

Has the importance of the concepts of biblical inerrancy and infallibility changed for evangelical Christians today when compared to the end of the 19th Century? If so, why?

At the end of the 19th century the issue of the inspiration of scripture, specifically its traditional claims of inerrancy and infallibility as the very words of God communicated to and recorded providentially and perfectly by human authors ('verbal inspiration'), commanded near centre stage within British, American and Continental academic theology. This essay identifies the primary importance of the emergence of fundamentalism as both an academic response and a cultural reaction to the radical cultural changes that were taking place. It then evaluates to what degree the formulations it developed to defend the status of the scriptures are still relevant for evangelicals today.

The origin of the challenge to the status of scripture was in the 19th century application of the Renaissance critical methods to the biblical texts rather than simply according them a special status as a sacred text, written in a special "*Holy Ghost Greek*"¹ and providentially created and preserved within the *Textus Receptus* (TR)². The early "lower critics" were generally motivated by a desire to validate the integrity of the text by identifying sources of discrepancies within extant manuscripts. Their work is exemplified in Tischendorf (c1862) whom had the distinction of discovering the *Codex Sinaiticus* and as a consequence of this discovery his second edition of the biblical text revised the text significantly. He secondly

¹ Richard Rothe, *Zur Dogmatik* (Gotha, F.A. Perthes: 1863), p138

² The passion surrounding this issue is alive and well today in "the King James debate", see www.1611KingJamesBible.com and D.A. Carson, *The King James Debate – A Plea for Realism* (Baker Academic), 1979 for two radically different views. The KJVO (King James Version Only) side of the debate maintains the pre-critical era position, i.e. the supremacy of the *Textus Receptus*, the group of manuscripts from which most Reformation era Bible translations were made.

stated the principles on which the text should be reinterpreted³. The subsequent assault on the TR by lower critics such as Westcott and Hort⁴ allowed for a complete deconstruction of the traditional theological view described above. Westcott and Hort proposed an historical theory in which they were to assert that their eclectic reconstruction of the text, a synthesis of extant manuscripts of differing text-types, was the original Greek rather than the Byzantine TR⁵. This work of the lower critics in reconstructing the understanding of scripture as a work of *literature* with a major human element in its creation and transmission had radical consequences and complemented the emerging higher critical movement that was concerned with the human history of the text in regard to its sources, authors and redactors.

The second major challenge to the status of scripture was the major assault on the historicity of the narratives. Darwin's evolutionary theory seemed to provide a direct contradiction to the creation narrative of Genesis. Many higher critics had been influenced by Darwinian ideas and the liberal rationalism of 19th century science was theologically hostile to traditional Christianity. Schleiermacher's theology of the early part of the 19th century⁶ had already de-emphasised doctrine in favour of religious experience and had challenged the traditional received understandings and importance of the historical basis and application of scripture⁷. It was a straightforward transition for moderate Liberals to embrace a subjective or allegorical reinterpretation of the biblical narrative when its

³ Kurt Aland and Barbara Aland, *The Text of the New Testament*, trans. Eroll F. Rhodes, 2nd edition (Grand Rapids, William B. Eerdmans: 1995), pp11-14

⁴ B. F. Westcott and F.J.A. Hort, *Introduction to the New Testament in the Original Greek: With Notes on Selected Readings* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson rep. ed., 1988 [1882])

⁵ Aland and Aland (1995), p14

⁶ *Reden über die Religion (Emg. trans. Religion, Speeches to cultured despisers)*, 1799.

⁷ Jeffrey B. Straub, 'George William Lasher – Baptist Proto-Fundamentalist' in *DBSJ* Vol 11 (2006), p140

historicity was challenged. The radical Liberal response, to develop most dramatically in Bultmann was to “*demythologise*”⁸ the traditional understanding of Christianity into what were the “essences” of Christianity, accessible purely through the “*necessary truths of reason*”⁹. However, rather more cautiously, mainstream liberal modernism sought to reconcile biblical teaching with the discoveries of modern science and emphasised the primary role of reason in the interpretation of the scriptures. Such Higher criticism was considered “objective” and “scientific” concerned with the *human history* of the text:

“It was certainly the view of those who argued for the ‘higher criticism’ and liberal theology that the findings of modern science had made implausible many traditional Protestant beliefs.”¹⁰

As a consequence, the orthodox opposition developed in a focussed fashion from the 1870s onwards as conservative elements within denominations began holding conferences and making fresh doctrinal statements of their commitment to what was considered basic to the Christian faith¹¹. The climax of this opposition was the publication of *The Fundamentals* (1909-1912) with close to half¹² of this scholarly and academic¹³ compendium focussed on addressing the challenges to inspiration from the critical methods.

⁸ German *Entmythologisierung* first in the work ‘Neues Testament und Mythologie’ in *Offenbarung und Heilsgeschelen*, Beitrage zur Evangelischen Theologie, Bd. vii: 1941. This was an anthology of his work but he began publishing around 1910.

⁹ Alister McGrath, *A passion for truth – the intellectual coherence of evangelicalism* (Leicester, Inter Varsity Press: 1997), p88.

¹⁰ Bruce, S., ‘Modernity and Fundamentalism: The New Christian Right in America’, *The British Journal of Sociology*, Vol. 41, No. 4 (Dec., 1990), pp.487-488.

¹¹ An academic description of this phenomenon is “proto-fundamentalism” as it predates the self-identification of the group in 1920 by Curtis Lee-Laws when he called people “to do battle royal for the fundamentals and let us be called ‘fundamentalists’” (Curtis Lee Laws, “Convention Side Lights” in *Watchman-Examiner*, 1 July 1920, p. 834)

¹² ‘The Fundamentals – A Testimony to the Truth’, R.A. Torrey, C. Dixon (eds.) (Baker Books reprint, Grand Rapids: 2008), Vols I and II.

¹³ Although it would seem reasonable to assert “fundamentalism” started with the *Fundamentals* this is perhaps an over-simplification. *Fundamentalism* quickly became characterised as anti-academic and culturally isolationist. Some of the authors of the *Fundamentals* would perhaps not be considered sufficiently orthodox by modern fundamentalists.

One of the contributors was B.B. Warfield who belonged to the Princeton Theological Seminary. It was to be in the work of these 'old' Princeton theologians¹⁴ that an archetypal defence of inspiration was developed. Thus, it is appropriate to examine the theological and philosophical nature of this defence.

The reality and validity of lower criticism in and of itself began to demand attention from the Princeton theologians such as A.A. Hodge and B.B. Warfield because Tischendorf had produced work of exceptional quality that had irrefutably established a transmissional history of the text. A novel inversion of the text critical principle was found in Warfield's "*original autograph*"¹⁵ theory. Indisputable errors in our present text *could* be present but they could not be presented as belonging to the "original autographs":

"No 'error' can be asserted, therefore, which cannot be proved to have been aboriginal in the text....no phenomenon can be urged against verbal inspiration which cannot be proved to involve *an indisputable error*"¹⁶
(emphasis original)

Any variation was a corruption, a dialectical aberration, a copyist error, misinterpretation or an erroneous correction¹⁷. Thus, if there was an error in the text, rather than pushing the text in the direction of higher critical reconstruction, it demonstrated the probability that it

¹⁴ J Gresham-Machen was first Professor of Theology at Princeton Theological Seminary who later left to found Westminster Theological Seminary owing to the progress Liberal theology had made into the famous conservative school. A typical example of the struggle in the seminaries of the orthodox Calvinists against the new theologies is related in Straub (J.B. Straub, DBSJ 11 (2006): 135–150). Although this study applies to the Baptist Seminary it was very closely paralleled in the Princeton Presbyterian seminary.

¹⁵ B.B. Warfield, 'The Authority and Inspiration of the Scriptures' in *Collected Works of BB Warfield, Volume 2*, Dr. Johnson C. Philip and Dr. Saneesh Cherian (eds)(Amazon Kindle Edition, Philip Communications: 2013), locations 398-424

¹⁶ B.B. Warfield (2013), locations 398, 424

¹⁷ B.B. Warfield (2013), location 407-416

must be corrupt. Inerrancy was thus guaranteed by isolating it strictly in *“the scriptures as original given”*¹⁸.

On a theological level, Hodge and Warfield were adamant on the principle, *“a proved error in Scripture contradicts not only our doctrine, but the Scripture claims and, therefore, its inspiration in making these claims”*¹⁹. J Gresham-Machen, in the wake of Warfield, was to write *“the Bible is an ‘infallible rule of faith and practice [and any moderation of the doctrine would not be] logically tenable”*²⁰. Thus, philosophically, for Warfield and those that followed him, inerrancy was logically congruent with infallibility. This inerrancy defence is considered the *“classic defence”*²¹ of inspiration and was the one finally adopted by the fundamentalist movement of North American Protestantism during the 1920s and 1930s. So, for example, Ellison and Young in explaining the inconsistencies between Chronicles, Samuels and Kings in reporting numerical statistics or the ambiguity as to who actually killed Goliath, asserted they were simply copyist errors and misunderstandings²² absent from the autographs.

In summary, it is possible to summarise Warfield’s position with the following definitions:

1. *Inerrancy* implies that the Bible *“contains no error of any kind – not only theological error, but error in any sort of historical, geographical or scientific fact”*²³. It is also stated

¹⁸ Most conservative evangelical colleges will still require staff to submit to a variation of this principle as a condition of employment.

¹⁹ A.A. Hodge and B.B. Warfield, ‘Inspiration’, *Presbyterian Review*, Vol 2 (1881), p245

²⁰ Machen (2009), pp63-64.

²¹ Poythress (2012), p13n.

²² E.J. Young, *Thy Word is Truth* (1973(1956)), p123

²³ James Barr, *Fundamentalism*, 2nd edition 2nd impression (London: SCM Press, 1984), p40

in terms of its truthfulness, *“it is completely true in what it says, and makes no claims that are not true”*²⁴;

2. *Infallibility* is understood initially in that *“the Bible does not intentionally mislead in matters of faith or action”*²⁵. This author has previously offered this definition:

“[It is the view that] the correct use of reason with regards to the biblical texts allows the discovery of objective principles with which to conduct oneself in this life and to enter into union with God through His Word. The Bible contains spiritual “facts”, not opinions, of the writers by the virtue that the scripture states about itself that it was “God-breathed”²⁶

In essence, infallibility is more a quality expressing the ontological state of the scripture as a whole and overlaps heavily with the definition of inerrancy in terms of truthfulness. In this ethical sense, it is a witness to its inerrancy, *“inerrantists...stress the epistemological self-containedness of Scripture”*²⁷.

The argument in these terms endured through the 20th century. Young was to write in 1956, *“To maintain there are flaws or errors in [the scripture] is the same as declaring there are flaws or errors in God Himself”*²⁸. Packer based his correlation of scripture with the actual words of God²⁹ on Warfield’s argument. Poythress³⁰ maintains the validity of the argument in contemporary Christian discourse. Though Barr called it “[an] *absurd theory*

²⁴ Vern Sheridan Poythress, *Inerrancy and Worldview* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2012), p13

²⁵ Barr (1984), p288

²⁶ Michael Macneil, *Critically assess the view that Fundamentalism is a revolt against modern secular society* (Bangor, Unpublished: 2011), p5

²⁷ Joe E Barnhart, *What’s All The Fighting About? Southern Baptists and the Bible in Southern Baptists observed*, N. T. Ammerman (ed.) (Knoxville, The University of Tennessee Press: 1993), p126

²⁸ H.L. Ellison, ‘Chronicles’ in *The New Bible Commentary Revised*, Donald Motyer, JA Stibbs, AM Wiseman, D Guthrie (eds) (Leicester, IVP: 1970), p370; E.J. Young, *Introduction to the Old Testament* (Leicester: Tyndale Press), p397

²⁹ J. I. Packer, *Fundamentalism and the Word of God* (Eerdmans, Grand Rapids: 1958), p86

³⁰ Poythress (2012), p13n; Vern Sheridan Poythress, *Inerrancy and the Gospels* (Crossway, Wheaton: 2012), p13 and p13n.

*without evidence*³¹ and is arguably correct in his assertion that reason was the primary “architectonic authority for [Princeton theology]”³², his polemic does not necessarily constitute a forceful argument within the world of textual criticism. Particularly with the modern eclectic methods of textual criticism that generate an “original text” that has no direct manuscript evidence, Warfield’s argument remains a triumph of rational argument of comparable logical quality to these arguments. Contra Barr, Aland and Aland demonstrate the historical claims of Westcott and Hort had serious methodological deficiencies³³ and Robinson demonstrates the weakness of the claims of the Higher critical theories to objectivity³⁴. As the original autographs were not known to exist Warfield presented an untestable but irrefutable thesis. However, the important question now to be considered, was how Warfield’s view was applied within historical evangelicalism and how *significant* are the concepts for the modern evangelical movement.

“Evangelical” in the broadest possible sense applies to those Christians for whom the scriptures rather than church tradition or papal sanction have the “*ultimate authority in matters of spirituality, doctrine and ethics*”³⁵. The evangelical “*confines and submits himself completely to the teaching of the Bible*”³⁶. Being evangelical is defined as commitment to the “*fundamental and inalienable authority of scripture*”³⁷. For some evangelicals of the 20th century, this was seen to imply a single evangelical theology known as *fundamentalism*:

³¹ Barr (1984), pp279-284

³² Barr (1984), p284

³³ Aland and Aland (1995), pp14-18

³⁴ Maurice A. Robinson, ‘Appendix: The Case for Byzantine Priority’ in *The New Testament in the Original Greek*, Maurice Robinson and William G. Pierpont (eds) (Chilton Publishing Company, Chilton: 2005), pp534ff

³⁵ Alister McGrath, *A Passion for Truth* (Leicester: Apollos, 1996), p22

³⁶ D.M. Lloyd-Jones, *What is an Evangelical?* (The Banner of Truth Trust, Edinburgh: 1992), p42

³⁷ McGrath (1996), p23

“‘Fundamentalism’ is just a twentieth century name for historic Evangelicalism [it] is the *only* consistently thought-out version of the faith, and the ‘Fundamentalist’ is the *only* Christian who uses his mind in a *fully* Christian way.”³⁸ (emphasis added)

In contrast, McGrath, an influential, contemporary moderate evangelical theologian, writes to distance evangelicalism from fundamentalism but nevertheless accepts fundamentalism as a specific historical movement within conservative evangelicalism:

“The deliberate decision to use the term *evangelical*...dates from 1942. The formation of the National Association of Evangelicals (NAE)...represented a carefully weighed and considered move to distinguish ‘evangelicals’ from ‘fundamentalists’...There was a need for a reappraisal and a fresh start.”³⁹

Barr, in contrast again, who provided the seminal and polemical critique of fundamentalism, characteristically denies such a distinction is possible:

“These men are...conservative evangelical [scholars]. For the average fundamentalist reader...the function of conservative scholarship is to give him comfort and security”⁴⁰.

This analysis is directly refuted by McGrath:

“Barr’s deeply flawed work failed to distinguish between fundamentalism and its evangelical critics, satisfying only those sufficiently ill-informed to be unable to distinguish them yet sufficiently prejudiced to dislike each with an uncritical vigour.”⁴¹

McGrath, supported by other evangelical scholars⁴², asserts that it is historically clear that post-Second world war, some senior American evangelicals recognised the need to avoid the schism and factionalism that characterised the American fundamentalism during the 1920s and 1930s by distinguishing essentials from non-essentials⁴³. The modern consensus

³⁸ Packer (1958), pp19-22

³⁹ Alister McGrath, *Evangelicalism and the Future of Christianity* (Inter Varsity Press, Downers Grove: 1995), p22

⁴⁰ Barr (1984), p123

⁴¹ McGrath (1995), p43

⁴² Lloyd-Jones (1992), p89

⁴³ Lloyd-Jones (1992), pp85-91

would be that “*fundamentalists are a subgroup within evangelicals*”⁴⁴. Further, the author believes the main determinant as to the significance of the issues in question for contemporary evangelicals is their current relationship to specific aspects of the fundamentalist doctrinal positions and it is to an identification and examination of these issues that is now focussed upon.

The precursor to fundamentalist theology was the publication of Charles Hodge’s *Systematic Theology* in the early 1870s. The important innovation in his theology was that proper Christian revelation was *necessarily* the result of an evaluation by reason of the *propositions* present in scripture:

“Revelations cannot be made to brutes or idiots. Truths, to be received as objects of faith, must be intellectually apprehended...In other words, *knowledge is essential to faith*. In believing we affirm *the truth of the proposition* believed...”⁴⁵ (emphasis added)

Hodge was heavily influenced by Scottish Enlightenment philosophy and placed emphasis on *facts* as constituents of understanding:

“under the new dispensation, our Lord selected twelve men, endowed them with *plenary knowledge* of the gospel, rendered them infallible as *teachers*, and required all men *receive their instructions* as the words of God...”⁴⁶ (emphasis added)

He also comprehensively rejected mystical forms of Christian knowledge:

“the gift of speaking under the inspiration of the Spirit, was analogous to the gift of miracles. The one as obviously ceased as the other.”⁴⁷

Consequently, fundamentalism was to emphasise correct doctrine as a prerequisite of the evangelical life and minimised, if not specifically excluded⁴⁸, the experiential and mystical

⁴⁴ Poythress (2012), p13n

⁴⁵ Hodge (1871-1873), Chapter 3 (S5)

⁴⁶ Charles Hodge (1871-1873), *Systematic Theology* (unabridged Kindle Edition), Chapter 4 (S7)

⁴⁷ Hodge (1871-1873), Chapter 4 (S7)

⁴⁸ For example, traditional Southern Baptist fundamentalist theology has no role for the supernatural.

aspects. Fundamentalism, however, was also a cultural movement. It was specifically American within the American context of the development of the republic and its democratisation of knowledge. The revolutionary fervour of the Restorationists⁴⁹ had swept away much of the Calvinist theological hermeneutic and had modified the classical Reformed theology with a literal hermeneutic, simplicity and “common sense”⁵⁰. The cultural mood was such that the Bible did not need theologians or traditions to interpret it for the people, they could read it and understand it for themselves by the exercise of their own reason:

“We claim to be, not only rigid literalists, but unsparing iconoclasts – ruthless demolishers of all theories. We wish to strip the passage of all the superincumbent strata which ingenious men have deposited all around it, and come down to the plainest most literal reading of the text.”⁵¹

Thus, by the middle of the 19th century a primitive form of theological rationalism had come to dominate American Protestantism⁵² and it was in this context that Hodge’s successor at Princeton, B.B. Warfield and his son A.A. Hodge developed fundamentalism and its characteristic view of inspiration. Hodge had not required absolute inerrancy to support infallibility but Warfield’s fundamentalism collapsed them into one concept out of logical necessity:

“[Charles Hodge] though firm on the infallibility of the Bible, did not insist that this was absolutely congruent with its inerrancy...Errors in scripture could not be tolerated...any one ‘proved error’...threatened the inspiration of scripture and thereby the reliability of the teaching of the apostles [and] the total credibility of the Christian faith.”⁵³

⁴⁹ Restorationists were associated with the Great Awakenings and included Jonathon Edwards in the first and Charles Finney in the second as major figures.

⁵⁰ Mark A. Noll, *America’s God – From Jonathon Edwards to Abraham Lincoln* (Oxford University Press, New York: 2002), pp379

⁵¹ Unknown author, ‘The Millennium of Rev xx’ in *Methodist Quarterly Review*, Jan 1843 in Noll (2002), p381

⁵² Mark A. Noll, *America’s God – From Jonathon Edwards to Abraham Lincoln* (Oxford University Press, New York: 2002), pp367-385

⁵³ Barr (1984), p263

Thus, the separation of these concepts is important in distinguishing moderate evangelicalism from fundamentalism⁵⁴. Barnhart demonstrates that within a representative modern Reformed Protestant denomination (the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC)) that there is an extensive nuancing of the terms that elucidates the separation⁵⁵. He posits three categories within the SBC: *extended inerrancy*, *limited infallibility* and *appropriate infallibility*.⁵⁶

Extended inerrancy posits that “*when the Scriptures affirm something as true, it is true exactly and precisely as stated*”⁵⁷ and so of logical necessity, collapses inerrancy and infallibility into one another. This was the position first taken by Warfield and is characteristic of fundamentalism. Thus, for fundamentalists committed to extended inerrancy such as Schaeffer, Poythress and Lindsell, the project of harmonisation of clear discrepancies or differences between the gospel accounts requires major apologetic effort⁵⁸. In contrast, *limited infallibility* admits of “*irreconcilable differences*”⁵⁹ between parallel accounts. Discrepancies regarding sequences of events would imply one or both authors were in error regarding facts but maintains that what the passage as a whole asserts remains infallible as to the spiritual significance of the central event. Similarly, *appropriate inerrancy* admits of the possibility of *factual* error but because the *genre* of the

⁵⁴ Barr (1984), p263

⁵⁵ J. Barnhart, ‘What’s all the fighting about? Southern Baptists and the Bible’ in *Southern Baptists observed*, N. T. Ammerman (ed.) (Knoxville, The University of Tennessee Press: 1993), p140

⁵⁶ Barnhart (1993), p139ff.

⁵⁷ Barnhart (1993), p139.

⁵⁸ See Poythress in the bibliography.

⁵⁹ Barnhart (1993), p139

writing⁶⁰ may not require factual accuracy (e.g. a Psalm or Proverb). Again, it is possible to maintain that the passage *communicates* exactly what God intended it to communicate.

How this works in practical theology is seen in a contemporary example in Birch-Machin. Birch-Machin is firm on infallibility. The importance of “[*being*] rooted in his word”⁶¹ appears as an injunction. There is found the statement of theological orthodoxy “all revelatory ministry is built upon the foundation of the word of God”⁶² and he affirms the authority of scripture using the familiar inspiration ‘proof text’ of 2 Tim 3:16⁶³. However the *praxis* of the movement he founded is mediated through the practical experience of God in the moving of His Spirit and maintains a necessary distance from inerrancy:

“Sometimes prophets just get things plain wrong but this does not undermine their ministry...Paul prophesied [but] an angel corrects Paul...A [further] misinterpretation of prophecy is recorded in Acts 21:10-12...Therefore we shouldn’t throw out a whole prophecy if there are a few points that are not correct or misinterpreted.”⁶⁴

Here we see the attempt to establish a subjective context for Christian truth *in [the realm of] Christ’s person* rather than a purely objective *with reference to Christ’s words*⁶⁵. This hermeneutic is seen as a primary interpretative principle by the authoritative Anglican N T Wright:

“When we take the phrase ‘authority of scripture’...we recognise that it can have Christian meaning only if we are referring to scripture’s authority *in a delegated or mediated sense* from that which God himself possesses...”

⁶⁰Barnhart (1993), p139ff

⁶¹ Mark Birch-Machin PhD, *Speakers of Life – How To Live an Everyday Prophetic Lifestyle* (River Publishing, Maidstone: 2014), p41

⁶² Birch-Machin (2014), p41

⁶³ Birch-Machin (2014), p41

⁶⁴ Birch-Machin (2014), p41

⁶⁵ This is a frequent constructive in the Greek and this interpretation is technically called a locative dative. Whether the term should be interpreted in this way is a problem for exegesis, see Wallace (1996), pp153-155.

how does this authority actually *work* [and] how does it relate...to the 'authority' [of and within] the Church?"⁶⁶ (emphasis added)

This is in direct opposition to the Enlightenment view of a secularised, objective truth universally accessible to reason, that appeared within theology as "*general revelation*"⁶⁷. It was this view of objective truth that was commonly held by the Princeton theologians, "*its rationalism passed into modern American Reformed evangelicalism...without troubling themselves to ask where they came from.*"⁶⁸ This remarkable coalescence of Enlightenment rationalism and theology is seen vividly in the Restorationist writings of Lamar:

"The Scriptures admit of being studied and expounded upon the principles of the inductive method; and...when thus interpreted they speak to us in a voice as certain and unmistakable as the language of nature heard in the experiments and observations of science."⁶⁹

For the fundamentalist, the propositions of Scripture are generally considered syllogistic statements⁷⁰ and *all* scripture makes normative, true statements that the Christian mind should resolve with complete certainty:

"Regardless [of genre] [the] biblical writers, their literary devices have a logical point which can be propositionally formulated and is objectively true or false."⁷¹

Similarly, in 1971 D.M. Lloyd Jones, one of the most conservative of British evangelicals, was to address evangelical students at IFES⁷², "*Scripture contains propositional truth. This [is the] dividing line between evangelicals and pseudo-evangelicals.*"⁷³ However, McGrath demands a separation from this propositional view of Christian knowledge:

⁶⁶ Tom Wright, *Scripture and the Authority of God* (2nd edition) (SPCK, London: 2013), p23

⁶⁷ Barnhart (1993), pp124-127

⁶⁸ McGrath (1996), p170

⁶⁹ J.S. Lamar, *The Organon of Scripture: or the inductive method of Biblical Interpretation* (J.B. Lippincott & Co, Philadelphia: 1860), p176

⁷⁰ For a description of syllogistic logic see Anthony Kenny, *A New History of Western Philosophy* (Oxford University Press, Oxford: 2010), pp96-100

⁷¹ Carl F Henry, *God, Revelation and Authority* (6 vols) (Wheaton, Crossway Books: 1999), Vol 3 p453

⁷² International Fellowship of Evangelical Students whose publishing arm, the *Inter Varsity Press* is still active.

⁷³ Lloyd Jones (1992), p72

“For reasons which ultimately reflect the dominance of Enlightenment ideas at Princeton during the nineteenth century, evangelicalism was prone to minimise the narrative elements in scripture, in order to secure the intimate relationship between Scripture and doctrine, often regarding the former as a doctrinal sourcebook.”⁷⁴

He similarly objects to this conception of Christian truth:

“‘Truth’, in the New Testament sense of the term, is not abstract or purely objective; it is personal, and involves the transformation of the entire existence of those who apprehend it and are themselves apprehended by it. It is necessary...to rescue evangelicalism from this secularised notion of truth.”⁷⁵

In short, the logical force of the inerrantist argument is posited to rely on a secular and propositional view of truth. It is Enlightenment rationalism that provides the force of the argument, not a Christian concept, *“ideas whose origins and legitimation lie outside of the Christian gospel...exercise a decisive influence on that gospel”*⁷⁶. Thus, what is being asserted is that much of what constituted Higher criticism, liberal theology then the responses and reactions of fundamentalism was the late modernism of the 19th century.

This thesis is readily tested by considering the case of a prophetic utterance from a member of the congregation. Most believers who accept the “charismatic” experience⁷⁷ would agree that the utterance of those who prophesy were Holy Spirit “inspired”

⁷⁴ McGrath (1996), p108

⁷⁵ McGrath (1996), p178

⁷⁶ McGrath (1996), p200

⁷⁷ It is of note that the US fundamentalists of the Baptist SBC and the Pentecostal Assemblies of God (AOG) were amongst the most vocal in their opposition to the charismatic movement as it affected the mainstream denominations during the 1960s and 1970s. The case of the AOG is most remarkable as it was founded by the new experience of the charismatic gifts at the beginning of the 20th century. The major problem for both bodies is characteristic of fundamentalist theology, ‘these believers do not believe the right thing and yet have what we have, it must be counterfeit or it contradicts our entire theology’. Some of the most vicious battles between denominations have been fought on this basis.

operations⁷⁸ logically equivalent to “inspiration” as found in the text most quoted by the fundamentalists:

“Every (or all)⁷⁹ scripture is inspired by God and useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness”⁸⁰

Yet Paul gave repeated instruction regarding prophecy within the congregation where the congregation would probably typically be a small group of believers meeting within a house⁸¹ or in an open space⁸²:

“Two or three prophets should speak and the others should evaluate what is said.”⁸³

“Do not treat prophecies with contempt. But examine all things; hold fast to what is good.”⁸⁴

The Greek verbs⁸⁵ translated here ‘*evaluate*’, ‘*examine*’ and ‘*hold fast*’ both imply a critical evaluation and the possibility of error by the prophet. In summary, being mediated through a fallible human with fallible linguistic processes and limited epistemological resources, the inspiration of a prophetic word does *not* guarantee the infallibility. So, the thesis would seem to be confirmed. There is no need to require inerrancy as a condition of infallibility, you simply understand that the inspired utterance was expressed approximately by human language via the interface between the inspired human spirit and the fallible reasoning processes.

⁷⁸ Greek θεόπνευστος (theópneustos): a communication which has been inspired by God in ‘*Louw-Nida Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament Based on Semantic Domains*’, 2nd Edition, J. P. Louw and E. A. Nida (eds) (United Bible Societies: New York, 1988).

⁷⁹ The Greek construction can mean both translations. To translate “all” refers to the body of scripture; to translate “every” emphasises the inspiration within each unit of scripture.

⁸⁰ 2 Tim 3:16 (NET)

⁸¹ Act 2:46, Act 5:42, Rom 16:5

⁸² Act 16:13

⁸³ 1 Co 14:29, The NET Bible, Version 1.0 - Copyright © 2004, 2005 Biblical Studies Foundation, www.netbible.org.

⁸⁴ 1 Th 5 20-21 (NET)

⁸⁵ διακρίνω (diakrenō), δοκιμάζω (dokimazō) and κατέχω (katechō)

Another key concept to examine within evangelicalism and fundamentalism is the use of “*Providence*”⁸⁶. Providence features heavily in fundamentalist apologetics as in God’s oversight and validation of the creation and inspiration of the scriptures. However, an over-emphasis on deterministic “providential inspiration” poses theological problems for Christian praxis. For if the apostles of the Lamb⁸⁷ or their successors had some “special providence” by which the Holy Spirit ensured that what they wrote was normative for the life of the believing community, a special type of “super believer” is introduced whose experience and quality of faith is somehow superior to what the Body as a whole could enjoy. There is quickly a biblical cult-like stratification of believer with dispensation (as found in the Jehovah’s witnesses) and a “special” experience was granted to certain believers to ensure that a normative foundation was laid⁸⁸. This also implies and requires that the canon of New Testament scripture was clearly written just by those first twelve apostles and that the process of canonisation was uniform and unambiguous.

Neither of these presuppositions are proven. Firstly, traditional attribution of Revelation to the *apostle* John or 2 Peter to the *apostle* Peter are problematic because of the differences present in linguistics and theology between the books and their traditional authors. The fundamentalist defence of Packer in refuting the possible pseudonymous authorship of any canonical material simply employs circular hermeneutics⁸⁹ by stating that ‘any false statement in scripture’ contradicts “*scripture’s view of itself*”⁹⁰ as ‘truthful’ and so

⁸⁶ Packer (1956), pp77-81

⁸⁷ Rev 21:14, Jesus’ immediate companions.

⁸⁸ Charles Hodge (1871-1873), *Systematic Theology* (unabridged Kindle Edition), Chapter 4 (S7)

⁸⁹ Packer (1956), pp182-186

⁹⁰ Packer (1958), p75ff

concludes, “to deny authenticity is to deny canonicity also”⁹¹. However, other fundamentalists explain differences in the Greek of 1 and 2 Peter on the basis of the difference between the Greek skills of the secretaries of the apostle, a novel conjecture which is not evaluated here but it shows the logical requirement to refute the possibility of pseudonymity despite the high probability of scribal copying, editing and assembly⁹² well established to have happened within the transmissional context in which they were set. Secondly, canonisation is described as an extremely complex process even when described by the most evangelical scholars,⁹³ it illustrates the circumlocution in the fundamentalist arguments and the paucity of evidence for such important suppositions. In brief, reflective scholars illustrate the complex transmissional processes and the differences in the settled canon between Christian churches which are highly problematic for a deterministic view of Providence.

Thus it is possible to discern that “Providence” as conceived by fundamentalists is a self-referential logical device that ensures the integrity of the text and is not a distinctively Christian concept. A more distinctive Christian view of providence is the continuing presence of the Holy Spirit within the life of the Church. It is an *existential reality*, not a *rational* one. The Church in time and space generated doctrine by interpreting its experience using scripture as understood within space and time; it has been the product of

⁹¹ Packer (1956), p186.

⁹² John Reumann in *Phillipians – Anchor bible commentaries* (Yale, Yale University Press: 2009) demonstrates forcefully the thesis that Phillipians in its present form was assembled from fragments of maybe four of Paul’s letters.

⁹³ Roger T. Beckwith, ‘The Canon of the Old Testament’ in *Understanding Scripture*, Wayne Grudem, C. John Collins, Thomas R. Schreiner (eds)(Crossway, Wheaton: 2012), pp71-80; Roger T. Beckwith, ‘The Apocrypha’ in *Understanding Scripture*, Wayne Grudem, C. John Collins, Thomas R. Schreiner (eds)(Crossway, Wheaton: 2012), pp89-100; Charles E. Hill, ‘The Canon of the New Testament’ in *Understanding Scripture*, Wayne Grudem, C. John Collins, Thomas R. Schreiner (eds)(Crossway, Wheaton: 2012), pp81-88;

theological and philosophical reflection, then mediated, interpreted and reinterpreted by the experience of the believing community. There have been times of great corrective action as in what is called the Reformation but no one who has studied the Reformation would suggest they made no mistakes, regardless of the inspiration and providence of God that powered those movements which reshaped the understanding of what it means to be Christian. This moderated view of “providence” also avoids the theological problems of alternative, evangelical though non-fundamentalist hypotheses⁹⁴; non-Protestant Catholic interpretations⁹⁵; the problems of non-Western religions and “New Age” spiritualities⁹⁶ which all claim an experiential basis for their praxis. From a logical basis at least in the post-modern context, none would seem to have more merit than the other and as McGrath would assert, is simply a “*competing rationality*”⁹⁷.

However, this is not in any way to automatically set the contrary conclusions of such movements necessarily above those of the fundamentalist theologians. Whilst with Barr it is reasonable to challenge the safety of the concept of a “*proof text*”⁹⁸ when one considers the “context” of a passage as important for its meaning, one can also reasonably argue with Packer, that starting from a hermeneutical assumption, our religious experience does indeed reinforce the truth of that hermeneutic. This is known as a hermeneutic circle or a hermeneutic spiral⁹⁹. It is also true that some of the Higher critical conclusions and methods have been rightly critiqued by fundamentalist themselves¹⁰⁰ but the simple point being

⁹⁴ Barr (1984), pp156-162

⁹⁵ Barr (1984), p165ff

⁹⁶ McGrath (1996), p176

⁹⁷ McGrath (1996), pp93-94

⁹⁸ James Barr, *Escaping from Fundamentalism* (SCM, London: 1984), p3

⁹⁹ Anthony C. Thiselton, *Hermeneutics – An Introduction* (William B Eerdmans, Grand Rapids: 2009), pp13-16

¹⁰⁰ Torrey (2008), Volume 1

argued here is that both sets of arguments are rationalist arguments of the same logical quality and share the same weakness. The theological and philosophical issue is that an evangelical faith that grounds itself in the categories of modernism either as fundamentalism or liberalism, leaves itself vulnerable to all the post-modern and post-liberal critiques of modernism.

The biblical record for the answer to the apologetic problem in the plurality of competing rationalities, analogous to our post-modern context, was a straightforward demonstration of spiritual power, not an appeal to logic. This was the current author's experience from being enmeshed in eclectic new age teaching and spiritualism during his youth to be suddenly confronted with the spiritual power of Jesus in a direct spiritual confrontation with these other "spirits". Rational apologetics did not settle the issue (in fact, the author was completely unaware of their existence) only the reality of the life of the scripture expressed by the community was the real arbiter of truth¹⁰¹. This "truth", though rooted in the scripture, was not a static propositional block of knowledge but *becomes* with the transformation of the inner life of the believer¹⁰². Scripture and the inner light of the Holy Spirit and the experience of being the *body* of Christ is more than the sum of its doctrinal parts¹⁰³, important though they are. This was recognised by the Barth^{104,105} in his formulation of the written word becoming the living word because of the presence of the

¹⁰¹ Wright (2006), p117

¹⁰² Wright (2006), p123

¹⁰³ In some sections of the post-modern church this is known as "emergent Church" (see Tomlinson in the Bibliography). Emergence theory is a general scientific theory attempting to describe non-deterministic phenomenology, e.g. a star-fish which loses its leg will expectedly re-grow its lost leg, what is not expected is the severed leg will grow a new starfish!

¹⁰⁴ Karl Barth, *Kirchliche Dogmatik*, Volume II, part 2, (Evangelischer Verlag, Zollikon-Zuerich: 1948), pp102-106.

¹⁰⁵ Karl Barth, *Kirchliche Dogmatik*, Volume I, part 1, (Evangelischer Verlag, Zollikon-Zuerich: 1948), p136

Spirit¹⁰⁶. His designation as “neo-orthodox” and his eventual rejection by fundamentalist and some very-conservative evangelical thinkers¹⁰⁷ was the result of moving beyond the bounds of a theology that is expressed in the propositions of reason alone.

So, in summary, the case being made here is that inerrancy and infallibility interpreted in the sense used by fundamentalists or by the most conservative of the evangelical theologians, is firmly rooted in an Enlightenment rationalism. The Reformed emphasis on “scripture alone” was fused with Enlightenment rationalism in Hodge when he rejected the mystical component. To the fundamentalist, right doctrine rather than right living is the mark of the true evangelical. Fundamentalism, contra Packer, was not simply “*historical evangelicalism*”¹⁰⁸ but a modern reinterpretation of evangelicalism to deal with a late modern challenge. The *Fundamentals* dealt with the issue of scriptural inspiration and authority because the apologetic priority of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century was to provide a logical ring-fencing of scripture using liberal rational principles to respond to the liberal-rational critique. Warfield’s concept of “autographs” provided an unbreachable fortress of inerrancy but only of apologetic value, as McGrath observes, *if its modern presuppositions are held by the target audience*¹⁰⁹. Such fundamentalists are accurately described as “*modernists swimming against the tide*”¹¹⁰.

¹⁰⁶ This is expressed biblically in Ephesians 6:17. Although this is commonly translated the “the sword of the Spirit is the Word of God” the Greek shows that the text is properly translated the *spirit-filled* Word of God is the sword of the Spirit. The relative matches the gender of its antecedent and so the antecedent of the relative is ‘of the spirit’ *not* ‘the sword’.

¹⁰⁷ D M Lloyd Jones (1991), p72

¹⁰⁸ Packer (1958), p19

¹⁰⁹ McGrath (1996), p176

¹¹⁰ Lawrence, B. (1989), *Defenders of God: the fundamentalist revolt against modern secular society*, San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, p35.

However, for the evangelical body of Christ that is not part of the late-modern intellectual tradition, in an African, Asian or Latin-American context, they will interpret and apply scripture authoritatively in their cultural context without reference to these technical arguments. This phenomena is sometimes referred to as “neo-fundamentalism” to reflect its claim to orthodoxy:

“Neo-‘fundamentalism’ empowers individuals in new ways and open them up to freedoms which have never before shown up...among the social groups most affected by these movements third force Christianity is more centrally marked by the importance of the gifts of the Spirit than by the doctrine of biblical inerrancy...away from religious/cultural monopolies and towards a pluralism based on the voluntary principle [an] autonomous spiritual space”¹¹¹

Similarly, in a Western context, the “neo-fundamentalism” of the Healing and Word of Faith movements unconsciously imported the Barthian conception of the Word of God permitting an increased role for the supernatural and the mystical. However, the use of spiritual gifts and the speaking in tongues is moderated in such neo-fundamentalisms as being “subject” to the written Word¹¹² and you can discern the modern roots of those movements.

However, for post-modern evangelicals in “Fifth Wave” churches and fellowships, such as the Speakers of Life (SOL) movement, the emphasis is now on the supernatural and experience of God, “*While we base our theology on the Bible, it is our experiences with God that makes his truth come alive in our hearts*”¹¹³.

So, in final answer to the question, although the “*Battle for the Bible*”¹¹⁴, particularly in the North American context is still very much a live issue for fundamentalists and neo-

¹¹¹ Martin, B., ‘From pre- to postmodernity in Latin America: the case of Pentecostalism’, *Religion, Modernity and Post Modernity*, Heelas, P., Martin, D. & Morris, P. (Eds), 1998, p107

¹¹² Birch-Machin (2014), pp40-41

¹¹³ Birch-Machin (2014), p75

¹¹⁴ Wright (2005), p.ix

fundamentalism is seen as an unacceptable innovation which is to be aggressively opposed¹¹⁵, evangelicals worldwide have generally progressively shifted their focus from the idealist premillennial fundamentalism to a form of theological realism that is less eschatological and implicitly post-millennial¹¹⁶. The movement amongst thinking evangelicals since the mid-1970s is that of creating a living community of faith *demonstrating* the living experience of the Faith¹¹⁷ with its spiritual power, reclamation of wrecked lives and a radical reclaiming of culture, science, economy, education and nation¹¹⁸. Post-modern evangelicalism is about “experiencing God” and consequently, the abstract issue of inspiration has lost its general presence in Christian discourse. Such evangelicalism separates itself from fundamentalism by locating truth and objectivity in the person of Christ by the internal dwelling of His Spirit and allowing *limited infallibility* to deal with the realities of the bible as literature and *appropriate inerrancy* to deal with it theologically as it relates to the praxis of a living Christian community¹¹⁹. There is now a post-modern prerogative within a pluralistic cultural context similar to that found in the

¹¹⁵ A tenet of traditional Baptist theology (shared by many denominations whose origin was in the Reformation) is that miracles, signs and wonders were for the establishment of the Church only and that in the post-apostolic age only the evangelistic, teaching and pastoral ministries are necessary. The charismatic experience is thus *dispensationalised* and even presented as counterfeit spiritual activity – i.e. those that have that experience are actually energised by the satanic.

¹¹⁶ The “millennium” is thought of as the 1000-year reign of Christ on Earth (Rev 20: 2). Whilst classical Reformation theology was *amillennial* with the current church age being viewed as the millennium and Christ was to return at its consummation, fundamentalism considered the presence of evil in the world as a *reductio absurdum* for this view and were almost completely premillennial viewing the “Kingdom” as a spiritual concept with the end of the age being viewed as full of evil, the remnant Church being removed in the “rapture” and a great period of judgement called the Great Tribulation before Christ’s return and the institution of the Millennium at His return by Him alone. Post-millennialism takes the opposite view, there is no rapture, the Church is to become more and more glorious, transforming the culture of the world with Christ’s supernatural power and authority, so that the Kingdom is created on Earth and Jesus is welcomed to receive the Kingdom at the end of the millennium.

¹¹⁷ Dave Tomlinson, *Re-Enchanting Christianity* (Norwich, Canterbury Press: 2008), p74

¹¹⁸ Landa Cope, *An Introduction to the Old Testament Temple*, 2nd edition (YWAM Publishing, Seattle: 2011), pp15-16

¹¹⁹ Barnhart (1993), pp139ff

biblical narrative of Acts¹²⁰. It requires a truly biblical solution to the challenges to its authority by unbelievers as found in neo-fundamentalist and “Fifth Wave” churches. Rational apologetics needs to shift with the innovations in rationality.

Word count: 5027

¹²⁰ McGrath (1996), p201

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