
Focus

*This article is the second in an important series entitled Focus in which we intend to draw attention to major biblical doctrines. The purpose of Focus is to elucidate Scriptural doctrines and, secondly, report on the way in which these doctrines are viewed in our contemporary situation. Thirdly, we want to challenge Christians to think more biblically and theologically about these doctrines and then to encourage preachers and church leaders to teach and contend for these truths in our generation. The first article by the Editor focussed on *Eternal Punishment*; in this second article the Rev. Hywel Jones focusses on the *Doctrine of Holy Scripture*. In our next issue, we intend to discuss some controversial aspects of the *Doctrine of the Church*.*

Focus : 2 Holy Scripture

Hywel Jones

The recent history of evangelical theological thought on this basic doctrine could be fairly accurately written up under the heading **From Inerrancy to Interpretation**. This caption should not, however, be understood as indicating a complete transference of scholarly attention from the first to the second of those subjects, but rather as a description of a movement of the thought around each, and between, those two poles. Inerrancy hit the headlines in the seventies; now, in the eighties, Interpretation holds the centre of the stage.

The aim of this article is to point out those areas where work has been recently done on this subject, highlighting matters which will doubtless continue to receive attention, but also to point up those issues where care needs to be taken. We shall concentrate on the evangelical constituency in the main and use the subjects of Inerrancy and Interpretation as divisions for our material.

In his recently published book entitled **Biblical Inspiration**¹ Dr. Howard Marshall summarises the last decade and a half or so in terms of five developments with regard to this doctrine (pp.9-12). The first of these is the re-assertion of the total trustworthiness of all the Bible by the International Council on Bible Inerrancy.² The second is a "resurgence of criticism of the whole evangelical position reminiscent of the 'fundamentalism' debate of the 1950's".³ The third is the realisation of the existence of "the wide cultural gap between the world of the biblical writers and the world of today".⁴ Fourthly, "various fresh attempts are being made from a middle-of-the-road position to approach constructively the problems raised by the Bible".⁵ (Dr. Marshall's book also fits into this category.) Finally, "a fifth development is perhaps more important. It has become increasingly obvious that the question of how

we are to interpret the Bible is of central significance in discussing its character as the Word of God".⁶ These five lines will form a map for the reading of contemporary literature on the Bible.

Inerrancy

In spite of the able and welcome work of the ICBI,⁷ debates about inerrancy still continue in the evangelical camp. These revolve around the infallibility/inerrancy disjunction, the nature of inspiration and the phenomena of the Bible. We shall comment on each in turn.

The Infallibility/Inerrancy Disjunction

Though these terms are, strictly speaking, synonymous, it has become the practice by some evangelical scholars to drive them apart by making them refer to different things. From a historical point of view (if a question may be begged for a while), "infallibility" was the term used to affirm the total trustworthiness of all the contents of the Bible. That is no more and no less than the term "inerrancy" is used to maintain. But of late and in our time, the scope of the term "infallibility" has been narrowed down to refer to what in the Bible relates to faith and conduct. This restriction is based on the declared purpose of the Scriptures in 2 Tim. 3:15,16. Therefore, in current evangelical usage, the terms are no longer synonymous. Hence the necessity arises for asserting and using the term "inerrancy" to serve the purpose today for which the older term "infallibility" used to be perfectly adequate.

This disjunction is the most basic point in contemporary evangelical study of the Bible. It is Schaeffer's watershed.⁸ It has consequences for one's view of the inspiration, the phenomena and the interpretation of the Bible. But there are two other matters associated with infallibility versus inerrancy which are receiving attention. These are the making of a sharp distinction between deductive and inductive reasoning on the one hand and the concept of an author's intention on the other. To each of these we now turn.

Deductive and Inductive Reasoning

By deduction is meant the viewing of a subject in terms of a conclusion drawn from premises. By induction is meant the building up of a case on the basis of data derived from the subject itself. Applied to Scripture it means that as God cannot lie and Scripture is His Word, q.e.d. Scripture is inerrant. Inductive reasoning is a working up to a conclusion on the basis of an examination of details. The claim has often been made that the latter is the scholarly approach; the former smacks of church dogma and party line.

The charge that is made on the basis of this distinction is that inerrancy rests only on deduction. Dr. Marshall takes this line, but in addition, grounds the validity of deductive reasoning about the Bible on the accuracy and acceptability of the theory of divine dictation being the mode of inspiration used in its production. This theory he rightly rejects as being inadequate to the various ways in which the writers of Scripture worked, but he also refers to Warfield's theory of concursive action⁹ which he approves. Given this alternative, does the objection to inerrancy stand?

It is not fair, however, to convey the impression that those who uphold inerrancy only engage in deduction. They engage in painstaking inductive, i.e. exegetical, work which confirms their deductive approach.¹⁰ In addition, it is often overlooked that those who favour induction begin their study with the most notorious difficulties. Dr. Marshall overlooks both these facts.

The Concept of the Author's Intention

All that is unique about Scripture has been predicated of it "as originally given", i.e. the actual autographs and not the first copies. Instead of that expression an alternative form of words has been mooted, namely "as originally intended". Once more we have to appreciate the distinction between these two expressions. Though they are both related to one and the same reality, i.e. what is written, they do not refer to it in the same way. "As originally given" refers to the text and, therefore, all that is predicated about Scripture's nature and status is predicated about that objective text. "As originally intended" goes behind that text to the mind of the author. It is that intention which is declared to be infallible. Though that distinction may seem very fine, it is of the utmost importance because it concerns the relation between intention and expression, meaning and words. Any idea that an author failed to express his intention clearly and fully must be prevented as a possibility. It can only be excluded by the strongest affirmation that inspiration is verbal.

There are two aspects to this matter of the author's intention, depending on which author, i.e. human or divine, is in view. The human author's viewpoint or perspective is frequently invoked, **irrespective of the nature of the language** which is used, e.g. in the accounts of Creation, Fall and Flood. Bernard Ramm writes "the universality of the flood simply means the universality of the experience of the man who reported it."¹¹ With regard to the intention or purpose of the divine author 2 Tim. 3:16,17 is appealed to. Dr. Marshall majors on God's intention. In the course of dealing with Inspiration, he writes: "The crucial point here is the concept of what God **wished** to be written. Our ideas of what we may have wished God to write may not be the same as what **he** may have wished to write." (emphasis original)

To the unphrased question "what did God wish to write?" the answer is taken from 2 Tim. 3:16,17 and Dr. Marshall writes: "The purpose of God in the composition of the Scriptures was to guide people to salvation and the associated way of life. From this statement we may surely conclude that God made the Bible all that it needs to be in order to achieve this purpose. It is in this sense that the word 'infallible' is properly applied to the Bible."¹²

The effect of this is, on Dr. Marshall's own confession, a move from accuracy to adequacy, i.e. from accuracy of presentation in all that is written to adequacy for the achievement of a stated purpose. This is proposed as a way forward. As Dr. Marshall realises, this stance raises the question of the truth of the Scriptures. This he discusses in terms of demonstrating how complex the idea of truth is, e.g. "True in what sense and on what level? True for whom? Still true?" Truth as accuracy is dismissed because it is only truth at a com-

paratively superficial level — but it is the basic and all important level. The question of truth is side-stepped and the possibility of error not excluded.

The Nature of Inspiration

Two books have recently appeared on this subject besides the one already referred to by Dr. Marshall. The first of these is by an American, Paul Achtemeier¹³ and the other by William J. Abraham who originates from Northern Ireland. Both want to speak about inspiration in relation to the Bible, but neither asserts the inspired-ness of the Bible as a literary product. It must always be remembered that to fail to say the latter is to fail also to speak accurately and adequately about the former because the New Testament asserts that literary records were breathed out by God. Dr. Marshall rightly criticises both these books on the single ground that they leave “something of a gap between the inspiration of the biblical writers and the inspiration of the writings themselves”.¹⁴

Achtemeier wants to locate the Spirit’s inspiration in the lengthy process of accumulating the traditions and their redaction which lay behind the actual finished product. Abraham wants to regard the Bible’s inspiration in a way analogous to that which a pupil gains from a teacher and expresses as a result. Inspiration is a stimulus to creativity and no check is supplied so mistakes can occur.

Inspiration has to be verbal to be biblical, i.e. it has to extend to the written words to be what the Bible means by the term. Dr. Marshall distances himself from both Achtemeier and Abraham and yet does not use the term “verbal” to describe his view of inspiration. To point this out may be pedantic because he does speak about inspiration being “the activity of God throughout the whole of the process so that the whole of the product ultimately comes from him.”¹⁵ Is not this enough? It probably is, but why the term “verbal” is not used is slightly mysterious because it is used in connection with the theory of dictation which is rejected. The adjective, therefore, needs re-introduction and re-habilitation because its meaning is essential and there is no better one.

The Phenomena of the Bible

Under this heading must be included all those difficulties which are encountered in the study of the Bible, e.g. textual ones (i.e. variations in the manuscripts, in quotations and in differing accounts of the same events), linguistic, historical and numerological references. These difficulties are regarded by some as making inerrancy untenable and by others as also ruling out infallibility. These are well known and the ground has been well trodden.

The ICBI has sought to come to terms with these matters and to show that inerrancy is not dependent on minute precision by modern standards. This does not mean that these details are overlooked. Where appropriate, the manuscripts are emended¹⁶ or other difficulties treated by patient exegesis. In its official statement, it speaks about the phenomena as follows: “We ... deny that inerrancy is negated by biblical phenomena such as a lack of modern technical precision, irregularities of grammar or spelling, observational

descriptions of nature, the reporting of falsehoods, 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

Dr. Marshall focusses on this matter of precision, or rather imprecision, and his treatment deserves careful study (p.58ff). He makes a distinction between those who accept the Bible as a divine-human product on the one hand, i.e. those who favour inerrancy and those who favour infallibility, and on the other, those who see the Bible as a human, fallible document through which God may speak. Concentrating on the first two groups because of what they have in common, he attempts to close the gap between them by asking whether the only difference between them concerns the degree of imprecision which each allows. If this were the case, then the difference is one of interpretation only and should be approached by co-operative exegesis. But much as one would like to believe this, it is not really the case. The inerrantist is prepared to allow, is committed to allowing, as great a degree of imprecision as Scripture presents in its statements understood in their contexts. Inerrancy does not commit one to minimising that. The debate between the first two groups Dr. Marshall mentions is over whether Scripture’s soteriological-ethical purpose should determine the degree of imprecision allowed or not. We contend that it should not.

Interpretation

There are two areas to be noted here. The first relates to history and the second to Scripture.

The Interpretation of History

It used to be the case that defenders of infallibility in the old sense of that term could confidently claim that the position which they took with regard to the nature and status of the Bible was the position the Church had taken for fifteen hundred years and more. They were very rarely taken up on their assertion. Of late, however, and from within the evangelical camp, this position has come under attack. The names of Rogers and McKim¹⁸ are known in this regard. Professor Ernest Sandeen¹⁹ also figures in this revision of historiography. Rogers and McKim have argued that the Reformers, and Calvin and Luther in particular held to limited inerrancy and the Princeton theologians were those who foisted inerrancy on them. Hodge, Warfield and Alexander are the villains of the piece. Sandeen argues with the latter point. This has been replied to by a number of scholars²⁰ and one ICBI symposium is devoted to inerrancy from the standpoint of historical theology.

The Interpretation of Scripture

The ICBI assigns a place to interpretation in its Chicago Statement. Inerrancy is not seen as an end in itself, but is regarded as vital for the health of the Christian and the Church. For this goal to be achieved, interpretation is essential. J. Packer has written: “Now it really is important that we inerrantists move on to crystallize an a posteriori hermeneutic which does full justice to the character and content of the infallible written word as **communication**, life-embracing and divinely authoritative.”²¹

In doing this, a new problem has to be encountered. It is that of the hermeneutical circle. (This Journal has carried two articles on the subject of the New Hermeneutic. These are very relevant here.)²² Though this new method of interpretation did not originate in the evangelical camp, it has had an effect on it. If that has only been to shake one's confidence in the importance of the grammatico-historical method, i.e. viewing the text in its linguistic, historical and theological context then that is bad enough. But it has fed into a theology of contextualisation which not only emphasises the importance of reckoning with the cultural element in the application of Scripture, nor merely the same element in the culture of the student-interpreter, but also culture in the biblical material. Rene Padilla has written: "How can the chasm between the past and the present be bridged? An answer is found in the contextual approach which combines insights derived from classical hermeneutics with insights derived from the modern hermeneutical debate. In the contextual approach, both the context of the ancient text and the context of the modern reader are given due weight."²³

Our concern with this approach is its bearing on the doctrine of Scripture's nature and status. There are two aspects of this on which great caution needs to be exercised. The first is that items in Scripture can be regarded as cultural which are not cultural at all, e.g. male-female relationships. The second is that because of the desire to be relevant in our culture, the careful interpretation of Scripture becomes submerged in contextual application. J. Robertson McQuilkin has an important article on this whole area entitled "Limits of Cultural Interpretation".²⁴

Conclusion

At the beginning of his book, Dr. Marshall lists some problems which have to be faced in formulating a doctrine of Scripture. These are the subjects of Revelation,²⁵ Inspiration, and the questions of Epistemology (i.e. how can it be proved that the Bible is what we claim it to be), the Phenomena of Scripture and Interpretation. What these subjects do is to indicate that while every age has, because of its own problems, to grapple afresh with the doctrine of Scripture, it is basically the same issues that have to be faced.

The peculiar danger which has to be faced today is connected with the elevation of Scripture's purpose to a place of primary importance. There is a tendency to relate Revelation, Inspiration, Infallibility and Interpretation to it and to allow it to become the arbiter of what is revealed, inspired, infallible (and what is not?). These categories of truth, i.e. revelation, inspiration and infallibility can then be merged and almost collapsed. John J. Hughes points out the importance of clearly distinguishing these matters by way of criticism of the methodology of Rogers and Berkouwer, he writes:

"Both Rogers and Berkouwer fail adequately to distinguish the mode of revelation (dream, vision, dictation, etc.) from the manner of inspiration (the employment of various literary techniques and genus) from the result of inspiration (what Scripture says God says), and the purpose of inspiration (to make us wise unto salvation). Apparently they believe that to affirm

both the purpose and manner of inspiration precludes affirming the result of inspiration.’²⁶ (emphasis original)

Grudem comments on this aptly and forcefully, he says:

“The Old Testament and New Testament authors show great concern to affirm the result of inspiration, much less interest in specifying the purpose of inspiration and very little interest in discussing the manner of inspiration or the mode of revelation (to use Hughes’ phrases).”²⁷

The failure to affirm, for whatever reason, that the words of Scripture are the word of God to us, in their sense to be discovered by believing, careful exegesis leaves Christianity without a secure definable base, and can leave the Christian Church without a message and the Christian’s life without content and aim.

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References

1. BIBLICAL INSPIRATION by I. Howard Marshall, Hodder 1982.
2. The ICBI was founded in 1977. Its purpose was “to counter the drift from this important doctrinal foundation by significant segments of evangelicalism and the outright denial of it by other church movements”. A list of its publications appears below in note.
3. See FUNDAMENTALISM by James Barr, London 1977.
4. The example of this which Marshall refers to is THE USE AND ABUSE OF THE BIBLE by D.E. Nineham, London 1976.
5. The volume referred to here is THE DIVINE INSPIRATION OF HOLY SCRIPTURE by William J. Abraham, O.U.P. 1982. This was reviewed in Issue No.10 of *Foundations* by Brian Edwards.
6. The reference Marshall gives is the essay by A.C. Thiselton “Understanding God’s Word Today” in OBEYING CHRIST IN A CHANGING WORLD, ed. J. Stott.
7. The ICBI has published:
GOD’S INERRANT WORD, ed. J.W. Montgomery, Bethany Fellowship 1974.
THE FOUNDATION OF BIBLICAL AUTHORITY, ed. J.M. Boice, Zondervan 1978.
INERRANCY, ed. N.L. Geisler, Zondervan 1979.
INERRANCY AND COMMON SENSE, ed. R.R. Nicole and J.R. Michaels, Baker 1980.
CHALLENGES TO INERRANCY, ed. G. Lewis and B. Demarest, Moody 1984.
INERRANCY AND THE CHURCH, ed. J.D. Hannah, Moody 1984.
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8. THE GREAT EVANGELICAL DISASTER, by F. Schaeffer, Crossway 1984.
9. Marshall, op.cit. p.53.
10. See for example “Scripture’s Self-Attestation” by Wayne Grudem in SCRIPTURE AND TRUTH, eds. D.A. Carson and John D. Woodbridge, IVP 1983. A most important volume of essays.
11. THE CHRISTIAN VIEW OF SCIENCE AND SCRIPTURE, p.164, Bernard Ramm, Paternoster 1964.
12. Marshall, op.cit., p.53.
13. THE INSPIRATION OF SCRIPTURE, Paul Achtemeier, Philadelphia 1980.
14. Marshall, op.cit., p.40.
15. Marshall, op.cit., p.42.

16. The debate over the Textus Receptus continues — sad to say.
See — THE IDENTITY OF THE NEW TESTAMENT TEXT, W.N. Pickering, Nelson 1977. (Reviewed in *Foundations* — Issues 4 and 5.)
 17. EXPLAINING INERRANCY, p.29, R.C. Sproul, ICBI 1980.
 18. THE AUTHORITY AND INTERPRETATION OF THE BIBLE: AN HISTORICAL APPROACH, J.B. Rogers and D.K. McKim, Harper and Row 1979.
 19. ROOTS OF FUNDAMENTALISM: BRITISH AND AMERICAN MILLENARIANISM 1800-1930, Ernest Sandeen, Baker 1978.
 20. "Biblical Authority in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries", W. Robert Godfrey in SCRIPTURE AND TRUTH, IVP 1983.
"The Princetonians and Biblical Authority", J.D. Woodbridge and R.H. Balmer in SCRIPTURE AND TRUTH.
See also INERRANCY AND THE CHURCH.
 21. Review of Lindsell's THE BIBLE IN THE BALANCE in UNDER GOD'S WORD, Lakeland 1980.
 22. *Foundations* — Issues 9 and 12.
 23. R. Padilla, THEMELIOS Vol. 7, No. 1.
 24. See "Limits of Cultural Interpretation", J. Robertson McQuilkin, JOURNAL OF EVANGELICAL THEOLOGICAL STUDIES 1980.
and R.C. Sproul, "Controversy at Culture Gap", EVANGELICAL REVIEW OF THEOLOGY, Issue 2.
For an example of Contextualisation, see "Interpreting in a Cultural Context", C.H. Kraft, JETS Vol. 21, No. 4.
 25. GOD, REVELATION AND AUTHORITY, C.F. Henry, Word Books
Also, THE PRIORITY OF DIVINE REVELATION, JETS, March 1984.
 26. Review of "Scripture, Tradition and Interpretation" in Westminster Theological Journal, Spring 1980, quoted in SCRIPTURE & TRUTH, p.40.
 27. SCRIPTURE AND TRUTH, p.363.
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In his last writing Dr. Francis Schaeffer asked, "Does inerrancy make a difference?" He responded with a positive declaration, "Overwhelmingly; the difference is that with the Bible being what it is, God's Word and so absolute, God's objective truth, we do not need to be, *and we should not be*, caught in the ever-changing fallen cultures which surround us. Those who do not hold the inerrancy of Scripture do not have this high privilege. To some extent, they are at the mercy of the fallen, changing culture. And Scripture is thus bent to conform to the changing world spirit of the day, and they therefore have no solid authority upon which to judge and to resist the views and values of that changing, shifting world spirit.

Does inerrancy really make a difference — in the way we live our lives across the whole spectrum of human existence? Sadly we must say that we evangelicals who truly hold to the full authority of Scripture have not always done well in this respect. I have said that inerrancy is the watershed of the evangelical world. But it is not just a theological debating point. *It is the obeying of the Scripture which is the watershed!* It is believing and applying it to our lives which demonstrate whether we in fact believe it."

From The Great Evangelical Disaster