

Hermeneutics and Biblical Authority

BY JAMES PACKER

THE importance of my theme is obvious from the single consideration that biblical authority is an empty notion unless we know how to determine what the Bible means. This being so, I have been surprised to find how rare evangelical treatments of the relation between hermeneutics and biblical authority seem to be. Indeed, I do not know a single book or article by an evangelical writer that is directly addressed to this topic—though that may, of course, only indicate the narrowness of my reading! But my impression is that this is a subject on which fresh thought by evangelical Christians is very much needed; otherwise, we shall constantly be at a disadvantage, in at least two ways.

First, we shall be forced to remain (where we have long been!) on the edge of the modern Protestant debate about Holy Scripture; for in this debate the theme of my paper remains, as it always was, central. Since the age of rationalism in the eighteenth century, and of Schleiermacher in the nineteenth century, and more particularly since the work of Kähler, Barth, and Bultmann in the twentieth century, the relation between hermeneutics and biblical authority, and the meaning of each concept in the light of the other, have been constant preoccupations, and the mere mention, with Bultmann, of thinkers like Fuchs and Ebeling will assure us that this state of affairs is likely to continue for some time to come. Now, if we are going to join in this debate to any purpose, we must address ourselves seriously to the problem round which it revolves; otherwise, nothing we say will appear to be *ad rem*. One reason why the theology of men like Barth, Bultmann, and Tillich (to say nothing of J. A. T. Robinson!) has rung a bell in modern Protestant discussion, in a way that no contemporary evangelical dogmatics has done, is that their systems are explicitly conceived and set forth as answers to the hermeneutical question—the question, that is, of how the real and essential message of the Bible may be grasped by the man of today. One reason why evangelical theology fails to impress other Protestants as having more than a tangential relevance to the ongoing theological debate of which we have spoken is that it does not appear to them to have tuned in on this wavelength of interest. That the interest itself is a proper one for evangelicals will not be denied, and it is not to our advantage when we appear to be neglecting it.

Then, second, in the absence of reflection on my present theme, we risk being contradicted in our own thinking by over-simplifications at more than one point. Let me set this out as I see it.

I am sure I need not spend time proving that over-simplification is a damaging form of mental self-indulgence, leading to shallow, distorted, and inhibited ways of thinking. I am sure that my evangelical readers have all had abundant experience of this particular evil. I am

sure we have all had cause in our time to complain of over-simplifications which others have forced on us in the debate about Scripture—the facile antithesis, for instance, between revelation as propositional or as personal, when it has to be the first in order to be the second ; or the false question as to whether the Bible is or becomes the Word of God, when both alternatives, rightly understood, are true ; or the choice between the theory of mechanical dictation and the presence of human error in the Bible, when in fact we are not shut up to either option. I am sure we have all found how hard it is to explain the evangelical view of Scripture to persons whose minds have once embraced these over-simplifications as controlling concepts. Warned by these experiences, we shall be on our guard against allowing similarly cramping over-simplifications to establish themselves in our own thought.

The basic over-simplification that threatens us here, in my view, is that we should treat the relation between biblical authority and hermeneutics as a one-way relation, whereas in fact it is a two-way relation operating within a one-way system. Let me define my terms, and you will see what I mean.

* * * *

Biblical authority, as historically (and, in my judgment, rightly) understood by evangelicals, is a complex dogmatic construction made up of seven elements as follows.

The first is a view of *inspiration* as an activity whereby God, who in His providence overrules all human utterance, caused certain particular men to speak and write in such a way that their utterance was, and remains, His utterance through them, establishing norms of faith and practice. In the case of those written utterances which make up the canonical Scriptures the effect of inspiration was to constitute them as norms, not merely for that limited group of people to whom God's messengers directly addressed their writings, but for all men at all times. This, I judge, is the precise notion expressed by Paul in 2 Timothy 3 : 16, where he describes "all Scripture" as *theopneustos* (literally "God-breathed"), and therefore "profitable" as a standard of intellectual and moral perfection for anyone who would be a "man of God".

The theological basis of biblical inspiration is the gracious condescension of God, who, having made men capable of receiving, and responding to, communications from other rational beings, now deigns to send him verbal messages, and to address and instruct him in human language. The paradigm of biblical inspiration (not from the standpoint of its literal types or of its psychological modes, which were manifold, but simply from the standpoint of the identity which it effects between God's word and man's) is the prophetic sermon, with its introductory formula, "Thus saith the Lord". The significance of biblical inspiration lies in the fact that the inspired material stands for all time as the definitive expression of God's mind and will, His knowledge of reality, and His thoughts, wishes, and intentions regarding it. Inspiration thus produces the state of affairs which Warfield (echoing Augustine) summed up in the phrase : What Scripture says, God says.

Whatever Scripture is found to teach must be received as divine instruction. This is what is primarily meant by calling it the Word of God.

It is hardly possible to deny that what God says is true, any more than it is possible to deny that what He commands is binding. Scripture is thus authoritative as a standard of belief no less than of behaviour, and its authority in both realms, that of fact as well as that of obligation, is divine. By virtue of its inspiration the authority of Scripture resolves into, not the historical, ethical, or religious expertise of its human authors, however great this may be thought to have been, but the truthfulness and the moral claim of the speaking, preaching, teaching God Himself.

The second element in the historic evangelical account of biblical authority is a view of the principle of *canonicity*, as being objectively the fact, and subjectively the recognition, of inspiration. This follows from what has just been said. All Scripture was given to be the profitable rule of faith and practice. It is not suggested that all the inspired writings that God ever gave were for the church's canon; the Scriptures themselves show that some books of prophetic oracles, and some church epistles of Paul (to look no further) have, in God's providence, perished. What is suggested is not that all inspired writings are canonical, but that all canonical writings are inspired, and that God causes His people to recognize them as such. Accounts of canonicity which distort, or discount, the reality of inspiration, and rest the claims of Scripture on some other footing than the fact that God speaks them, misrepresent both the true theological situation and the actual experience of Christians. This leads to our next point.

The third element in the evangelical position is a belief that the Scriptures *authenticate themselves* to Christian believers through the convincing work of the Holy Spirit, who enables us to recognize, and bow before, divine realities. It is He who enlightens us to receive the man Jesus as God's incarnate Son, and our Saviour; similarly, it is He who enlightens us to receive sixty-six pieces of human writing as God's inscripturated Word, given to make us "wise unto salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus" (2 Timothy 3 : 15). In both cases, this enlightening is not a private revelation of something that has not been made public, but the opening of minds sinfully closed so that they receive evidence to which they were previously impervious. The evidence of divinity is there before us, in the words and works of Jesus in the one case and the words and qualities of Scripture in the other. It consists not of clues offered as a basis for discursive inference to those who are clever enough, as in a detective story, but in the unique force which, through the Spirit, the story of Jesus and the knowledge of Scripture always carry with them to strike everyone to whom they come. In neither case, however, do our sinful minds receive this evidence apart from the illumination of the Spirit. The Church bears witness, but the Spirit produces conviction, and so, as against Rome, evangelicals insist that it is the witness of the Spirit, not that of the Church, which authenticates the Canon to us. So the fourth answer of the Westminster Larger Catechism declares: "The Scriptures manifest themselves to be the Word of God, by their majesty

and purity ; . . . by their light and power to convince and convert sinners, to comfort and build up believers unto salvation : but the Spirit of God bearing witness by and with the Scriptures in the heart of man, is alone able fully to persuade it that they are the very Word of God ”.

Fourthly, evangelicals maintain that the Scriptures are *sufficient* for the Christian and the Church as a lamp for our feet and a light for our path—a guide, that is, as to what steps we should take at any time in the realms of belief and behaviour. It is not suggested that they tell us all that we would like to know about God and His ways, let alone about other matters, nor that they answer all the questions that it may occur to us to ask. The point of the affirmation is simply that, in the words of Article VI of the Church of England, “ Holy Scripture containeth all things necessary to salvation ”, and does not need to be supplemented from any other source (reason, experience, tradition, or other faiths, for example), but is itself a complete organism of truth for its own stated purpose. The grounds on which this position rests are, first, the sufficiency of Jesus Christ as Saviour ; second, the demonstrable internal completeness of the biblical account of salvation in Him ; third, the impossibility of validating any non-scriptural tradition or speculation relating to Christ by appeal to an inspired source.

Fifthly, evangelicals affirm that the Scriptures are *clear*, and interpret themselves from within, and consequently, in their character as “ God’s word written ” (Article XX), are able to stand above both the Church and the Christian in corrective judgment and health-giving instruction. With this goes the conviction that the ministry of the Spirit as the Church’s teacher is precisely to cause the Scriptures to fulfil this ministry toward the Church, and so to reform it, and its traditions, according to the biblical pattern. It is also held that the ministry of the Spirit as interpreter guarantees that no Christian who uses the appointed means of grace for understanding the Bible (including worship and instruction, both formal and informal, in the Church—there is no atomic individualism here) can fail to learn all that he needs to know for his spiritual welfare. Not that the Christian or the Church will ever know everything that Scripture contains, or solve all biblical problems, while here on earth ; the point is simply that God’s people will always know enough to lead them to heaven, starting from where they are.

Sixthly, evangelicals stress that Scripture is a *mystery* in a sense parallel to that in which the Incarnation is a mystery—that is, that the identifying of the human and the divine words in the one case, like the taking of manhood into God in the other, was a unique creative divine act of which we cannot fully grasp either the nature or the mode or the dynamic implications. Scripture is as genuinely and fully human as it is divine. It is more than Jewish-Christian religious literature, but not less, just as Jesus was more than a Jewish rabbi, but not less. There is a true analogy between the written word and the incarnate Word. In both cases, the divine coincides with the form of the human, and the absolute appears in the form of the relative. In both cases, as we say, the divine in the human manifests and evidences itself by

the light and power that it puts forth, yet is missed and overlooked by all save those whom the Holy Ghost enlightens. In both cases, it is no discredit to the believer, nor reason for rejecting his faith, when he has to confess that there are problems about this unique divine-human reality that he cannot solve, questions about it that he cannot answer, and aspects of it (phenomena) which do not seem to fit comfortably with other aspects, or with basic categories in terms of which it asks to be explained as a whole (sinlessness, for instance, in the case of Jesus ; truthfulness, for instance, in the case of Scripture). When you are dealing with divine mysteries you must be prepared for this sort of thing ; and when it happens, you must be quick to recognize that the cause lies in the weakness of your own understanding not in any failure on God's part to conform to His own specifications.

Seventhly, evangelicals hold that the obedience of both the Christian individually, and the Church corporately, consists precisely in *conscious submission*, both intellectual and ethical, to the teaching of Holy Scripture, as interpreted by itself and applied by the Spirit according to the principles stated above. Subjection to the rule of Christ involves—indeed, from one standpoint, consists in subjection to the rule of Scripture. His authority is its, and its is His.

* * * *

Such is biblical authority ; what, now, is hermeneutics ? Hermeneutics as commonly understood, is the theory of biblical interpretation. Interpretation has been defined as the way of reading an old book that brings out its relevance for modern man. Biblical hermeneutics is the study of the theoretical principles involved in bringing out to this and every age the relevance of the Bible and its message. Evangelical practice over the centuries has reflected a view of the process of interpretation as involving three stages ; exegesis, synthesis, and application.

Exegesis means bringing out of the text all that it contains of the thoughts, attitudes, assumptions, and so forth—in short, the whole expressed mind—of the human writer. This is the “literal” sense, in the name of which the Reformers rejected the allegorical senses beloved of medieval exegetes. We would call it the “natural” sense, the writer’s “intended meaning”. The so-called “grammatico-historical method”, whereby the exegete seeks to put himself in the writer’s linguistic, cultural, historical, and religious shoes, has been the historic evangelical method of exegesis, followed with more or less consistency and success since the Reformers’ time. This exegetical process assumes the full humanity of the inspired writings.

Synthesis means here the process of gathering up, and surveying in historically integrated form, the fruits of exegesis—a process which is sometimes, from one standpoint, and at one level, called, “biblical theology” in the classroom, and at other times, from another standpoint, and at another level, called “exposition” in the pulpit. This synthetic process assumes the organic character of Scripture.

Application means seeking to answer the question : “If God said and did what the text tells us He did in the circumstances recorded, what would He say and do to us in our circumstances ?” This

applicatory process assumes the consistency of God from one age to another, and the fact that "Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, and today, yea, and for ever" (Hebrews 13 : 8, RV).

Now, it is already clear from what has been said that the principle of biblical authority underlies and controls evangelical hermeneutics. The nature of this control can conveniently be shown by adapting Bultmann's concept of the "exegetical circle"—a concept springing from recognition of the truth (for truth it is) that exegesis presupposes a hermeneutic which in its turn is drawn from an overall theology, which theology in its turn rest on exegesis. This circle is not, of course, logically vicious ; it is not the circle of presupposing what you ought to prove, but the circle of successive approximation, a basic method in every science. Without concerning ourselves with Bultmann's use of this concept of the "exegetical circle" we may at once adapt it to make plain the evangelical theologian's method of attaining his hermeneutic. First, he goes to the text of Scripture to learn from it the doctrine of Scripture. At this stage, he takes with him what Bultmann would call a "pre-understanding"—not, like Bultmann, a Heideggerian anthropology, but a general view of Christian truth, and of the way to approach the Bible, which he has gained from the creeds, confessions, preaching, and corporate life of the Church, and from his own earlier experiments in exegesis and theology. So he goes to Scripture, and by the light of this pre-understanding discerns in it material for constructing an integrated doctrine of the nature, place, and use of the Bible. From this doctrine of the Bible and its authority he next derives, by strict theological analysis, a set of hermeneutical principles ; and then, armed with this hermeneutic, he returns to the text of Scripture itself, to expound it more scientifically than he could before. Thus he travels round the exegetical circle. If his exegetical procedure is challenged, he defends it from his hermeneutic ; if his hermeneutic is challenged, he defends it from his doctrine of biblical authority ; and if his doctrine of biblical authority is challenged, he defends it from the texts. The circle thus appears as a one-way system : from texts to doctrine, from doctrine to hermeneutic, from hermeneutic to texts again.

What control does the hermeneutic which derives from the evangelical doctrine of Scripture place upon one's exegesis ? First, it binds us to continue using the grammatico-historical method ; second, it obliges us to observe the principle of harmony. We will say a word about each of these, though brief formal discussion of them (which is all that our space allows) can scarcely give an idea of how far-reaching they really are.

The grammatico-historical method of approaching texts is dictated, not merely by common sense, but by the doctrine of inspiration, which tells us that God has put His words into the mouths, and caused them to be written in the writings, of men whose individuality, as men of their time, was in no way lessened by the fact of their inspiration, and who spoke and wrote to be understood by their contemporaries. Since God has effected an identity between their words and His, the way for us to get into His mind, if we may thus phrase it, is *via* theirs. Their thoughts and speech about God constitutes God's own self-

testimony. If, as in one sense is invariably the case, God's meaning and message through each passage, when set in its total biblical context, exceeds what the human writer had in mind, that further meaning is only an extension and development of his, a drawing out of implications and an establishing of relationships between his words and other, perhaps later, biblical declarations in a way that the writer himself, in the nature of the case, could not do. Think, for example, how messianic prophecy is declared to have been fulfilled in the New Testament, or how the sacrificial system of Leviticus is explained as typical in Hebrews. The point here is that the *sensus plenior* which texts acquire in their wider biblical context remains an extrapolation on the grammatico-historical plane, not a new projection on to the plane of allegory. And, though God may have more to say to us from each text than its human writer had in mind, God's meaning is never less than his. What he means, God means. So the first responsibility of the exegete is to seek to get into the human writer's mind, by grammatico-historical exegesis of the most thoroughgoing and disciplined kind—always remembering, as Calvin so wisely did, that the biblical writer cannot be assumed to have had before his mind the exegete's own theological system!

As for the principle of harmony, this also is dictated by the doctrine of inspiration, which tells us that the Scriptures are the products of a single divine mind. There are really three principles involved here. The first is that Scripture should be interpreted by Scripture, just as one part of a human teacher's message may and should be interpreted by appeal to the rest. *Scriptura scripturae interpres!* This does not, of course, imply that the meaning of all texts can be ascertained simply by comparing them with other texts, without regard for their own literary, cultural, and historical background, or for our extra-biblical knowledge bearing on the matters with which they deal. For instance, one cannot get the full point of "Thou shall not seethe a kid in its mother's milk" (Exodus 23 : 19, 34 : 26, Deuteronomy 14 : 21) till one knows that this was part of a Canaanitish fertility rite and this one learns, not from comparison with other texts, but from archeology. Similarly, this principle gives no warrant for reading the Bible "in the flat" without any sense of the historical advance of both revelation and religion, and the difference of background and outlook between one biblical author and another. Such lapses would show failure to grasp what grammatico-historical exegesis really involves. But the principle that Scripture interprets Scripture does require us to treat the Bible organically and to look always for its internal links—which are there in profusion, if only we have eyes to see them.

The second principle is that Scripture should not be set against Scripture. The church, says Article XX of the Church of England, may not "so expound one place of Scripture, that it be repugnant to another"—nor should the individual expositor. The basis for this principle is the expectation that the teaching of the God of truth will prove to be consistent with itself.

The third principle is that what appears to be secondary and obscure in the Scripture should be studied in the light of what appears primary and plain. This principle obliges us to echo the main emphases of

the New Testament and to develop a christocentric, covenantal, and kerygmatic exegesis of both Testaments ; also it obliges us to preserve a studied sense of proportion regarding what are confessedly minutiae, and not to let them overshadow what God has indicated to be the weightier matters.

These three principles together constitute what the Reformers called *analogia Scripturae*, and what we have termed the principle of harmony. It is a principle which makes an integrative aim in interpretation mandatory at every point. To have such an aim is, of course, no guarantee that the interpreter will always succeed in achieving what he aims at, but at least it keeps him facing in the right direction and asking some of the right questions.

Here, then, are two hermeneutical axioms which we may call "deductive" principles, though, as we have seen, they derive from an exegetical induction in the first instance. They are presuppositions, gained through exegesis of some texts, which demand to control the exegesis of all texts. They are historically, and in my view rightly, basic to evangelical interpretation of Scripture.

* * * *

Now it is just here, as it seems to me, that the dangers of over-simplification threaten. I am not now thinking of the popular pietistic over-simplification of supposing that if one approaches Scripture by the light of these evangelical axioms, then interpretations will become magically easy and one's exegesis will be infallibly right. Such ideas do not demand discussion here ; we know better than to expect interpretation ever to be easy, and we know there are no infallible interpreters, certainly not ourselves. No ; the over-simplifications I have in view are other than this.

The first and basic over-simplification consists simply of forgetting that, as our concept of biblical authority determines our hermeneutic in the manner described, so that concept itself is always, and necessarily, open to challenge from the biblical texts on which we bring our hermeneutics to bear. For our concept of biblical authority is a theological construct, or theory, one of a number which make up our dogmatics ; and theological theories, like the theories of natural science, have to be tested by seeing whether they fit all the relevant biblical data (think, for instance, of the doctrine of the Trinity, which is an example of a successful theological theory). If the data seem not to fit the theory, then the relation between them should be thought of as one of reciprocal interrogation : each calls the other in question. So, if particular texts, despite our exegetical coaxing, still appear to be out of accord with each other in some significant way, or to assert what is untrue, methodologically the first thing we have to do is to re-examine our concepts of biblical authority, and of the hermeneutic which we drew from it. But we must do this by appeal to the proper evidence, that is, the statements of Scripture about itself, not the phenomena which have prompted the check-up. A mistake in method at this point would be disastrous, as the following comments by Dr. Roger Nicole on one of the theses of Dr. Dewey Beegle's book, *The Inspiration of Scripture*, will show.

Dr. Beegle very vigorously contends that a proper approach to the doctrine of inspiration is to start with induction from what he calls "the phenomena of Scripture" rather than with deduction from certain biblical statements about the Scripture. . . . This particular point needs to be controverted. If the Bible does make certain express statements about itself, these manifestly must have a priority in our attempt to formulate a doctrine of Scripture. Quite obviously, induction from Bible phenomena will also have its due place, for it may tend to correct certain inaccuracies which might take place in the deductive process. The statements of Scripture, however, are always primary. To apply the method advocated by Dr. Beegle in other areas would quite probably lead to seriously erroneous results. For instance, if we attempted to construct our view of the relation of Christ to sin merely in terms of the concrete data given us in the Gospels about His life, and without regard to certain express statements found in the New Testament about His sinlessness, we might mistakenly conclude that Christ was not sinless. If we sought to develop our doctrines of creation merely by induction from the facts of nature and without regard to the statements of Scripture, we would be left in a quandary. The present remark is not meant to disallow induction as a legitimate factor, but it is meant to deny it the priority in religious matters. First must come the statements of revelation, and then induction may be introduced as a legitimate confirmation, and, in some cases, as a corrective in areas where our interpretation of these statements and their implications may be at fault (*Gordon Review*, Winter 1964-65, p. 106).

When we check our concept of the nature and authority of Scripture by the appropriate biblical evidence, in the light of the specific questions raised by the hard texts, we may find that our previous interpretation of the evidence needs to be modified; or we may not. In the latter case, methodologically we are now bound to embrace as our working hypothesis that the inconsistency of the phenomena with the biblical doctrine is apparent, not real. However, the embracing of the hypothesis is not itself a solution of the problem, and a real tension between our deductive principles and the phenomena remains. When, as in most if not all cases, the puzzling phenomena are minutiae, the principle of *analogia Scripturae*, as we saw, would counsel us not to get them out of proportion. But as long as they are there, they continue to present a challenge to us to check and re-check our doctrine of Scripture, and the hermeneutical principles which we derive from it, just as our doctrine of Scripture challenges us to seek harmonistic explanations of puzzling phenomena. It would be a potentially serious oversimplification, as it seems to me, to ignore the fact that we may need to go round the one-way system of the exegetical circle very many times, reviewing our doctrine of Scripture and our hermeneutics again and again in the light of the various queries about both that the different classes of phenomena raise. The point can be illustrated and, perhaps, given some application by citing from two evangelical documents which have had some currency in recent years, and whose overall thrust is in each case admirable. On page 49 of his *Introduction to Systematic Theology*, Louis Berkhof states boldly, as Warfield did before him, that part of the interpreter's task is to "adjust the phenomena of Scripture to the biblical doctrine of inspiration". A memorandum for theo-

logical students produced under the auspices of the International Fellowship of Evangelical Students in 1961, closed with a summons to "development of a truly biblical, i.e., biblically determined, hermeneutic" and "derivation from this hermeneutic of a proper understanding of the nature of biblical authority". My present point is simply that to say either of these things without the other would be to over-simplify. The first statement is no more than a half-truth, until it is added that our apprehension of "the biblical doctrine of inspiration" itself must be constantly checked against the queries concerning it which the phenomena themselves raise. The second statement is no more than a half-truth, until it is added that some pre-understanding of the nature of Scripture and its authority is necessarily involved in any attempt to develop a "biblically determined hermeneutic". (After all, even Bultmann would claim, on the basis of his own pre-understanding at this point, that his own hermeneutic was "truly biblical, i.e. biblically determined"! It is at the point of this pre-understanding that the ways divide.) The truth is that neither our doctrine of Scripture nor our exegesis can be in a healthy state unless they constantly interact, and each undergoes constant refinement in the light of the other.

If, therefore, we allowed ourselves to treat a pre-packaged, deep-frozen formula labelled "the evangelical doctrine of Scripture" as a kind of untouchable sacred cow, we should not only be showing ourselves more concerned about our own tradition than about God's truth (and you do not need me to remind you how dangerous that would be); we should also be jeopardizing our own prospects in the realm of biblical exposition. If, however, we recognize and accept the principles just stated, it will keep vividly before us the element of *mystery* that confronts us in the Scriptures, the *audacity* of our confession of the doctrine of biblical authority, with so many problems, albeit small ones, yet unsolved, and the need to make this confession in great *humility* and utter dependence upon God; and this will undoubtedly be good both for us and for our handling of the sacred text.

* * * *

I want now to glance at the modern hermeneutical debate, and to consider how far evangelicals are equipped to enter into it.

The debate has sprung from felt perplexities at three points. First, there are perplexities about the Word of God. Since Barth, the Bible has been re-acknowledged as the medium of God's self-communication to man; but the question presses, how can this be, when (*ex hypothesi*) the Bible, regarded as a human book, is both fallible and fallacious? How does God communicate Himself through the Bible? What is the real nature of the Word of God? What is its relation to the words of the book?

Then, second, there are questions about the New Testament. Modern scholars, preoccupied with the complexities of its contemporary setting, and working in disregard of the notion of revealed truth, feel it to be a most elusive book. What is its real nature? What is its real relation to the Old Testament? What is the significance of its intractable eschatology? What must one do to it to make plain its message for our own time?

Then, third, linked with this are problems about preaching. The New Testament is *kerygmatic*: it consists of proclamation of Christ; but the world to which it proclaims Him is a very different world from ours. What transpositions of the form of the message are needed to enable us to preach it today?

To these questions various answers are given. Let us briefly remind ourselves of three of the main ones.

(i) Karl Barth holds that God communicates with man through the Scriptures by freely choosing to use them to make Jesus Christ, the true Word of God, known. The statement that Scripture is the Word of God means simply that God constantly uses it in this way. Christ is the reality to which all Scripture, when thus used by God, bears witness. Barth's hermeneutical method, therefore, is to apply the "christological method" of his *Dogmatics*, asking all texts one question only—what have you to say of Jesus Christ? According to Barth's ontology, it is only when one is reading Christ out of texts that they tell us anything about either God or man. This at first sounds promising to evangelical ears; however, what we find is that Barth's ontology, which goes off at a tangent from what the biblical writers were concerned to say about God and His world, imposes on his thought a cramping preoccupation with problems of theoretical knowledge, and the dogmatic arbitrariness of his "christomonism", as Althaus called it, according to which all truth about creation and the created order is swallowed up into the doctrine of Christ, leads him to conceptions of election, reprobation, and redemption, which systematically distort both his exegesis and any preaching that may be based on it.

(ii) The "biblical theology" and *heilsgeschichte* movements tell us that God has revealed Himself through a sequence of redemptive events which came to its climax in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. To this historical sequence Scripture is man's interpretative witness. Scripture is the product of illumination and insight, but not of inspiration as we earlier defined it, and there is no identity of God's word with man's. The hermeneutical method of these movements, therefore, is to ask the texts what witness they bear to the acts of God, and to integrate their testimony into a complex christocentric whole by means of the organizing categories of prospect and fulfilment. ("Prospect" is a better word than "promise" here; the God of "biblical theology" does not speak, and so cannot make promises.) One odd result is that theologians of this type seem a good deal more sure that this pattern as a whole corresponds to the acts of God as a whole than they are about the truth of any single part of it! This is particularly noticeable in such a writer as Alan Richardson. The preaching that springs from this movement is a summons to trust in the God, and the Christ, of this whole story, which is good so far, but since this teaching affords no basis for a direct correlation between faith and Scripture in general, or the biblical promises in particular (since it is not held that God has ever actually used words to talk to man), the preaching is necessarily inadequate.

(iii) Bultmann holds that God acts in man's consciousness through the myths of the New Testament *kerygma* (which myths, he says, we may now ceremonially debunk, and replace, in order to show modern

man that they are nothing more than myths !). His action consists of bringing about in experience the dynamic event of the "word of God". This "word of God" is a summons and a decision to live in openness to the future, not bound by the past : which is the whole of Bultmann's understanding of faith. Nothing depends for Bultmann on the fact that the Christ of the myths has no basis in the facts concerning the historical Jesus : "faith" for him is not correlated to particular historical facts, any more than it is to particular divine words. His hermeneutical method is to ask how the texts disclose the human situation according to Heidegger, and how they summon us to the decision of faith, as described above.

Our enumeration need not go further ; these three positions are, between them, the fountain-heads of all the main hermeneutical trends of our time. (The so-called "new hermeneutic" is only new in the sense of being an extended development of the third approach.) They all appear as products of Christian thought deflected, more or less, from the historical biblical road by the Kantian and post-Kantian heritage in western philosophy. Kant's "Copernican revolution" in the philosophy of mind and nature, carried through at just the critical moment when Europe was recoiling from Rationalism into Romanticism, diverted interest from the known world to the knowing subject, ruled out the possibility of God addressing man in words, and let loose the bogey of sceptical and nihilistic solipsism to plague his successors. Idealism, positivism, and existentialism, the three main philosophical developments since Kant's time, should be seen as a series of attempts to banish the bogey by new answers to the problem of the knowing subject ; and similarly the three types of hermeneutic sketched out above should be seen as so many attempts to banish the same bogey by vindicating the proposition that Christians really know God, even though He does not really talk to us. But this is precisely what the God of the Bible does !—and the first point to be made as we approach the modern hermeneutical debate is that, to the extent to which an expositor denies or discounts the reality of divine talk, to that extent he neither opens the Scriptures nor confesses their God, but wrests the former and denies the latter.

In none of the positions described is the testimony of Scripture to a speaking God, and to itself as His organic revealed Word, taken with full seriousness. Each of them effectively breaks loose from the authority of the Bible by declining fully to accept either its account of its own nature or the hermeneutic that is bound up with that account. Each, in consequence, fails satisfactorily to answer the questions from which it starts. Arbitrariness of this kind brings its own penalty of instability, not to say untruth. In fact, the true key to solving the problems which sparked off the modern hermeneutical debate is to take the Bible's self-testimony perfectly seriously, and to give full weight to the truth that, to put it as vividly as I can, *God has talked*, and Holy Scripture is His own recorded utterance, and what He said in Scripture long ago He says still, in application to ourselves.

It is sometimes said that this view of revelation is itself arbitrary, since the texts on which we rely do not really affirm so much ; but Warfield answered that thesis two generations ago, and nothing since

his day has in my judgment affected the conclusiveness of his answer. It is also said that this position is rationalistic. That word is, of course, a dreadful missile, but what does it signify in this context? "Rationalistic" in theology may mean (i) reducing reality, both God and His world, to the limits of an exhaustively intelligible scheme, so ruling out all recognition of the partial character of knowledge of God in this world, as compared with that which is to come (1 Corinthians 13 : 13) ; or (ii) going against Scripture at some particular point at the dictates of reason ; or (iii) speculating beyond biblical limits ; or (iv) seeking to ground on logical or historical proof truths about God which should be received by faith, simply on the ground that God has told us of them. In which of these senses, now, can the evangelical revelation-claim be called rationalistic? In none! The truth is that it is not rationalistic at all, but simply *rational*. It is a confession of faith in a rational God who has talked rationally to creatures whom He made rational, and whom He declines to treat as anything other than rational.

And the evangelical hermeneutic is a rational hermeneutic, based on the recognition that the affirmations of the biblical writers are the authoritative affirmations of God Himself, and seeking to extract them by exegesis in order that they may be applied afresh to men and their problems in our own day, so that God's message to us may be made plain. Traditionally, when formulating our hermeneutics, we evangelicals have limited the subject to questions of exegesis and synthesis (see any textbook, Berkhof's *Principles of Biblical Interpretation*, or Ramm's *Protestant Biblical Interpretation*, for example, for proof of this) and have left questions of the application of truth to be dealt with under the rubrics of homiletics and practical theology ; but it is much to be wished that we might re-state our hermeneutics in explicit correlation to the concept of God *communicating*, God speaking in a way that terminates on man. This would involve a final section in the textbooks and lecture courses on the possibility, purpose, and modes of God's address to men through the Bible, and the discussion would cover topics like the *imago Dei* in man as the presupposition of communication ; sin, which makes man deaf to God, and grace, which unstops his ears ; the whole complex of relations that exists between the revealing Spirit and the revealed Word ; preaching as the Word of God ; and the Church as the community that listens to God's Word, and lives by it.

The concept of God active in communication is certainly the focus of hermeneutical interest and the field of hermeneutical debate, in modern theology, and when one observes the encroaching shadows of post-Kantian nihilism one sees why this should be so. But this does not mean that there is anything wrong with the concept itself. The truth is rather the reverse. Is not the thought of God active in communication the central, and organizing, hermeneutical concept to which the Bible itself would lead us? If so—and I think it is—then our traditional presentation of hermeneutics ought to be re-thought and re-angled so as to express this fact. Until we have shown ourselves to be tackling this task in good earnest, we are hardly ready to take part in current hermeneutical discussions ; for not only shall we not be on its "wavelength", we shall be making it plain to all the world that we

have not yet learned, in the theological sense, to take our own hermeneutical principles quite seriously. Books like Gustav-Wingren's *The Living Word* and Alan Stibbs' unpretentious and untechnical, yet extraordinary seminal, little paperback *Understanding God's Word* give some of the leads that are in point here.

* * * *

It is sometimes supposed that evangelical hermeneutics are necessarily vitiated by evangelical adherence to the concept of biblical inerrancy. For some reason which, to say the least, is not obvious, this adherence is thought to betray an anachronistic resolve to make the Bible teach science, in the modern sense and with modern precision, and thus to mark a departure from the grammatico-historical method which cannot but distort interpretation radically. It is also thought to betray confidence of "having the answer" to all seeming contradictions and difficulties in the biblical text. In view of these mistaken impressions, it is well to round off this paper by sketching out what inerrancy does and does not mean.

Inerrancy is a word that has only been in common use since the last century, though the idea itself goes back through seventeenth-century orthodoxy, the Reformers, and the Schoolmen, to the Fathers and, behind them, to our Lord's own statements, "the Scriptures cannot be broken", "thy word is truth" (John 10 : 35, 17 : 17). The word has a negative form and a positive function. It is comparable with the four negative adverbs with which the Chalcedonian definition fenced the truth of the Incarnation. Its function, like theirs, was not to explain anything in a positive way, but to safeguard a mystery by excluding current mistakes about it. It, like them, has obvious meaning only in the context of the particular controversy that caused it to be used; apart from that context it, like them, may well seem esoteric and unhelpful. Logically, its function has been to express a double commitment: first, an advance commitment to receive as truth from God all that Scripture is found on inspection actually to teach; second, a methodological commitment to interpret Scripture according to the principle of harmony which we analysed above. It thus represented not so much a lapse into rationalism as a bulwark against rationalism—namely, that kind of rationalism which throws overboard the principle of harmony. It thus expressed also, not an irreligious preoccupation with scientific accuracy, as some have suggested, but an attitude of reverence for the sacred text which some were irreverently expounding as if it were in places self-contradictory and false.

Whether evangelicals continue to speak of biblical inerrancy or not will depend on whether we think that the gain of having a verbal pointer to this double commitment outweighs the disadvantage of being lumbered with a term that is regularly, though mistakenly, taken to imply a blanket claim to know solutions for all apparent biblical discrepancies. The prevalence of this misconception is really rather disastrous, for scholarly advance in biblical study, as in all other realms of science, has the effect, not only of extending broad areas of certainty, but also of increasing the number of questions of detail which at any single moment have to be regarded as open, pending further inquiry or the discovery

of more evidence—some of these, inevitably, being questions to which earlier generations thought they knew the answer ; and if we evangelicals are thought to be making a claim which shows, not merely unawareness of this fact, but a dogmatic interest in denying it, we shall have a hard time convincing others that our approach to Scripture is not fundamentally unscientific and unsound. This might be thought a strong argument for eschewing the word wherever possible. But whether or not we use the word is not the most important issue. What matters is that in our exegetical practice we should abide by the principle of harmony ; in other words, that we should be agreed at the methodological level. If, on the one hand, we actually agree to receive as truth from God all that Scripture writers are found actually to assert, and, on the other hand, we are agreed in continuing to look for convincing harmonizations of the hard places and declining to cut the knot by saying flatly that the Bible errs, it will not matter whether we talk of inerrancy or not. What matters is never the word, this or any other, but the thing for which it stands.

What I am saying assumes that the scope of each biblical passage, its literary genre, and the range and content of the actual assertions made, must be determined entirely inductively, by grammatico-historical exegesis. It is necessary to insist constantly that the concept of inerrancy gives no direct help in determining such questions as these. It is *not*—repeat, *not*—an exegetical short cut.

No doubt we shall all find that many particular exegetical and harmonistic problems, arising from puzzling biblical phenomena, will have to be left open at every stage in our pilgrimage of biblical study. What significance has this fact? I would suggest that it has no significance that need alarm us. It is stimulating for continued exegetical inquiry ; it is unimportant, so far as I can see, for dogmatics, except insofar as it stimulates closer reflection on the doctrine of Scripture ; and it is only unmanageable for apologetics if one's apologetic method is rationalistic in type, requiring one to have all the answers to the problems in a particular area before one dare make positive assertions in that area, even when those positive assertions would simply be echoing God's own, set forth in Scripture. But it might be worth asking whether it is not perhaps a blessing to be warned off apologetics of that kind.
