paul Jewett to join ETS. But why not? Again the problem is methodology. Despite Jewett's claim to orthodoxy he has a method that is inconsistent with his confession. What he gives with the right hand confessionally he takes away with the left hand hermeneutically. His unorthodox methodology belies his confession to orthodoxy (on the doctrine of Scripture). Indeed, we would say that he is methodologically unorthodox.

(3) The case of Robert Gundry is interesting and more crucial to ETS because he not only confesses to inerrancy but he also belongs to ETS. Yet like the other examples he holds a methodology that seems inconsistent with the ETS doctrine of inerrancy.

In many respects Gundry holds a limited form of the allegorical method. Like Origen, he confesses that the Bible is inspired. Yet like Origen, when there are parts of the Bible that if taken literally seem to him to contradict other parts of Scripture, Gundry rejects their literal truth and takes a kind of allegorical (i.e., midrashic) interpretation of them.¹⁰ For example, Matthew reports that wise men followed a star, conversed with Herod and the scribes, went to Bethlehem, and presented gifts to Christ. Gundry, however, denies that these were literal events. He denies that Jesus literally went up on a mountain to give the sermon on the mount as Matthew reports it. He denies that the saints were literally resurrected after Jesus died as reported in Matthew 27, and so on. So while Gundry confesses to believe that the Bible is the inerrant Word of God, he denies that these events reported by Matthew are literally and historically true.

But to deny that what the Bible reports in these passages actually occurred is to deny in effect that the Bible is wholly true. As the 1982 "Chicago Statement on Hermeneutics" declares, "We deny that any event, discourse or saying reported

⁸J. B. Rogers and D. K. McKim, *The Authority and Interpretation of the Bible* (New York: Harper, 1979) 315.

⁹See P. Jewett, *Man as Male and Female* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975) 134, 171.

¹⁰See R. Gundry, *Matthew: A Commentary on His Literary and Theological Art* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982).

in Scripture was invented by the biblical writers or by the traditions they incorporated" (Article XIV). This is precisely what Gundry does—namely, he claims that some events reported in Matthew did not actually occur but were invented by the gospel writer.

The question, then, naturally arises: Should Gundry be a member of ETS? Is not his actual methodology inconsistent with his confessed bibliology? Does it not also, like those previously discussed, take away hermeneutically what he confesses theologically? And if others with unorthodox methodologies would be excluded from membership in ETS, then the question arises: Why should Gundry be included?

Surely it is insufficient to say that Gundry should be included because he conscientiously confesses inerrancy whereas others do not. For, as previously noted, it is not mere confession of a doctrine that is the test for the truthfulness of a belief but actual conformity to what that doctrine means.

Neither will it suffice to point out that Rogers and Jewett officially deny the classic formula of inerrancy—"What the Bible says, God says"—but that Gundry does not officially deny it, for Origen and Christian Scientists could hold this formula too. Denial of the formula renders one unorthodox, but affirmation of the mere formula does not necessarily make one's view orthodox.

As a formal principle, "What the Bible says, God says" is empty and contentless, for it leaves wide open the question of just what the Bible is saying. The mere formula means only that "if the Bible affirms something, then God affirms it too." As a mere formula it does not imply that the Bible actually affirms anything in particular. But surely the ETS doctrinal statement is not a mere empty formula. The very name "Evangelical Theological Society" implies that we believe the Bible affirms an evangelical theology, which implies that certain basic content is included in our confession.

Nor is it sufficient to point out that while others deny inerrancy *de jure*, Gundry does not. Gundry's is a *de facto* denial of inerrancy, for he denies that some events reported in Scripture did in fact occur. But our ETS statement insists that we believe the entire Bible is true.

We summarize the argument this way: (1) The ETS statement demands belief in the entire Bible; (2) Gundry denies part of the Bible; (3) therefore Gundry's view does not really conform to the ETS statement.

Still, some may insist that the implied evangelical content as to what the Bible is affirming should not exclude those whose method does not entail the denial of any major doctrine of Scripture. But Gundry affirms all major evangelical doctrines, such as the deity of Christ, his atoning death, his bodily resurrection, etc. Surely, then, Gundry's unorthodox methodology is not tantamount to unorthodoxy. Or is it? In response let us note several things.

First, the doctrine of the inerrancy of Scripture is a major doctrine, and Gundry's method is a *de facto* denial of the doctrine of the inerrancy of Scripture. Even if his method never leads him actually to a denial of any other doctrine, it does deny one important doctrine, the doctrine of the inerrancy of Scripture. In fact, as far as ETS is concerned this is the only explicitly stated doctrine by which one is tested for membership. So Gundry's denial of the occurrence of some events reported in the gospel of Matthew is a denial of the ETS doctrine that all Scripture is true.

Further, it can be argued that Gundry's position does lead logically to a denial of other teachings of Scripture even if Gundry does not personally draw these conclusions. It should be remembered that Jewett's methodology has yet to lead him actually to deny any major doctrine. The method itself, however, leads logically to a denial of a major doctrine—i.e., the doctrine of Scripture. For Jewett's method denies the principle of inerrancy that "what the Bible says, God says."

Just because Jewett did not apply his own implied principle ("What the Bible says, God does not necessarily say") elsewhere does not mean it is not applicable. The fact remains that the principle is applicable, and if it is applied it will lead logically to denial of another major doctrine. For example, if Paul can be wrong (because of his rabbinical training) in affirming the headship of the husband over the wife, then logically what hinders one from concluding that Paul is (or could be) wrong in the same verse when he affirms the headship of Christ over the husband? Or if rabbinical background can influence an apostle to affirm error in Scripture, then how can we trust his affirmations about the resurrection in the same book (1 Corinthians 15)? After all, Paul was a Pharisee, and Pharisees believed in the resurrection. If he had been a Sadducee perhaps his view on the resurrection would have been different. How then can we be sure that Paul is not also mistaken here on the major doctrine of the resurrection?

Now what applies to Jewett seems to apply also to Gundry. Although Gundry does not apply his allegorical (midrashic) interpretation to any major doctrine, the midrash methodology seems to be applicable nonetheless. For example, why should one consider the report of the bodily resurrection of the saints after Jesus' resurrection (Matthew 27) allegorical and yet insist that Jesus' resurrection, which was the basis for it (cf. 1 Cor 15:23), was literal? By what logic can we insist that the same author in the same book reporting the same kind of event in the same language can mean spiritual resurrection in one case and literal bodily resurrection in another case? Does not Gundry's method lead (by logical extension) to a denial of major doctrines of Scripture? And if it does, then there seems to be no more reason for including Gundry in ETS than to include Origen, Rogers or Jewett. They all do (or could) affirm the inerrancy of Scripture, and yet all have a method that actually negates or undermines inerrancy in some significant way.

Even if one could build safeguards into the midrash method whereby all major doctrines are preserved from allegorization, there is another lethal problem with Gundry's view. The ETS statement on inerrancy entails the belief that everything reported in the gospels is true ("the Bible in its entirety"). But Gundry believes that some things reported in Matthew did not occur¹¹ (e.g., the story of the wise men [chap. 2], the report of the resurrection of the saints [chap. 27], etc.). It follows therefore that Gundry does not really believe everything reported in the gospels is true, despite his claim to the contrary. And this is a *de facto* denial of inerrancy.

It will not suffice to say that Matthew does not really report these events, for he reports them in the same sense that he reports other events that Gundry be-

¹¹Since a "report" is "a statement of facts" (Webster's *New Twentieth Century Dictionary*, unabridged), Gundry has denied the fact stated in the report. It is futile to say that Matthew does not report these events, for he reports them in the same sense that he reports other events (sometimes in the same chapter) that are taken to be literally true by Gundry.

believes actually occurred. In fact some stories that seem more likely candidates for midrash (for example, the appearance of angels to the Jewish shepherds in Luke 2) Gundry takes as literal, whereas the earthly pilgrimage of astrologers following a sign in the sky he takes as purely imaginary (i.e., midrash). Regardless, the fact of the matter is that Gundry denies that certain events reported in Scripture (Matthew) actually occurred. This means in effect that he is denying the truth of these parts of Scripture. And if he denies in effect that the Bible is true "in its entirety," then he has disqualified himself from ETS.

II. AN OBJECTION CONSIDERED

Does not the above argument prove too much? Granted the finitude and fallibility of man, is it not a reasonable presumption that we are all inconsistent in our beliefs in some way or another? Therefore should we not all be excluded from ETS?

Several crucial differences between common inconsistency of belief and a conscious commitment to a methodology that undermines our beliefs should be noted, however. First, the common inconsistencies with which we are all plagued are unconscious inconsistencies. When they are brought to our attention we work to eliminate them. On the other hand a theological method such as Gundry's midrash method is a conscious commitment on his part.

Further, and more importantly, common inconsistencies are not recommended as a formal method by which we are to interpret Scripture. Hence they have no official didactic force. They do not purport to teach us how to discover the truth of Scripture. Gundry's method, however, entails a crucial truth claim. It claims that by using this method we will discover the truth that God is really affirming in Scripture. After all the mere formula, "What the Bible says, God says," is empty in itself. Gundry's method proposes to tell us what it is that the Bible is actually saying and thus what God is actually saying. This makes a conscious commitment to a theological method a very serious matter, for a hermeneutical method purports to be the means by which we discover the very truth of God.

Further, there is another possible difference between common inconsistencies and the serious inconsistency in which Gundry engages. The former do not necessarily lead logically to a denial of major doctrine, but the latter can. As was noted earlier, unorthodoxy in methodology leads logically to unorthodoxy in theology. This is true regardless of whether the proponent of the method makes this logical extension himself. For example, a double-truth method or an allegorical method leads logically to a denial of the literal truth of Scripture.

III. CONCLUSION

Assuming that there are some methods that are inconsistent with a belief in the ETS statement on inerrancy, where should we draw the line and why should we draw it there?

In the above discussion I have offered a criterion for drawing such a line—that is, for determining methodological unorthodoxy. Briefly it is this: Any hermeneutical or theological method the logically necessary consequences of which are contrary to or undermine confidence in the complete truthfulness of all of Scripture

is unorthodox. The method can do this either *de jure* or *de facto*.

It seems to me that if we do not accept some such criterion we are admitting the emptiness of our ETS confession. For if the ETS statement of faith does not exclude any particular belief about Scripture, then it includes all beliefs about Scripture. And whatever says everything, really says nothing.

My plea, then, is this: In order to preserve our identity and integrity as an evangelical group that confesses an inerrant Word from God, we must define the limits of a legitimate methodology. If the one I have suggested is inadequate, then let us find a sufficient one.

One thing seems safe to predict: Granted the popularity of evangelicalism and the degree to which the borders of legitimate evangelical methodology are now being pushed, the Evangelical Theological Society will not long be "evangelical" nor long believe in inerrancy in the sense meant by the framers of that statement unless we act decisively on this matter.

In short we would argue that, since methodology determines one's theology, unless we place some limits on evangelical methodology there will follow a continued broadening of the borders of "evangelical" theology so that the original word "Evangelical" (in "Evangelical Theological Society") will have lost its meaning. After all, even Barth called his neo-orthodox view "evangelical." Is this what the word "evangelical" meant to the founders of ETS? Or have we already conceded so much to the "new hermeneutic" that it does not really matter what the words "evangelical" or "inerrant" meant to the authors of the statements, but only what they mean to us? On the other hand, if we reject this kind of subjective hermeneutic (and we most certainly should), then it behooves us to draw a line that will preserve our identity and integrity as an "evangelical" theological society. Such a line, we suggest, need not entail a change in (or addition to) our doctrinal statement but simply the explicit acknowledgment (perhaps in the by-laws) that the denial of the total truth of Scripture, officially or factually, *de jure* or *de facto*, is grounds for exclusion from ETS.