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The Evangelical Theological Society tomorrow

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THE EVANGELICAL THEOLOGICAL SOCIETY TOMORROW*

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The Evangelical Theological Society is a remarkable organization. The term *Evangelical,* an inheritance from the Reformation, reminds us of the so-called formal principle and the so-called material principle of the origin of Protestantism. Justification by faith alone was the material principle; and the religious conditions of the sixteenth century required great stress on this essential element of the gospel.

The Evangelical Theological Society, however, has not done much with the doctrine of Justification. This is not because Justification by faith alone is any less essential now, but rather because the battle today, in a way unlike that of the sixteenth century, rages around the so-called formal principle of the Reformation, namely, the Scripture itself. Both principles are, of course, essential in every age. No one can rightly appropriate the term Evangelical who rejects the one or the other. But though there are still many today who reject Justification and who decry it as a forensic, legal, irreligious concept, the main battle centers on the truthfulness of Scripture.

It is for this reason that the Evangelical Theological Society is a remarkable organization. In a day when the main attack against Christianity is centered on the truthfulness of God's Word, and when the liberals loudly claim that no scholarly defense of the Bible can be made, this Society of college and seminary professors was organized for the purpose of propagating the doctrine of Scriptural infallibility.

Thus it happens that our Society includes the best conservative scholars in the land, and to this end our discussions examine every known phase of Biblical literature, archaeology, theology, and apologetics. At our first meeting, which may be called our constitutional convention, we saw clearly that if the Bible is the Word of God, a phrase even the neo-orthodox sometimes use, it cannot contain error, for the simple reason that God cannot lie. Conversely, if the Bible contains errors, it cannot, certainly not in its entirety, be the Word of God. Hence the basis on which the Society was founded, and the principle on which it operates to this day, and the statement to which we all subscribe is: "The Bible alone and the Bible in its entirety is the Word of God written, and therefore inerrant in the autographs."

Note that the statement was deliberately cast in the logical form of an implication. The premise of the implication is the proposition that

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the Bible is the Word of God written. Therefore the conclusion follows that the Bible is inerrant. God cannot lie.

The Bible's View of Itself

This platform of our Society is not the result of an arbitrary decision. We chose this basic principle because it is the Bible's own view of itself. In *The Divine Human Encounter* (p. 45) Emil Brunner says, "The Bible...contains no doctrine of the Word of God." But Brunner is completely mistaken. The Bible has a great deal to say about itself. There is of course the well known verse, "All Scripture is given by inspiration of God." This verse most obviously asserts plenary inspiration; and when we quote it, we often emphasize the word *all*. *All* Scripture is inspired. Plenary inspiration is important: we must insist that the Bible in its entirety is the Word of God. But what sometimes escapes notice is that the emphasis could equally well fall on the word Scripture. All *Scripture* is inspired. That is to say, this verse asserts the inspiration, not of the thoughts of the prophets, though their thoughts may have also been inspired, nor of the spoken words of the prophets, though their official speech may have been inspired too; but this verse asserts the inspiration of the written words on the manuscript. God "breathed out" the written words.

This verse is no hapax legomenon. It does not stand solitary and exceptional. There are many passages in which the Bible describes its own nature. A dozen times or more the Bible prefaces or concludes its message with the phrase, "The mouth of the Lord hath spoken it." In one place we read, "The Spirit of the Lord spake by me, and his word was in my tongue." Or, again, "Thou, Lord, hast said by the mouth of Thy servant David," and again, "This Scripture must needs be fulfilled, which the Holy Ghost by the mouth of David spake before concerning Judas."

The meaning of these verses is unmistakable. No exegesis could make them plainer. They say explicitly that the words which proceeded from the mouth of David and were written on the manuscript were the words of the Holy Ghost. Since these words are the very words of God, we are fully justified in concluding that they are therefore true, infallibly true. God cannot lie.

It must not be thought that the five verses quoted are the only verses in which the Bible asserts its own inspiration. Indeed, the verses quoted are only a small number selected from the amazingly ample statements that the Bible makes concerning its own nature.

May We Appeal to The Bible?

Dr. Dewey M. Beegle in *The Inspiration of Scripture* objects to this appeal to the Bible. He complains that the doctrine of verbal inspiration

relies on a few proof texts instead of following the true scientific method of induction from the Biblical phenomena.

Now, in the first place, the doctrine of verbal inspiration does not rely on a *few* proof texts. It relies on an amazingly ample supply. Such references as Beegle's to a few proof texts gives the impression that our opponents have never read Louis Gaussen's *Theopneustia*. If anyone's memory is dim with respect to the very extensive explanation the Bible gives of its own nature, Gaussen's *Theopneustia* is the corrective.

In the second place, an induction from the Biblical phenomena does not so obviously produce the conclusion Dr. Beegle desires. He takes it that an induction would result in a list of verses that are indisputably erroneous. Wellhausen nearly a century ago supplied such a list. But since his day, one after another has been crossed off his list. The investigations of the members of this Society have brought to light many cases where the alleged error has been shown to be no error at all. Then, too, outside our Society, Dr. Albright and Dr. Glueck, though they do not hold to verbal inspiration and are far from being fundamentalists, have conclusively disposed of the quick and easy assumption that the Bible is unreliable. Therefore we who hold to the doctrine have good reason to hope that whatever difficulties remain may likewise be removed as investigation proceeds.

Then, in the third place, we reject the invidious contrast that Dr. Beegle draws between a few proof texts and the true scientific method of induction. Let anyone who wishes, give archaeology the honorific title of scientific. We shall not object. On the contrary we are delighted with the trend of archaeological investigation. But it is not scientific or scholarly, indeed it is utterly illegitimate to ignore what the Bible says about itself, as Dr. Beegle wants us to. On this particular point "The Inspiration of Scripture" by Dr. Roger Nicole (*The Gordon Review*, Vol. VIII, Nos. 2, 3 deserves highest commendation.

The Present Task

The doctrine of verbal inspiration is not only the platform on which the Evangelical Theological Society stands, it is also the crucial issue in theological debate today. Dr. James Warwick Montgomery in our Society's Bulletin (Vol. 8, No. 2) begins his extensive article on *Inspiration and Inerrancy* by recalling that James Orr made note of the fact that the Church in each epoch of its history had to come to grips with one particular doctrine of crucial significance. At the beginning of the fourth century the crucial issue was the doctrine of the Trinity. Now toward the close of the twentieth century controversy centers in the nature of the Word of God.

One major piece of evidence that the truthfulness of Scripture is the present center of controversy is the current situation in the United Presbyterian church. Thirty years ago, by judicial action, that denomina-

tion refused to enforce its creed and made the Westminster Confession a dead letter. This year the formal and legal procedure was begun to replace the Confession with a new statement in which virtually nothing of the old creed remains. The motive acknowledged in the literature is the desire to be free from Scriptural infallibility. With infallibility gone, the other doctrines of Scripture automatically drop by the wayside. Thus the vicarious satisfaction of Christ and other doctrines are no longer regarded as truths, but merely as "images of a truth which remains beyond the reach of all theory" or knowledge.

In this century's controversy over inspiration the Evangelical Theological Society should take the lead. There are no doubt good and capable men who are not members of this Society, but there is no other professional association organized on this basis. Hence this is our present task.

The Blows of Battle

In a vigorously fought contest it is not usual for either side to emerge completely unscathed. The Evangelical Theological Society has suffered some losses and may suffer more. Just this year one of our members withdrew because, to quote his letter, "I have found it...intellectually impossible to accept the last clause of the Society's doctrinal basis."

Behind this statement there most probably lies the idea that historical investigation has discovered indubitable errors in Scripture. As was said a moment ago this great confidence seems strange in view of the fact that so many particular allegations of error have been exploded.

Is Infallibility Useless?

The letter of resignation also suggests another reason why it is intellectually impossible to accept verbal inspiration. Our departed member believes that the idea of infallibility, even if it were true, would yet be useless because, to quote again, "secular history can be infallible in the sense of a faultless record of historical facts, but it will not be saving truth."

What does this argument mean? Apparently the occurrence of true statements in secular history books is taken to imply that the Bible does not need true statements. Now, if anything is intellectually impossible, it is not Scriptural infallibility, but this queer argument against Scriptural infallibility. Just because certain true statements about American or Chinese history are not saving truths, how does it follow that saving knowledge need not be true? It is a very strange form of intellect that argues against infallibility, or against the usefulness of truth, or the necessity of truth, on the ground that secular histories are sometimes true.

Spiritually Useless?

By its assertion that the truths of secular history are not saving truths, the letter of resignation seems to depend more on the idea that infallibility is spiritually useless than on its being intellectually impossible. To complete a quotation already given in part, the writer says, "I have found it spiritually unnecessary and intellectually impossible to accept ...the Society's doctrinal basis."

A sharp divorce between what is intellectual and what is spiritual, a divorce proclaimed by the neo-orthodox and the pietistic Fundamentalists alike, ill accords with our Reformation heritage. Dr. Beegle, previously mentioned, accuses the dogma of inerrancy of leading to a cold impersonal relation to Scripture as a body of objective propositional truth, thus undervaluing experiential response. The use of the words cold and impersonal is simply a propaganda device. In a frigid winter the word cold makes us shiver; but in summers of tropical heat, something cold is very appealing. If now we put away the deceptive metaphors of propaganda, what remains is Dr. Beegle's distaste for objective propositional truth. Apparently he finds truth spiritually unnecessary. Those who have been influenced by Kierkegaard and modern existentialism adopt a view of the nature of religion which is quite different from the religion of Luther and Calvin. These Reformers, like the Apostle Paul, had no antipathy toward objective, propositional truth.

Perhaps the gentleman who resigned does not go so far into existentialism as Bultmann or Beegle has gone. What he actually says is that "Secular history can be infallible,...but it will not be saving truth." Therefore he seems to maintain that infallibility is spiritually unnecessary because a sinner can be truly saved without believing it. Other things he says indicate that he considers infallibility spiritually unnecessary because various other evangelical doctrines can still be defended after infallibility is relinquished.

The argument that verbal inspiration is useless because a sinner can be saved without believing it is an argument of massive confusion. True, the thief on the cross did not know of and therefore could not believe in the Virgin Birth, the doctrine of sanctification, and the second advent. Is therefore the doctrine of sanctification useless? Are ordinary Christians, not to mention pastors and theologians, to restrict their knowledge to the limitations of the thief on the cross? Dare any scholar speak so stupidly? Must one teach again the rudiments of the first principles to those who ought to be teachers but who have regressed from strong meat to the milk of infancy? Surely theology is not to be limited to the minimum knowledge essential for the initial stage of any random individual's salvation.

This reminds me of a professor in a Christian college whom I heard opposing the inclusion of a course in Theism in the curriculum on the ground that a course in Theism never saved anybody.

Evangelical Doctrines

If, however, we are willing to advance beyond the most elementary stage of Christian life, and learn, discuss, and preach several additional doctrines, the next question is: Can we maintain those several doctrines apart from the doctrine of plenary and verbal inspiration? Historically not much evidence can be found in favor of an affirmative answer. Examples are sufficient of individuals and of ecclesiastical organizations that relinquish infallibility and other doctrines either in succession or simultaneously. Above it was noted that the United Presbyterian church, motivated by a desire to avoid the co-called cramping effect of Biblical inspiration, is discarding virtually every one of the Westminster doctrines.

This is no anomaly. It is a perfectly consistent development. If the Bible in a hundred different passages is mistaken in its account of itself, why should the rest of its message be accepted as true? If the prophets spoke falsely when they said that their words were the words of God, put in their mouths by the Holy Ghost, so that the God who cannot lie was speaking through them—if they were thus in error, what confidence can we have in anything else they said? If the words of David and Jeremiah are God's words, then we are obliged to accept them. But if those words are only David's or Jeremiah's, would it not be more profitable to study Aristotle or Plotinus? And if, as the new creed of the United Presbyterian church says, "the words of the Scriptures are the words of men, conditioned by the language, thought-forms, and literary fashions of the places and times at which they were written," and if "they reflect views of life, history, and the cosmos which were then current," can the Bible be anything more than a source book of the sociology of ancient Israel? I think not. A prophet who mistakes the current views of history and the cosmos for the Word of God, or a book that gives a false account of its own origin and nature is not a reliable guide in religion. Its doctrine of the Atonement, its account of the Resurrection, its promise of heaven could not then be trusted.

Biblical Authority

If now anyone insists that a chance statement by Jeremiah or the doctrine of sanctification in Paul may accidentally be true, and can be accepted even after rejecting infallibility, we would like to know on what basis and by what method these other doctrines are retained. It is not enough to claim that this verse and that doctrine can be salvaged from an erroneous Bible. The claim must be substantiated. By what right can Brunner accept "The Word became flesh," when he rejects "Behold, a virgin shall be with child"? How can Bultmann demythologize the Gospels and retain a transcendent God? Can the cosmological argument, based on mere observation of nature, prove the existence of a God who hears our prayers? Does history, including the World Wars of this century, demonstrate that Christ's death satisfies divine justice? Do human frustrations imply the second advent? Or, perhaps, the neo-orthodox will call these suggestions a parody and caricature. I am sorry; I apologize. But since they have never described their method, one can only make wild guesses. Yet I must continue to insist that their claim to salvage some doctrines is not enough. They must present a clearly articulated procedure for examination.

Instead of making their principles and procedure clear, they seem satisfied to call the Bible authoritative. The afore-mentioned letter of resignation does this. In fact the letter says the Scripture is "fully inspired," from which one may well conclude that the errors in Scripture are also fully inspired. The letter goes on to redefine inerrancy so that a Bible full of mistakes can be called inerrant. Whether or not this is intellectual honesty and spiritual necessity, it is at least poor lexicography. May we not legitimately ask how an erroneous book can be inerrant and spiritually authoritative?

Suppose I should call your attention to this book which I hold in my hand. It is an ancient book about Socrates, written by Simmias, one of Plato's friends. Simmias advances the unusual opinion that Anaxagoras was the father of Socrates, and not Sophroniscus as Plato says. Furthermore, the author tells us that Socrates was killed in battle and received a hero's funeral in Athens; and there are numerous other errors of fact in the book. Unfortunately, too, the author was so favorably impressed by Socrates' personality that he attributed to Socrates the theory of behaviorism which Socrates stimulated in his mind. And at the present time, since the historical Socrates wrote nothing, historical research cannot be sure of a single thing Socrates said.

However, let me say emphatically that this book is the authoritative source of Socratic philosophy. We must accept it, or at least so much of it as stimulates our own authentic reactions. This book is the infallible word of Socrates.

Now, if I had said all this to you in complete seriousness, would you not suspect that I was slightly demented? Of course, I might be sane enough on subjects such as baseball and the stock market; but if you were interested in philosophy I think you would find it intellectually necessary and philosophically useful to look elsewhere.

Human Need

The only criterion the letter of resignation uses to select something out of the confusion of error is spiritual need. If there is some other method for retaining a few fragments of the Bible, it too should be examined, after it has been clearly articulated. The letter mentions only spiritual need.

This method proves to be a failure because of two related objections. The writer of the letter finds plenary and verbal inspiration spiritually unnecessary. Another person I could name finds that he

needs, spiritually and intellectually, an infallible message from God. In this situation are we to say that a verse or doctrine is false for one man but true for another? Mr. A. needs the doctrine of sanctification, but Mr. B., either because he is an antinomian or because he has already achieved sinless perfection, does not need the doctrine. Will those who adopt this procedure acknowledge and defend the relativism of truth that underlies it?

The letter of resignation gives the optimistic impression that a goodly number of evangelical doctrines can be maintained, and that evangelical churches can continue on this basis. Yet it is clear that some people think they need more and some people think they need less. Will the resignation allow the latter people to discard more and finally discard all of the Bible? What arguments could he press upon them, who do not feel his need, to retain what he wishes to retain? If he has freedom to reject some doctrines, must he not grant them the same freedom to reject what they think they do not need?

Now, there is a second, a related objection to this criterion of spiritual need. The objection relates to the determination of need. If the writers of the Bible were not infallible, could any of us be infallible percipients of our needs? Dare we claim to have made no error in our self-analysis? The Bible furnishes us with an analysis of human nature and need. It tells us that the guilt of Adam's first transgression was immediately imputed to us, with the result that we were born in iniquity and that our heart is deceitful above measure. If this Biblical statement is true, any merely human analysis of human nature is bound to be unreliable. And if the Bible is not true, what reason is there for thinking that we have a more accurate understanding than the prophets, who even on neo-orthodox principles stood so close to the fountains of the faith. May I suggest therefore that anyone who says he does not need the doctrine of infallibility has misunderstood his own needs?

The Criterion

If in the face of this objection such theologians still maintain that many or even a few scriptural doctrines can be retained out of an erroneous Bible, we have, at least, the right to know how they decide which doctrines they need. We press them for their method of retaining some while rejecting others.

Just recently one liberal writer referred contemptuously to this challenge. He said the conservatives win a cheap victory by asking the liberals to state their nonbiblical criterion of acceptance and rejection. Why this challenge is cheap, I do not know. Why it is not a victory, he did not say. If a theologian accepts a doctrine simply because the Bible teaches it, he accepts Biblical infallibility; but if he rejects Biblical infallibility, he cannot accept the doctrine simply because the Bible teaches it. Therefore he must use some other criterion. I do not see anything

cheap in asking what this criterion is. In fact, the ideals of scholarship are abandoned, and the ground of faith is disguised, unless this criterion is plainly stated.

The neo-orthodox, however, seem very reluctant to answer the question. They hide their criterion under a bushel. But it is "intellectually impossible" to get along without any replacement at all for the criterion of Scripture. In theology, as in automotive engineering, if you take out the spark plugs, you will have to use some substitute, or the car won't go.

The Evangelical Theological Society

Now, of course, if a person rejects inerrancy, he has no legitimate place in the Evangelical Theological Society. The person who resigned, having changed his theology after first joining with us, is morally commendable for his withdrawal. Too often ordination vows are exercises in perjury, and professors seeking positions in Christian colleges sometimes resort to lies when questioned on their religious faith. As a contrast to this liberal dishonesty, we express admiration for a man who honestly resigns.

His resignation disturbs us, however, when he hints that there are several in our membership who are not so honest as he. Perhaps in the last two or three years our membership has expanded too rapidly; but I shrink from accusing anyone in our fellowship of attempting to subvert it.

But in any event, I do not take kindly to our departed member's advice to alter the purpose of our Society for fear of losing other members by resignation. This may be the policy of liberalism, but it is not the voice of the Reformation. The voice of the Reformation says

> Let goods and kindred go
> Some membership also.

This Society did not frame its platform out of considerations of size and money. Rather, we felt a spiritual need for a message from God, and we knew intellectually that a message from God must be true. For this reason we said, "The Bible alone, and the Bible in its entirety, is the Word of God written, and therefore inerrant in the autographs."

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