MAINTAINING THE WITNESS TO INERRANCY

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Standing in the shadow of the impending cross, Jesus spoke to the disciples rather freely about the historical developments which the Church would face. One element of the picture which he sketched for them was the certainty of defection from the Gospel by many. "When the Son of Man cometh, shall he find faith on the earth?" he inquired.

Some have seen in this word, using the definite article as it does in the Greek, a reference to *the faith,* the historic faith of the Church, elsewhere alluded to by St. Paul and Peter. Others have seen in the word only a reference to *faith,* to personal faith in Christ. Such qualities of course call for the use of the definite article in the Greek.

Perhaps Jesus was purposely cryptic here. For personal faith in the evangelical sense could not long outlast the evangel itself. But however we deal with this matter of shading, here was a somber foreshadowing of the great apostasy of Christendom as the time for Christ's return should draw near. This falling away the apostles likewise predicted.

Because the Christian faith centers in a person, Christ, resting upon the basis of certain historical understandings about that person, and because these historical understandings depend upon the Holy Scriptures, it is only natural that apostasy should have reference to these understandings, and it is just as inevitable that it should affect negatively this faith. Such an attack involves first the realm of the intellect and then, very certainly, the realm of the will.

Thus the educational institutions, founded in the first instance by the Church for its purposes of faith based upon truth, have been the prime locus for this attack. The nineteenth century saw the European universities serving as the intellectual arsenal for the destructive higher criticism. This defection was soon mirrored in the outlook of the American colleges, until it can almost be said that none of our early colleges, founded for the propagation of the faith as they were, now retains this sacred depositum.

We who today are active in colleges and seminaries of newer provenance holding this same faith may well ask what assurance we can have that the very institutions for which we labor will not be sucked into the same drift. To be sure many of us—yes, all of us, I trust—are determined that this shall not happen. But our tenure is short and the question is long.

The best we can do is to serve our own generation by the will of God. But our labors will be swept away unless prayerfully, humbly, and in the fear of God we at least recognize what is happening in the realm of

education and intellectual activity, and make thoughtful provisions calculated to conserve "the faith once committed."

Just as in the Garden of Eden man's obedience hung upon his certainty as to whether God had really spoken, and just as he fell in the matter of obedience as a result, partially, of his involvement in a finely spun semantic inquiry into the factuality and reasonableness of what God may have said, so today the prime point of attack and the cardinal matter in spiritual decline is the question whether God has really spoken, and whether the Bible is what he has said and caused to be written.

Certainly our schools will not keep true in their espousal of the historic church's estimate of Scripture unless we do what intelligent people can do and take what care faithful people can take to secure this. In analyzing the situation, each for his own setting, let us at the outset ask what it is that inclines devout intellectuals to weaken and relax their insistence upon the inerrancy of Scripture.

First may well be mentioned the entertainment of a faulty idea as to what is implied by the concept of inerrancy. Most Bible believers are simple in their faith; most of them have not the slightest awareness of the problems which are being raised in the field of Biblical studies. And those who do read enough to stumble upon these problems naturally hear them stated by critical attackers. While refusing to abandon at once their adherence to Biblical inerrancy, yet they often incautiously and perhaps unconsciously accept the critical statement of what inerrancy implies.

And so there is hazy thinking, for example, as to the specific application of the claim of inerrancy to the original writings only, and why this is done. There is often a failure to keep in mind that the concept does not have full reference to copies and translations. Proper consideration is not given to possible corruptions and inadequacies of the text as these may affect difficult passages and particularly when the precarious Hebrew transmission of number is involved. Evangelicals let themselves be drawn along in the applying of vigorous mathematical canons—so foreign to the orientals through whom and for whom the Scriptures were written—in the consideration of quotations, universal statements both affirmative and negative, and in matters of chronology and sequence. Again there is the temptation to recognize as valid the allegation of "error" in figurative speech and in figures of speech which are even in common use today—as "inaccurate" as ever, but with no loss of semantic dependability.

Over the years the most literalistic, unfeeling, and, I must insist, impossible interpretations of Scripture are those advanced by scholars unfriendly to the church doctrine of Scripture inerrancy. And when evangelicals are willing to accept this framework and simply to add up the figures fed to them by liberal scholarship, any refusal to accept the liberal outcome tends to be precarious and shortlived. A faulty understanding as to what is meant by scriptural inerrancy lists high among the causes for defection, I feel.

Another important factor lies in man's basic gregariousness. Adam

joined Eve in disobeying God, not because he had been overcome intellectually as had been the case with his less stable and more emotional mate, but probably because he did not want to oppose and separate himself from her. To have stood with God would apparently have meant to stand alone and to leave the one he loved standing alone.

The school child would rather do anything than to be observably different from his group. So would the college student. And this is a strong tendency also with the scholar. The certain knowledge that one stands apart from the great mass of scholarship in his own field of professional activity is like hydraulic pressure upon the one who stands apart. It almost certainly impels those in the tiny minority to seek bridges and relief valves and reconciliations. And should it later be realized that these are not real solutions, it is almost easier to let them go and to join the majority.

The principle of democracy has been so thoroughly sold to us that it is hard for us really to believe that upon any given point a large number of very intelligent people can be dead wrong, particularly when they have some stake in the conclusion. And many young liberals today are content to base their position simply upon the indications that "this is the way things are going." Change is hailed as advance, regardless of its content, just as though change were an independent entity. And persons are urged not to fight history but to help make history. This atmosphere may well be the most important element leading to the abandonment of the idea of scriptural inerrancy. The points of view of our fellows are very influential with us all.

The opposite side of the same coin is a weakening of our consciousness of God. If there is anything that will make an Elijah face a God-forsaking king and nation, or will cause an Isaiah to show God's people their sin, or that will make a fenced city and a brazen wall out of a Jeremiah, it is a vital and continuing vision of God. One who knows God has little difficulty in believing him, in going from faith to faith. Such a person will also maintain a much keener sense of the error of sinful man, who has left God's activity entirely out of his reckoning of truth.

Such a person will not be so greatly concerned to build bridges of agreement and intellectual reconciliation with the thinking of his time, nor to suggest theories to make God's work easier for him. It will not be so hard for a real prophet to stand alone or with but few. A great cause of the defection and presently concerns us has been the loss of vital spiritual contact with God. This is always a hazard in even Christian intellectual preoccupation.

Finally, in this discussion of factors leading to a weakened grasp on the concept of inerrancy, I would mention the administrative failure to insist upon its importance. This is not a primary reason, but it grows from the administrator's natural tendency to make his work easier by refusing to multiply items upon which he must insist. After all, he must deal with

those affected by the primary influences already discussed. There is the temptation to yield to his "itching ears", his knowledge of what academic colleagues want, and to make no issue. Boards of Trustees often reason in the same way.

I would like now to cross over to the positive side and to consider with you the question as to whether there are practical measures which seem to offer some promise of stability at this point. As a basis for this part of the paper we contacted the Christian colleges and seminaries on a list which has been in my office for some time. It was felt that from these we might glean some suggestions which would be helpful to us all.

We sent to all of these institutions a brief questionnaire asking the following questions:

1. Do you require the signing of a doctrinal questionnaire by prospective teachers? (If yes, will you please send me a copy.)

   If yes, please answer the following:

   Do you require satisfactory answers to all questions?

   Do you require affirmative reply on the question (however stated) on Scriptural inerrancy?

   Do you have a different standard for theological, as compared with non-theological, faculty? If affirmative, please explain briefly.

2. If the answer to (1) was negative, would you mind telling us what precautions you take to be sure of the theological dependability of new faculty members. Do you insist upon their adherence to belief in the inerrancy of Scripture?

3. Will you please send me a copy of your institution's statement of faith.

Mostly on the basis of the replies received I shall attempt to derive two or three advices for the Christian college or seminary which it is hoped will have some applicability to the discouraging factors already considered.

First let us go back to the item of failure of the controlling board to insist on the importance of maintaining a firm institutional stand upon the inerrancy of Scripture. Our questionnaires were sent out to fifty-one colleges and nine seminaries, of which number forty colleges and eight seminaries replied. The fact that all without exception possessed written statements of their doctrinal position and that many of these were said to have been officially adopted by the trustees of the institution or by its sponsoring church lends reasonableness to the judgment that the careful formulation of a written doctrinal position is important enough to claim the attention of the governing body of every Christian college and seminary.

Two or three of the institutions neglected to send in a copy of their articles of faith, but of those which were sent to us almost all contained a statement concerning the authority of Scripture.

Now we move on to an examination of the various formulations on the dependability and authority of Scripture. As might be expected, there is a wide spread in these statements. Many of them do not actually express faith in the full inerrancy of Scripture, even though the institutions themselves are undoubtedly evangelical in the sense of insisting upon the validity of the principal doctrines of the historic church. Doubtless the failure to affirm inerrancy or infallibility for Scripture sometimes arises from a deliberate decision of the governing board or denomination not to go this far. In other instances, judging from the comments of the officers submitting this material, those in authority feel they have asserted the inerrancy of Scripture when as a matter of fact they have not done so.

Endeavoring to discover some pattern in these statements concerning the Bible, we note that there are two kinds of affirmation whose intent is reasonably clear. At the one hand there is that group which seems on any reasonable interpretation to be saying that the Scriptures were divinely and uniquely kept free from error and that they themselves *constitute* the Word of God written. The terms used by the declarations in this group include such qualifications as the following: "Free from error as originally given"; "wholly without admixture of error of any kind"; "inerrant in the original writings"; "infallibly written"; "the inspired, the only infallible, authoritative Word of God" (the NAE statement); "the verbal inspiration of the Bible". Seventeen of the statements seem clearly to belong in this group.

At the other end of the spectrum (excluding the two or three colleges who make no reference to the Scriptures in their platform) are those formulations which seem to be trying to say that the Holy Scriptures *contain* the word of God or the will of God or enough of God's word and will to be sufficient for our salvation. There are just two which fall at once in this group. One of these declares faith in "the inspired Word of God as expressed in the Bible"; the other declares that the Bible is "a sufficient guide for man's salvation".

In a mediating position between these, but probably intending to belong in one or the other of the primary groups just mentioned, are two groups expressing adherence respectively (1) to the plenary inspiration of Scripture or (2) to the divine inspiration of Scripture. The latter group is characterized by such phrases as the following: "the inspired Word of God", "given by divine inspiration", "given in inspiration of God", "written by inspiration of the Holy Spirit". There are ten in this group. Let us give them a bit of attention to see in which of the two primary groups they may belong.

Consider first the statements which express adherence to the plenary inspiration of Scripture of which there are thirteen. It is hard to see how the word *plenary*, "extending to all parts", can logically mean less than full divine responsibility for the whole of Scripture. Hodge and Warfield used it in this sense, attaching to it the adjective *verbal*. The Methodist theologian Pope uses the word to describe his own view of Scrip-

ture. He avoids the word *verbal,* apparently preferring a dynamic methodology, but seems to exclude the idea of error in the Scripture.

Two of the institutions whose statements espouse the plenary view clearly show by further explication that they believe the Scriptures to have been free from error as given. One of these declares that the canonical books "as originally given are plenarily inspired and free from all error in the whole or in part." The other declares belief in "the plenary, verbal inspiration of the original writings of the Scriptures, and that as thus given they were wholly without error of any kind." Certainly these two, and possibly others in the plenary group, intend to be espousing the concept of scriptural inerrancy.

The greater number in the plenary group would, however, not appear to intend to be classified as holding to inerrancy. This can be inferred from the accompanying explication. Most of these statements averring belief in the plenary inspiration of Scripture go ahead to affirm the "sufficiency concept" contained in the Thirty-nine Articles of the Church of England and from there taken up by historic Methodism and later by newer bodies in the Methodist tradition. Our own Wesleyan Methodist Church until ten or fifteen years ago merely affirmed the sufficiency of the Holy Scriptures for salvation, although almost to a man we believed in inerrancy.

Characteristic of the plenary group now in view are statements such as the following: "The plenary inspiration of the Scriptures, their essential unity, and their inviolable authority"; "the divine, plenary inspiration of the Holy Scriptures as the Word of God, authentic, authoritative, and the only sufficient rule of faith and practice"; "the plenary inspiration of the Holy Scriptures...given by divine inspiration, inerrantly revealing *the will of God concerning us in all things necessary to our salvation*" (emphasis added). On thoughtful consideration these would seem to fall short of being an affirmation of scriptural inerrancy in the usually accepted sense.

I once asked one of the school men whose statement of faith was of this kind whether in his opinion a person of neo-orthodox views could subscribe to this statement. I agreed with him when on careful thought he replied in the affirmative. He went on to say that sometimes a less strict requirement would, as a practical matter, take off artificial pressure and produce better results in actual practice. But even as I heard this I could not help thinking of a comment which had come to me from a certain conference where there had been a good deal of amazement generated over the existentialist views expressed by a professor from this same college.

To summarize, perhaps the majority in the plenary group should not be reckoned without qualification among the adherents to straight scriptural inerrancy, although many individuals among them would quickly choose so to be listed.

Now to note quickly the other mediating group adhering to statements affirming the divine inspiration of Scripture. There are fewer clues here as to whether inerrancy is meant to be implied. Fifty years ago divine inspiration of course implied inerrancy. Divine inspiration, theopneusty, was referred to the writings rather than the writers (See II Tim. 3:16). It was the Scripture, the Writing, which was to be received as God-breathed. And what God had breathed was understood without further qualification to be free from error.

As is well known, the semantic situation regarding this term has been greatly altered. Suffice it to say that this expression no longer connotes accuracy, freedom from error. Nor is it any longer an effective barrier to persons who for some reason wish to teach in an evangelical institution while not holding the view of scriptural inerrancy.

It is especially sad when, because of the play in this word, an evangelical institution is quietly moved away from its original orthodox position. I asked a fine Christian laymen, chairman of the board of such an institution, whether he considered that the item in their statement of faith declaring that the Scriptures were inspired by God meant that the declarations of the Bible are all to be taken as true in the ordinary sense of that word. He replied warmly in the affirmative. But I knew that the students in that school were being taught that, while the sacred writers were helped of God in their spiritual teaching, when they spoke of science or history they were left to themselves and spoke as men. And a liberal scholar, acquainted with the institution, told me with satisfaction that in his opinion the school had shifted greatly from its earlier orthodox position while still affirming the divine inspiration of Scripture.

Perhaps what has been said on this point will suffice to emphasize the importance of having a statement of faith which, if intended to affirm Scriptural inerrancy, comes as near to doing so as is possible, words meaning what they do today.

I want, as my next suggestion, to make reference to the need for courageous, wise, and yet kindly administrative surveillance at this point with some attention to questions of method. Should the prospective faculty member be asked to indicate in writing his adherence to the doctrinal position of the institution, including the one on inerrancy? Twenty-seven of the colleges and five of the seminaries require a written statement, while twelve of the colleges and two of the seminaries do not so require.

Included among the colleges who do not require a written statement are several who pay scant attention to doctrinal beliefs when they employ new faculty members. A few, however, make use of written questions and commitments requiring unqualified verbal assent to these when interviewing prospective faculty members. Theological seminaries, with their smaller faculties and infrequent turnover, sometimes rely wholly upon the personal interview.

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affirmative response to the institution's doctrinal attitude on the Scriptures. We have already seen that several of these doctrinal statements seem to fall short of affirming effectively the inerrancy of Scripture.

Should a written statement be sought? I am inclined to believe it, particularly when the faculty exceed a dozen or so. During these days, considerations of tenure are well established in the thinking of teachers. And recollections of exactly what a prospective teacher was made to understand concerning doctrinal requirements during the employment interview can become quite faded. The exchange of a single word can make the difference between black and white. A signed questionnaire is desirable, I feel.

The wise administrator soon realizes the shiftiness of this whole area. Here is a teacher affirming that the dating of Daniel is quite optional. Yet he has indicated his belief in inerrancy and still holds to it when questioned. He can see no incompatibility in the two positions.

It seems to me that the effort of the administrator, when confronted with teaching inconsistent with the school position, should be to lead the young teacher to a full realization of what is involved in his pronouncement, to point out the reasonableness of the orthodox position, and without pressing for an immediate resolution, to allow time consistent with respect for another's personality and will. But faithfulness requires a return to and final solution of the trouble spots. Administrative attention is indispensable to continuing doctrinal faithfulness.

Finally, it seems to me that spiritual refreshing and renewal is quite necessary if the institution is to keep on its course. I do not doubt that not a few institutions which, in terms of their statements of faith, almost have no reasonable expectancy of evangelical persistence, are in actual fact warmly evangelical and even orthodox, and this because of frequent or continuous spiritual revival or renewal. And even doctrinal faithfulness, however loyal, when reduced to mere proposition, has little continuing appeal. It degenerates to cold, gray literalism.

Surely I need not labor this point—enough only to state it. Surely we all agree that, as someone has said, the Holy Spirit is in the final analysis the great conservator of orthodoxy. God grant that we here today, and our successors if the Lord tarries, may be helped of God to be faithful enough, and loving enough, and wise enough to keep the faith.

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