

BIBLICAL INERRANCY TODAY

This panel discussion was presented with John F. Walvoord as moderator at the seventeenth annual meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society on December 28, 1965. The contribution by Kenneth S. Kantzer will appear next issue.

THE BASIS FOR OUR BELIEF IN INERRANCY

R. LAIRD HARRIS, Ph.D.

Our subject is simply, "Why I believe the Bible." And of course there are many reasons. We use the word "believe," however, not in a general sense. Generally speaking we may believe the reports of the war in Viet Nam without believing them in detail. When we say we believe it we mean we believe it to be true, and true throughout. In short, we believe it to be without error.

It is obvious that this has been the historic Protestant position. The Reformation creeds do not use the terminology of today, yet candid examination has convinced most people that they express what we call Bible inerrancy. The Roman Council of Trent is as explicit on this subject as any Protestant could wish. And the Nicene Fathers who speak on the subject make express statements to the effect that the Scriptures show no real contradiction, but are to be believed whole and entire. Earlier writings are scanty, but Irenaeus can be quoted as saying that "the Scriptures are indeed perfect since they were spoken by the Word of God and his Spirit" (Against Heresies II, 28, 2). And Justin Martyr near the middle of the second century says "I am entirely convinced that no Scripture contradicts another" (Dialogue with Trypho, ch. 65). Such statements are found also in those scanty writings which remain of Polycarp, Ignatius, and Clement—men who actually were contemporaneous with the apostles.

This doctrine of the inerrancy of Scriptures is pervasive, ancient and basic. Why has it been held so universally in all ages? Whatever may be the bases for this belief, they must be strong and powerfully persuasive to Christian hearts and minds.

It is not of small moment that the Bible has also often been disbelieved. Indeed it has almost always been disbelieved by those outside of orthodox Christian faith. The early days had a Cerinthus. The Reformers were troubled by the Socinians. The age of rationalism produced a welter of sceptics. Our own days are more than usually afflicted in that the seats of unbelief are firmly emplaced within the visible church and in particular in the halls of theological learning. None today are

so sceptical as theologians. It is left to them to proclaim not only the mythology of the Bible but the very death of God.

We may learn however from church history that those who are earnest believers in Jesus Christ as Lord are by and large believers also in the Bible. There have been and are exceptions. Some have tried to hold on to the teachings of Jesus while discounting the inerrancy of the Bible. But in general it does not work. The students of such men either go on to denial of Christ as He is revealed in the Scriptures, or they draw back to a more complete and consistent faith. There would seem to be a reason for this situation. It appears that belief in inerrancy is closely associated with a full-orbed Christian faith. And the converse seems also to be one of the lessons of history. Although belief in the Bible is not necessary to salvation, yet Christian faith has great difficulty in maintaining itself without this doctrine. I believe there are reasons for this, and we shall look at them. They concern the bases for our belief in inerrancy.

Calvin, in his *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, long ago set a pattern for our inquiry. At the beginning of his system of theology Calvin states the necessity of a written revelation for men to know God. He declares that there are proofs a-plenty to convince any reasonable person of the truth and divine authority of the Scriptures. But he concludes that these are all the arguments of men and will not convince a single sceptic except when the certainty of it shall be founded on the "internal persuasion of the Holy Spirit." For he says the conviction that Scripture is the word of God "cannot be known without faith" (*Inst.* I.8.13).

Calvin's rational arguments in favor of the Scripture are summed up in the Westminster Confession as "The testimony of the church... the heavenliness of the matter, the efficacy of the doctrine, the majesty of the style, the consent of all the parts, the scope of the whole (which is to give all glory to God) the full discovery it makes of the only way of man's salvation, the many other incomparable excellencies and the entire perfection thereof." I suppose that today we should add the argument from archaeology! But the Confession goes on, "our full persuasion and assurance of the infallible truth, and divine authority thereof is from the inward work of the Holy Spirit bearing witness by and with the Word in our hearts" (ch. 1, sec. 5).

Here, both Calvin, the Westminster Confession and others too leave the subject. This is thought to be the ultimate answer. The Scripture is self-authenticating. This principle is sometimes extended also to the question of canon as in the French Confession of 1559 and in the Systematic Theology of my friend and colleague, Dr. J. Oliver Buswell, Jr.

Hodge on the other hand refers the question of canon to the authority of Christ and not at all to the inner testimony of the Holy Spirit. And he bases the proof of inspiration likewise on the authority of Christ and

on the phenomena of Scripture, almost to the exclusion of the inner testimony.

In my own work on Inspiration and Canonicity I follow Warfield, Hodge, Alexander and others in giving the greatest weight to the authority of Jesus Christ as the basis of inerrancy. However, I do say that this position does not exclude the idea of the testimony of the Holy Spirit when rightly considered as is done I believe both correctly and extensively by A. Kuyper in his *Principles of Sacred Theology*.

It is a remarkable fact that the doctrine of the testimony of the Holy Spirit is not alluded to at all by the writers of the first two centuries. I am not a sufficient student of the Middle Ages to state a flat negative—that the doctrine was not held before the Reformation. But it appears not to have been widely held at least. Augustine was widely quoted as resting the authority of the Gospels on the witness of the church. Calvin takes up this quotation and declares that he only meant that the witness—not the authority—of the church was vital. But it seems likely that the great name of Augustine plus the pretensions of the hierarchy made the church the standard basis of Biblical inerrancy through the Middle Ages. Curiously, this view was not openly espoused by the Council of Trent which contented itself with ascribing inerrancy to the Scriptures because God was their author and because they derived from Christ.

The prominence of the teaching of the testimony of the Holy Spirit in Reformation times is probably due to the fact that questions of authority were under discussion. The Catholics alleged an ecclesiastical authority. The self-authentication of Scripture was a good rebuttal. It should be complemented, however, with that which the early church constantly alleged—the historical evidence of the teaching of Christ.

Papias, for instance, in the fragments remaining of his works, tells how he minutely inquired after the sayings of the Lord from the followers of His disciples. Ignatius too rests all upon the authority of Christ, "When I heard some saying, 'If I do not find it in the ancient Scriptures I will not believe the Gospel,' on my saying to them, it is written, they answered me, 'That remains to be proved.' But to me Jesus is in the place of all that is ancient." (to the Philadelphians, ch. 8). Other such statements could be multiplied. The early believers were not called Christians for nothing. They based all their authority, their hope, their salvation, their duty on Christ. Indeed, one problem in the study of the fathers on Gospel origins is to determine whether their quotations of the words of Christ are authoritative because they come from Him or because they are found in the Gospels. Likely we should say—both. Because no words of Christ of any consequence are quoted outside of our canonical Gospels. But in any event the appeal before the public was to well-authenticated words of the divinely attested Christ.

It is an interesting experience to read through these early fathers from this angle. What is their source of authority? The answer shines on

every page. It is Christ. As Ignatius said in the quotation given above, "His cross, and death, and resurrection and the faith which is by Him are undefiled monuments of antiquity." The apostles are also highly elevated as a complete and closed circle.

But the apostles possess their high authority only in virtue of their relation to the Divine Christ. The Old Testament writings are of course also fully authoritative. But no conflict was felt here because they are the Word of God spoken by God's Spirit and Christ also is God. In short, the Old Testament Scriptures are authoritative because they are from God and the New Testament writings are equally acceptable and found remarkably easy acceptance because in them the incarnate God speaks.

I remind ourselves that this is still a good basis for inerrancy. I do not need to belabor this point for I have done it in print and so have others. One book I have found quite helpful is one by Hugh McIntosh, *Is Christ Infallible and the Bible True?* Warfield has also developed this thought in his *Revelation and Inspiration*, as has Abraham Kuyper in his *Principles of Sacred Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1954 reprint, pp. 428-473). I must point out that this is a basis, a solid basis, and one that even a non-believer can appreciate—though he will naturally not be convinced.

The witness of Christ is plain. Standard verses are John 10:35; Lk. 16:17, 29, 31; Lk. 24:25, 44; Mt. 5:17, etc. Lk. 24 gives Christ's resurrection testimony. Lk. 16:29, 31, speak of the Bible as a more effective witness than a resurrection of the dead would be. Lk. 16:17 declares that the Bible is true to the smallest letter. Mt. 5:17 is probably a parallel passage and declares that the book—the Law and the Prophets which is a standard New Testament designation of the Jewish canon—is perfect to the jot and tittle. Clearly verbal inspiration was taught by Christ. Furthermore Jesus' whole attitude to the Old Testament is one of complete acceptance. He believed its prophecies and cited its miracles. He accepted the Mosaic authorship of the Pentateuch, the reality of Adam and Eve, of Jonah, of Noah. Happily it is admitted today that Jesus was no higher critic. The orthodox exegesis of these passages is at least admitted. The question now lies where it ought to lie—shall we accept the teaching of Jesus or no? A. Kuyper in a masterful section shows that to speak of Jesus accommodating Himself to the ideas of the day is now out of the question for a Christian who accepts the moral integrity of Christ. For the modern theologians themselves scorn to accommodate themselves to a Christian public holding older conservative ideas. He concludes, "Either Jesus' view of the Scripture is the true one, and then we should kneel in His presence; or Jesus' view of the Scripture is an enormous mistake, in which case the Rabbi of Nazareth can no longer be the absolute guide along the way of faith" (*op. cit.*, p. 459). Of course modern scepticism has dissolved Jesus still more. If all we know of Jesus is His "thatness", it is of no value to discuss His teaching—but then nothing is of any value anyhow and unbelief wallows deeper in its quicksands. What the answer

of the early church fathers to such ideas would have been is easy to suppose. They would have gone on declaring the facts and giving the evidence not worrying too much about some seed falling on stony ground. For us the basis of inerrancy is clear enough and if some will not see it, we must conclude that the God of this world is still active.

For as Kuyper declares, there is no middle ground. You can not accept Jesus as Lord and be saved while holding that all we know of Him is His "thatness." And if we know more, at once we see that what we know of Him is that He believed in the inerrancy of the Scripture. Thus if we have a regard to consistency we believe in Christ and Biblical inerrancy both—or neither. For the Christian the choice is plain. And Jesus Himself laid this choice before us, "If ye believe not his writings, how shall ye believe my words?" (John 5:47).

I could add greatly to the details of this argument, but there is neither time nor need. The authority of Christ is an adequate basis for belief in Biblical inerrancy. I might say also, by the side, that the statements of Christ are a sufficient definition of the type of inerrancy to be held. This is one explanation of the curious fact mentioned at the start why the historic Christian faith has always included inerrancy but non-Christians just do not really believe the Bible except perhaps in a theoretical impersonal way—a grudging admission without intelligent investigation of the corollaries.

But as mentioned previously, this teaching is not antithetic to the doctrine of the witness of the Holy Spirit. However, this witness must be carefully defined. The Westminster Confession calls it a witness by and with the Word in our hearts. Calvin speaks of it as an opening of the eyes to behold inherent excellencies of the Scripture. Dr. Buswell speaks similarly. Professor John Murray well says, "The internal testimony does not convey to us new truth content" (*The Infallible Word*, "The Attestation of Scripture", Phila: Presbyterian Guardian, 1946, p. 50). There are no new revelations of the Spirit. And neither is this testimony a new work of God making the Bible the Word of God for us *a la* Barth. The Spirit testifies by and with the Bible that it is the Word of God and authoritative because it is from Him.

Can such a testimony witness to inerrancy? If so, would it witness to an inerrant King James Bible? Not if the doctrine is appropriately defined as is done best, I believe, by A. Kuyper (*op. cit.*, p. 557ff.). Briefly, his view is that the Spirit works "gradually and unobserved." First comes the *palingenesis*. But this involves both an acceptance of the greatest of miracles, Christ's resurrection, and a new way of looking at Biblical supernaturalism. At once the offense of the cross is gone. And this miracle of salvation is of a piece with Bible doctrine and specifically with the Gospel records of Christ. Our hearts are strangely warmed by *these* doctrines—and no others. "Thus the veil is gradually being pushed aside,

the eye turns toward the Divine light that radiates from the Scripture, and now our inner *ego sees* its imposing superiority" (*op. cit.*, p. 558). Kuyper mentions the work of brother Christians and even of non-believing antagonists in sharpening the process. Finally of great significance is what we have just said—*this* Christ who thus brings peace and pardon also recommends to us the Scriptures in their minutest detail. Problems with such a view are solved first by a new look from the spiritual angle, then by a greater faith to lay some problems as it were on ice for later light. The help of brother Christian students accounts for more assistance. At last as Kuyper says, "the assurance of his faith on this point is immovably established" (p. 562).

This formulation I believe agrees with the fact that a non-Christian who has not seen the light of the Spirit working on the evangelical history can not appreciate or understand nor accept the Bible as true because he does not accept the Christ of the Bible as his own. It also agrees with the fact that this testimony was not referred to in early times—they had it too, but did not analyze it. They simply included this teaching in their understanding of what it meant to believe on Christ, as the Westminster Confession puts it in chapter 14 on Saving Faith, "a Christian believes to be true whatsoever is revealed in the Word, for the authority of God Himself speaketh therein."