

OLD PRINCETON, WESTMINSTER, AND INERRANCY*

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WARM devotion to the Reformed faith. Noble aggressiveness in the defense of historical orthodoxy. Emphasis on the exegesis of the original languages of Scripture. Commitment to the blending of piety and intellect. Willingness to engage opposing viewpoints with scholarly courtesy and integrity. These and other qualities combined to give Princeton Theological Seminary, from its inception through the 1920s, a powerful distinctiveness in the ecclesiastical and academic worlds. It was this distinctiveness that the founders of Westminster Theological Seminary sought to preserve when the new institution was established in 1929.

We would betray the genius of this tradition if we were to identify any one issue as all-important or determinative. And yet, given the historical contexts that brought Princeton into new prominence in the late nineteenth century and that brought Westminster into existence half-a-century ago, one must fully acknowledge the unique role played by the doctrine of inerrancy as that doctrine has been understood by its best exponents, notably B. B. Warfield. It may be an exaggeration, but only a mild one, to say that the infallibility of Scripture, with its implications, has provided Westminster's *raison d'être*. Indeed, as far as the present faculty is concerned, we would sooner pack up our books than abandon our conviction that the Scriptures are truly God's very breath.

What I would like to stress in this chapter, however, is the definition of inerrancy implied by the words in the previous paragraph: *as that doctrine has been understood by its best exponents*. The contemporary debate regarding inerrancy appears hope-

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lessly vitiated by the failure—in both conservative and non-conservative camps—to mark how carefully nuanced were Warfield's formulations. The heat generated by today's controversies has not always been accompanied by the expected light, and for every truly helpful statement one will easily encounter ten that blur the issues. The unfortunate result is that large numbers of writers and students assume, quite incorrectly, that their ideas about inerrancy correspond with the classic conception.

One effective way to demonstrate this point would be to conduct a survey that asked people to identify selected quotations. Take the following statement on biblical inspiration:

It is not merely in the matter of verbal expression or literary composition that the personal idiosyncracies of each author are freely manifested . . . , but the very substance of what they write is evidently for the most part the product of their own mental and spiritual activities. . . . [Each author of Scripture] gave evidence of his own special limitations of knowledge and mental power, and of his personal defects as well as of his powers.

Here is another one:

[The Scriptures] are written in human languages, whose words, inflections, constructions and idioms bear everywhere indelible traces of error. The record itself furnishes evidence that the writers were in large measure dependent for their knowledge upon sources and methods in themselves fallible, and that their personal knowledge and judgments were in many matters hesitating and defective, or even wrong.

Where do these remarks come from? A nineteenth-century liberal like Briggs? Some recent radical theologian like Bultmann? Those words, it turns out, come from what is widely regarded as the classic formulation of biblical inerrancy by the two great Princeton theologians A. A. Hodge and B. B. Warfield.¹ Most evangelicals, I am sure, would be quite surprised to hear this. Some of them might even decide that Warfield didn't really believe the Bible after all. The situation is even worse among nonevangelical writers, very few of whom would be able to understand that the quotations above are indeed consistent with a belief in inerrancy.

¹ A. A. Hodge and B. B. Warfield, *Inspiration* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1979, orig. 1881) 12f., 28. Interestingly, the second quotation was attacked at the time of publication as reflecting a lowered view of inspiration. Cf. Warfield's responses, included as Appendices 1 and 2 in *Inspiration*, 73–82.

This widespread ignorance works to the detriment of the doctrine. For example, when modern conservative scholars seek to nuance the discussion, they are more often than not accused of putting the doctrine to death through a thousand qualifications. Indeed, these scholars are perceived as backpedaling on their commitment to inerrancy and redefining its boundaries more or less after the fact—as though they were making up the rules as they go along. Sadly, that assessment is accurate enough in certain cases, and one can fully understand (and even share) the concern expressed in some quarters.

The passages quoted above, however, should make it plain that, in its original form, the Princetonian doctrine was carefully qualified, and that contemporary scholars who do the same are not necessarily undermining inerrancy but possibly preserving it. The common conception of Warfield is that he came up with a “deductive” approach to inspiration which did not take into account the phenomena of Scripture. Such an approach would in any case have been unlikely when one considers Warfield’s expertise in the fine points of textual criticism and exegesis,² and our two quotations leave no doubt that the common view is a grotesque misconception. Similarly, it makes little sense to accuse modern evangelical scholars of (a) being insensitive to the text if they happen to believe in inerrancy, or (b) being untrue to inerrancy if they take fully into account the human qualities of Scripture.

Before proceeding any further, however, it is crucial to point out that the two passages quoted above cannot be taken, by themselves, as an adequate representation of the Hodge/Warfield view. The whole thesis of their famous work is that the Bible, whose primary author is God, teaches no errors. That thesis is the broad context necessary to understand their qualifications. One can easily imagine how some contemporaries who wish to preserve their identity as evangelicals while aban-

² Warfield became a member of the Society of Biblical Literature and Exegesis as early as 1882 and contributed a number of technical articles to *JBL* and other periodicals. One interesting example is “Notes on the *Didache*,” *JBL* no vol. (June 1886) 86–98. For other material cf. John E. Meeter and Roger Nicole, *A Bibliography of Benjamin Breckinridge Warfield 1851–1921* (n.p.: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1974).

doing the doctrine of inerrancy might gleefully inscribe those two quotations on their personal banners and announce to the world their solidarity with Warfield.

But that is hardly fair to the Old Princeton theology. Indeed, it would constitute one more example of the kind of shoddy use of sources that got us into our present confusion to begin with. Writers (liberals and conservatives) who like to quote Warfield's strongest expressions of inerrancy without paying attention to the nuances that accompany them are no worse than individuals who look for the qualifications alone and ignore the very thesis that is being qualified.

Without seeking to exegete those two quotations, we should at least identify the basic qualification that the authors have in view, namely, the need to distinguish between official teaching and personal opinion. Elsewhere Warfield stated that such a distinction

seems, in general, a reasonable one. No one is likely to assert infallibility for the apostles in aught else than in their official teaching. And whatever they may be shown to have held apart from their official teaching, may readily be looked upon with only that respect which we certainly must accord to the opinions of men of such exceptional intellectual and spiritual insight. . . .

. . . A presumption may be held to lie also that [Paul] shared the ordinary opinions of his day in certain matters lying outside the scope of his teachings, as, for example, with reference to the form of the earth, or its relation to the sun; and it is not inconceivable that the form of his language, when incidentally adverting to such matters, might occasionally play into the hands of such a presumption.³

Warfield did not mean, of course, that every chapter of the Bible may well contain erroneous personal opinions and that we are left to our subjective judgment regarding the authoritative character of each proposition. Such an interpretation of Warfield's words would be a complete travesty. What he surely had in view was the occasional occurrence of certain forms of expression, such as conventional phrases, that *reflect* commonly held views regarding history, nature, etc.

³ B. B. Warfield, *The Inspiration and Authority of the Bible* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1948) 196f. The passage comes from an article, "The Real Problem of Inspiration," originally published in the *Presbyterian and Reformed Review* 4 (1893) 177-221.

Inspiration does not convey omniscience, and since the personal limitations of any one biblical writer are not all miraculously suspended by virtue of his being inspired, we may expect to see here and there some evidences that he was indeed a limited human being. The marvel of inspiration resides precisely in this fact, that the divine origin of Scripture insures the preservation of both the divine truth being communicated and the unique personality of each writer. The Holy Spirit, in other words, prevents the authors from teaching falsehood or error without overriding their personal traits.

Warfield's distinction between the "official teaching" of Paul and on the other hand those "matters lying outside the scope of his teachings" is exceedingly important for our concerns. In effect, it forces us to consider the thorny issue of authorial purpose or intention.⁴ And this issue in turn reminds us of the crucial role that exegesis must play in our discussion. Not everything found in the Scriptures is actually affirmed or taught by the biblical authors (e.g., "There is no God," Ps 14:1). The text must therefore be studied so that we can determine what it teaches. Such is the task in view when we say that we must identify the author's intent. To put it simply, we must figure out what the writer wishes to communicate. Unfortunately, the words *intention* and *purpose* have become veritable shibboleths in the contemporary debate. Some writers, in fact, argue that the appeal to intention undermines biblical authority.⁵

⁴ One issue that cannot detain us here, however, is the distinction among such factors as divine meaning, author's meaning, audience meaning, and so on. I must assume that the readers of this article recognize the primary importance of ascertaining the original historical meaning of a document (whatever credence they may or may not give to the possibility of additional meanings intended by God or read into the text by later readers).

⁵ Nelson Kloosterman, for example, speaks pejoratively of those who "hold to a Bible whose authority is limited by the human author's intentions, intentions which can presumably be exposed and defended by a certain kind of theological scholarship" ("Why You Need MidAmerica Theological Seminary," *The Outlook* 31, no. 12 [December 1981]: 3). Similarly, Harold Lindsell, in *The Battle for the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1976), makes the same point repeatedly. Even Lindsell, of course, finds it necessary to appeal to the concept of intention, as in his discussion of the parable of the mustard seed: "The *American Commentary* says of this passage that it was popular language, and it was the intention of the speaker to communicate the fact that the

Their concern is understandable, since these terms are a little vague. A theologian, for instance, may have in mind the broad purpose of Scripture and argue that, while the Bible could be full of errors, yet it is infallible in its explicit teachings about salvation. Again, another writer may suggest that the intention of the biblical author is a psychological element behind the text and to be distinguished from the text—a position reminiscent of the old argument that it is the thoughts, not the words, of Scripture that are inspired and infallible. These and comparable formulations are indeed destructive of biblical authority and must be rejected.⁶

It would be a grave mistake, however, if we allowed these abuses to force us into the indefensible position of denying the crucial exegetical role played by an author's intention, for this is the fundamental element of the principle of *sensus literalis*. Grammatico-historical exegesis is simply the attempt to figure out what the biblical writer, under divine guidance, was saying. The basic question is then, What did the author mean? The only evidence we have to answer that question is the text itself. In other words, we dare not speak about the Bible's infallibility in such a way that it legitimizes random and arbitrary interpretations of the text.

Our best theologians made it clear all along that inerrancy was being claimed for the Bible on the assumption that the

mustard seed was 'the smallest that his hearers were accustomed to sow.' And indeed this may well be the case. In that event there was no error" (p. 169).

⁶ Norman L. Geisler has rightly attempted to discredit these approaches in "The Relation of Purpose and Meaning in Interpreting Scripture," *Grace Theological Journal* 5 (1984) 229–45. Unfortunately, Geisler draws too sharp a distinction between meaning and purpose. Determining the purpose of a text is one of the elements necessary to identify the context of the document. On p. 231 Geisler attacks interpreters of Genesis 1–2 who believe that those chapters intend merely to draw men to worship God. Geisler seems unaware that his own understanding of those chapters (with which I concur) also assumes a certain purpose, namely, the intent to state certain historical facts. Cf. these comments by Hodge and Warfield: "No objection [to inspiration] is valid . . . which overlooks the prime question: What was the professed or implied purpose of the writer in making this statement? . . . Exegesis must be historical as well as grammatical, and must always seek the meaning *intended*, not any meaning that can be tortured out of a passage" (*Inspiration*, 42 and 43; italics in the original).

Bible would be interpreted responsibly, and such a proper interpretation consists in determining what the original author meant, what he intended. As Hodge and Warfield stated it: the Bible gives us “a correct statement of facts or principles intended to be affirmed. . . . Every statement accurately corresponds to truth just as far forth as affirmed.”⁷

It may be useful to illustrate our problem by referring to 1 Cor 10:8, where Paul makes mention of 23,000 Israelites who died because of their immorality, in apparent conflict with Num 25:9, where the number given is 24,000. Notice the following attempt to solve the problem:

. . . it is not unheard of, *when there is no intention of making an exact count of individuals, to give an approximate number. . . . Moses gives the upper limits, Paul the lower.*

The next quotation, though longer, seems to make the same point:

. . . neither of the writers *intended to state the exact number, this being of no consequence to their object. . . . It was not at all necessary, in order to maintain their character as men of veracity, that they should, when writing for such a purpose, mention the exact number. The particularity and length of the [exact] expression would have been inconvenient, and might have made a less desirable impression of the evil of sin, and the justice of God, than expressing it more briefly in a round number; as we often say, with a view merely to make a strong impression, that in such a battle ten thousand, or fifty thousand, or half a million were slain, no one supposing that we mean to state the number with arithmetical exactness, as our object does not require this. And who can doubt, that the divine Spirit might lead the sacred penman to make use of this principle of rhetoric, and to speak of those who were slain, according to the common practice in such a case, in round numbers?*

Here is another author that takes a similar approach:

Are there errors in the Bible? Certainly not, so long as we are talking in terms *of the purpose of its authors* and the acceptable standards of precision of that day. . . . *For the purpose that Paul had in mind [the variation] made no difference. His concern was to warn against immorality, not to give a flawless performance in statistics.*

⁷ Hodge and Warfield, *Inspiration*, 28–29. It is very important to note that Warfield emphasized this particular qualification when he responded to criticisms of the article (cf. pp. 79–80).

All three of these writers seem concerned to deny that the apostle is guilty of an error, yet none of them attempts some artificial harmonization (for example, the view that Paul is speaking about those who fell "in one day," while Numbers includes the additional 1,000 who died later). Moreover, all three of them assume that inerrancy does not necessarily demand mathematical exactness. Finally, all of them appeal to Paul's intention or purpose to use a round number. I am unable to see any substantive difference among these three explanations.

The three authors quoted above happen to be John Calvin, the nineteenth-century American theologian Leonard Wood (one of the most forceful defenders of biblical inerrancy prior to B. B. Warfield), and our contemporary Robert H. Mounce.⁸ My reason for bringing these three quotations together is to point out that Harold Lindsell quotes the third of those statements as evidence that Mounce does not believe in inerrancy, yet a few pages later he presents the quote from Calvin as giving an acceptable treatment of the problem!⁹ It may be that the tone of Mounce's brief article (it sounds as though the author is apologizing for the evangelical view) led Lindsell to believe that Mounce had indeed rejected the doctrine of inerrancy. It is impossible, however, to prove that point from the quotation above—or, for that matter, from the other statements by Mounce to which Lindsell refers.

In any case, we can see clearly how easy it is to misconstrue qualifying statements, even when the qualification in view is very much a part of the evangelical tradition. In short, the appeal to the author's intent, if properly understood, is an integral element in the classical affirmations of biblical inerrancy. And the reason is, if I may repeat myself, that we cannot

⁸ J. Calvin, *The First Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1961) 208–9; Leonard Wood, *The Works of Leonard Wood, D.D.*, 5 vols. (Boston: Congregational Board of Publications, 1854) 1.173; R. H. Mounce, "Clues to Understanding Biblical Accuracy," *Eternity* 17, no. 6 (June, 1966) 16–18, p. 18. (The italics are mine, except for the phrase *such a purpose* in the second quotation.) In connection with Wood, note the very helpful discussion of preWarfield inerrantists by Randall H. Balmer, "The Princetonians and Scripture: A Reconsideration," *WTJ* 44 (1982) 352–65.

⁹ Lindsell, *Battle*, 168.

claim to know what the Scripture infallibly teaches unless we have done our exegetical homework.

Our discussion so far has made it apparent that one can hardly speak of inerrancy without getting involved in hermeneutics. And yet, an exceedingly important caveat is necessary here, for while the two concepts are closely related or even inseparable, they are also distinct. For inerrancy to function properly in our use of Scripture, an adequate hermeneutics is a prerequisite. But that is a far cry from suggesting that the doctrine of inerrancy automatically provides us with the correct hermeneutics, except in the rather general sense that it precludes any interpretation that makes out God to lie or to err.

A few examples will clarify the issue. As recently as two decades ago it was not unusual to come across devout Christians who were persuaded that, when interpreting prophecy, a premillennialist eschatology was the only approach consistent with the doctrine of infallibility. For many of these brethren—of whom a few remain, I am sure—a so-called literal interpretation of prophetic passages was taken as evidence, maybe even as the most important piece of evidence, that an individual believed the Bible; and it was taken for granted that amillennialists, therefore, were “liberals.” But such an equation is baseless, since the doctrine of inerrancy does not determine that any one prophecy (or set of prophecies) must be interpreted “literally.” That can only be determined by an exegesis of the passage(s) in question.

Let's take a more disturbing example: the historicity of Genesis 1–3. All inerrantists, so far as I know, believe in the factual character of that material. This state of affairs creates a certain presumption that inerrancy *by itself* demands such an interpretation. But the presumption is false; indeed, it is an equivocation. The doctrine of biblical infallibility no more requires that narratives be interpreted “literally” than it requires that prophetic passages be interpreted “literally.” That decision must be arrived at by textual evidence and exegetical argument.

Now I happen to believe that the essential historicity of Genesis 1–3 is a fundamental article of Christian orthodoxy. It would surely require hermeneutical prestidigitation to ar-

gue that the original writer meant those chapters to be taken as “less historical” than the later patriarchal narratives (and could the original audience have discovered any such distinction between the early and the later chapters of the book?). For that reason and others, such as Paul’s argumentation in Romans 5 and 1 Corinthians 15, I would want to argue very strongly that the proper interpretation of the Genesis material is one that does justice to its historical claim.

And yet I would want to argue just as strongly that such an interpretation is independent of my commitment to inerrancy. These are two distinct questions. Of course, once we have established exegetically that the first three chapters of Genesis teach historical facts, then our belief in infallibility requires us to accept those chapters as factual. But infallibility, apart from exegesis, does not by itself determine historicity. Otherwise we would be obligated to accept as historical Nathan’s story in 2 Sam 12:1–4 or even the parable of the trees in Judg 9:7–15.

I have deliberately chosen my two examples from polar opposites. Relatively few evangelicals would argue that inerrancy entails premillennialism, but many seem ready to argue that it does require a historical interpretation of Genesis 1–3. Between these two extremes are countless interpretations that have traditionally been held by conservatives and that are viewed as necessary consequences of accepting biblical infallibility. It may therefore prove worthwhile pointing out that the Princeton/Westminster tradition, though it has stood forcefully and unequivocally for biblical inerrancy, has never degenerated into the practice of assuming, apart from exegetical demonstration, that this doctrine requires the adoption of particular interpretations.

My first example comes from the area of the relationship between the Bible and science. Students familiar with Warfield’s writings are well aware of his positive attitude toward modern scientific theories regarding origins. Though it is a little difficult to determine specifically Warfield’s position, it appears that his view came relatively close to what we call theistic evolution (without compromising, to be sure, the direct creation of man).¹⁰

¹⁰ Cf. Mark A. Noll, *The Princeton Theology, 1812–1921: Scripture, Science and*

J. Gresham Machen, in sharp contrast to the fundamentalism of his day, refused to become involved in the evolution controversy.¹¹ More recently, Meredith G. Kline proposed an interpretation of Genesis 1 that parted company with traditional views. Kline's colleague on the Westminster faculty, E. J. Young, took issue with that interpretation, but at no point in his argument did he accuse Kline of abandoning the doctrine of infallibility. Nor did Young simply assume that such a doctrine entailed the traditional view of Genesis but rather sought to refute Kline through careful exegetical argumentation.¹²

A second example has to do with higher criticism. This is one area, it must be admitted, where a belief in inerrancy appears to have a direct bearing on interpretation. If the author of a NT epistle, for example, claims to be the apostle Paul, we would be questioning the moral integrity of the author if we were to argue that the letter was not in fact written by Paul. Yet this set of questions too has to be decided on exegetical grounds, and not on the assumption that inerrancy entails a traditional view of authorship, date, etc.

It is no secret that E. J. Young, who was uncompromisingly conservative on virtually every higher-critical issue, came to the conclusion that the Book of Ecclesiastes was not composed by Solomon, even though that appears to be the claim of the book itself.¹³ Professor Young was among the most conservative in the long line of biblical scholars in Old Princeton and Westminster. It is doubly significant, therefore, that he did not apparently see a necessary connection between a belief in inerrancy and the traditional view of Solomonic authorship for Ecclesiastes.

A third and particularly instructive example is the way different writers approach the difficult problem of Gospel har-

Theological Method from Archibald Alexander to Benjamin Breckinridge Warfield (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1983) 289, 293-94.

¹¹ See Ned B. Stonehouse, *J. Gresham Machen: A Biographical Memoir* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1954) 401-2.

¹² E. J. Young, *Studies in Genesis One* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1964) 58-64.

¹³ E. J. Young, *An Introduction to the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1949) 340. The revised 1964 edition omits the strongest paragraph, but it is clear that his position had not changed in spite of the fact that not a few feathers had been ruffled by it.

monization. Take the story of the rich young ruler. According to Mark 10:17–18 and Luke 18:18–19 this ruler addressed Jesus as “Good Teacher” and asked what he could do to inherit eternal life; Jesus replied, “Why do you call me good?” In Matt 19:16–17, however, the word “good” is transferred to the man’s actual question (“Teacher, what good thing shall I do . . . ?”) and so Jesus’ rebuke takes a different form: “Why do you ask me about the good?” Our first quotation seeks to solve the problem by incorporating both versions into one account:

In all probability, the full question was, “Good teacher, what good thing shall I do that I may possess eternal life?” To this the complete answer of the Lord may have been, “Why callest thou Me good and why askest thou Me concerning that which is good?” . . . No one of the evangelists, however, has seen fit to give the complete question or the complete answer.

The second quotation reflects quite a different approach:

. . . one must allow for the possibility that Matthew in his formulation of 19:16, 17 has *not only been selective* as regards subject matter but also that he used some freedom in the precise language which he employed. The singular use of the adjective “good” might then be a particularly clear example of his use of that freedom. . . . One tendency [in the history of the harmonization of the Gospels] that is both conservative and simple, has been to join divergent features and to seek to weave them together into a harmonious whole. Where, however, the divergent elements are exceedingly difficult to combine in that way, it is insisted that the narratives must be regarded as reporting different events or different sayings. . . . there is, in my judgment, a sounder attitude to most problems of harmonization than that which was characterized above as conservative and simple.

Neither of these writers is against harmonization in principle, but they differ rather substantively in what they consider necessary to defend the integrity of the narrative. One could certainly argue that the second writer is directly reacting against the viewpoint espoused by the first. Remarkably, these two passages were written by contemporaries on the Westminster faculty. The first one comes from E. J. Young’s famous work on inerrancy, published in the late 1950s, while the second statement was written just a few years later by Ned B.

Stonehouse.¹⁴ One is intrigued by the question whether Stonehouse remembered Young's discussion; if so, was he deliberately distancing himself from that approach? In any case, the differences are most instructive.

What shall we infer from these examples?¹⁵ Should evangelical scholars be insulated from criticism if they appear to be bucking historic Christian tenets without clear biblical support? So far from it, that the Princeton/Westminster tradition has consistently deepened the evangelical conception of biblical authority within the framework of Reformed orthodoxy. No doubt, some may wish to appeal to the disagreements described above and argue that, therefore, "anything goes"—that the increasingly positive attitude toward higher criticism by a number of contemporary evangelical scholars is quite consistent with the doctrine of inerrancy. Such a move would hardly be honest, however, especially when one considers that the Princetonian formulations of inerrancy were meant precisely to counteract the growing popularity of nineteenth-century critical theories. What then can we learn from the history we have briefly surveyed?

The hermeneutical flexibility that has characterized our tradition would probably come as a surprise to many observers who view Westminster as excessively rigid. Ironically, our confessional documents, the Westminster Confession and Catechisms, are far more extensive and detailed than those

¹⁴ E. J. Young, *Thy Word Is Truth: Some Thoughts on the Biblical Doctrine of Inspiration* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1957) 131; Ned B. Stonehouse, *Origins of the Synoptic Gospels: Some Basic Questions* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1963) 108–9, my emphasis. Warfield's own approach, which seems close to Young's, may be found in *The Person and Work of Christ* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1950) 160: "It lies in the nature of the case that the two accounts of a conversation which agree as to the substance of what was said, but differ slightly in the details reported, are reporting different fragments of the conversation, selected according to the judgment of each writer as the best vehicles of its substance."

¹⁵ Other intriguing examples of diversity could be mentioned. Particularly important (because of its relation to the field of ethics) is the case of Paul Woolley, professor of church history, who took a rather "liberal" position on a wide variety of social and political issues. On many questions of this sort Professor Woolley stood alone or nearly alone within the Westminster faculty, but to the best of my knowledge his devotion and commitment to biblical authority was never called into question.

found in most evangelical institutions. Our theological parameters are indeed very clearly defined, and yet those parameters themselves have made possible a diversity of viewpoints that would not have been tolerated in some other institutions.

It can even be argued, I think, that there is a direct connection between such a diversity and the fact that the Princeton/Westminster tradition has provided consistent leadership to the evangelical world in the area of biblical authority. Why is this so? The doctrine of infallibility assures us that we can have total confidence in God's revelation to us. It does not mean, however, that we may have total confidence in our particular interpretations of the Bible.

For many believers, unfortunately, assurance that the Bible is true appears to be inseparable from assurance about traditional interpretive positions, so that if we question the latter we seem to be doubting the former. George E. Ladd is absolutely right when he states:

"Thus saith the Lord" means that God has spoken His sure, infallible Word. A corollary of this in the minds of many Christians is that we must have absolute, infallible answers to every question raised in the historical study of the Bible. . . .

This conclusion, as logical and persuasive as it may seem, does not square with the facts of God's Word; . . . the authority of the Word of God is not dependent upon infallible certainty in all matters of history and criticism.¹⁶

I do not know to what extent Ladd agrees or disagrees with Warfield's position, but this quotation is perfectly consistent with it; more to the point, Ladd's qualification belongs to the very essence of the classical doctrine of inerrancy. Yet—inexplicably—Lindsell quotes those words as evidence that Ladd has abandoned biblical infallibility.¹⁷

Uncertainty is not a pleasant thing, and our instinct to avoid it can lead us into trouble. Concerned not to leave the door open to excesses, we are tempted to raise artificial barriers. But this medicine can be worse than the disease. I mention

¹⁶ George E. Ladd, *The New Testament and Criticism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1967) 16–17.

¹⁷ Lindsell, *Battle*, 114. In fairness to Lindsell, I should point out that Ladd's language (in the larger section from which the quotation is taken) does not seem designed to inspire confidence in biblical infallibility.

these things because there is a strong current of opinion in evangelical circles that says we need to tie inerrancy down to certain hermeneutical boundary lines. But to speak in this way is once again to increase the conceptual confusion. It is of course true that a commitment to inerrancy entails that we will believe such interpretations as are clearly demonstrable from the scriptural text, but inerrancy does not automatically settle interpretive debates, such as the mode of baptism, the doctrine of unconditional election, the practice of charismatic gifts, and so on.

Many evangelicals have awakened to the fact that belief in inerrancy does not insure acceptance of traditional positions, and several recent writers have emphasized the wide and significant disagreements that exist within the evangelical community. Some infer, not surprisingly, that the doctrine of inerrancy is of little value for Christian living and should therefore be given up. Conservatives then tend to overreact and argue that we need to define inerrancy in such a way as to guarantee that evangelicals will agree on important issues.¹⁸

Nothing could be more wrongheaded. Forced hermeneutical unanimity is meaningless; worse, it would be destructive of biblical authority. To say that the doctrine of inerrancy demands acceptance of a particular interpretation is to raise human opinion to the level of divine infallibility; in such a case, said interpretation cannot be questioned and need not be defended. On the other hand, to acknowledge a measure of interpretive ambiguity, rattling though that may be, indicates our conviction that the Bible, and the Bible alone, is inerrant. To be sure, the Christian church may and must condemn hermeneutical approaches as well as specific interpretations that contradict the teaching of Scripture. But the point is this: the church cannot simply appeal to the infallibility of the Bible. The church is obligated to show persuasively that these interpretations are wrong. In short, we must exegete that infallible Bible and demonstrate that we have understood its teachings.

¹⁸ I have treated this matter more extensively in *Has the Church Misread the Bible? The History of Interpretation in the Light of Current Issues* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1987).

Perhaps it is now clear why, in my opinion, the hermeneutical flexibility that has found expression on the faculties of Old Princeton and Westminster has actually contributed to (instead of undermining) the influence these institutions have exerted with regard to the doctrine of biblical authority. Precisely because they accepted the reality of hermeneutical uncertainty, they worked especially hard to remove that uncertainty through careful exegesis.

It is no accident that Old Princeton and Westminster have been so obnoxious in requiring students to learn Greek and Hebrew. It was not some methodological misconception that led John Murray to teach courses in systematic theology that looked more like courses in exegesis. It was no blunder that made a Warfield or a Machen or a Stonehouse pay an enormous amount of attention to the work of liberal and radical scholars. These and other "oddities" are direct consequences of a commitment not to leave any stones unturned to find out what the Bible really says. Our whole ministry is, in its own way, a response to our Lord's penetrating criticism, "You err because you do not know the Scriptures." With Warfield we devote ourselves to the task of knowing the unerring Scriptures so that we will not err.

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