

# Inerrant the Wind: The Troubled House of North American Evangelicals

by Robert M. Price

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## I. INTRODUCTION

Evangelical Christians in America have always been a house divided over something or other. If not predestination, then the mode of baptism; if not the charismatic gifts, then millennial eschatology. But probably none of these internecine scraps has posed so serious a threat to the integrity of the movement as does the current 'battle for the Bible'. For at stake here is the very epistemological basis on which all the other 'battles' were waged: can the Bible be esteemed authoritative in such a way that the citation of any text (in context) will settle a question? In recent years, as is well known, some Evangelicals have doubted (loudly and publicly) that biblical authority functions in quite this way. The resulting issue is doubly charged. Conceptually, it is particularly thorny, as will soon appear. Politically, the stakes are high since as Gerald Sheppard has suggested, 'inerrancy' functions almost as more of a shibboleth for membership in the Evangelical subculture in North America, than as a meaningful piece of theology.<sup>1</sup> And the membership of those whom we will call 'non-inerrantists' is now jeopardized. The present essay will attempt to sketch briefly the setting of the current crisis of biblical authority, and then to outline five major trends discernible among non-inerrantists. Finally, we will ask just where the controversy seems to be leading its antagonists.

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## II. A NEW FUNDAMENTALIST-MODERNIST CONTROVERSY?

If the struggle with Pharaoh and the exodus from Egypt formed foundational saga for Israelite identity and mission, no less is the self-understanding of American evangelicals irrevocably defined in terms of the Fundamentalist-Modernist Controversy which occurred in two phases, at the turn of the century, and in the 1920s. During this painful contest, the conservatives found themselves at first the inquisitors, then the heretics, as they beat a retreat from their own denominations, mission boards, and seminaries. They fled like Lot from Sodom, never daring to look back, but instead founding their own parallel network of institutions. Though

<sup>1</sup> Gerald T. Sheppard, 'Biblical Hermeneutics: The Academic Language of Evangelical Identity' in *Union Seminary Quarterly Review*, vol. 32, no. 2, Winter 1977, 81-94.

it is often imagined in latter-day discussions of the controversy that it was waged between two completely diverse theological parties, this was not the case, at least not principally. It would have been comparatively simple to write off out-and-out modernists, as rationalists, skeptics, and deists had been dismissed in earlier days.

The great danger perceived was that methods of 'higher criticism' of the Bible were being embraced, however carefully, by evangelicals themselves. Fundamentalist battlers for the Bible did not judge that one must already be a modernist to employ higher criticism; rather they warned that if one did embrace criticism, one would sooner or later *become* a modernist. Thus they sought to push the Trojan horse back outside the city walls before Strauss and Wellhausen could tumble through the trap door, sword in hand.

The relevance of this bit of history for the current North American struggle is that when Harold Lindsell, Francis Schaeffer and others warn of a new Fundamentalist-Modernist Controversy, they are not simply crying 'wolf'. It should quiet no one's fears that non-inerrantists claim with good faith to be evangelicals. For the situation was the same in the case of Charles Augustus Briggs, Henry Preserved Smith, Llewellyn J. Evans *et al.* As we will see below, many of the hermeneutical 'modifications' of inerrancy suggested by these 'modernists' have reappeared in the present discussion, though those who propose them seldom trumpet the fact of this precedent. This observation leads us to explore the surprising range of options current on the North American scene regarding the inspiration and infallibility of Scripture.

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### III. NEW INERRANTIST STRATEGIES

If the dangers perceived by inerrantists in the present debate parallel those of the earlier fundamentalist-modernist controversy, it is no surprise that the strategy of today's conservatives matches that of their forebears. In fact it is striking the extent to which the old 'World's Christian Fundamentals Association (WCFA)' seems to have staged a 'second coming' in the form of the International Council on Biblical Inerrancy (ICBI). The latter organization was founded in 1977 by prominent inerrantists including Harold Lindsell, Francis A. Schaeffer, and J. I. Packer. The old WCFA listed among its goals the purging of modernist heretics and the establishing of a list of theologically 'safe' seminaries and Bible Institutes. Even so, the new ICBI has urged the tightening up of doctrinal shibboleths in Evangelical organizations and schools to include inerrancy clauses, so as to exclude the non-inerrantist *minim*. In 1978, the ICBI explored the possibility of forming a 'Coalition of Inerrancy Seminaries', but so far this has produced no visible results.

More specific parallels include those between the propaganda efforts of today's inerrantists and those of yesteryear. The WCFA set up over one hundred local conferences on 'Christian fundamentals' in both the United States and Canada. The ICBI conducts several travelling seminars to educate lay people as to the truth of inerrancy and the dangers of compromise. Incidentally, William Jennings Bryan would be pleased to see his modern-day counterpart Duane T. Gish holding forth from these platforms against Darwin's theory of evolution.

Probably the most successful endeavor of the WCFA was its impressive series of publications, *The Fundamentals*. The echo of the ICBI at this point is noticeably more feeble. It, too, has rushed to the presses with works entitled, not surprisingly, *Inerrancy; The Foundation of Biblical Authority; Can We Trust the Bible?; and Does Inerrancy Matter?* The content of these volumes is no less predictable, simply parroting each other's arguments, not to mention those ritually intoned in years past in inerrantist works such as *God's Inerrant Word; The Infallible Word; Thy Word is Truth; Revelation and the Bible; The Bible: Living Word of Revelation; etc., etc.* (One might undertake a form-critical study of the 'inerrancy apologetic formula' from these sources!)

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The most significant action taken by the ICBI is the drafting in 1978 of *The Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy*, a creedal affirmation reminiscent of yesterday's lists of the 'Five (or however many) Points of Fundamentalism'. The Chicago Statement is, however, important for reasons vastly different than those intended by its drafters. The text brings into clarity two extremely significant ironies besetting the inerrantist movement. The first is an implicit creedalism that serves to call into question the signers' own stated belief in the sufficiency of Scripture as a norm for belief. The Chicago Statement includes only the latest of several recent lists of hermeneutical safeguards, rules which should guarantee that the inerrant Scripture will produce orthodox theology. The exegete is told in advance (by this statement and similar ones adopted, *e.g.*, by Melodyland School of Theology and the Lutheran Church, Missouri Synod) that he must not find biblical texts to be contradictory, or relativize certain Pauline statements as culturally-bound. Are we not left with the admission that to affirm '*sola Scriptura*' was a little hasty after all? The Bible's teaching, it would seem, must be filtered through the tradition of the Church, at least someone's church. Neither the fact of this 'cryptocreedalism' nor the recognition of it is particularly new. F. F. Bruce pointed it out in his *Tradition Old and New*. Yet the irony is all the more stark here since the reins of tradition are being pulled on the interpretation of Scripture precisely in order to protect the 'unique' authority of Scripture!

Another rather puzzling phenomenon brought into focus by the Chicago Statement is a curious ambivalence among allegedly 'strict inerrantists' as to just how inerrant they want the Bible to be. Clark Pinnock has noted that, under the rubric 'inerrancy', some evangelicals hold positions equivalent to those of the 'non-inerrantists' they condemn.<sup>2</sup> No clearer evidence could be sought than certain contradictory claims in the Chicago Statement, where it is first denied 'that Biblical infallibility and inerrancy are limited to spiritual, religious, or redemptive themes, exclusive of assertions in the fields of history and science' (Article XII). Yet in the very next Article (and in its interpretive paragraphs 5 and 6), the signers announce that we ought to expect in the Bible 'non-chronological narration and imprecise citation' of Old Testament texts by New Testament writers, 'phenomenal descriptions of nature', 'lack of modern technical precision,' 'the use of hyperbole and round numbers', 'variant selections of material in parallel accounts' of the same events, etc. This sounds for all the world like a description of the 'limited-inerrancy' or 'non-inerrancy' position against which the statement was supposedly drafted. How are we to explain this 'apparent contradiction'?

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First, let us note once again that it is nothing new. Even before the issuing of the Chicago Statement, the readers of signers J. I. Packer and Francis A. Schaeffer may have noted with surprise that Packer's demand for inerrantist orthodoxy permits the interpretation of Adam and Eve as allegorical ciphers, while Schaeffer sees the factual historicity of Genesis 1-11 as the very cornerstone of biblical inerrancy!<sup>3</sup> What is the difference between 'inerrantists' like Packer and non-inerrantists like Jack Rogers? And where is the continuity between the former and really strict inerrantists like Schaeffer? It is all a question of apologetical strategy. Schaeffer is willing to brook no compromise: the Bible is strictly inerrant, take it or leave it. Rogers would reject this, pointing (for example) to the mythical nature of the Eden story. Such a concession to biblical criticism functions for the non-inerrantist as a wedge to go even further in the same direction. But Packer stands between the two, offering a compromise; he in effect seeks to assure the doubters that, all right, they *can* reject the literal factualness of Adam and Eve if they will but refrain from touching the ark again. Yet whether such a tactic is logically compatible with belief

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<sup>2</sup> Clark H. Pinnock, 'The Inerrancy Debate Among the Evangelicals' (n.p.: n.d.) (Mimeographed.)

<sup>3</sup> J. I. Packer, *Fundamentalism' and the Word of God* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1960), 98-99; Francis A. Schaeffer, *No Final Conflict: The Bible Without Error in All that it Affirms* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1977), 14-24.

in inerrancy, no matter what its political utility, is questionable. Perhaps Schaeffer's theological instinct is sounder when he seeks, as it were, to push Bultmann's nose out of the tent. Incidentally, it is this apologetical 'sliding scale of biblical inerrancy' that most clearly confirms Sheppard's contention that the whole controversy is more political than theological anyway.

#### IV. FIVE NON-INERRANTIST OPTIONS

To heed the claims of either side in today's controversy, one would naturally conclude that what is in question is the simple affirmation or denial of inerrancy. If this rubric is ceded to criticism, can 'the' doctrine of biblical infallibility for faith and practice be maintained? Ultimately no one really cares about the dimensions of the Molten Sea, but must the value of *pi* be sacrificed or harmonized to safeguard what all evangelicals *do* care about — namely the system of doctrine and the plan of salvation? Some (e.g., Lindsell, Schaeffer, Gerstner) say 'yes'; others (e.g., Rogers, Pinnock, Fuller) say 'no.' But this apparently simple agreement at least as to the issues conceals a range of opinion indicating the real complexity of the problem. Neither side has sought to go any deeper, perhaps for political reasons. As far as strict inerrantists are concerned, what does it matter whether it was arsenic or cyanide that the suicide drank? The theological results of denying inerrancy are believed to be equally fatal in any case. The non-inerrantists (or 'limited inerrantists', or 'nuanced inerrantists'), on the other hand, are equally reluctant to 'name their poison' because they do not want to have others believe (or to believe themselves) that their positions are very different from the traditional model. But in fact, the repudiation of inerrancy takes several forms, between which the differences are just as important as that between any of them and the strict inerrancy position of Lindsell.

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##### A. *Limited Inerrancy*

The non-inerrancy position seemingly closest to the traditional view is that called 'limited inerrancy'.<sup>4</sup> It seems merely to limit or more carefully to define the scope of inerrancy, so as to leave some biblical statements

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<sup>4</sup> It is classed here as a simple denial of inerrancy, since 'inerrancy' is by definition an absolute term.

Cf. Stephen T. Davis, *The Debate About the Bible* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1977), 23; J. Ramsey Michaels, 'Inerrancy or Verbal Inspiration?: An Evangelical Dilemma', in *Inerrancy and Common Sense*, eds. Roger R. Nicole and J. Ramsey Michaels (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1980), 55.

outside the rubric of 'infallible assertions.' Daniel P. Fuller is the foremost advocate of this view. Fuller actually proposed his modification of inerrancy as a modification of B. B. Warfield's 'view of history',<sup>5</sup> in order to bring Warfield's non-falsifiable doctrine of inerrancy into alignment with his evidentialist apologetic based on the *indicia* of Scripture. Though Warfield himself had already rejected any restriction of inerrancy to 'mysteries', those areas verifiable by human research,<sup>6</sup> Fuller professed to find unsuspected latitude for such a modification in the wording of 2 Timothy 3:15-16, where inspiration is predicted only of matters of 'doctrine, reproof, correction, and instruction', and those relevant 'unto salvation'. The result? According to Fuller, 'since the Bible declares that its purpose is to impart revelation, we run no risk of distorting its message as we credit the revelational teachings and admit the possibility that its non-revelational statements and implications are a reflection of the culture of the writer and his original readers.'<sup>7</sup> Such 'statements and implications' include the famous example of the mustard seed (Matthew 13:31-32). According to Fuller, anyone with common sense the size of one can see that Jesus was not concerned to teach botany, but to teach about the Kingdom. So why scruple if the mustard seed is *not* the smallest? The fundamental criterion for which texts must be, or not be inerrant is whether the assertion of the text is verifiable by human investigation, *not that of the original writer*, but rather *that of the modern historian*. Any assertion open to historical/scientific verification (or disconfirmation) is to be removed from the 'inerrancy' category. No revelatory/inerrant statements are verifiable, or the Bible-believer might find himself in trouble. Fuller's concern is basically not one of *hermeneutics*, but of *apologetics*. He is concerned to establish a safety zone into which criticism cannot pass so as to threaten the 'fundamentals of faith.' These fundamentals, for Fuller, are God's mighty, saving acts, including most notably, the resurrection of Jesus Christ. And this is where Fuller's schema runs into the greatest difficulty. For as his *Easter Faith and History* makes evident, Fuller believes that the resurrection may in fact be proven by the historian! This must imply either that Fuller is guilty of a gaping contradiction, or that his thought is quite consistent, but surprising. The implication is that the *geschichtlich* (revelatory) import

<sup>5</sup> Daniel P. Fuller, 'Benjamin B. Warfield's View of Faith and History', *Bulletin of the Evangelical Theological Society* 11 (Spring 1968), 75-83.

<sup>6</sup> In fact, readers of Warfield's *Limited Inspiration* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian & Reformed Publishing Co., 1974) may be moved to swear that Warfield was clairvoyant, debating prophetically with today's 'limited inerrantists'!

<sup>7</sup> Daniel P. Fuller, 'The Nature of Biblical Inerrancy', *Journal of the American Scientific Affiliation*, June 1972, 50.

of Easter Morning is independent of the *historisch* (factual) happenings at the tomb, as investigated by the historian. (This must be so if the revelatory, or inerrant, is never susceptible to verification or falsification.) Though Fuller thinks the historian *will* find positive results, the saving revelation of Easter survives intact whether he does or not!

Clark H. Pinnock has challenged Fuller's 'limited inerrancy' view, yet 'we must admit to limiting inerrancy ourselves ...'<sup>8</sup> Only whereas Fuller's version of inerrancy left certain kinds of assertions out of account, Pinnock seeks a way to affirm some kind of inerrancy for each and every statement. To do this, he invokes the criterion of intentionality, first put forth by Hodge and Warfield. They warned that in order for any critic to prove the presence of an error in Scripture, the discrepancy must be shown to be included in the author's intended meaning insofar as this can be determined by the interpreter.<sup>9</sup> Notoriously, inerrantist apologists have often failed to abide by this criterion in good faith, insofar as they have dismissed the plain sense of the text for some less natural one in any case of an 'apparent contradiction'. Witness the doctrinal statement of Melodyland School of Theology: 'A passage of Holy Scripture is to be taken as true in its natural, literal sense unless ... an article of faith established elsewhere in Scripture requires a broader understanding of the text.'<sup>10</sup>

But Pinnock has significantly modified the intentionality rule, in effect drawing Fuller's dividing line, not *between* texts, but *within* them. Now, the assumptions incidental to the assertions intended by the biblical writer may be in error. Inerrancy applies only to those 'intended assertions'. Pinnock seems more adequately to have limited the scope rather than the extent of inerrancy, but the results are not all that different from Fuller's. In the final analysis, it is hard to imagine Pinnock negating any *theological* 'assumptions' of the writers. For example, would Paul's assertion that 'we have peace with God' be inerrant even if his assumption ('having therefore been justified by faith') were mistaken? So it would seem to be only *factual* 'incidentals' that Pinnock is willing to make negotiable. But even here there are problems. Pinnock would seem to have constructed a more nearly inviolable safety zone than Fuller, since any factual event *asserted* by the biblical writer, including the

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<sup>8</sup> Clark H. Pinnock, 'Limited Inerrancy: A Critical Appraisal and Constructive Alternative' in *God's Inerrant Word*, ed. John Warwick Montgomery (Minneapolis: Bethany Fellowship, 1974), 148.

<sup>9</sup> Archibald A. Hodge and Benjamin B. Warfield, *Inspiration* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1979), 36.

<sup>10</sup> Quoted in John Warwick Montgomery, *Faith Founded on Fact* (New York: Thomas Nelson, 1978), 225.

resurrection, is guaranteed as inerrant. But the question is inevitably raised as to where the line is drawn between assumption and assertion. Any factual term may slip from the latter to the former category, as soon as its accuracy becomes dubious on other grounds.

This process is easily illustrated from Henry P. Hamaan's *The Bible Between Fundamentalism and Philosophy*. Inerrancy is said not to be threatened 'where the central concern is clear as clear could be, but where there is irreconcilable disagreement way out on the periphery.'<sup>11</sup> For example, whether Jesus entered Jerusalem mounted on one animal or two is immaterial; the (inerrant) fact is that he did enter. But how would Hamaan (or Pinnock) feel about whether Peter walked on the water? Matthew says that he did, whereas other evangelists imply that he did not, though all agree that *Jesus* walked on water. One might similarly ask after the 'inerrancy' of the physical resurrection, since Luke says the risen Jesus had flesh and thus was no spirit (Luke 24:39), while Paul calls him a spirit and concludes he had no flesh (1 Corinthians 15:45, 50).

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As James Barr points out, whenever interest shifts in this manner to the 'intention' of the writer, the focus is no longer on an external, *factual* referent but on an internal, *mental* one. Thus inerrancy winds up concerning, potentially, only the theological point the writer or redactor wished to make, regardless of the accuracy of his 'assumptions.'<sup>12</sup> Could not *any* narrative account be deemed an error 'contained but not taught' in Scripture? It is on the basis of just such a distinction that Bultmann's demythologizing programme is based.<sup>13</sup> In the long run, then, both Fuller and Pinnock have difficulty 'limiting' inerrancy so as to prevent the dehistoricizing of revelation.

### B. The Infallible Gospel

Almost alone among commentators on the current controversy, Robert K. Johnston has noticed a division among those who reject the strict inerrancy position. Those described above as 'limited inerrantists' are called by Johnston 'complete infallibilists'.<sup>14</sup> While inerrancy of factual details is a problem, the Bible's teachings regarding doctrine and ethics

<sup>11</sup> Henry P. Hamaan, *The Bible Between Fundamentalism and Philosophy* (Minneapolis Augsburg Publishing House, 1980), 60-61; see also Harry R. Boer, *Above the Battle? The Bible and its Critics* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1977), 83-84.

<sup>12</sup> James Barr, *The Bible in the Modern World* (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1973), 173-174.

<sup>13</sup> Cf. Robert C. Sproul, 'Sola Scriptura: Crucial to Evangelicalism' in James Montgomery Boice, ed., *The Foundation of Biblical Authority* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1978), 115.

<sup>14</sup> Robert K. Johnston, *Evangelicals at an Impasse* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1979), 19.



are still believed by this group to be 'infallibly' true. By contrast, there are those whom Johnston calls 'partial infallibilists',<sup>15</sup> who admit errors and contradictions, not only in the factual realm, but also in the theological-ethical area. Thus they limit the scope of infallibility to a reliable 'central message' of salvation. Now it is the *gospel*, not even all the *theology* of the Bible, that is infallible. Their position is derived from the 'Biblical Theology Movement' or '*Heilsgeschichte* School' of the 1930s-1950s, as represented by A. M. Hunter, Reginald H. Fuller, Werner Georg Kümmel, John Bright and G. Ernest Wright. The central message is the recital of God's mighty acts in history, together with his character as evidenced in those acts. Such a 'structure of belief' (Bright) is held in common by all biblical writers, however they may differ in detail or idiom regarding the doctrinal and ethical outworkings. Wright and others were at pains to point out that such an understanding forbade one to imagine that the Bible contained a system of theology.

George Eldon Ladd seems to have been the first major American evangelical to adopt the 'Biblical Theology' model, but he has recently been joined by Richard J. Coleman, Jack Rogers, Donald G. Bloesch and others. Rogers came to this position by way of the influence not of his Fuller Seminary colleague Ladd, but of G. C. Berkouwer of the Netherlands. Rogers' clearest statement of his position occurs not in his *magnum opus* *The Authority and Interpretation of the Bible* (written with Donald McKim), but in his earlier book *Confessions of a Conservative Evangelical*. 'The Biblical Writers are witnessing to their experiences of a person. They are not primarily outlining a system of abstract ideas. ... We should not impose on Scripture a demand that it produce rational ... rules, objective, impersonal truths.'<sup>16</sup>

Traditional evangelical critics of G. Ernest Wright *et al* continually objected that knowledge of God was being made into mere subjective inference, and thus was not properly revelation at all. Rogers and McKim try to meet this objection by expanding the traditional category of 'accommodation', whereby God was believed to have adjusted divine truth to human receptive capabilities. Originally God was thought to have accommodated revelation *through* the biblical writer *to* the original audience. Rogers and McKim have shifted the meaning to imply that accommodation is in the first instance to the limitations of *the biblical writers*, with the result that their cultural biases and blind spots may be recognised and bracketed by modern interpreters. Thus even the 'didactic thought models' maintained as normative by limited-inerrantist

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>16</sup> Jack Rogers, *Confessions of a Conservative Evangelical* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1974), 58, 82.

Pinnock are relativised by Rogers. The move has been made from 'propositional' to 'personal revelation'. The result is that, as Wright had anticipated years before, the Bible may not be seen as containing an implicit systematic theology. Surprisingly, it is not clear that Rogers wants the result that he has laboured so hard to achieve. His and McKim's new book contains a charter for exactly the sort of flexible pluralism opposed by conservatives in their denomination (those United Presbyterians who oppose compulsory ordination of women and homosexuals). Yet they offer the volume as a truce proposal for warring factions! The case of Donald G. Bloesch is also strikingly illustrative here. Only a few years ago, he accused Karl Barth of the 'happy fault' of using Scripture as if it were verbally inspired, even though his Neo-Orthodox doctrine of Scripture could not consistently justify this.<sup>17</sup> Yet now Bloesch is in the same position, since he allows that 'Not all Scripture attests equally to the ... Gospel of reconciliation and redemption, which is the formal norm of Scripture. ...'<sup>18</sup> And therefore 'It is inadmissible to treat the Bible as though it were a source book of revealed truths that can be drawn out of Scripture by deductive or inductive logic.'<sup>19</sup> If this is true, how is it that Bloesch does not hesitate in the same work to map out in detail the inter-relations of heaven, hell, sheol, hades, pre-, post-, and a-millennialism, etc., all accompanied by prooftexts?

### *C. The Pluriform Canon*

So far, we have argued that whereas the limited inerrancy model of the first group of non-inerrantists skirted the vital issue of disunity and disagreement in the 'safe' area of revelational texts, the 'central message' model of the partial infallibilists sought to fill this gap by confining such theological disunity to the periphery of the canon. Presupposed in that approach was that there was at least a broad area of agreement between biblical writers. Often writers in the original 'Biblical Theology Movement' used analogies drawn from music. Daniel P. Stevick compared the Bible to a symphony score, wherein a ritardando which had been omitted could be detected and restored by the conductor because the thrust and general contours of the piece were so distinctive that the ritardando was conspicuous by its absence. Thus the Bible's 'central message' is so clear as to contrast plainly with its 'loose ends'. Conversely

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<sup>17</sup> Donald G. Bloesch, *The Evangelical Renaissance* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1973), 92-93.

<sup>18</sup> Donald G. Bloesch, *Essentials of Evangelical Theology*, vol. 1 (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1978), 55.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 69.

that very diversity serves to define the common ground all the more distinctly.

But another group of scholars on the contemporary evangelical scene detect something of a sour note in this analysis. They would sooner compare the Bible with an orchestra pit where everyone is tuning up before the performance begins. They challenge the very notion of a central kerygma representing the majority of biblical writers. Any point of agreement shrinks to almost mathematical dimensions. And if the teachings contained in the canon are so radically diverse, perhaps it is time to refocus canonical authority from the center back to the periphery. The result is a pluriform canon which, instead of mandating any one view, authorizes or legitimates several options.

The outstanding American voice proclaiming a pluriform canon is Charles H. Kraft of Fuller Theological Seminary. As far as he is concerned, there is very little that is authoritatively shared throughout the extent of the canon. In the New Testament, we are told of the basis on which God has always justified sinners, and continues to justify them, namely the incarnation and atonement of Jesus Christ. Yet this 'information' is certainly not present throughout the Bible, certainly not in the Old Testament. And if the canon is normative in its entirety, how can information limited to only one section be called normative in an absolute sense? For to do so would be to admit that earlier portions of Scripture were inadequate (not just 'less full') revelations. So Kraft reasons that 'though the inspired information concerning *how* God brought about our salvation is extremely valuable, *God's message is no different since the occurrence and Spirit-guided interpretation of these redemptive events than it was in Abraham's or Adam's time.* It was then, and still is today, the message of the eternal God who exists and who 'rewards those who search for him' in faith (Hebrews 11:6).'<sup>20</sup>

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What of all the rest of the biblical materials? They are construed as culturally-appropriate models or paradigms in which the biblical writers expressed 'super-cultural' divine truths. These models differ from one another in more and less important respects, and none need be seen as absolute. But all together, they form a canonical 'tether' or radius inside which a diversity of models would be authorized today, as long as they were 'dynamically equivalent' to biblical counterparts. Kraft is willing to admit that some of these theological and ethical models (both within and without the text) are 'sub-ideal' but still adequate, since in the theologizing process God is concerned more with *appropriateness* to context than with *correctness* to fact. By contrast, James D. G. Dunn, who expounds a

<sup>20</sup> Charles H. Kraft, *Christianity in Culture* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1979), 230.

closely analogous schema in his *Unity and Diversity in the New Testament*, judges all canonical expressions as being on equal footing. But the result is effectively the same, since for Kraft 'sub-ideal' may still be 'appropriate'.

Evangelicals have traditionally balked at recognizing two biblical texts might contradict each other. At least this was so in theory, but their practice has often been much more flexible. They commonly tolerate quite a range of doctrinal latitude. Anyone has the right to affirm either Calvinism or Arminianism, pre- or post-tribulation, eschatology, pentecostalism or dispensationalism, etc., so long as either belief were sincerely thought to be mandated in Scripture. As long as differences concerned 'secondary' matters, no charges of 'repudiating biblical authority' were leveled. The recognition of biblical ambiguity on nonessentials was not difficult. In fact, the student of the Bible has often been advised in making decisions on such issues, to line up all the verses on the side of either doctrine. One is supposed to choose the doctrine supported by the majority of relevant passages (as if one were doing textual criticism before the days of Westcott and Hort)!<sup>21</sup> No one seemed to notice that not mere ambiguity but actual disagreement was being predicated of the Bible. Kraft and Dunn are simply noticing it, and trying to make the choice of options a more intelligent one.

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#### *D. Deabsoluting Biblical Culture*

If the exegetical discovery of radical diversity in the canon is an alarming prospect for some, no less jolting is the theological/ethical diversity often produced by hermeneutics, as biblical texts are variously applied in modern cultures. The exegetical and hermeneutical versions of the diversity issue are distinguishable, but whether they are truly separable is itself an issue of controversy. Gordon D. Fee contends that 'We simply must be done with the nonsense that suggests that some evangelicals are "soft on Scripture" because, for example, they believe in women's ministries in the church. ... (Such) differences are not questions of the authority of Scripture. They are questions of interpretation and have to do with our historical distance from the text and the whole question of cultural relativity.'<sup>22</sup>

But other American Evangelicals are not so sure that this is 'nonsense'. John Warwick Montgomery replies: 'To the contrary, the total trust Jesus

<sup>21</sup> See, for example, the lists of texts concluding each chapter of Gordon R. Lewis, *Decide for Yourself, A Theological Workbook* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1973).

<sup>22</sup> Gordon D. Fee, 'Hermeneutics and Common Sense', in *Inerrancy and Common Sense*, eds. Roger R. Nicole and J. Ramsey Michaels (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1980), 182.

and the apostles displayed towards Scripture entails a precise and controlled hermeneutic.<sup>23</sup> To this end, strict inerrantists have adopted several 'syllabi of errors' that must not be committed. The 'Statement of Scriptural and Confessional Principles' of the Lutheran Church, Missouri Synod; the doctrinal statement of Melodyland School of Theology; and the 'Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy' produced by the International Council on Biblical Inerrancy, all contain lists of rules to be followed in interpreting the supposedly 'perspicuous' Bible. It has long been an embarrassment that the strict inerrancy position by itself could not guarantee any particular theology, not even Chalcedonian Christology, since the Jehovah's Witnesses cult embraces the former but not the latter. So these new 'hermeneutical creeds' seem to be a belated effort to ensure the desired uniformity, or at least to prevent any drastic worsening of the situation. Specifically such formulae seek to plug the hole in the dyke exploited by those evangelicals who strive for a broad range of application of biblical teaching to new situations.

Evangelicals have always recognized the problem of cultural relativity in some form, usually trivial. Must women wear veils in church? What is new in the efforts of, e.g., Virginia Ramey Mollenkott and the 'biblical feminists' is the tendency not merely to bracket off occasional texts as irrelevant, but actually to criticize some texts as deficient when measured by others. The best example is the critique by Mollenkott and Paul K. Jewett of Paul's statements on the role of women in 1 Corinthians 14:34 and 1 Timothy 2:11-15, on the basis of his egalitarian thrust in Galatians 3:28. Passages such as the former, it is implied, are not only improper for the present day, but were inconsistent with Paul's better judgment even in his *own* day. (Interestingly, this kind of distinction tends to reverse that drawn by Pinnock. Now it is the *assumptions* which are normative, whereas the *assertions* may be discounted as errant!)

On this understanding, those who would deabsolutize the culture of the Bible tend to parallel Bultmann's hermeneutical procedure. Bultmann severs the kerygma from the supernaturalistic world picture of the biblical writers, whereas Mollenkott and Jewett are concerned simply to cut away the Bible's patriarchal culture. But the strategy is visibly similar. Besides this, both Bultmann and these biblical feminists venture to apply 'content criticism' (*Sachkritik*) to the biblical text. Their deprecation of Paul's 'anti-women' texts in favour of Galatians 3:28 parallels Bultmann's rejection of Paul's list of eyewitnesses to the resurrection (1 Corinthians 15:5-8) in favour of the apostle's emphasis on pure faith expressed elsewhere (1 Corinthians 2:1-5). Jewett also charges the

<sup>23</sup> Montgomery, *Faith Founded on Fact*, 223.

Pauline texts in question with breaking the 'analogy of faith' defended by the larger (egalitarian) thrust of Scripture as a whole (including, *e.g.*, the first creation account in Genesis 1). 'Ordinarily ... one is said to "break" the analogy of faith when one teaches something contrary to Scripture. (But) we are using the phrase to describe what may be regarded as a disparity or incongruity within Scripture itself. ...'<sup>24</sup> In doing so, he reminds the reader of Bultmann's *New Testament Theology*, where he relates everything after Paul and John to the deuterocanonical status of 'development toward the ancient church'.

142 Charles H. Kraft should also be mentioned here, since he places heavy emphasis on the diversity of applications of God's 'supracultural' truth across a wide spectrum of cultures. Here he joins with the wider theological movement toward 'contextualization'. Much of Kraft's position on this issue has already been anticipated in the preceding section, and one particularly controversial example will serve our purposes here. If African converts had always believed in the survival of ancestors in the spirit-world, may they not legitimately interpret 1 Peter 3:19; 4:6 as offering hope that their pre-Christian kin will yet have the chance to hear and believe the gospel? The controversial nature of the suggestion is due not so much to any assumption on Kraft's part that the passage literally warrants such a belief; rather, it is immaterial to Kraft whether the text 'really' means this or not! For the criterion for applicability is not 'absolute correctness' but 'appropriateness'.

### *E. The Orthodox Option*

In the last section, we noted the formulation of several 'hermeneutical creeds' by evangelicals concerned to stem the growing tide of hermeneutical diversity. The very act of formulating such documents implies a crisis of confidence in the traditional *sola Scriptura* principle, since the Bible is no longer trusted to speak to the exegete *impromptu*. It must be coached to produce those results decreed proper by prior dogma. Still another group of evangelicals, some inerrantists (*e.g.*, Peter E. Gillquist) and others not (*e.g.*, Robert E. Webber), are beginning to reason that, if one is going so far in the direction of catholic-type ecclesiastical authority, why not go all the way? This tendency surfaces among those who feel that even with inerrancy, doctrinal/hermeneutical diversity is too bewildering, as well as those who want to employ biblical criticism at the expense of inerrancy but are afraid of a resulting erosion of theological authority. The second group, then, agrees with the strict

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<sup>24</sup> Paul K. Jewett, *Man as Male and Female* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1975), 134-137.

inerrantists' diagnosis of the problem, but cannot affirm biblical inerrancy. Thus they seek another route to theological certitude — that of the Church.

This movement has a less and a more consistent version. The first was at first identified with a loose group calling themselves the 'Orthodox Evangelicals', which issued a statement (with commentary) entitled 'The Chicago Call'. They wanted to summon American evangelicals to greater creedal identity and continuity of the historic catholic tradition. The agenda was much the same as that presented in Webber's *Common Roots*. Specifics included the regulation of biblical interpretation by a creedal rule of faith, in concert with church tradition. The trouble was that no particular creed or church was named. Webber spoke glowingly of the 'Early Church' *i.e.*, of the second century. But he failed to deal with the fact that the second century church displayed the same radical pluriformity that the pluriform canonists find in the New Testament.<sup>25</sup> So the dreaded disunity problem was merely swept under the rug.

The more consistent group is willing to identify with a particular church tradition. Some of the 'Orthodox Evangelicals' had already begun to identify with the 'New Oxford Movement' in the United States and the United Kingdom. The movement which expresses its concerns in *The New Oxford Review*, was already Anglican in orientation and has begun to flirt conspicuously with Roman Catholicism, thus threatening to follow the original Oxford Movement of John Henry (Cardinal) Newman out of separate existence, and into the papal fold. Another body of American Evangelicals, disenchanted with their sectarian past, has formed a new denomination called 'The Evangelical Orthodox Church', which intends to disappear into unity with the (formerly Russian) Orthodox Church in America. So via these various routes, a number of evangelicals seem to have given up hope of a viable doctrine of exclusively biblical authority, in favour of apostolic succession and ecclesiastical authority.

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## V. TOWARDS POST-EVANGELICALISM?

In the current North American debate over biblical inerrancy and authority, it has become apparent that we cannot speak simply of two sides, as if one group affirmed inerrancy and the other denied it. That would not be even half of the story, since among non-inerrantists, we may distinguish five different emphases, some of which actually represent

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<sup>25</sup> See Walter Bauer, *Orthodoxy and Heresy in Earliest Christianity* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1971), where despite his thesis's limited applicability to the first century, Bauer indicates the bewildering diversity of the second-century 'early church'.

entirely different and opposing views. Furthermore, it looks as if each of these positions reflects the hermeneutical stances of other (Catholic or Protestant) theological camps. Either a given non-inerrantist view unwittingly tends in the same direction as a non-evangelical view (*e.g.*, Fuller and Pinnock tend to dehistoricize revelation; Mollenkott and Jewett parallel Bultmann's demythologizing and content-criticism); or the non-inerrantist view willingly emulates the non-evangelical view (*e.g.*, Rogers and Bloesch echo the 'Biblical Theology Movement'; Webber *et al.* move toward catholic ecclesiasticism). This being so, there would seem no longer to be anything distinctively hermeneutical defining these emerging paths (or anyone treading them) as 'evangelical'.

144 If the preceding analysis has been anywhere near the mark, then the strict-inerrantists may be seen as essentially correct in their claim that the rejection of inerrancy is leading many slowly(?) out of the evangelical orbit. Now this is to say nothing of the propriety or impropriety of such a flight to new worlds. But once such a voyage is undertaken, it may be worth asking just what will henceforth be the role of one's evangelical past? Obviously even a former identity cannot but continue to exercise its influence. We might expect that our 'Post-evangelical' pilgrims would retain a certain evangelical style and set of proprieties. Factors such as personal piety and the importance of the Bible, however construed, would no doubt persist. So would the set of 'fundamentals', though these might become a set of fundamental *questions* rather than *answers*. In short, Post-evangelicals will be interested in many of the same issues as they always were, though they will have found (or will still be seeking) new positions on them. This incidentally should make them the ideal partners in the evangelical-mainstream theological dialogues they have been seeking. The irony is that they themselves will have become the very mainstream partners they once, as evangelicals, sought.