

BIBLICAL INFALLIBILITY: THE REFORMATION AND BEYOND*

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Let us examine the age of the Reformers to see what their witness to Scripture is and what they believed and taught. It would be a mistake to suppose that the Reformers formulated a viewpoint such as those expressed by the early ecumenical councils when they were dealing with Christology. It must be remembered that the Reformers spent their time talking about the issues that were important in the struggle against the Roman Church. Since the Roman Church held to a view of Scripture that was not different from that held by the Reformers, there was no real problem. The problem came from adding to Scripture and was not concerned with whether Scripture could be trusted; it was about interpretation, not inerrancy. The role of the Church as the unerring interpreter of Scripture over against the universal priesthood of all believers was important, and the Reformers believed that the Church could err in interpretation.

MARTIN LUTHER

We come first to Martin Luther. And there is no better place to start than with his Ninety-five Theses. Their contents tell us what troubled him and are a synopsis of the chief subjects Luther wanted to discuss:

Four of the theses dealt with the gospel doctrine of repentance.

Twenty-five covered the question of the pope's power over the souls in purgatory.

Eleven proclaimed that church penalties were cancelled at death and that indulgences could guarantee no one's salvation.

Twelve stressed that other Christian works were more important than buying indulgences.

Twenty-eight compared the value of indulgence preaching with the values of gospel preaching.

Ten dealt with related matters, such as the pope's wealth and prayers for the dead once an indulgence was obtained.

Five brought into sharp relief the difference between an indulgence religion and true faith in Christ.¹

Luther did not spend any time arguing about Biblical infallibility in the Ninety-five Theses, nor did he elsewhere. It was not a live question,

*This article is part of a chapter from its author's latest book, *The Battle for the Bible*, to be issued by Zondervan Publishing House in April, © copyright 1976. The extract is used by permission.

¹*Christian Heritage*, June, 1975, p. 9.

for there was correspondence of belief between himself and the Church on that score. Luther believed and taught that the Bible was infallibly true in all its parts. Of that there can be no doubt. But it is useless to look in his writings for a developed thesis to support Biblical inerrancy. He believed it; it was not in dispute; he wrote all of his works based on his belief that the Bible was true. But he does leave us with much evidence as to his confidence in the truth of Scripture.

Luther quoted from Augustine's letter to Jerome in which he wrote, "This I have learned to do: to hold only those books which are called the Holy Scriptures in such honor that I finally believe that not one of the holy writers ever erred." Luther endorsed this view of Augustine, and he himself stated, "The Scriptures have never erred" (XV:1481). He also said, "The Scriptures *cannot* err" (XIX:1073). "It is certain that Scripture cannot disagree with itself" (XX:798). "It is impossible that Scripture should contradict itself, only that it so appears to the senseless and obstinate hypocrites" (IX:356). "One little point of doctrine means more than heaven and earth, and therefore we cannot suffer to have the least jot thereof violated" (IX:650). "For it is established by God's Word that God does not lie, nor does His Word lie" (XX:798).

When Luther found an apparent discrepancy with respect to chronology, he refused to side with "those rash men who in the case of a Bible difficulty are not afraid to say that Scripture is evidently wrong; I conclude the matter with a humble confession of my ignorance, for it is only the Holy Ghost who knows and understands everything" (I:721).²

J. Theodore Mueller in his book *Luther and the Bible* says that "Luther unfailingly asserts the inerrancy of Scripture over against the errancy of human historians and scientists. He writes: 'The Scriptures have never erred....'" He also argues that the Lutheran

Dr. Reu champions the following theses, namely, that Scripture was the sole authority of Luther; that Luther's preface to the Epistle of James does not prove a different attitude; that Scripture remained Luther's sole authority of the Christian faith till the end of his life; that Luther never admitted any error in Scripture; that Luther considered even those parts of the Bible that do not concern our salvation as inerrant; that Luther ascribed absolute inerrancy to the original drafts of the Bible and that Luther did not teach a mechanical theory of inspiration. Luther indeed believed in verbal and plenary inspiration but not in a mechanical dictation theory.

Mueller also quotes the Lutheran Dr. H. Echter nach approvingly: "The infallibility of Scripture was the consensus of the Church, irrespective of denominational lines, until long after 1700 A.D.'"³

Robert Preus wrote about the Lutheran Quenstadt who followed in Luther's footsteps. Of all the Lutherans of that era, perhaps none

²T. Engelder, *Scripture Cannot Be Broken* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1944). Engelder quotes from Luther's work as indicated in the text.

³J. T. Mueller, *Luther and the Bible*, pp. 99, 103.

excelled Quenstadt, who has been charged with holding to a mechanical dictation view of inspiration. We must remember again that whether one holds to this or to some other view of *how* inerrancy came about the fact remains that the end process, by whichever method one chooses, is an inerrant Scripture. But Quenstadt was hardly guilty of all the allegations leveled against him. Preus points out that Quenstadt believed that Scripture was not brought into being monergistically, that is, by God or by man alone. He quotes Quenstadt:

We must distinguish between those who have been snatched away and are in a trance and do not know what they are doing and saying and between the apostles whom the Holy Spirit activated in such a way that they understood those things which they were speaking and writing.⁴

Preus claims that

the mechanical idea of inspiration was not only foreign to the dogmatists, it was loudly and consciously condemned by them. They were opposed to every conception of inspiration which would degrade the writers to the status of inanimate objects which neither thought nor felt in the act of writing but to which God imparted revelation as one might pour water into a pail.⁵

Quenstadt, says Preus,

true to form, states the orthodox position in a manner which defies misunderstanding. He says: "The holy canonical Scriptures in their original text are the infallible truth and free from every error, that is to say, in the sacred canonical Scriptures there is no lie, no deceit, no error, even the slightest, either in content or words, but every single word which is handed down in the Scriptures is most true, whether it pertains to doctrine, ethics, history, chronology, typography, or onomastic; and no ignorance, lack of understanding, forgetfulness or lapse of memory can be attributed to the amanuenses of the Holy Spirit in their writing of Holy Scriptures."⁶

One aspect of Luther's approach to the Word of God requires elaboration. Currently a number of Lutherans keep pointing out the fact that Luther, when using the term "the Word of God," did not have Scripture in mind, but Jesus Christ. Pelikan of Yale has stressed this, as have those who are opposed to Biblical inerrancy. Historically, it is true that Luther used the term "the Word of God" when he had Jesus Christ in mind, and he did this frequently. But it would be incorrect to say that he did it all the time. Moreover, there are enough evidences available to prove conclusively that Luther also used the term "the Word of God" to mean Scripture. He also used the word "Scripture," and there are

⁴R. Preus, *The Inspiration of Scripture, A Study of the Theology of the Seventeenth Century Lutheran Dogmatists* (London, 1955), p. 58.

⁵*Ibid.*, pp. 66 f.

⁶*Ibid.*, p. 77.

sufficient evidences to show that he regarded Scripture as inerrant. Clearly Luther knew there are two "Words of God," the Word of God incarnate and the Word of God written, and he held both of them to be completely trustworthy. So no one need get hung up on this issue nor spend time arguing whether on this occasion or that Luther meant Jesus Christ or the Scripture when he spoke of "the Word of God."

JOHN CALVIN

What can be said of Luther can be said also of John Calvin. He held the Scriptures in the highest esteem and believed them to be infallible in all their parts. Perhaps the best modern acknowledgment of Calvin's convictions about Scripture comes from the pen of Edward A. Dowey, Jr., who was the chief architect of the United Presbyterians' *New Confession*. His doctoral dissertation covered this question. He says of Calvin that we owe their (the apostles' and prophets') writings in Scripture

the same reverence which we owe to God, because it has proceeded from him alone and has nothing human mixed in.... We ought to embrace with mild docility, and without exception, whatever is delivered in the Holy Scriptures. For Scripture is the school of the Holy Spirit in which as nothing useful and necessary is omitted, so nothing is taught which is not profitable to know.⁷

Dowey says that when Calvin "does admit an undeniable error of grammar or of fact, without exception he attributes it to copyists, never to the inspired writer. There is no hint anywhere in Calvin's writings that the original text contained any flaws at all."⁸ It is of more than passing interest to note here that critics like Charles Augustus Briggs constantly criticized Benjamin Warfield as the inventor of the notion that inerrancy belongs to the autographs. He speaks of this as a late contribution brought about by an inability to demonstrate the infallibility of the copies. But Dowey here makes it plain that Calvin, where he does find a difficulty, lays it to a copyist's error, and this can mean only that Calvin regarded the autographs as infallible.

According to Dowey, "Neither in these places nor anywhere else does Calvin discuss in detail the method by which the Scripture was preserved. This leaves an interesting hiatus in his doctrine. It is interesting precisely because it is always to the text before him, never to the original text of Scripture, that Calvin attributes such errors as his exegesis discovers."⁹ "To Calvin the theologian an error in Scripture is unthinkable. Hence the endless harmonizing, the explaining and

⁷E. A. Dowey, Jr., *The Knowledge of God in Calvin's Theology* (New York: Columbia, 1952), p. 91.

⁸*Ibid.*, p. 100.

⁹*Ibid.*, p. 103.

interpreting of passages that seem to contradict or to be inaccurate.”¹⁰ “If he [Calvin] betrays his position at all, it is apparently in assuming *a priori* that no errors can be allowed to reflect upon the inerrancy of the original documents.”¹¹ Here are Calvin’s own words: “For if we consider how slippery is the human mind ... how prone to all kinds of error ... we can perceive how necessary is such a repository of heavenly doctrine, that it will neither perish by forgetfulness, nor vanish in error, nor be corrupted by the audacity of men.”¹² “The question of authority supplies the dominant motif in Calvin’s doctrine of Biblical authority, as well as his doctrine of faith in general. No hearsay about God can be the foundation of Christian assurance.... The divine origin of Scripture, the fact that it has come ‘from heaven’ is that to which the Spirit gives witness, and this transfers authority from men to God.”¹³

Does Calvin’s belief in Biblical inerrancy mean he held that the mode of inspiration was by dictation? Dowey went into this question also, for there were evidences in Calvin’s writings that might lead to such a conclusion.

We must now consider whether Calvin’s teaching about inspiration as so far presented requires the interpretation that Calvin held a mechanical or literal dictation theory of the writing of the Bible.... His emphasis as seen throughout our study of the miraculous accompaniments of inspiration upon the transmission of the message, in my opinion, adds weight to the claim that he conceived the Scriptures as literally dictated by God.... Most of what today are recognized as idiosyncrasies in style and even mistakes in the text are attributed to the purposes of the Holy Spirit. To this end, the principle of accommodation is for Calvin a common exegetical device for explaining away irregularities that might otherwise, with a less rigorous view of the perfection of the text, be simply attributed to inaccuracies. When he does admit an undeniable error of grammar or of fact, without exception he attributes it to copyists, never to the inspired writer.... There is no hint anywhere in Calvin’s writings that the original text contained any flaws at all.¹⁴

Dowey then asserts that

R. Seeberg, O. Ritschl, and A. M. Hunter ... attribute unambiguously a dictation theory to Calvin. These are closer to the truth, but probably the solution of Warfield, curious as it appears at first glance, is the best formulation for doing justice to a certain lack of clarity or variation in Calvin himself. Concerning “dictation,” Warfield comments, “It is not unfair to urge, however, that this language is figurative and that what Calvin has in mind, is, not to insist that the mode of inspiration was

¹⁰*Ibid.*, p. 104.

¹¹*Ibid.*, p. 105.

¹²*Ibid.*, p. 105.

¹³*Ibid.*, p. 109.

¹⁴*Ibid.*, p. 99.

dictation, but that the result of inspiration is as if it were by dictation, viz., the production of a pure word of God free from all human admixtures.... The important thing to realize is that according to Calvin the Scriptures were so given that—whether by ‘literal’ or ‘figurative’ dictation—the result was a series of documents errorless in their original form.”¹⁵

One item in the testimony of John Calvin should be explained. A number of opponents of Biblical inerrancy have attributed to Calvin the opinion that he rejected the Petrine authorship of 2 Peter. This is important because modern critics not only claim that this epistle was not written by Peter; they also claim that it is a second-century, not a first-century, product. The problem of Petrine authorship, it should be stated, is not a modern one. It has existed in the Church for centuries. Calvin was involved in this, too. Of 2 Peter he says in his commentary on that book:

If it is received as canonical, we must admit that Peter is the author, not only because it bears his name, but also because he testifies that he lived with Christ. It would have been a fiction unworthy of a minister of Christ to pretend to be another personality. Therefore I conclude that if the epistle is trustworthy it has come from Peter; not that he wrote it himself, but that one of his disciples composed by his command what the necessity of the times demanded. It is probable that at the time he was very old; he says he is near to death, and it could be that at the request of the godly he allowed this testament of his mind to be signed and sealed just before his death, because it might have some force after he was dead to encourage the good and repress the wicked. Certainly since the majesty of the Spirit of Christ expresses itself in all parts of the epistle, I have a dread of repudiating it, even though I do not recognize in it the genuine language of Peter. Since there is no agreement as to the author, I shall allow myself to use the name of Peter or the apostle indiscriminately.¹⁶

From Calvin’s own statement we should note several things. First, he acknowledges that if one accepts 2 Peter as canonical it must be admitted that Peter is the author simply because the epistle so claims. Calvin would be at variance with modern critics who advocate the viewpoint that someone used Peter’s name long after his death and that this device is acceptable. Calvin says no! Moreover, he makes it plain that 2 Peter was written during Peter’s lifetime. He refuses to date it in another century even as he refuses to let it come from a forger who has used Peter’s name. It is true, on the other hand, that Calvin had trouble with the language of 2 Peter and it was this that occasioned his suggestion that perhaps the epistle was written by an amanuensis under the supervision of the aged apostle, in which case it was a genuine product of the apostle. Calvin does not hesitate to say that, allowing for the possibility that Peter had someone write it under his supervision and control, he uses the

¹⁵*Ibid.*, pp. 101 f.

¹⁶J. Calvin, *The Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Hebrews and the First and Second Epistles of St. Peter* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1963), p. 325.

name of Peter or the apostle as the author indiscriminately. Thus the faith of Calvin in the inerrancy of Scripture overcame his scholar's questions and Peter remained for him the true author of the epistle that bears his name.

Anyone who reads Calvin and Luther and compares them with modern writers who deny Biblical infallibility cannot fail to note the difference between the attitude of the Reformers and that of the modern objectors to infallibility. The latter unflinchingly seek to denigrate Scripture, to humanize it, to swallow a camel and strain out a gnat. The Reformers did not react in this way. Their attitude toward the Word of God was one of reverence, humility, and positive acceptance of it as both authoritative and infallible.

THE WESTMINSTER CONFESSION OF FAITH

Among the confessions of faith in the Reformed tradition, none ever written is superior to the Westminster Confession in scope, clarity, and precision. Chapter 1 sets forth the doctrine of Scripture. It is called "the only infallible rule of faith and practice." From this some have argued that the Westminster Confession in effect limited inerrancy to matters of faith and practice, excluding matters having to do with history, science, and cosmology. The error of this may be seen when two facts are taken into account. One is the entire statement on Scripture, which includes two phrases that destroy the limited inerrancy notion. The confession speaks of "the entire perfection" of Scripture and acknowledges the "consent of all of the parts." These portions of the definition rule out the notion of limited inerrancy. But more than that, the history of the times must be taken into account. We have noted that during the Reformation period Biblical infallibility was a tenet accepted by both the Roman Catholic Church and the Reformers. It was not central to the dispute that occasioned the rupture. Had it been, the Reformers would have pinpointed the issue, and the canons of the Council of Trent, in which the Roman Catholics answered the Reformers, would have included a counterblast. At the time the Westminster Confession was adopted there was no serious challenge to the view of Biblical infallibility, and the Confession did not speak to the issue the way it undoubtedly would have had there been such a difference of opinion.

No one can deny that in the United States, so far as the Reformed denominations are concerned, wherever the Westminster Confession was the controlling creed it was understood to mean that the Scripture in all of its parts was without error. This was true of the northern and southern Presbyterian churches as well as the United Presbyterian Church. During the Fundamentalist-Modernist controversy that swept through the Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A., the 1920s were the years of crucial decision. Clarence Edward McCartney was swept into the moderatorship of the Church in connection with this issue. The General Assembly in 1924 voted to endorse Biblical infallibility as the official view of the Church. The Assembly did not vote this way as though this

viewpoint represented a change of stance and constituted an addendum to the Westminster Confession, but only as a reaffirmation of what had been the standpoint of the denomination historically and of what had been established officially at an earlier date.

The evidences to support the contention that the Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A. (now the United Presbyterian Church) accepted the notion of Biblical infallibility are so numerous that it hardly requires documentation. The former Dean of Princeton Theological Seminary, Dr. Elmer Homrighausen, says this:

Few intelligent Christians can still hold to the idea that the Bible is an infallible Book, that it contains no linguistic errors, no historical discrepancies, no antiquated scientific assumptions, not even bad ethical standards. Historical investigation and literary criticism have taken the magic out of the Bible and have made it a composite human book, written by many hands in different ages. The existence of thousands of variations of texts makes it impossible to hold the doctrine of a book verbally infallible. Some might claim for the original copies of the Bible an infallible character, but this view only begs the question and makes such Christian apologetics more ridiculous in the eyes of sincere men.¹⁷

This statement by Homrighausen clearly illustrates the truth that he was refuting a viewpoint that had once been held but was no longer acceptable. Unfortunately, his statement denigrates those who believe in Biblical infallibility and casts them in the mold of stupid illiterates. Thus he says, "Few *intelligent* Christians can still hold to the idea ..." (italics mine). Anyone holding to Biblical infallibility makes such Christian apologetics "more ridiculous in the eyes of *sincere* men" (italics mine). Here Homrighausen speaks of disbelievers in Biblical infallibility as sincere men, and the implication is plain that those who accept Biblical infallibility are less than sincere. Moreover, he inveighs against "the doctrine of a book [that is] verbally infallible." Now if no one held such a view, he would not argue against it. It is plain that Homrighausen was talking against the common viewpoint of his own denomination that neither he nor a host of others in that denomination could accept any longer.

The founding of Westminster Theological Seminary was a protest against what was happening in the Presbyterian Church. That the struggle included the nature of Biblical truth may be seen from what Edward J. Young, a long-time Old Testament teacher at Westminster, said in his volume *Thy Word Is Truth*:

If the autographs of Scripture are marred by flecks of mistake, God has simply not told us the truth concerning His Word. To assume that He could breathe forth a word that could contain mistakes is to say, in effect, that God Himself can make mistakes. We must maintain that the original of Scripture is infallible for the simple reason that it came to us direct from God Himself.¹⁸

¹⁷E. Homrighausen, *Christianity in America* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1936), p. 121.

¹⁸E. J. Young, *Thy Word Is Truth* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1957), p. 87.

What is true for the Presbyterian Church in the north is true for the Presbyterian Church in the south as well. In 1962 *The Presbyterian Outlook* published a symposium entitled, "Do We Need an Infallible Bible?"¹⁹ On the face of it, such a symposium would have no meaning if no one was asking the question whether the Bible is infallible and if no one believed, or had ever believed, in an infallible Bible. The whole discussion was slanted to present one viewpoint, that of a fallible Bible. Every contributor to the discussion argued against Biblical infallibility for the very reason that such a viewpoint was formerly believed. The arguments did not deny that the inerrancy position exists or that it had been the view of the Presbyterian Church in the south. Rather, they were presented to destroy belief in an infallible Scripture. What stronger evidence does one need to support the claim that Biblical infallibility has been the historic viewpoint of the Reformed tradition?

AMERICAN AND BRITISH BAPTISTS

Among the Baptists, the same truth emerges. Until recently, Baptists of the north and the south have held to an infallible Bible. The New Hampshire Confession of Faith states that Scripture "has God for its author, salvation for its end, and truth, without any mixture of error, for its matter." My chapter on the Southern Baptist Convention will deal more specifically with the details of the struggle within that denomination relative to Biblical infallibility. For the moment it remains only to make clear that the Northern Baptist Convention (later the American Baptist Convention) also held to inerrancy until the latter nineteenth century when German higher criticism invaded this and other denominations. During the Fundamentalist-Modernist controversy a continual battle raged between the differing viewpoints about Scripture, and schism resulted with the formation of two new and distinct Baptist denominations. One was the General Association of Regular Baptists, which dates from 1932; the other, the Conservative Baptist Association of America, began in 1947. The latter group comprised a number of fundamentalists who had stayed within the Northern Baptist Convention after the GARB came into being. They thought that the overwhelming majority of Northern Baptists believed in an infallible Scripture and hoped to deliver the Convention from the control of the liberals. The Eastern and Northern Baptist Theological Seminaries were created as conservative institutions to combat the liberalism of the old-line denominational schools such as Crozer, Andover Newton, Chicago Divinity School, and Colgate-Rochester.

Alvah Hovey, president of Newton Theological Institute (which was later joined with Andover to become Andover Newton), defended Biblical inerrancy. He argued against those who said that

infallibility in the original Scriptures requires for its complement infallibility in all copies, translations, and, some would say, interpretations

¹⁹*The Presbyterian Outlook* (Dec. 24, 1962), pp. 1ff.

of them. For otherwise, we are told, the benefit of infallibility is lost to all but the primitive readers. But this, again, is a mistake; for the errors from transcription, translations, etc., are such as can be detected, or at least estimated, and reduced to a minimum; while errors in the original revelation could not be measured.²⁰

Hovey was saying clearly that Biblical inerrancy was the common viewpoint, but it was being challenged. And he responded to those who offered that challenge. He pursued this theme by alluding to questions of historical and scientific errors:

On the supposed historical errors of the Bible we remark, (1) They relate, for the most part, to matters of chronology, generally numbers, etc. (2) Transcribers are specially liable to mistakes in copying numbers, names, etc. (3) Different names for the same person, and different termini for the same period, are quite frequent. (4) Round numbers are often employed for specific. Making proper allowance for these facts we deny that historical errors are found in the Bible.

He also dealt with the so-called scientific errors:

All references to matters of science in the Bible are (1) Merely incidental and auxiliary; (2) Clothed in popular language; and, (3) Confirmed by consciousness, so far as they relate to the mind. Remembering these facts, we say that the Bible has not been shown to contain scientific errors—astronomy, geology, ethnology.... Bearing in mind these facts, it will be impossible for us to find in the Bible any contradictions which mar its excellence.²¹

What has been said about the Baptists in the United States can also be said of the Baptists in Great Britain. They believed in Biblical infallibility, although the same retreat from infallibility was to become serious in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The famed Charles Haddon Spurgeon was deeply involved in the changing fortunes of the Baptists as they moved away from belief in inerrancy. Spurgeon, who was undoubtedly the best known and most popular preacher of his age, bore witness to the traditional view of the Bible. He delivered a sermon in 1855, a part of which was devoted to Biblical infallibility. He said:

Then, since God wrote it, mark its truthfulness. If I had written it, there would be worms of critics who would at once swarm on it, and would cover it with their evil spawn; had I written it, there would be men who would pull it to pieces at once, and perhaps quite right too. But this is the Word of God. Come, search, ye critics, and find a flaw; examine it from its Genesis to its Revelation and find an error. This is a vein of pure gold, unalloyed by quartz or any earthy substance. This is a star without a speck; a sun

²⁰A. Hovey, *Manual of Systematic Theology and Christian Ethics* (Philadelphia: A.B.P.S., 1880), p. 83.

²¹*Ibid.*, p. 85.

without a blot; a light without darkness; a moon without paleness; a glory without a dimness. O Bible! it cannot be said of any other book, that it is perfect and pure; but of thee we can declare all wisdom is gathered up in thee, without a particle of folly. This is the judge that ends the strife where wit and reason fail. This is the book untainted by any error, but is pure, unalloyed, perfect truth. Why? Because God wrote it. Ah! charge God with error if you please; tell Him that His book is not what it ought to be.... Blessed Bible, thou art all truth.²²

Perhaps the strongest evidence that Spurgeon was not parroting a new teaching when he proclaimed Biblical inerrancy may be seen from what was happening in Britain after Darwin's *Origin of the Species* had been published and public fancy had responded to its ideas. The Baptist Union was "a very free and liberal organization which did not attempt to hold any person very strictly to doctrine or creed. Yet many of the strongest preachers in the Baptist denomination in and about London were members of that Association. In the membership there were also a number of pastors who taught in their pulpits some of the modern ideas of science—so called—and who advocated the theories of higher criticism and a more liberal and loose construction of the Old Testament records." Upon this subject Spurgeon wrote:

No lover of the Gospel can conceal from himself the fact that the days are evil. We are willing to make a large discount from our apprehensions on the score of natural timidity, the caution of age, and the weakness produced by pain; but yet our solemn conviction is that things are much worse in many churches than they seem to be, and are rapidly tending downward. Read those newspapers which represent the Broad School of Dissent, and ask yourself, How much further could they go? What doctrine remains to be abandoned? What other truth to be the object of contempt? A new religion has been initiated, which is no more Christianity than chalk is cheese, and this religion, being destitute of moral honesty, palms itself off as the old faith with slight improvements, and on this plea usurps pulpits which were erected for gospel preaching. The Atonement is scouted, the inspiration of Scripture is derided, the Holy Ghost is degraded into an influence, the punishment of sin is turned into fiction, and the Resurrection into a myth, and yet these enemies of our faith expect us to call them brethren, and maintain a confederacy with them!²³

Spurgeon's words portray what the situation was among Baptists in his day. They indeed were turning away from the old faith. But their turning is itself a witness that the old faith included full confidence in the totality of Scripture. And this was the witness of Spurgeon who continued to believe in Biblical inerrancy. Moreover, he bore down on the consequences that always follow disbelief in the full reliability of the Bible. This disbelief leads inevitably to a denial of many of the basic

²²R. H. Conwell, *The Life of Charles Haddon Spurgeon* (Edgewood Publishing Co., 1892), pp. 574-576.

²³*Ibid.*, pp. 468-470.

doctrines of the Christian faith. Whatever these new-style Baptists believed and however much they departed from the old benchmarks, their departure witnessed to what had been the common viewpoints of the English Baptists.

THE ANGLICANS AND METHODISTS

What has been said of the Reformers and of the Baptists may also be said about the Anglicans and the Methodists. But they came out of a different tradition, and their views must be understood within that context. The Anglican Church came into being as a direct result of Henry the VIII's marriage dilemma with Catholic Catherine whom he wished to divorce. When the papacy refused to accede to his desires, Henry broke with the pope and established his own Church. But that Church stood then and remains in the tradition of Catholicism. It traces its apostolic succession back to the apostles and believes in the historical episcopate as Roman Catholics do. It accepts the real presence of Christ in the sacrament of the supper and in a number of ways stands within the tradition of Roman Catholicism. Among the doctrines it inherited from the Roman Church was its view of the Bible as the infallible Word of God. It rejected some of Rome's teaching, such as those of the seven sacraments, the headship of the pope, and the like. But it did not declare itself against the Roman Catholic Church's teaching with respect to Biblical infallibility. It followed this doctrinal teaching until it, like so many of the denominations that sprang out of the Reformation period, discarded it in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

The Methodist denomination came from the loins of Anglicanism, and its founder, John Wesley, lived and died within the fold of the Anglican faith. It too holds to the historic episcopate and traces its own holy orders through the Anglican Church back to the apostles. Like the Anglican Church, Methodism believed in an infallible Scripture. Neither the Anglicans nor the Methodists enshrined their belief in an infallible Scripture in creeds and confessions with the precision and accuracy that marked those of the Reformed tradition, the Baptists, and the Lutherans. This may also explain why it was that the Anglicans and the Methodists were the most easily led astray from a commitment to Biblical infallibility, and why those two groups in our generation include among their numbers large bodies of theological liberals whose theological beliefs are quite extreme.

George A. Turner of the evangelical Asbury Theological Seminary wrote this about John Wesley:

Wesley believed in the full inspiration and inerrancy of the Bible. His view would now be described as pre-critical, as would the view of most eighteenth-century writers. The problem of authority which Luther faced was less acute in Wesley's day than the problem of indifference in the Church. Thus Wesley was less bold than Luther in determining the relative value of different books of the Bible; to him they were all equally inspired and hence authoritative ... he did not feel the need of establishing the authority of the Bible or defending it from destructive critics. Jean

Astruc, "the father of Pentateuchal criticism," published his views on the authorship of Genesis in 1753, but there is no evidence that it was noticed by Wesley and his colleagues.²⁴

Wesley's own view of the Bible was a high one indeed. He never believed for a moment that because the writers of Scripture were human they therefore erred in what they wrote. In his *Journal* he wrote, "Nay, if there be any mistakes in the Bible there may as well be a thousand. If there be one falsehood in that book it did not come from the God of truth."²⁵ It would be inaccurate to suggest that Wesley spent much time on the question of Biblical infallibility. He believed it and so did those who became Methodists. He preached, taught, and labored on the basis of his underlying conviction that the Bible is the inerrant Word of God.

Among the Anglicans and the Methodists today there are strong defenders of Biblical inerrancy just as there are strong opponents of that viewpoint. And no one can suppose for a moment that either of these denominations now or in the discernible future will become strong advocates of inerrancy.

THE CONCLUSION OF THE MATTER

This survey of Biblical inerrancy in the history of the Church since the Reformation could be extended indefinitely. There are all kinds of material available to show that the Church through the ages has held to an infallible Bible. This truth can be stated negatively as well. There is no evidence to show that errancy was ever a live option in the history of Christendom for eighteen hundred years in any branch of the Christian Church that had not gone off into aberrations. It can also be said that what was true for eighteen hundred years is no longer true today. In the last two centuries inerrancy has become a live issue, and increasingly there has been a turning away from this belief until the point has been reached where it is safe to say that a great proportion of scholars and ministers in the Christian Church in all of its branches no longer holds to Biblical inerrancy. However, there has been a strong evangelical strand in the Church that has held to inerrancy in the last two centuries. Among these people were men like Spurgeon, B. B. Warfield, Charles Hodge, J. Gresham Machen, and Edward John Carnell, as well as a host of scholars who are members of the Evangelical Theological Society today.

In recent years evangelical Christianity has been infiltrated by people who do not believe in inerrancy. This penetration into the evangelical spectrum is my deep concern.

²⁴G. A. Turner, "John Wesley as an Interpreter of Scripture," in *Inspiration and Interpretation*, J. W. Walvoord, ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1957), p. 161.

²⁵J. Wesley, *Journal*, VI, 117.