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The Logic of Infallibility: an evangelical doctrine at issue

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It is now nearly ninety years since Benjamin Warfield commented wryly that in the matter of the inspiration of Scripture

The old formula, *quot homines tot sententiae*, seems no longer adequate. Wherever five 'advanced thinkers' assemble, at least six theories as to inspiration are likely to be ventilated.¹

The passage of those years has hardly simplified the position. Contrary to some of the expectations of Warfield's Conservative contemporaries, the theories of the 'advanced thinkers' still hold the field. On the other hand, despite the fond hopes of his adversaries, the orthodoxy which he represented has yet to be driven from it. Indeed, it has made gains and advances in the face of a confused enemy. But of recent years the confusion has been less confined to the line-of-battle drawn up against evangelical Christianity. Its defenders, too, have shown signs of division, and it is a good deal less easy to see who stands where in the battle for the Bible today than it was in the days of Old Princeton.

A key element in Warfield's exposition and defence of his doctrine of Scripture has been highlighted by David Kelsey in his important work, *The Uses of Scripture in Recent Theology*. He writes that, according to Warfield, 'the doctrine of inspiration is a vast hypothesis functioning methodologically like the Copernican theory or the theory of evolution'. As a result

Anyone who relies on the hypothesis has the confidence that any conflicts that appear between facts and the hypothesis can be explained within the framework of the hypothesis. It would take an enormous number of conflicts to raise serious doubt about the adequacy of the hypothesis.²

In fact, Kelsey is less than fair to Warfield in his exposition of the Princeton scholar's stance. He expounds him in these terms:

the doctrine of inspiration provides us with a rule: Always suppose that scripture is inspired and therefore inerrant. The rule instructs us *a priori* to treat apparent errors or inconsistencies in the Bible as being merely apparent and not real. As Warfield puts it, 'all objections brought against the doctrine of inerrancy pass out of the category of objections to its truth into the category of difficulties to be adjusted to it.'³

Thus quoted, Warfield sounds more than a little arbitrary. In the essay which Kelsey cites it is otherwise. He has argued that the Church assumes the truthfulness of the teaching of Scripture in doctrinal matters generally. Therefore, in the matter of the doctrine of Scripture, if Scripture itself speaks it must be heeded. As it happens, the Biblical writers teach a doctrine of plenary inspiration.

If they are trustworthy teachers of doctrine and if they held and taught this doctrine, then this doctrine is true, and is to be accepted and acted upon as true by us all. In that case, any objections brought against the doctrine from other spheres of inquiry are inoperative; it being a settled logical principle that so long as the proper evidence by which a proposition is established remains unrefuted, *all so-called objections brought against it pass out of the category of objections to its truth into the category of difficulties to be adjusted to it* . . . If a fair criticism evinces that this is not the doctrine of the Biblical writers, then of course it has 'destroyed' the doctrine which is confessedly based on that supposition. Failing in this, however, it can 'destroy' the doctrine, strictly speaking, only by undermining its foundation in our confidence in the trustworthiness of Scripture as a witness to doctrine. The possibility of this latter alternative must, no doubt, be firmly faced in our investigation of the phenomena of the Bible; but the weight of evidence, be it small or great, for the general trustworthiness of the Bible as a source of doctrine, throws itself, in the form of a presumption, against the reality of any phenomena alleged to be discovered which make against its testimony.⁴

That is to say, the methodological *a priori* which can dismiss alleged errors and inconsistencies is itself the fruit of two arguments, asserting the general trustworthiness of Scripture in matters of doctrine, and its teaching of the doctrine of plenary inspiration. The burden, however, of Warfield's argument – and this is aptly seen by Kelsey as it has not been by many of Warfield's critics, and, one might add, not a few of his disciples – is that the believer in plenary inspiration (by which phrase we may refer to Warfield's doctrine) is under no *obligation* to dispute a case brought against the doctrine *on its merits*, where they comprise the fruit of historical and literary

criticism. That is to say, he may come to face any given objection to the doctrine of plenary inspiration and its implication of inerrancy with a well-grounded presumption that, irrespective of apparent difficulties, the doctrine may be held with confidence.

When Warfield suggested that wherever five 'advanced thinkers' are gathered six theories of inspiration will be ventilated, he went on to qualify himself. However deep the disagreements which divide them, modern writers on the subject are united in one matter:

They differ in every conceivable point, or in every conceivable point save one. They agree that inspiration is less pervasive and less determinative than has hitherto been thought, or than is still thought in less enlightened circles. They agree that there is less of the truth of God and more of the error of man in the Bible than Christians have been wont to believe. They agree accordingly that the teaching of the Bible may be, in this, that or the other, – here, there or elsewhere, – safely neglected or openly repudiated . . . They agree only in their common destructive attitude towards some higher view of the inspiration of the Bible, of the presence of which each one seems supremely conscious.⁵

That too, of course, holds good today. We face a consensus rejection of the evangelical tradition, but alongside it a deep consciousness of that doctrine and its implications. It could be argued that the fundamental problem of modern theology lies in its inability to find a ground in Biblical authority. The emasculated Rule of Faith with which those who reject the essentials of Warfield's position are left is an insufficient rule. As a result, as Van A. Harvey has commented aptly, 'much of recent Protestant theology may be regarded as a series of salvage operations, that is, attempts to reconcile the ethic of critical historical inquiry with the apparent demands of Christian faith'⁶. As it happens, the context of his remark is one of the more perceptive salvage operations. But it may be doubted whether any of them can succeed. The intention of this paper is to explore some of the issues which underlie the endeavour.

1. The Nineteenth-Century crisis

Since conservative evangelicals today find themselves in a small minority, perhaps especially in their doctrine of Scripture, it is common to find it assumed that this had always been the case. A sectarian mentality, and an accompanying failure of confidence, are the result. In fact – and this can scarcely be disputed – the doctrine of plenary inspiration which Warfield defined and defended is nothing less than what he termed 'the church-doctrine of inspiration': the common heritage of the Church Catholic. To say that is, of course, to raise several difficulties. In what sense can the doctrine of one age be said to be identical with that of the next, when the context in which it was once defined has been superseded by another? What are the characteristics of 'authentic' doctrinal development, and 'inauthentic'? How would particular defenders of plenary inspiration before the rise of Higher Criticism have responded had they written after its widespread acceptance? It is often argued that to call in testimony writers who did not themselves live against the back-cloth of critical historical study as witnesses against its method and conclusions is simply anachronistic.

There is some substance in this argument, but it is not as convincing as it may appear; for it begs the real question at issue. That is to say, *if* the doctrine of inspiration held by the older generations in fact essentially involved inerrancy in matters of history and so on, it is by no means illegitimate to cite their testimony against lesser views. On the other hand, *if* historical and literary inferences drawn from the essentials of the doctrine were to a degree arbitrary accretions of the general assumptions of the day, they may reasonably be disregarded. But that, of course, is the issue which today requires resolution.

What we may say with some definiteness is that, prior to the rise of what is commonly called historical criticism, what is today the minority preserve of James Barr's 'Fundamentalism' was the common doctrine of the Christian Church. Perhaps the most striking admission of this was made at the height of the Fundamentalist Controversy in the United States, by Kirsopp Lake, the New Testament scholar, who was a vigorous and indeed, extreme opponent of orthodoxy. He candidly writes in these terms:

It is a mistake, often made by educated men who happen to have but little knowledge of historical theology, to suppose that Fundamentalism is a new and strange form of thought. It is nothing of the kind: it is the partial and uneducated survival of a theology which was once universally held by all Christians. How many were there, for instance, in the Christian Churches, in the eighteenth century, who doubted the infallible inspiration of all Scripture? A few, perhaps, but very few. No, the Fundamentalist may be wrong; I think that he is. But it is we who have departed from the tradition, not he, and I am sorry for the fate of anyone who tries to argue with a Fundamentalist on the basis of authority. The Bible and the *corpus theologicum* of the church is [*sic*] on the Fundamentalist side.⁷

That assessment could be illustrated at indefinite length. It could also be disputed, but not in its essentials. For even where isolated Christians have doubted this or that text, or have admitted difficulties in particular passages, the general assumption of Scripture's normative authority – an authority extending to the historical claims which it makes, which are indeed the warp of its theological woof – has been universal in the Church. And that for

a simple reason: the canonicity of the books of the Old and New Testaments is the major premise of all theology and preaching. To call it into question is to abandon a tradition dating historically and stemming logically directly from the New Testament church's use of its own Scriptures, and from our Lord's use of His. If the Bible is the Church's canon, its infallibility is no added extra, it is *necessary*, entailed in its adoption by the Church.

But to revert to the historical question. The beginning of the nineteenth century found Britain still largely shielded from the questioning of Christian doctrine which was becoming widespread on the Continent. The traditional position was maintained by all alike within the churches – whether evangelical or moderate, high or low, established or dissenting. There were fundamental differences between churchmen of these different tendencies, but about Scripture there was a marked homogeneity. One authoritative survey of the position during the eighteenth century remarked that 'the doctrine of unerring literal inspiration was almost everywhere held in its strictest form' (Abbey and Overton)⁸. The opening of the nineteenth saw G.S. Faber's Bampton lectures for 1801 on *A View of the Mosaical Records* speak of the attitude to Scripture as one of 'prescriptive veneration'. His work, writes one commentator, 'proceeded on the alternative that if the Pentateuch is not infallible there is no revelation'⁹. In 1814 the Bampton were concerned specifically with the interpretation of Scripture, and the Lecturer was William Van Mildert, later Bishop of Durham and widely recognised as the most learned of the bench of bishops of his day. He was no evangelical – he denounced the Methodists as fiercely as the Romans – but he was representative of the received orthodoxy of the period. As one writer put it, 'the Bishop was essentially a prudent Churchman, his progress never exceeding that of the whole ecclesiastical body'.¹⁰ V.F. Storr writes of the acceptance of

the traditional view of the Bible as a volume inspired from cover to cover, whose statement, whether they related to science, or history, or religion, were to be accepted without questioning. The Bible was treated as something apart from other writings. Its various books were regarded as being all on the same level of inspiration, and as having proceeded under a divine superintendence which protected them from any material error. Even a man of such large mind as Van Mildert could write that in the Bible 'it is impossible even to imagine a failure either in judgment or in integrity'.¹¹

For Van Mildert, 'the authenticity, authority and truth' of Scripture 'are assumed as axioms or postulates'.¹² In consequence, 'the critical reason is entirely subordinate' to 'the subject-matter of the revelation'.¹³

In these words, Van Mildert touches upon the heart of Warfield's defence of the orthodox position: the scholarly study of Scripture must ever defer to Scripture's statements, including those about itself, its nature, and its composition. While there must indeed be such scholarly study – and Van Mildert is insistent on that point – 'the Scriptures themselves have a peculiar and extraordinary character impressed upon them, which takes them out of the class of ordinary writings'.¹⁴

It is at this precise point that the nascent historical criticism of the nineteenth century challenged the orthodox view. Because it asserted – it presupposed – that the Bible must henceforth be studied, in Jowett's famous phrase, 'like any other book'. No longer would Scripture be permitted a hermeneutic all of its own. Whatever special qualities it had must emerge from an examination of it on the same terms on which all human documents were examined.

2. The claims of history

Harvey is one of only a few modern writers to draw attention to the significance of the nineteenth-century controversy for the church. Christians were called upon to abandon their traditional presumption of infallibility in favour of historical study whose results, whether or not they favoured the Biblical testimony, could never be more than approximations and probabilities. As it happened the conflict with the new methods was largely conducted on the pragmatic level: did Moses write the Pentateuch? did John write the Fourth Gospel? rather than the level of principle: is our access to the knowledge of God in Scripture by means of historical criticism, or by means of our submission to the evidence of Scripture *as such* ?

Harvey writes

The entire history of conservative Biblical scholarship in the nineteenth century represented a retreat from one announced last-ditch stand to another. If Tholuck claimed that the last bastion of Christian faith was the apostolic authorship of the Fourth Gospel, a succeeding generation believed this to be obviously indefensible and fell back on what they regarded as a more adequate barricade, only to evacuate that for still another which would also be overrun.

The only really viable alternative was to enter the lists of the debate and to attempt to vindicate the truth of the sacred narratives. To do this, however, it was necessary to pay a costly price: it was necessary to accept the general canons and criteria of just those one desired to refute. One had, so to speak, to step onto the ground that the critics occupied. This was fatal to the traditionalist's cause, because he could no longer appeal to the eye of faith or to any special warrants. The arguments had to stand or fall on their own merits. (pp.105.6)

That is to say, the conservatives – evangelical and otherwise – who did not swim with the new currents of scholarship from across the North Sea faced a dilemma. Either they could denounce the basis on which the historical-critical study of Scripture rested, as dogmatically and Biblically improper, or they could face the critical arguments on their merits. During the first half of the century, and indeed into the 1860's, the former seemed adequate. Bampton lecturers and others included German rationalism, or 'neology' as it was sometimes called, along with other infidelities under a common ban. But once *Essays and Reviews* and the writings of Bishop Colenso had disseminated the essentials of the critical approach widely amongst clerical and educated lay opinion, something more was called for, and something more was given. Commentaries and monographs appeared disputing *ad hominem* the latest German critical positions. The work of an earlier generation of German conservatives was republished in Britain, a factor which itself educated British opinion in the new theories while appearing to reassure that they could be answered. The Higher Criticism had seized the initiative, and for practical purposes conservatives felt obliged to play the critics at their own game. As Harvey suggests, they had perhaps no alternative. But the course which they adopted was fatal to the position they sought to defend.

Various factors urged them on, not least the remarkable success of the Cambridge School of New Testament scholarship – the famous Trio of Lightfoot, Westcott and Hort) who, without recourse to dogma, had undermined the extremely radical views of the Tübingen scholars and set New Testament scholarship in this country on a firm and very conservative base. Westcott, for instance, though declining to pronounce on the matter, treats Scripture precisely as would a declared infallibilist. Conservatives were reassured that their coveted doctrine would be capable of vindication on 'critical' grounds. Increasingly, Old Testament writers gave practical recognition to the validity within the church of the critical tools and methods, as men such as Alfred Cave sought to defend the orthodox doctrine of Scripture in its conclusions on the grounds adopted by its detractors. The result, of course, we know: he and his fellows – including the far more prodigious American scholar William Henry Green – failed to make any significant impact on the course of scholarly debate. The analogy with what had been achieved in the field of New Testament by the Cambridge men was false; the essentials of Graf-Wellhausen remained intact, and the volumes of the conservatives were ignored. They were seen for what they were: attempts to *use* historical criticism to support a dogmatic position. That held no interest for those who rejected the dogma itself. For once the propriety of the new historical methods had been acknowledged, there was no room for the special warrants and the special hermeneutic which were the *raison d'être* of the conservative position. Willis B. Glover, in his work on the non-conformist reaction to Higher Criticism in England, instances Cave's small volume *The Battle of the Standpoints*:

Cave rightly insisted that the central problem was the nature of revelation, but he did noting to define the difference between his own standpoint and that of the dominant scholarship of historical criticism.

Since he claimed to meet them on their own ground, it is difficult to see what he meant by a battle over standpoints . . . This Pamphlet . . . exemplified in the contradiction between the title and the content the confusion of Cave's thought. His really was a different standpoint, but he hid this fact from himself and others by his claim that his approach was critical and inductive.¹⁵

In other words, the grounding of my belief that *p* happened may be historical (on general historical grounds it is more likely than not that *p*) or on some other, special grounds (the Bible says *p*, and since I hold for special reasons that what the Bible says happened, happened, I believe *p*). It is one thing to move on, having given this latter ground for belief in *p*, to show apologetically that even if the major premise of Biblical trustworthiness is not accepted, there are grounds on which we may believe *p* to be likely. It is another to give these general, historical warrants for *believing p*.

3. The logic of the revolution

The underlying debate of the nineteenth century about Scripture was not actually one about whether what the Bible said was to be believed, in the sense that *p* happened rather than *q*. It was about whether what the Bible said was to be believed *because the Bible said it*, or whether it should be believed, or disbelieved, on the grounds of critical historical investigation. This distinction is vital, and the fact that it was largely obscured in many of the discussions by means of which the position identified with Warfield and his successors changed from being that of the consensus into that of a small minority was itself a major contribution to that change. The spectacle of the Cambridge Trio's success in demonstrating New Testament reliability on historical grounds largely confused those who were contending for the doctrine of Scripture and the reliability of the Old Testament. Under the guise of disagreements over questions of authorship and relatively minor historical details, a fundamental revolution was accomplished in the method and self-understanding of Christian theology.

We suggested as we began that Kelsey's analogy between the doctrine of Scripture maintained by the orthodox camp and the great organising theories of the natural sciences was apt and illuminating. By way of reflection on the hermeneutical revolution which underlies the modern debates about Scripture we may draw attention

to the parallels which it has with revolutionary changes in the natural sciences themselves. The classic example remains that of the Copernican revolution in sixteenth-century astronomy, and it well illustrates the revolution in method which convulsed nineteenth-century Biblical scholarship. The replacement of critical history for the doctrine of plenary inspiration as the fundamental principle governing the interpretation of Scripture was no less catastrophic in its implications for Christian thought than that of helio- for geo-centricity for the study of the heavens. Not merely did certain data require re-evaluation; the whole theoretical framework by which they were understood was overturned. The Ptolemaic astronomers had come to terms with deviant observations by positing epicycles in the planetary orbits; yet now such observations were hailed as the key to the new astronomy. Orthodox Biblical scholars were well used to apparent discrepancies in the Biblical history, and well able to posit harmonistic devices which had hitherto been agreed to make sense of them; yet now the anomalous phenomena were made the basis of a new science of Biblical interpretation. The old and trusted methods of harmonising observation and theory came to be seen as mere special pleading, such that the epicycles of the old Biblical interpreters carried no more weight with Critical scholars than those of the old astronomy did with the disciples of Copernicus. A fundamentally different perspective had been attained, new *gestalt*, and there could therefore be no logical, step-by-step movement from the one position to the other – in either direction – since the decision required of the theologian, as of the astronomer, was in essence a single one; and yet by it he travelled to a wholly fresh understanding of his task, in its method and in its results. The believer in ‘plenary inspiration’ could never, logically, come to doubt infallibilism, since his theory left no standing-ground for errors which might challenge it. Van Mildert and Warfield were unable to ‘discover’ errors in Scripture for the same reason as the pre-Copernicans were unable to ‘discover’ helio-centricity: their fundamental method prevented any conceivable data from receiving such an interpretation. Only a revolution in their thinking, involving a step outside one logical pattern and into another, could bring this about. Part of the value of this parallel is that it points up the profound significance of the change which took place, as infallibilism was abandoned. It suggests that in a difference of *gestalt* we have a way of understanding the extraordinary disparity between conservative and other views of *se*. It is not that the conservatives are dishonest and ignorant, nor is it that others find errors where no sensible man could see them. Rather, the religious presuppositions which determine the differing methods of the two schools cause B to see error where A can see only truth.

It is not uncommon for pious men inside or outside the doctrinal bounds of the Scottish Evangelical Theology Society to play down the significance of the debate about Scripture. We may indeed wish to distance ourselves from some of the more strident executors of B.B. Warfield. But the fundamental epistemological question which is raised in the children’s hymn,

Jesus loves me, this I know
For the Bible tells me so

will not go away. Does our knowledge of God come from His Word, or must that Word forever await the attestation of critical history? Do we consider that we have a full community of discourse with any and all Biblical scholarship, or is our hermeneutics a *special* science that we admit to be inter-dependent with our religious presuppositions? These are pressing questions, and while their answers need to be cautious and reverent and duly qualified, the recognition that there is a logic to infallibility which can admit of no challenge poses a major question-mark against the strategy of a generation of evangelical scholarship.

Notes

1. *Works*, I, p.51.
2. Kelsey, p.22.
3. *Ibid.*
4. *Works*, I, pp.174f; emphasis ours.
5. *Ibid.*, p.51.
6. *Historian and the Believer*, p.246.
7. *Religion of Yesterday and Tomorrow*, pp.61f.
8. *English Church in the Eighteenth Century*, I, p.560.
9. Hunt, *Religious Thought in the Nineteenth Century*, p.41.
10. *Ibid.*, p.39.
11. *English Theology in the Nineteenth Century*, p.177.
12. *Scripture-Interpretation*, p.11.
13. *Ibid.*, p.22.
14. *Ibid.*, p.21.
15. *Evangelical Non-conformists and Higher Criticism in the Nineteenth Century*, p.192.