

THE BIBLE AND THE CONSCIENCE OF OUR AGE

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At this stage of our gathering you have already survived more papers and presentations than the apostles may have had to endure in a lifetime. I am not suggesting that they would necessarily have been displeased with what we have been doing—or at any rate, with our authorial intention—although I don't think many of them would have stayed by for these closing remarks. I have been tempted to forego them myself. But Dr. Radmacher, who by name is essentially a wheel-maker, not being content with the wheels within wheels that your groups have provided, has added yet another wheel—not a big wheel, as you will soon realize—but a spare wheel, or a wheel that I wish he had spared, and perhaps you also.

You have heard the Scripture (2 Tim 4:8-19). It speaks of the unfettered Word of God, of the truth of God that we are to handle rightly. In the forefront Paul keeps the risen Jesus, who burst the bonds of the tomb, and he holds before us the resurrection to come and assures us that the Lord knows who are his. Paul also warns against needless disputes about words and godless chatter. He is passionately devoted to the truth and Word of God and is against semantics that sags out of this divine orbit and even serves shoddy and earthly causes.

Ours is a mass-media age, and now the dawning computer age threatens to drown us in verbiage. Will the truth of God be smothered by these torrents of modernity, by the words of man infallibly reproduced by computer systems?

Not so, says Paul: The Word of God cannot be fettered. Remember Jesus Christ, risen from the dead. In God's great plan and purpose the inscripturated Word and the incarnate Word are indissolubly linked. They cannot be bound but have the final say.

You have had two major working conferences. Over against radical and mediating scholars who would bind the Bible by all manner of critical concession you have affirmed the inerrantly inspired Word of God. What God inspires is inerrant, and all Scripture—as Paul said—is God-breathed. Scripture must not be bound, you said in effect, by speculative theories that strip away its truth segment by segment until the reader is left with mere fragments of the comprehensive revelation of God. Now the second working conference, on hermeneutical concerns, draws to a close. Against those who would frustrate the meaning and truth of scriptural revelation by interpretative artifices alien to the Christian heritage you have championed the literal sense of Scripture and insisted that neither the culture-rootedness of language nor the rise of science-oriented civilization nullified the objective and universal authority of the Bible. You speak not from haughty pedestals of pride but from compassionate and anguished hearts.

All of us lament the loss, by many theologians professing to speak for the

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Christian movement, of the objective reality of God and of the objective truth of his revelation. We see no sure outcome of this defection from the living God and his scriptural disclosure, other than looming skepticism and nihilism. For two generations mediating theologies have been yielding to ever more unstable alternatives. Understanding of God collapses into self-understanding and the living God expires into the dying god—not the God-man who dies for sinners and rises to return in triumph but rather the man-gods postulated by a generation fashioning divinity in its own likeness and image. The loss of absolutes—absolute truth, absolute right and wrong—follows from the speculative effort to vindicate truth and the good independently of the living God who makes his nature and will known. The whole edifice of the Enlightenment—which charitably retained the supernatural, yet separated from the God of miraculous revelation and redemption the whole enterprise of nature, history, law and every other discipline of study—is crumbling, and all the intermediary godlets are disintegrating with it, including religion itself carrying a universal validity-claim, the special worth and dignity of man, a meaningful universe, and a patterned history. All are now buckling under to despairing hedonism.

Let God be God, we implore. Let us hear again the life-giving Word of the Lord who speaks to all mankind a summons to divine truth and to the holy.

Some 55 years ago I first read a Bible. Though my mother was nominally Catholic and my father nominally Lutheran, our home had no Bible until I acquired a copy by removing it from the pew racks of the Episcopal Sunday school that I attended. I began reading the gospel stories of Jesus' resurrection from the dead, cautiously maneuvering through the accounts much as a moth circles around a flame.

Little did I realize that I was not the first to steal the Bible. The medieval Church had kept the Book from the masses for whom it was intended, and we evangelicals often keep it from our own lives that it is intended to nurture. But in recent years a different type of thievery has emerged as some fellow evangelicals, along with nonevangelicals, wrest from the Book segments that they derogate as no longer Word of God. Some now even introduce authorial intention or the culture-context of language as specious rationalizations for this crime against the Book, much as some rapist might assure me that he is assaulting my wife for my or for her good. They misuse Scripture in order to champion as Biblically true what in fact does violence to Scripture. It is one of the ironies of Church history that even some professedly evangelical spirits now speak concessively of divine revelation itself as culture-conditioned, and do so at the precise moment in the fortunes of western destiny when the secular dogma of the culture-relativity of all truth and morality and religious belief needs most fervently to be challenged.

In challenging the concessive mood of the day we must at the same time avoid falling into certain temptations. One temptation is to overstate the strength of the critical camp and to underrepresent the evangelical enterprise as but a corporal's guard or Gideon's band. Among professionals—teachers and clergy—the defections from a fully authoritative Bible may be disconcertingly numerous. But the great masses of active churchgoers take the Bible at its word. There is no firm consensus, however, and no stability of outlook among those who hold a broken and inconsistent view of Biblical authority.

A few years ago I proposed at the American Theological Society, which con-

siders the survival of Biblical inerrantists about as viable as that of dinosaurs, that those present list the five problem-passages that constitute their main barrier to belief in Biblical inerrancy and which, if resolved, would encourage commitment to a fully authoritative Scripture. I went on to say that such an exercise would demonstrate two things: first, the lack of unanimity concerning where the problem lies; and second, the fact that the real objection to inerrancy is philosophical and speculative, so that no amount of resolution of particular problems would serve to reinstate the evangelical view.

We are, in fact, emerging into an age in which critical scholars increasingly claim the inspiration of the Spirit for their own production of novel critical theories. The Spirit of God is said to have inspired not only Moses and Isaiah and Matthew, but also editorial redactors who supposedly composed the Biblical writings in their final stages (and who therefore really ought to get the credit for many noble passages that tradition ascribes to prophets and apostles and Jesus). The Holy Spirit is alleged to inspire scriptural commentary also (not only midrash but why not even commentaries by modern publishers?). Divine inspiration, it is now sometimes said, extends to the special insights of Biblical critics in their highly professional enterprise. Who indeed in a characteristically exuberant age would not want to share in such universal outpouring of the Spirit? We hear scholars talking about God's inspiration not only of apocryphal but even of supposedly pseudepigraphal writings, with 2 Peter considered such.

In the early years of Fuller Seminary I was once driving through Pasadena with Dr. William F. Albright, who had come to give a lecture. We were talking about the neo-orthodox emphasis on interpersonal divine encounter—that is, a direct inner divine revelatory confrontation of individuals, a confrontation incapable of being logically grasped by reason, yet in which God allegedly makes himself known. Encounter theology, said Albright, could open the door to a whole new era of demonism. We have yet to “see the worst” in an age that sunders the Spirit from the Scriptures.

I hope too that we have yet to “see the best” of a movement that holds Spirit and Scripture together as the risen Lord would have us do as he rules his Church through the Spirit by the Scriptures. May these days have brought us low before God without whose Word our cause is barren, before the risen Jesus without whose triumph over death the joy and power of Christian fulfillment would be gone, before the Holy Spirit who yearns to fill us daily with virtues that even now sample the age to come, and before the Bible that we may be even more prone to defend than to read.

The God who said “Let my people go”—free them from bondage and let them take the place in the world that I seek for them—seems now to say to us, “Let my Bible go”: Let it go beyond the limitations imposed by critics, beyond the walls of cloisters and churches, beyond even evangelical reticence and timidity. Give it free and full scope in the world. “Let the earth hear my voice.”

We need, in a nation in peril, to address the conscience of the people. We need to lift God's sure Word into the lively confrontation of beggarly modern notions of the good life and the misguided pursuit of money and sex and world image as life priorities. Superior the free world may be and is to totalitarian societies that demolish freedom, predicate both government and education on an atheistic view of reality, and dismantle private property. Yet one can almost smell the stench of

western civilization about to crumble into rubble and ruin through the shameful erosion of its values by those who prize greed and self-gratification above all else. A land with a million abortions will not be spared by millions of Bibles whose moral imperatives go unheeded.

All around us a new concept of the good life is in the making, one that perceives the Biblical representations as a threat—even as a menace—to its realization. Some evangelists imply that if you come to Christ, God will put you in financial clover, multiply sexual pleasure, and cancel every need of hospitalization. But the worldly senses that something is wrong. Even those who seldom read a Bible suspect that God shows his people not how much they can aggrandize but how self-sufficient he can be for them. Let us not reinforce uncritical aspirations that make for dissolution of a privileged nation but speak instead to the sluggish conscience of America.

Our presidents emphasize the superiority over totalitarian societies of our democratic nation whose charter political documents affirm that God by creation has endowed mankind with inalienable rights. Dictators therefore are not the final stipulators of right and wrong. Yet our public schools often give the impression that creation is a myth and that belief in divine creation has no legitimate place in the classroom. Are we then not encouraging young people to reduce to myth as well our insistence on divinely-endowed human rights?

We need to use the media to confront not only public conscience but also the media mentality as well. For more and more writers, producers and commercial sponsors the Nielsen ratings determine what is good and right to program. In the last analysis money—that is, profit—transcends the conflict between good and evil.

Have evangelical circles no farsighted business leaders who will sponsor a television panel of courageous evangelical social and moral critics to speak to the moral dilemmas of the nation—men like Chuck Colson, for example, or Senate Chaplain Halverson, or Senator Hatfield, or Senator Armstrong, or Dick Ostling of *Time*—spokespersons who respect what “the Bible says” and are competent to confront the ethical deviations of humanists and behaviorists? Can we not mirror to the masses the ten commandments, and the sermon on the mount, and God who is the good and the source of the good?

Could not evangelical colleges and seminaries produce a “sunrise semester” television course on the Biblical world-and-life view? Must the humanists from New York University be allowed to preempt such television programming? Could not a cooperative venture enlist scholars from ten or a dozen evangelical schools to handle such great themes as the living God of the Bible, the incomparable Book, the doctrine of creation, the messianic promise, the death and resurrection of Christ, the final judgment of men and nations, the inevitable triumph of God’s kingdom? A series of fifteen-minute presentations preceding fifteen-minute panel discussions could easily involve some forty qualified scholars who survey the Biblical view with dignity and intellectual power.

Somehow we must relate the witness of the inerrant Book to the world for which God has intended it. Our concern to attest an inerrant Bible must lead beyond our Essene community into the cultural mainstream, there to confront our contemporaries with the right questions until they reach for the supreme Answer.

As we leave this wind-swept city of Chicago we are aware that evangelicals have not only much in common but some areas of debate as well that call for understanding and resolution. Institutions will of necessity maintain special emphases. The ever-present danger exists, however, that even legitimate differences may be promotionally and financially exploited in ways that increasingly fracture the evangelical community. Nobody really thought that this hermeneutics conference would overcome the theological differences that distinguish covenant and dispensationalist camps, or distinguish promise theology from both of these. Yet who can deny the bearing of these several perspectives on hermeneutics? But we have probed and pooled our commonalities in support of an authentic Biblical understanding over against those who would nullify it. While some differences still need to be addressed, our powerful impact on a secular society and on a confused theological scene can gain its full force only if we enlist every recruit where he or she is best able to serve and encourage every scholar to capture and preserve the terrain that needs to be retaken and held. But even more than this—we need bold, comprehensive and imaginative engagement at the many frontiers of national life. We need to ask not only ourselves but to ask God who says, “You have not because you ask not,” what we can perhaps do together that we cannot do alone. Let us take God at his Word.

Remember Jesus Christ, risen from the dead. The Word of God is not bound.