

A RESPONSE TO REX A. KOIVISTO

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I feel honored by Rex Koivisto's effort to understand the developments in my theology and welcome the opportunity to respond to his enquiries expressed in his fine article. The reason I have not clarified the situation before is simple: I would not have thought to write an article about my own thought when my calling is to write about God's truth and the opinions of his other servants. But now that Koivisto has asked for clarification, I am happy to give it. I found his essay fair in its judgments and open in its spirit, and I take absolutely no offense from anything in it. On the other hand, I think his conclusion is much too alarmist in depicting me as having departed from my earlier convictions, and I therefore wish to correct the focus for him and for our readers.

I can also understand and sympathize with his feeling of betrayal that I should have, in his judgment, abandoned the strict position he holds dear. It is always embarrassing in any sphere to find a strong proponent of a position appear to go back on it, and frustrating if he does not even explain why. We need to be aware of a certain dynamic at work in this exchange too. People of the Koivisto position tend to exaggerate any shifts that occur in neo-evangelical thought in order to keep the lines of dogmatic clarity clear, while evangelicals who have introduced changes into their theology tend to minimize them in order not to lose their evangelical credentials. I speak candidly here. Therefore the reader ought to watch for possible exaggeration in Koivisto and possible minimization in me.

Let me say at the very outset that my impression of the relation of the early Pinnock and myself is that of basic continuity accompanied by minor adjustments in style and emphasis. As Koivisto points out, I have always argued for a nuanced definition of inerrancy that allows give and take. If today I am found to be making greater use of this liberty than previously (I think this is probably true), I am not thereby proven to have been inconsistent or to have reversed myself. On the more personal level, I would like to confess that the theory I now hold to a weak or low view of the absolute authority of the Bible is both appalling and preposterous, as anyone who knows me will agree. I did not then and do not now have a limited inerrancy view—if by that one means a policy of pick and choose what Biblical teachings we intend to respect. I know of no basic change in my convictions that would not fall within the purview of orthodox traditions. (I assume that to have come to sympathize with Arminians and Pentecostals as I have in the past decade does not fall outside these bounds.)

I must confess that context has a great effect on me, as I suppose it does on others too. When I find myself confronted by unbelief as respects the truths of the Bible, my reaction is always to oppose it most vigorously. This is just as true in 1981 as it was in 1967. But when I find myself confronted by internecine rivalry in which it appears to me that evangelicals are cutting each other up over code-words that they never really define, then my reaction is to oppose that. I do not

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find this behavior at all inconsistent, and I wish to point it out to Koivisto.

What about the fact that I have defended and then critiqued Biblical inerrancy? Does it not prove that I have shifted my position fundamentally? I can see how Koivisto feels compelled to conclude this. But it is not actually the case. What I have defended in the past and do so today is inerrancy in the sense of Biblical truthfulness—and that in a nuanced way, as Koivisto points out. What I have critiqued is a form of inerrancy much more strictly defined and militantly applied. I would admit here that in 1967 I would probably have thought that an apparent inconsistency in Matthew must be explained (away), whereas now I would let it stand and not twist the text as conservatives like to do. So there is a certain latitude now that was not evident before, I would allow. But I think a fair critic would have to say that my position has evolved but not reversed itself. There cannot be more than a handful of theologians whose theology has not evolved internally and in response to changing situations. I think it would even be possible to say that my position is truer to itself now than earlier—and stronger, not weaker. I hope some readers might even conclude this.

Now the time has come to bite the bullet. In what ways am I prepared to admit to having changed my thinking on the subject of Biblical inerrancy and authority? Obviously there are changes. Koivisto is not making it all up. There is something going on here, and I need to comment on what it is. Let me outline the changes I am aware of.

First, as regards the claims of the Bible regarding its own inspiration, I have come to feel that Warfield (from whom most of us work) distorted the picture somewhat. He just omitted from the discussion the data concerning Jesus and the apostles' messianic interpretation of the OT and its bearing on inerrancy. He refused to acknowledge the various levels of claims made in Scripture for Scripture and insisted on regarding it all on the level of prophetic type inspiration. I have come to believe that if we wish to be fair to the Bible, as we say we wish to, we must allow its claims to be what they are, and not what we wish—for apologetic reasons—they were.

Second, I am now prepared to be more candid about the phenomena of Scripture than I was before. I used to espouse Warfield's seemingly impregnable case against ever admitting any kind of inconsistency in the Bible. Now I respect the Bible more. I am prepared now, if the text seems certain to be presenting me with a difficult feature, to admit that it does and not try to resist it. I have come to see how we conservatives practice Biblical criticism on the text. When we come across an uncomfortable feature, we get rid of it by some implausible theory or other and suppose we have defended the Book. We say the cock crowed six times even though the Bible nowhere says that. We deny the Bible in order to save it. Well, I guess I have grown weary of such antics, and I accept the text as it comes. Is that a weaker position? I would have thought my respect for the givenness of the text had increased, not slackened.

Third, I have come to place greater confidence in the power of the Spirit to make the Bible come alive for believers than I did before. It has begun to surprise me how seldom the militant inerrantists mention his vital ministry. Perhaps they do not wish to sound like Barth, so they avoid sounding like Paul either. Whatever the reason, stress on the Spirit is noticeably lacking in the literature of inerrancy. I think it reveals a preoccupation with apologetic certainty, and I admit to have been bitten with that bug myself in the 1960s but have now recovered. Not

that I cease to wish to argue for the faith, but rather that I feel less desperate and sound less dogmatic. I would no longer argue as I did before that one cannot be certain of anything if his or her Bible is not errorless, simply because it is a fatal argument: No available Bible is. So I admit to having learned a thing or two, and am not ashamed to acknowledge it. On the subject of epistemology, I would say that I have included in my model of rationality such items as what Koivisto calls pragmatism, but not that I am aware of having dropped out my earlier concerns for logic and evidence.¹ I think I can make a better, fuller case now than before.

Before closing, I wish to raise a question for the strict inerrantists that will both help to explain my shifts and invite others to follow me to what I take to be a sounder and ultimately stronger position. (Why should I take all the blows and not land one or two myself?) The strict inerrancy position is built on *one* (incorrect) assumption: that all Scripture is inspired by God in the sense of prophetic inspiration ("I have put my words in your mouth") which amounts to *de facto* dictation (what Scripture says, God says—period). That this is not so is obvious from almost any Biblical book—for example, Job, Song, Proverbs, Chronicles, and so on. Hardly any of them present themselves in such a way. From this (faulty) assumption the militant inerrantist deduces (it is not an induction) that Scripture, because it is given word for word by God, *cannot* contain anything we might deem errant since God cannot lie. From this it follows that the Bible must be interpreted in line with this principle, and anything at variance in the text must be gotten rid of by some hypothesis however far out. The front line of defense then becomes proving the Bible right—that is, proving that it nowhere fails to come up to our standard for it is already deduced. The result is supposed to give the believer a certainty when he reads the Bible. Koivisto has a point when he claims that my earlier work conveyed thinking of this kind and that the more recent work does not. I think he is correct in saying this. I have had to introduce course corrections into my work. I have had to listen more carefully to what the Scriptures actually say and teach. I have had to reduce certain emphases and experiment with others. When I read *Biblical Revelation*, which I wrote in 1971, I identify very much with the clear stand it takes on Biblical authority. I am not aware of having changed this in any vital respect. But I do also detect omissions and distortions in the argument at certain points, which I would not wish to repeat today.

If the reader wishes to encounter my position as I would wish to state it now, he can watch for a volume on Biblical inspiration and authority that I am now writing and that should appear in 1983 (Revell).

¹C. H. Pinnock, *Reason Enough* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1980).