

The Infallibility of Scripture and Evangelical Progress

Ned B. Stonehouse

On the occasion of this fellowship banquet, which is appropriately more informal than our regular sessions, I have in view a rather broad and general treatment of the topic which has been announced. If my recollections are correct I have good precedents for following this course rather than endeavoring to make a scholarly contribution to the understanding of some carefully circumscribed topic.

The joining of these two phrases, "The Infallibility of Scripture" and "Evangelical Progress", indicates that in my judgment there is a very intimate connection between the maintenance of the infallibility of Scripture and the attainment of any significant progress so far as the evangelical cause is concerned. The burden of what I have to say is indeed that the former is indispensable to the latter, that in fact the more clearly and consistently we take our stand upon the position to which this Society is committed the more assuredly and rapidly we shall make some genuine advance in the field of biblical and theological studies.

We are painfully aware indeed that this estimate is not shared by many of our contemporaries. We know that the doctrine of the infallibility of Scripture is widely regarded as an egregious error, reflecting obscurantism and inevitably leading to further obscurantism. Rather than being a liberating force it is regarded as an intolerable burden. It is sometimes said that it must result in religious and ecclesiastical paralysis. Our view of the Bible is thought to place us in bondage to a paper pope.

It will be recognized that this point of view, while hardly a novelty in our day, has been given considerable impetus and has found increasing acceptance because of the colossal impact of the teaching of Karl Barth. In view of the fact that his volume on The Doctrine of the Word of God has now become available in English and his theological position is becoming better and better known in our day, we may anticipate an increasing impact in the years ahead. Barth's clear cut position that the Bible is itself fallible and that it may not be regarded even as containing infallible elements is presented in an attractive light because it is insisted that precisely on his view of the relationship between God and Scripture there is a recognition of "the free grace in which the Spirit of God is present and active before and above and in the Bible".

The Barthian point of view is reflected in scores of volumes that are coming from the press in these days, one of the most recent of these being the book of J. K. S. Reid of Glasgow on The Authority of Scripture, published by Harper in 1957. Reid maintains, for example, that "the movement towards literal inerrancy can repeatedly be diagnosed as the sickness or torpor that succeeds a 'first fine careless rapture'. It is the mark of the ebb tide setting in, when the flood having reached its peak subsides" (p. 25). In another connection Reid maintains that according to the position of biblical infallibility "God's Word is petrified in a dead record" (p. 279).

In the face of the modern evaluations of Scripture shall we still maintain our historic position? And in particular may we insist that it is precisely as we lay hold with energy upon Scripture, acknowledged as coming to us with plenary and verbal inspiration and as possessing divine authority, that we are given the indispensable basis for genuine progress?

Certainly the issue raised by these questions is not of a peripheral or isolated character. We are confronted here with the profoundest questions as to the very nature of God and His relationships with man. The modern view maintains that the doctrine of the infallibility of Scripture is derogatory to God and involves an abridgement of man's essential liberty. If on the other hand we are to maintain this doctrine it can only be because we recognize that our doctrine of Scripture is an aspect of our doctrine of God. To acknowledge Scripture as infallible is to acknowledge the absolute supremacy of the God of the Covenant in the sphere of truth. Accordingly submission to that truth is a profoundly religious act.

In seeking now to come to grips more particularly with the specific theme of my address I wish first of all to make the point that our position concerning Scripture, and it alone, involved the recognition of a qualitative distinction between Scripture and tradition, and that precisely as we recognize this distinction in all our labors and carry out its implications we may be assured of a measure of progress.

In insisting upon the distinction between Scripture and tradition and in pleading for greater consistency in working out the implications of this Protestant principle, I would not indeed suggest that we should despise tradition or in general minimize its historical significance. Tradition, in truth, is a factor of great significance within the history of special revelation itself. This is bound up especially with the fact that the special revelation of the Bible is a revelation in history. As such the truth of revelation is often presented as that which, on the one hand, is received and, on the other hand, is delivered over. To make this point more specifically it may now suffice to recall the words of Paul in I Corinthians 15:3, "for I delivered unto you first of all that which I also received".

In addition to the tradition within Scripture there is the tradition beyond Scripture, the tradition of the church. And though this tradition is on a different level from that of which Paul has spoken, it remains true that for one who recognizes the providence of God, the kingship of Jesus Christ and the presence and power of the Holy Spirit in the life of the church, historical tradition may oftentimes be of very great significance. To put the matter in a somewhat different way, it must be recognized that Scripture itself has made a profound impact upon the life and thinking of the church, and this is of course especially true as it has been accompanied by the operations of the Spirit in the hearts of men.

Nevertheless, the distinction between Scripture and tradition must prevent us from absolutizing tradition. No matter how high our estimate of the scriptural significance of any phase of history, including for example the Reformation, we may not make the judgments and practices of any such phase our startingpoint for our evaluations of truth or our standard concerning it.

In emphasizing this point as I do I am deeply concerned with a tendency which seems to me to be widely prevalent among evangelicals to obliterate or obscure this basic distinction.

This tendency is found, for example, in dealing with questions concerning the origin of the New Testament. My impression is that it is reflected even in the terminology that is in common use in dealing with problems of New Testament Introduction. Although I cannot speak confidently with regard to present practices in the classroom and elsewhere, I may illustrate what I have in mind when I observe that in treating questions of Special Introduction, it seems to me to be rather common to deal first with "external evidence" and then with "internal evidence" as if these two types of evidence were simply coordinate. As a consequence the conclusions drawn seem to be based upon a kind of synthesis of these two kinds of evidence. We would, however, reflect our basic principle more fully if, even in this matter of terminology, we distinguished carefully between the testimony of historical tradition and the infallible testimony of Holy Scripture by which the voice of tradition is to be tested and judged. We need, I believe, a far more thoroughgoing way to observe to what extent it must be rejected and to what extent it is to be maintained.

May I illustrate what I have in view by referring more particularly to the subject of Gospel origins? We are confronted today with two extremes in dealing with the Synoptic Problem. On the one hand there is present an uncritical acceptance of the two-document theory even on the part of some conservatives. This is in spite of the fact that this theory commonly conceives of the evangelists as mere editors, and indeed often as editors who more or less consciously distort or manipulate the contents of the gospel. On the other hand, there appears to be a tendency, because of these fundamental objections to the two document theory, to reject it as simply the product of unbelief. This would preclude in advance the possibility of recognizing that there may be component features of the theory that are of a different character from the estimate of the editors to which I have just referred, features which may be quite acceptable and indeed preferable to certain traditional views. In particular as one is concerned with such questions as the

authorship and the order of the Gospels it is vital that one should draw a line between conclusions which flow from the testimony of Scripture itself and those which enjoy only the support of tradition.

In particular with regard to the order in which the Gospels were written, one may not rest heavily upon tradition. This is true, in the first place, because that testimony is not unitary. The Anti-Marcionite Prologue of Luke places Matthew and Mark before Luke whereas Clement of Alexandria says that the Gospels with genealogies were written before Mark. Moreover, in the nature of the case such testimony would not rest upon as secure a foundation as, for example, the tradition concerning the authorship of a Gospel. Whereas the latter would have been associated with the individual Gospels from the time of their original publication, the latter would have arisen presumably only as the Gospels were brought together and especially as there developed the necessity of assigning them a particular order in the manuscript transmission. In any case, one must apparently allow for the lapse of a period of time following the publication of individual Gospels before such judgments could have been formed. It is not possible at the present time to give further consideration to this question of the order of the Gospels, and in particular to the question whether Matthew is earlier than Mark or Mark earlier than Matthew. What I am concerned to stress, however, is that such decisions should not be largely influenced by tradition, and that the testimony of the Gospels themselves, as that is disclosed by an intensive study of their individual characteristics, must be given the decisive weight.

The question may now be appropriately raised whether the discounting of the authority of tradition in such a matter as the order of the Gospels applies in similar fashion to the traditions concerning their authorship. In my opinion, this does not necessarily follow. If one reflects, for example, upon the tradition relating to the authorship of Matthew it will appear that the tradition of apostolic authorship is early and consistent in all the witnesses. And in view of the significance of the attestation of the Gospel there is a strong presumption that such testimony goes back to the very beginning of its circulation. It is remarkable, moreover, that the church's interest in attestation, and its understandable concern with the witness of the apostles, did not result in a development in which, without regard to the actual facts, apostolic names were assigned to all four Gospels. The consideration that as many as two of the four Gospels have been handed down as the writings of Mark and Luke who were not numbered among the apostles constitutes weighty evidence that the association of the apostle Matthew's name with a particular Gospel must be due to the church's belief that he was responsible for it.

Regardless of our judgment as to the reliability of this tradition, however, we remain under the necessity of giving priority to internal evidence. Pursuant to this approach one must examine with the greatest possible care such objections to the testimony of tradition as have been or may be offered. My own opinion is that the objections to the apostolic authorship of Matthew advanced in modern times are not impressive unless one shares to a considerable degree the modern skepticism with regard to the trustworthiness of the Gospel tradition as a whole. I personally am strongly persuaded of the apostolic authorship of Matthew. Nevertheless, in keeping with the main point that I have been making, it appears to me to be essential to distinguish qualitatively in this matter also between the testimony of tradition and that of Scripture itself. Matthew is an anonymous work in that it does not make any claim to Matthaean authorship. One may therefore be influenced by the strength of the tradition and by the complete congruity of the contents of Matthew therewith firmly to maintain the traditional position concerning its authorship. Nevertheless we should not elevate such a conclusion to the status of an article of the Christian faith. Such articles of faith should be based securely upon the teaching of Scripture.

First of all, therefore, I have argued that as a matter of principle we must take great care not to ascribe more authority to tradition than properly belongs to it. A qualitative distinction between Scripture and tradition must be observed all along the line, and this I am convinced is the only way in which we may anticipate genuine evangelical progress in dealing with many basic questions.

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It is necessary now, however, to indicate a second implication of our basic position that is even more fundamental. This is that in every area of life and

thought we should more fully and constantly recognize and take into account the final authority that rightly belongs to Holy Scripture.

The fact of our common commitment in the Society to the infallibility of Scripture possesses indeed far-reaching significance for fellowship and co-operation. Yet we may not rest content with this common affirmation with regard to the Bible. This affirmation itself challenges us to reflection upon its implications. As a matter of fact there might be relatively little significance in such a commitment if it should turn out to be agreement with regard only to our doctrine of Scripture and in our total understanding of Scripture we should be basically at odds with one another. It is well that we remind ourselves from time to time that heretical and sectarian groups commonly also appeal to the infallibility of Scripture and insist that their peculiar views flow from this starting point.

If the word "evangelical" in the name of our Society and in its broader applications in our day is to possess genuine meaning we may not be satisfied with a lowest common denominator of Christian belief. Rather, taking with full earnestness our avowed commitment to the divine inspiration and authority of Scripture, and putting more fully into practice our theoretical acknowledgment of the primacy of exegesis, we must search out diligently what the Scriptures teach concerning basic questions on which evangelicals are seriously divided. There can be no hope of evangelical progress apart from energetic labors in this direction.

Let me mention a few areas in which it seems to me it is especially urgent that we give fresh attention to the testimony of Scripture.

In the first place, our commitment to the infallibility of Scripture imposes upon us the obligation of reflecting constantly upon the testimony of the whole of Scripture to its own character. Unless we are alert and conscientious in this matter there is considerable danger that we shall conceive of infallibility or inerrancy in an a priori or abstract manner. In dealing with such matters as the harmony of the Gospels and quotations of the Old Testament in the New, for example, there is danger that we shall draw inferences from the affirmation of infallibility, or apply this doctrine in such a way, as actually to do violence to the total witness of Scripture. A satisfactory evaluation of the testimony of Scripture will include indeed a responsible dealing with the most specific reflections upon the character of Scripture which are found, for example, in II Timothy 3:15, 16. In order to insure, however, that our evaluation of Scripture corresponds with the nature of Scripture as that is disclosed by its entire self-testimony it is necessary to expound and thus constantly keep before us the comprehensive character of his task.

My impression is indeed that we are largely aware of our responsibility in this matter. The publication of our own volume on Inspiration and Interpretation and of other recent volumes by members of our Society, the Wheaton Report on Inspiration, and a Report on Inspiration to be presented to the 1958 Assembly of the Reformed Ecumenical Synod are heartening evidences of this fact. It will be necessary to continue to insist, however, that it is precisely we evangelicals, committed as we are to the infallibility of Scripture, who are under the most solemn responsibilities to search the Scriptures without ceasing in order to assure ourselves that we have come to the fullest possible understanding of what Scripture really is.

In the second place, our particular evaluation of Scripture constrains us, as no other view can, to interpret correctly the message of Scripture. An affirmation of inspiration without regard to sound hermeneutics is of little or no significance. As Professor John Murray has expressed it,

"In all questions pertinent to the doctrine of Scripture we must remember that the intent of Scripture is Scripture; it is what Scripture means to say that is Scripture. We cannot deal, therefore, with the inerrancy of Scripture apart from hermeneutics. In dealing with the bearing of a particular passage on the inerrancy of Scripture we must, first of all, bring the science of hermeneutics to bear upon that particular passage and insure that it is the intended import of the text that is brought into consideration and not some other import which it may, on prima facie reading, appear to convey".

The problem of hermeneutics is acutely before us at the present time as we are under the compulsion to distinguish between literal historical affirmation and symbol or allegory as well as that which is alleged to be mythical or mythopoetic. The task of distinguishing between the literal and the figurative is clearly not an easy one especially because figurative features are commonly present in every form of writing. It should become increasingly obvious that the suggested rule, "as literal as possible" is not particularly helpful. Although one may sympathize with the apprehension lest the affirmations of history should dissolve into myths, sober reflection upon the character of language will compel the abandonment of any such simple approach to the problems of interpretation. In general it is safe to say only that a particular passage must be evaluated in the light of all the evidence that is pertinent to its elucidation. But in the mind of the evangelical there will be in the foreground the recognition that his view of Scripture carries with it the implication that "the infallible rule of interpretation of Scripture is the Scripture itself". It appears again therefore that the evangelical will be a sound interpreter only as he consistently acknowledges the authority of Scripture.

In the third place, as we take account of the biblical message of the redemption accomplished by God in Christ it is incumbent upon us that we set forth this doctrine in the perspective of the whole of Scripture. Only as it is understood in connection with the revelation of the whole counsel of God will we begin to understand it, not only in terms of its breadth and height and depth, but even in its essential character. It is in Christ that God was reconciling the world unto Himself as it was in a Son that He spoke at the end of these days. But if we are not to impoverish or distort the gospel it is imperative that we recognize that it is God who was reconciling the world unto Himself and it is God who has spoken unto us. There is an important sense indeed in which the message of the Bible is centered in Christ but modern viewpoints which define their position in Christocentric or Christological terms only too often fall far short of measuring up to the God-centered character of the redemption and revelation presented in the Bible. A person who does not hold to the authority of Scripture may not be under compulsion to take account of the whole counsel of God, and may seek to justify a more selective approach, but we evangelicals cannot escape the responsibility bound up with our view of Scripture that we shall seek to lay hold upon its testimony in its entirety.

Finally, there is the matter of eschatology. If we are fully agreed on our doctrine of Scripture but remain as divided as we apparently are on the subject of eschatology, one may gravely question whether our unity is as substantial and basic as we may have supposed. One influential factor that accounts for the present diversity is the lack of progress in the development of sound hermeneutics to which reference has previously been made. Another factor, in my judgment, has been the tendency to assign central significance to peripheral matters and to fail to recognize that which is truly central. To be more specific on this point, I believe, for example, that the interpretation of Revelation 20 has been accorded a place far beyond its relative significance both for the understanding of the book of Revelation as a whole and of the general questions of eschatology. On the other hand, the elemental aspects of eschatology, concerned as they are with the ultimate consummation of the plan of God and the coming of His Kingdom in all its perfection, are often lost sight of or obscured. The result has been tragic impoverishment both theologically and religiously. Thus the cosmic scope and sweep of the divine salvation have been neglected. And the perspective that is gained for the understanding of every aspect of our present life by a proper estimate of the world to come is also blurred. Has not eschatology generally been considered in a fragmentary way with the result that it is isolated from our theology as a whole and is viewed largely in terms of the interpretation of a few passages of Scripture?

At this point also accordingly our belief in the divine authority of Scripture must constrain us to renewed efforts to enter into a larger and more adequate understanding of eschatology. If we are successful in this endeavor we may anticipate not only a far greater meeting of minds than has heretofore been manifest but also a deepening of religious commitment and life as with greater penetration of meaning and intensification of our spirit of worship we exclaim:

"The kingdom of the world is become the kingdom of our Lord, and of his Christ, and he shall reign forever and ever".

From our commitment to the inspiration of Scripture there issues a liberating and energizing force which frees us from bondage to the doctrines and commandments of men. It should also spur us on to lay hold with all our powers upon the Word of God in order that all our thoughts and ways may come under His control.