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'What Scripture Says, God Says'

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Christianity is a religion of revelation. The God of Christianity is a God who spoke the command, 'Let there be light', and there was light; who revealed himself to a chosen people, giving them a written law, the observance or neglect of which would determine their future history — a history that would still be punctuated and illuminated by confrontation with the verbal 'Word of the Lord'. Finally, having 'spoken to our forefathers at many times and in various ways, he has spoken to us by his Son', the Living Word. God's revelation, then, is central to Christianity: central because, uniquely among the world's belief-systems, Christianity is built upon grace, upon the divine initiative, the epic of God stepping in to redeem the lost, the dead, shining his light into the darkness of our fallen and distorted thinking, the shepherd seeking the lost sheep, calling us that we may respond and follow.

And certainly Christ emphasized clearly (if the Gospels can be trusted in the very least) the centrality, reliability, and unique authority of the biblical revelation. He was born among people whose history and behaviour were shaped by a written revelation: and though Jesus used his messianic authority to challenge much that was apparently sacrosanct, this fundamental orientation he endorsed unflinchingly. Nor was he committed to the Old Testament in a merely general way, as if it were the container, the dispensable verbal embodiment, of some transcendental 'Living Word'. Rather, he declared uncompromisingly that 'till heaven and earth pass away' — though cultures may rise and fall! — 'not an iota, not a dot, shall pass from the law until all is accomplished' (Matt. 5:18).

Faced with Pharisaic traditionalism or Sadducee anti-supernaturalistic rationalism, his response was continually, 'Have you not read . . .' (Matt. 12:3, 5, 19:4, 21:16, 42, Mark 12:26): he challenges the rebellious Jewish theologians, 'Are you not in error because you do not

know the Scriptures . . .?' (Mark 12:24). In Matt. 19:4ff., he quotes a comment by the narrator of Genesis (or possibly Adam) as an utterance of God himself. It is on his authority, therefore, that we can affirm with Augustine, 'What Scripture says, God says'.¹

Prophecy, likewise, is not merely a humanly-flawed veil for timeless truth; rather, it is God's Word whose fulfilment governs the unfolding of future events. Continually Christ pointed out how his life, death and resurrection were to be in total conformity with OT prophecy (e.g. Luke 4:18ff., Matt. 26:24, Luke 22:37, 24:25-27, 44-48).² In Gethsemane he reminds Peter that twelve legions of angels were available to him, 'but how then would the Scriptures be fulfilled?' (Matt. 26:54). Biblical prophecy has no capacity for error: 'the Scripture must be fulfilled' (Mark 14:49).³

Thus his insistence that 'the Scripture cannot be broken' (John 10:35) goes beyond its ethical and doctrinal content: and it extends to biblical history. His sayings are frequently concerned with the very passages that have made nineteenth century liberals quail with embarrassment! 'As *were* the days of Noah, so *will be* the coming of the Son of Man' (Matt. 24:37). Sodom, a city that might conceivably have 'remained until this day', will be judged alongside Capernaum, and it '*shall be* more tolerable' for Sodom (Matt. 11:23-24). Jonah's audience in Nineveh will arise in the judgment with the current religious gurus of the Pharisees and condemn them (Luke 11:32). It is hard to see how these statements could have the same force if they were equivalent to 'As *were* the days of King Lear . . .', 'Camelot would have remained . . .', 'Macbeth will arise at the judgment . . .', etc. 'As the prophet Jonah was three days in the fish's belly, so the Son of Man was to be three days in the heart of the earth' (Matt. 12:40): the one event is as historical as the other. How meaningless Christ's remark would be if Jonah was a figure on a par with Merlin or Hercules: the suggestion would be that the resurrection had a similar status. Rather, Christ's repeated reference to Jonah surely assumes that the repentance of Nineveh was an historical event by which his hearers would do well to measure themselves.

For him, Scripture is God's Word without reservation, without adulteration. If we are his followers, our submission to its authority and reliability must be equally unqualified.

Two Alternatives

Such, surely, is the basis for the evangelical affirmation of Scripture: not that we can prove it point by point, or that there is currently a

favourable scholarly consensus, or that we have videotapes of Eve taking the fruit, Noah entering the ark and Jonah emerging from the whale. Rather, our commitment to the full authority of Scripture is a part of our obedience to Christ, our conviction that he knows all things and he knows better than we do. While there is a place for apologetics, our business is not to 'prove' biblical infallibility to non-Christians, so much as to challenge them to expose themselves to it; indeed, to preach it. (There are probably few better ways of removing doubts about the Bible's inspiration than by demonstrating its relevance in thorough and enthusiastic exposition.)

Logically, this must be so. Many of the events with which Scripture is concerned — the Fall, Abraham's offering of Isaac, the giving of the law, the feeding of the 5000, the parousia — are amenable neither to verification nor falsification. A deeper question is at stake: which is to be the final judge, Scripture or our contemporary opinions? Are we to correct Scripture by what we (at this moment) consider reasonable? Or do we allow our limited, twentieth-century European thinking to be corrected by the eternal Word?

Marxists, of course, are highly sceptical of 'commonsense reasonableness', pointing out that it can often be the depository of unexamined prejudices and assumptions. And certainly what appears 'reasonable' to one era may appear questionable or even absurd to another. The innate inferiority of women, the gross folly of teaching the lower classes to read, the institution of slavery — all seemed reasonable enough not long ago. How then can we get outside our twentieth century prejudices without a sure foothold in something that transcends cultural parochialism? Even scientific viewpoints change: cosmology changes. Academic fashions rise and fall. Moral attitudes change too: attitudes to divorce, sexuality, abortion. If the Bible's reliability is to be subject to the approval of our latest opinions, then we cannot speak with confidence as mouthpieces of the God who sees from beyond our uncertainties: we will be blown around by every breeze of intellectual style. The church will be modishly conservative and anti-communist in one decade, modishly liberal and socially concerned in the next, as Ellul points out. Without an authoritative revelation, we will have certainty neither in our doctrine nor in our ethics.

When Paul reminds the Corinthians 'in what terms I preached to you the Gospel', there is a heavy emphasis that what happened was 'in accordance with the Scriptures' (1 Cor. 15:1-4). God speaking through Scripture determines what exactly is the Gospel (which is why agreement on scriptural authority is an important presupposition to cooperation in evangelism. Only on that basis can the whole church, from its youngest members upwards, proclaim with joyful certainty,

'Thus says the Lord.' Opinions are not enough when salvation is at stake! Only if our teaching and action are based on a trustworthy Bible can we be certain that they are more than our own bright ideas; free from any error caused by its cultural setting, and only then will we go confidently against the fashion of our particular decade. Prophetic critique and radical holiness are built on the certainty that 'this is the Word of the Lord'.

The Undiluted Word

How such a view of biblical authority is best described is an open question. 'Inerrancy' is the word in the limelight in current debate in the USA.⁴ Oliver Barclay has argued for the advantages of 'infallibility';⁵ the IFES doctrinal basis has 'entire trustworthiness'; Ramsay Michaels prefers 'verbal inspiration'.⁶ Packer defines 'infallible' and 'inerrant' as meaning that

we may not (i) deny, disregard, or arbitrarily relativize anything that the writers teach, nor (ii) discount any of the practical implications for worship and service which their teaching carries, nor (iii) cut the knot of any problem of Bible harmony, factual or theological, by allowing ourselves to assume that the writers were not necessarily consistent with themselves or with each other.⁷

And this, surely, is the essence of the evangelical position. We reject any reductionist statement such as 'the Bible *is* not the Word of God, it *contains* the Word of God'; and any notion of a 'canon within the canon': we cannot see that human reason is competent to make such distinctions. We affirm the Bible and the whole Bible.

Above all, this is a practical matter. It is an affirmation that no matter how crucial the issue, we will not reject the biblical imperatives on the grounds that they are culture-bound, that that was 'only Paul' (although we may have to search and pray to understand their contemporary application). And that by God's grace we will seek to avoid bending Scripture to make it say what we want to hear. Likewise, we will try to avoid the kind of examination of a controversial issue (e.g. homosexuality) that attempts only to show that the biblical references are ambiguous (which for practical purposes means silent), and then decides the issues on the basis of other data: clearing Scripture out of the way to make room for our own opinions. The crucial test of our submission to God's Word is when it says something we do not want to hear. Then the difference between a full affirmation of scriptural authority, and a use of the Bible controlled at crisis point by human reason, becomes apparent. This may be illustrated from Stephen T.

Davis' book *The Debate About The Bible*. Davis is honest enough to follow the logic of his position through to this point:

... the whole community of Christian believers helps me to decide what I will believe, whether or not there is compelling reason to reject some biblical claim. For me this does not occur often, but it does occur occasionally. It has never yet occurred on a matter of faith or practice, and ... I hope it never will ... I believe that the Bible is or ought to be authoritative for every Christian ... unless and until he encounters a passage which after careful study and for good reasons he cannot accept ... (pp.76, 117).

The problems are obvious: even supposing the voice of the 'whole community' could be located church history shows how far it can go astray. Presumably Davis would have us side with the prophetic minority when it does so. But then there is no sense in which we are 'under authority'; there is no control to set against the secret machinations of our sin-tainted reason. Our opinions would have the final say.

Our rejection of any concept of a 'canon within the canon' must rule out the kind of approach taken by one contributor to the recent *New Testament Interpretation* symposium who argued that not only did Jesus not speak a particular saying in Matthew, but it represents 'a later acceptance of attitudes which Jesus himself had resisted', connected with 'the Pharisaic membership and theological influence within the church' (p.168). That is, the Bible is giving us a totally unreliable picture in this instance of what Jesus taught. It is separating commitment to Christ from commitment to Scripture — but straight-away the word 'Christ' is in danger of contentlessness: we ourselves will pick and choose within the Gospels according to our preferences, constructing a Christ who has done what we think likely. We are perilously close to making an idolatrous God in our own image: just as nineteenth century liberalism drifted into a near-panteism that refused to believe in a God of judgment. We need the Lord to speak to us, to 'rebuke and correct' us as he shows us just what he is like (cf. 2 Tim. 3:16), challenging us when our picture is too small.

To set aside the divine guarantee of the reliability of the Gospel records increases massively our capacity for subjectivism. And so much is at stake. 'Every one who hears these words of mine and does not do them will be like a foolish man who built his house upon the sand', Jesus told his hearers; 'the word that I have spoken will be his judge on the last day.' New Testament reliability matters!

Still, the prime area where a 'canon within in a canon', selected by human judgment, is currently advocated is biblical history, which serves to demonstrate what a curious thing theological fashion is. Not long ago the emphasis was all on the 'God who acts' in mighty deeds

throughout salvation-history: and evangelicals were having to demonstrate how, biblically, God's Word prepares for God's deed and vice versa, how verbal revelation does not militate against personal relationship with God but is the vehicle of it, etc. Now in liberal evangelical circles, the boot is on the other foot: we are told we must affirm that God has spoken, about salvation and ethics, but it is less important to affirm that he actually *acted* to save his people. Thus, a wedge is driven between the Word and the event: God promises both judgment and deliverance, but we are cautious about claiming that these things have actually occurred at any given point.

4004 and All That

This approach may be conveniently illustrated from David Winter's recent paperback, *But That I Can Believe*. Winter (who, we should add, is a man who has rendered yeoman's service for the Gospel) is aiming in undoubted good faith to help 'orthodox Christians' troubled by doubt by showing that they can 'believe that the Bible is the inspired Word of God, from start to finish, and yet reject ideas of biblical infallibility over matters of history and cosmology.' He feels that 'many of the things' that doubters have 'found so incredible in the Bible are peripheral to' the truth of salvation.

But a lot gets to be peripheral as the book progresses. The historicity of Adam and Eve is, predictably, 'irrelevant' (51), and the Tower of Babel 'quite obviously . . . is not history' (52). Sections of Numbers, Joshua, Judges and Kings follow suit: the Old Testament is historically factual only in patches. At the beginning of the Gospels 'the discrepancies . . . are enormous' (56), though the ones he lists don't seem to be, consisting largely of what one writer states and another omits. 'The evidence is overwhelming' (what evidence is a little unclear) that the Magi and the flight into Egypt are 'poetic elaboration' (63). The miracles, or 'signs' that John recorded 'that you may believe' (John 20:30,31) are not necessarily to be taken literally (92,93).

Nor is Winter an isolated voice: several writers at present are arguing that Bible narratives are only historically reliable when directly 'salvific', directly concerned with salvation — whichever those may be. Winter distinguishes between 'history that conveys spiritual truth and history that is irrelevant to it' (82). These are not easy distinctions to make: one might argue that the Genesis narratives are as clearly concerned with salvation and spiritual truth as anything in the Bible.

The whole approach is inherently reductionist, of course, and leaves us impoverished. It is true of literature generally that to simplify a

great book to a single theme is to emasculate it. Only as we stand back and see it as a whole do individual parts — that choice of vocabulary, this deceptively simple image — become significant: and then, if the writer is good enough, we will dig into all the odd corners that remain to find their place. Not unless we are convinced that we have mastered all a book has to offer can we classify any of it as dispensable or merely circumstantial. In John's Gospel, for example, we will be the losers if we fail to notice the thematic significance of the feasts referred to in the narrative: these minor chronological details might seem irrelevant but certainly convey 'spiritual truth'. The more we study Scripture, indeed, the more it begins to look as if 'all Scripture is . . . profitable for teaching'. In that case the reliability of biblical historical narrative must be affirmed as a whole.⁸

But one suspects that this criterion is problematic. Some of these writers are not apparently intending to affirm the historicity of all passages that are *concerned with* salvation (in its widest sense, one trusts: narrow definitions of salvation are rightly unpopular these days). Rather the criterion seems to be — or under pressure tends to become — one whereby we need only affirm historicity *where the plan of salvation would collapse without it*. Winter follows his distinction about conveying spiritual truth by saying that 'The crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus and his ascension to the Father clearly fall in this category, because they guarantee doctrines of the faith which are central to our salvation' (82-83). Not all liberal evangelicals would follow Winter in affirming the ascension, alas, and Winter's own statement has disturbing implications. It suggests that passages whose historicity must necessarily be affirmed are very few. Most of these writers will in practice defend a great deal more besides but the logic of their position is ominous.

Perhaps we should learn from what has happened in Catholicism since Vatican II. B. C. Butler, for example, stresses that the truth in Scripture that was 'without error' was . . . that 'relevant to God's saving purpose summed up in Christ', and, as Wells comments,

The point he is making is that many truths of science and history have no part to play in our salvation . . . But Gregory Baum has trimmed this core even further. To be saved, he says, we need to know exceedingly little: exceedingly little, then, is inerrantly taught in Scripture.⁹

Liberal evangelicals have not gone that far,¹⁰ but it is not clear that they have formulated a consistent approach to Scripture that will preserve them from an increasing withdrawal from biblical historicity.

From History to Poetry

Recently, a few writers have begun presenting biblical narrative passages as 'poetry' or 'story', intending to preserve their doctrinal content without defending their historicity. But biblical history is not so easily separable from doctrine as this. And Christian doctrine is not a collection of Hellenistic abstractions, it is in good measure about history. Unlike, say, Hinduism, Christianity is emphatically an historical religion. The good news that Paul proclaimed 'as of first importance' is that Christ historically died and rose again 'according to the Scriptures' (1 Cor. 15:3,4). If Christ be not risen, as a matter of historical fact, says Paul, 'we are to be pitied more than all men' (v.19). Christianity is not about myths. The apostle Peter knew the difference between myth and history and wanted his readers to be sure that his account of the Mount of Transfiguration was the latter and not the former (2 Pet. 1:16). The 'spiritual truth' many Bible passages convey is that the things they mention actually occurred: these are the ways that God acted in historical reality.

To the evangelical the crucial point is Christ's attitude to the Old Testament narratives. But Winter's criteria for recognizing 'poetry' deserve critical attention. For it seems all too likely that he often assumes the original authors were writing 'poetry' when there is a miracle in view. Certainly it is the more supernaturally-inclined OT sections that get termed 'magical' and hence (whether or not there is any sign of poetic structure) 'poetry'. As Winter notes himself, our attitude towards miracle narratives tends to be controlled by what sort of thing one expects God to do (85). But once again, those expectations will be finally determined either by Scripture or by our culture's opinions. We should be cautious about using the latter as a basis in asserting what God would not have done.

(In passing, it seems possible that this is really the hesitancy many people have about the historicity of Jonah. The question of a 'great fish' being 'prepared' to swallow a prophet is really a question about the nature of God: is God really the kind of God who breaks into history for the sake of a prophet's education, 'preparing' a marine creature for this purpose? Does he really value the laws of nature less than our spiritual maturity, is he so intimately in control of events that he brings about the kind of coincidence whereby the prophet is swallowed, and then, in answer to prayer, vomited out on dry land? Or is the 'problem with Jonah' more that we have been brainwashed by our culture into preferring a distant God, a safely predictable God, not a God who (on rare occasions — Jonah's experience is unique in Scripture) can break into history with glorious and majestic abandon?)

Winter suggests that the Gospel miracles are more likely to be historical than those in the OT because they are 'miracles *with* nature rather than against it' (93). But does it make any difference to our Creator God whether he is speeding up a natural process or suspending the laws he made and doing something radically new? Or is it just that we find the miracles 'with nature' easier to swallow? (Perhaps deep down we feel that if God made a 'long day' as in Joshua, he was in danger of upsetting the universe?) That is a fact about our twentieth century psychology, not about the power of God.

Winter also refers to 'the way they' (the OT miracles) 'are related' and the 'absence of reliable historical points of reference': but is there any difference between the way that, say, the axehead miracle is related in 2 Kings 6 and the account of Jehu's *coup d'etat* in 2 Kings 10? And what is a 'reliable historical point of reference' — the connection with Syrian monarchs in the various miracle narratives in 2 Kings, perhaps? Criteria like these leave too much room for subjectivity. But actually, says Winter, these aren't the real questions;¹¹ the real issue is, '“What did the writer intend?” With many of these saga-like narratives I have little doubt that the writer's primary concern was to illustrate the power or purpose of God rather than to document historical events' (92). This is a false either/or. Winter seems to believe that these stories illustrate the truth that God *can* and *does* deliver a whole nation by a means as small as one man (Samson is the immediate context), but that he didn't actually *do* it in Samson's time. But surely the illustration makes much more sense if it records actual historical events? If such divine deliverances occur, should we not expect the Bible to record them? Otherwise, what do the doctrines mean in historical terms?

The same problem occurs in his treatment of Genesis, where he attacks the belief in 'a literal Garden of Eden, a literal Adam and Eve, a literal temptation and Fall' and describes the doctrine that 'Adam and Eve, the fruit and the serpent, are part of the historical record of the planet' as 'nonsense' (114). But here the heartaches begin: Winter still holds to the biblical answer to the problem of evil, and writes elsewhere, "The "Fall" is central to any adequate understanding of the Bible . . . Man was created good, but a free moral agent, and by his own choice has declined to obey God and instead pursued his own ends' (87). But has this happened in history? If not, how can it adequately explain how a good God permitted the existence of a flawed universe — and as the problem then goes back to the Creation, what does that do to our doctrine of God? Or else the Fall actually occurred — which involves a literal Fall, and, if we believe in the devil, a literal temptation. And it makes at least as much sense to believe that the Fall

occurred to the first genuine 'man' ('Adam', after all, merely means 'Man', and 'Eve', 'mother of all living') as anything else. So it will not do to say that the Bible is speaking 'not of scientific or historical facts, but of ultimate, theological truth' (50). The 'theological truth' is about history: 'Man' ('Adam') was (historically) created perfect, he made an historical decision, he historically fell. If this is not history, it is not 'ultimate, theological truth' either.

A final example may be taken from Winter's treatment of the Gospels. Matthew's infancy narratives, he tells us, are 'structured to present an argument (that in Jesus Judaism is fulfilled), not to report events' (58), whereas Luke, he says, is 'trying to write an accurate, reliable, chronological record' (60). So Matthew gives us the 'beautifully imaginative' stories about wise men, rabbinic-style 'sermon illustrations' (62), whose historicity is irrelevant, while Luke gives us — well, actually, an angel striking Zacharias dumb in the temple and more angels filling the heavens with their praises: sober history, rooted in 'verifiable events' (61).

And the problem is not merely that Winter has jumped onto the latest (and not entirely stable) scholarly bandwagon, saying that Matthew is 'midrash', rabbinic-style, when it is debatable how far the rabbis used 'midrash' in a coherent narrative or in any other form that was disconnected from the OT text. There is a problem in his whole line of thought. Matthew, he says, is arguing a case. Certainly: and this does not destroy his historicity — many of the greatest historians were arguing a case in one way or another. But what more dubious way to argue a case than to invent the evidence? If Matthew wishes to assert that Jesus is Messiah because in many ways he fulfilled the OT, then if he makes up his fulfilments he is not a poet but a liar. We would not welcome it if we found the same thing being done by, say, the followers of Sun Myung Moon. It is precisely because Matthew is arguing a case that the events he presents must be historical. (Incidentally, as R. T. France points out, in the case of the massacre of the innocents it is odd the Matthew could not invent a story more obviously fitted to its OT prophecy, if indeed he really felt free to invent whatever narrative he pleased.)¹²

It seems, then, that this kind of approach has fundamental weaknesses. There seem to be no certain criteria to distinguish with any certainty between narratives that are historical and narratives that are not: Winter is in continual danger of slipping into what other disciplines call the 'intentional fallacy', interpreting a piece of literature by a predetermined authorial intention, when in fact the only possible evidence for that intention is the text itself. All too often the poetry category is being invoked for the miraculous elements in biblical narrative,

when in fact evangelicals need not share the liberal distaste for such elements. In the absence of objective criteria there is a real danger of vast areas of Scripture being emptied of their historicity, with a consequent impoverishment of our sense of God as a God who acts. We have seen that the category of what conveys 'spiritual truth' melts away on inspection. 'Spiritual truth' is in good measure about what happens or has happened in history, and many of Winter's 'poetic truths' depend on historical embodiment if they are to be meaningful. In short, biblical historicity is indispensable. We had better stay with Christ's attitude to Old Testament narrative.

But before we leave Winter, there is one fascinating point about his book namely that (like another anti-inerrantist, Robert Webber, in *Common Roots*) he ends up bolstering a weakened concept of the authority of Scripture by recourse to 'the authority of the church'. A whole chapter is devoted to the topic. Winter tells us that the Church is far more likely to guard the Scriptures than 'individualistic commentators or self-appointed prophets'(102). All things considered, one wonders where this leaves 'individualistic commentators' like Athanasius or Luther — or Paul, challenging Peter when the truth of the Gospel was at stake (Gal. 2:11): or what the 'self-appointed prophet' is to do when, with the unfashionable perspective of Scripture, he sees the ecclesiastical establishment all around him infected with materialism or racism or humanism or Pharisaism.

In fact for a liberal evangelical to lean on the authority of the church is even more hopeless than for a Catholic: for Catholicism at least has traditionally located the voice of that authority in the papacy. But the liberal evangelical has nowhere to locate it, since there are (alas) few controversial issues where Scripture is unclear on which even the evangelical community, let alone Christendom as a whole, speaks with a united voice. The crucial point, however, is surely Christ's teaching for, so far from promising a continuous work of the Spirit within the church to guarantee an authority capable of being set against Scripture, he clearly sets the Word of God over against, and in judgment upon, human tradition, even that of the leaders of the chosen people (Mark 7:6-13). Likewise, when debating with the Galatians about circumcision, Paul argues from Scripture, not from the decisions of the Council of Jerusalem in Acts 15.¹⁵

We have, then, no meaningful alternative to the supremacy of Scripture: and for that reason piecemeal affirmations of biblical authority are a trap. They leave every Christian unable to pin his faith to any but a very few passages: how can he be sure that this is not 'the one that got away'? At the practical level, one wonders how many Christians taught to treat Babel in Genesis 11 as myth will treat Abraham's

story in Genesis 12 any differently: and how many will in practice dig into Abraham's life story for spiritual nourishment if the events did not happen. Likewise, one wonders how many churches taught in this way will spend time grappling with the question of what, say, 2 Kings is doing in the Bible. The narrative sections of Scripture are thus all too easily turned from God's own record and commentary on history into something like a ragbag of half-remembered, exaggerated travellers' tales (although, like all good tales, they contain an edifying, abstract, moral). Certainly the vast majority of churches where the Bible is lovingly and extensively expounded, where real time is given to its exploration, are those committed to its full authority. Still, the final issue is not that the anti-infallibilist position is in itself inconsistent, and has to be rescued with an equally unhelpful concept of church authority: nor yet that, pragmatically, any position short of the full authority of Scripture debilitates the churches holding it. The crucial point is Christ's own attitude to Scripture, with which we began. To this reader there is in Christ's teaching a full affirmation that 'what Scripture says, God says', ethics, doctrine and history, without qualification. With our fallen reason, then, we must not dare to pick and choose.

What Infallibility Does Not Involve

Several points need making here, to avoid misunderstanding.

1. Infallibility does not necessitate literalistic interpretation where it is genuinely not appropriate (e.g. the symbolism of Revelation). The Psalms do not ask us to postulate a scientific rationale for the hills clapping their hands, no matter how much we enjoy the things that go on in Narnia!

2. Infallibility does not involve the claim to be able to supply instant harmonization of all apparent difficulties, because it is in the first place rooted in Christ's teaching on Scripture. Hence, it will not trouble us if difficulties remain (as with the continual movement of scholarship they are liable to do), or if for a decade or two the preference of critical opinion (which is not the same as incontrovertible proof) is against the reliability of a particular passage. These things can change (cf. the effect of J. A. T. Robinson's unexpectedly conservative *Redating the New Testament*). In the meantime, contrived harmonizations do no credit to scriptural authority or our own integrity. As Stott says, 'the wise Christian keeps what might be called a suspense account or a pending tray. That is, he suspends judgment, and goes on looking for harmony rather than giving up, because he is

sure that one day what is obscure will become plain, as in other major areas of doctrine — God's love in the face of suffering, for example.¹⁴

3. Infallibility does not deny the human element in Scripture. Nor does it involve asserting that Scripture was 'dictated'. God was entirely able to inspire his chosen human vehicles in such a way that his message was expressed without error, exactly according to his will, and yet in idioms, thought patterns, grammatical and stylistic idiosyncrasies, etc., that are those of the human writer. The interweaving of divine and human action may be as mysterious as divine foreordaining and human freewill, but it is no less real. Sometimes it is said that in denying error in Scripture we are falling into a trap analogous to docetism (the heresy that denied the humanity of Christ). But, of course, the genuine humanity of Christ did not involve sin. Nor does the humanness of Scripture need to involve error.

4. The infallibility of Scripture is not the same as the infallibility of our own interpretation, or the existence of one legitimate interpretation only. For example, infallibility does not render essential our believing that the world was created in six 24-hour periods in uninterrupted succession unless the text rules other alternatives out.

5. But in fact infallibility is not even a total doctrine of the authority of Scripture. It is possible to hold to infallibility or inerrancy and yet nullify its authority by other means: by reading it through our church tradition (of whatever kind) and ignoring anything it says that does not fit what we already believe; by incautious work in the area of genre criticism;¹⁵ by overstressing the 'culture gap' that can render biblical commands irrelevant, ignoring those things — the nature of God, the atonement, many aspects of human nature and discipleship — that do not change with time. It is worth remembering that the Sadducees had problems with the existence of supernatural powers — which is to say that Christ actually encountered and rejected, a demythologized approach in this area.

'Hermeneutics', the science — or art — of interpretation is currently in the limelight, and rightly. But there are ways of carrying out this vital exercise that hinder our hearing God speak, by overemphasizing the multiplicity of implications in a passage to the point where it says nothing clearly or authoritatively;¹⁶ or by allowing too much authority to a pre-understanding of what it can say (whether it be that of liberation theology, or that of the gospel-meeting sausage-machine that turns every passage into a springboard for the four spiritual laws!!); or by carrying the essential act of seeing the text in its context so far that all we retrieve is a truism. Indeed, the whole business can be made so obscure that we produce an intellectual elitism where hermeneutical dexterity matters more than spiritual maturity, assiduous and prayer-

ful Bible study and the enlightenment of the Spirit; so depriving all but academics of the confidence that God will speak through his Word, and landing us back in the pre-Reformation situation of a Bibleless laity. As so often, the cure is a thoroughgoing supernaturalism that trusts the Spirit to 'lead us into all truth'.

6. Infallibility — or inerrancy — is not an end-point for another reason too; it still needs definition. The Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy affirms that it is not 'proper to evaluate Scripture according to standards of truth and error that are alien to its truth and purpose':

Differences between literary conventions in Bible times and in ours must also be observed: since, for instance, non-chronological narration and imprecise citation were conventional and acceptable and violated no expectations in those days, we must not regard these things as faults when we find them in Bible writers . . . Scripture is inerrant, not in the sense of being absolutely precise by modern standards, but in the sense of making good its claims and achieving that measure of focussed truth at which its authors aimed.

We . . . deny that inerrancy is negated by Biblical phenomena such as . . . irregularities of grammar and spelling, observational descriptions of nature, the reporting of falsehoods (e.g. the lies of Satan), the use of hyperbole and round numbers, the topical arrangement of material, variant selections of material in parallel accounts, or the use of free citations.¹⁷

Undoubtedly we should expect biblical writers to record events according to their own historiographical conventions rather than ours. For such conventions exist: in our culture we willingly accept as accurate a considerably abridged account of, say, a parliamentary speech — even if it omits the asides and tidies half-sentences — *provided that* we have faith in the person who is doing the abridging. In quotation, our culture has the convention that if we commence 'He said that' we are allowed greater liberty for shortening or clarifying thought without being inaccurate than if we use 'He said' followed by quotation marks. Such conventions vary from culture to culture. We are likewise ill-advised to mistake the biblical equivalents of 'My heart sank' or 'The sun rose' for precise scientific descriptions. Indeed, in a non-technological era, such things as the meaning of 'cubit' or the method of dating reigns may vary from situation to situation or book to book, as Nicole points out.¹⁸

7. Finally, infallibility does not preclude responsible biblical scholarship. The more we can learn about the meaning and context of any passage, or the purpose with which God inspired any particular writer, the better. Of course, there exist areas where to join in the dialogue can involve presupposing a view of Scripture considerably lower than that of the Lord and the apostles, an anti-supernaturalistic world-

view, a denial of predictive prophecy,¹⁹ or of the reliable transmission of Christ's teaching. Evangelicals can be under pressure to forget Christ's teaching on Scripture, and act as if the reliability of a particular passage had each time to be decided on its own merits. This is to set human reason to judge Scripture once again: and the results will change from decade to decade as one dominant academic philosophy (e.g. existentialism) is dethroned by another (e.g. structuralism). Still, all these areas call for thoroughgoing and scholarly critique, not for obscurantism.

Infallibility is, indeed, a charter for exploration. Our faith in the canon of Scripture prompts us to ask, 'What is this doing here?' To us, nothing in the Bible is dispensable: therefore we will expect that the effort spent digging into any passage of Scripture will be rewarded. And our faith will not be in vain.

Infallibility is Not a Game

To submit to scriptural authority is not to give mental assent to a principle but to embark on a lifetime of seeking out what God is saying, and obeying it.

Therefore, if we really believe the Bible is God's Word we shall read it in quantity (we read no other book in shreds and patches as we do Scripture), giving quality time to studying it. If we spend less time on the Bible than the newspaper, then assuredly at a deep level of our personality we believe the newspaper to be more relevant, more indispensable: and in turn it, rather than the Bible, will provide the norms and frameworks through which we view reality. (The ideal is, of course, to be a prayerful reader of both!) Similarly, the fact that 'Brethren' churches seem less willing today than previously to set aside a whole day to study God's Word should make us wonder if our belief in biblical authority is all that we claim. The desire to read through the *whole* Bible (in a year perhaps?), to understand it, to take notes so that we retain what we learn, to pray over them in obedience — these are the marks of a 'sound doctrine of Scripture'.

It is perfectly possible to have sorted out the finer points of prophecy or predestination and yet ignore completely the fundamental biblical imperatives: to read 'Go into all the world and preach' and yet restrict our evangelism to expecting others (unaccountably) to come to us; to read 'Love one another' and yet treat a brother in Christ as feckless because his views on a few difficult passages are different from ours. To do such things is to deny the authority of Scripture. To hear the demands of the prophets that the poor and hungry be fed, and yet

to go along with the norms of a self-seeking, materialistic Western society, doing what is *reasonable* according to the neighbours and the adverts — this is to exalt the human reason, blown around as ever by the powers of this world, over the Word of God. Here, as clearly as in any of the liberal attempts to pick and choose a 'canon within the canon', the enemy is still posing the age-old question: 'Has God said?' Such disobedience is not evangelicalism: it is worldliness.

If Scripture is indeed the undiluted Word of God, we must continually be open for it to surprise us with fresh insights, passages we 'would not have put quite like that'. Let us not try to domesticate them into the shapes of what we already know, so learning nothing. Let us allow God, in his majesty, to teach us (for we have hardly begun) things greater than we have asked, thought or dreamed. That is to submit to Scripture as authoritative over our thinking.

And it is the only true radicalism. Nothing must quench our thirst to discover afresh what it means to be biblical people and biblical communities in the new era in which God has placed us, but the presupposition on which everything is founded must be our commitment and obedience to the entire Word of the Lord. In all our radicalism we must be, in Stott's fine phrase, 'radical conservatives', rooted unshakably in Scripture. Any other radicalism, daring to decide by its own opinions what it can and cannot obey and believe, will be swayed by every change of fashion in the world's thinking.

'What Scripture says, God says.' That was Christ's teaching, and his whole life was shaped by his unqualified obedience to the flawless Word of God. As his followers, we cannot do otherwise.

NOTES

1. J. I. Packer notes, 'Christ and his apostles quote Old Testament texts not merely as what, e.g., Moses, David or Isaiah said . . . but also as what God said through these men (see Acts 4:25; 28:25, etc.), or sometimes simply what "he" (God) says (e.g., 2 Cor. 6:16; Heb. 8:5,8), or what the Holy Ghost says (Heb. 3:7; 10:15). Furthermore, Old Testament statements, not made by God in their contexts, are quoted as utterances of God (Matt. 19:4f.; Heb. 3:7; Acts 13:34f.; citing Gen. 2:24; Ps. 95:7; Isa. 55:2 respectively). Also, Paul refers to God's promise to Abraham and his threat to Pharaoh, both spoken long before the biblical record of them was written, as words which *Scripture* spoke to these two men (Gal. 3:8; Rom. 9:17); which shows how completely he equated the statements of Scripture with the utterance of God' (*Under God's Word* (Hodder), p.117-8). Incidentally, this last point also demonstrates how the NT writers saw Scripture as a divinely-inspired *whole*, not something heterogeneous containing the Word of God in some of its parts.

2. These passages demonstrate, incidentally, that Christ's attitude to the Old Testament was not a minor accommodation to the (non-Sadducee) Judaism of his time. Rather, his attitude to Scripture was fundamental to his self-understanding, and his presentation of his person and ministry to others.
3. Cf. Packer, *Fundamentalism and the Word of God*, pp.54-62.
4. We should not think of it as a recent invention, however: Augustine and Luther use the concept.
5. *Christian Graduate*, June 1980.
6. Cf. his essay in Nicole and Michaels, *Inerrancy and Commonsense*.
7. J. I. Packer, *God Has Spoken* (Hodder), p.112, the best popular introduction to the authority of Scripture currently available.
8. R. T. Beckwith has commented on the importance of the minor points in the historical narratives, "The historical minutiae are stressed by the Bible itself. Think what use Hebrews 7 makes, in the case of Malchizedek, of his name, his realm, his tithing, his blessing, even of the silence of Genesis; think how Galatians 4 stresses the details of Hagar's and Sarah's history, one bond, one free, one bearing a child by nature, one by miracle, the mocking of Ishmael, God's words to Abraham; think of the name of the pool in John 9:7; of the interpreting of the unbroken bones and water from the side in John 19:36f. Again, that David in Spirit called the Messiah "Lord", and that God made promise to Abraham "and to thy seed" (not "seeds") are really incidental historical details, by no means essential to the main drift of those particular revelations seemingly, yet insisted on by the New Testament. Our Lord insists on the length of time that Jonah spent in the whale's belly (Matt. 12:40). Think too how Paul (2 Cor. 3:13-18) argues from the veil Moses put on his face, and the fact that he took it off when going before the Lord, as well as from the glory itself.' Quoted by John Wenham, in an unpublished essay entitled 'True, Trustworthy, Infallible, Inerrant'.
9. David Wells, *Revolution in Rome* (IVP), p.30. Cf. also *The Foundation of Biblical Authority*, ed. James Montgomery Boice (Pickering and Inglis), pp.74-76 (arguably the best scholarly symposium on biblical authority published over here thus far: and a model of courtesy to its opponents).
10. Although Winter's conclusion that the Bible is "infallible" where it matters . . . teaching us reliably all we need to know for our salvation' (84, summarizing a chapter) leaves the door open for Baum's approach.
11. Although he has used these criteria a paragraph earlier. The NT miracles, he says, 'took place in known and identified places, and involved named people' — but so did Joshua's long day, Elisha's axehead, and the narratives of Balaam and Samson. He also comments that the NT miracles 'were written up within the lifetime of eye-witnesses', but it would take a fairly authoritative piece of source criticism to show that this was not true of Kings or Judges.
12. See his essay in *Gospel Perspectives: Studies of History and Tradition in the Four Gospels*, Vol. 2 (JSOT), which provides a solid defence of the historicity of the Matthaean infancy narratives. Also noteworthy is Aune's review in the same volume of Talbett's *What is a Gospel?*, another book on which Winter bases his case. It seems that Winter has assumed for the scholars he quotes an authority that they have yet to earn.
13. It is sometimes argued that the church must have an authority alongside Scripture, since it was the church that established the canon. As early as 1 Corinthians and 2 Peter the idea is assumed of the new covenant being embodied in authoritative Scripture. But what was at stake in the church's discussions of the canon was not Scripture's authority, which was presupposed, but rather which books were included.

14. 'The Authority and Relevance of the Bible in the Modern World', printed in *Crux*, June 1980.
15. Genre criticism is a difficult area. The structuralist Todorov, for example, has demonstrated that the definition of a genre is varied by every new work. To show that a work belongs to a particular genre in five respects does not guarantee how it will behave in a sixth. (Aune's essay, cited above, has some useful comments on this.)
16. A. C. Thiselton comments in *New Testament Interpretation* on the lack of concern among such exponents of the 'new hermeneutics' as Fuchs and Ebeling as to understanding the text *correctly*, p.323.
17. The Chicago Statement, the clearest contemporary statement of the conservative inerrantist position, was signed in 1978 by many (mostly American) evangelical leaders. John Stott has described it as an 'extremely judicious document'. It is reprinted in *God has Spoken* and the *Evangelical Review of Theology*, Vol. 4, No. 1.
18. In an essay in *Inerrancy and Commonsense*. Also R. T. France, 'Inerrancy and New Testament Exegesis', *Themelios*, autumn 1975.
19. We should take careful note of Isaiah's firm and repeated insistence that predictive prophecy is a proof of the truth of the God of Israel.