

INERRANCY AND HERMENEUTICS:
A REVIEW ARTICLE

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This published symposium is the third in which the faculty of Westminster Theological Seminary has addressed topics directly related to the subject of the written Word of God. This volume, edited by Harvie M. Conn, seeks to build upon the Westminster tradition of affirming the infallibility and inerrancy of Scripture by addressing the contemporary issue of hermeneutics. Whereas the earlier symposia, *The Infallible Word* (1946) and *Scripture and Confession* (1973), were addressed to an articulation and defense of the authority and infallibility of Scripture, this one seeks, according to its editor, to move beyond a "superficial" and "defensive" attachment to this view of Scripture by considering with sophistication and creativity the issue of hermeneutics.

In the first chapter, entitled "A Historical Prologue: Inerrancy, Hermeneutic, and Westminster," Harvie M. Conn surveys the history of Westminster Seminary's approach to Scripture. He describes the early period of the Seminary as one in which the defense of Scriptural infallibility was uppermost in reaction to its denial in modernism and liberalism. This defensive posture continued to mark Westminster's approach to Scripture into the 1980s, and was expressed in a particular way when the Westminster faculty published its symposium *Scripture and Confession* in 1973 as a critique of the doctrine of Scripture espoused in the *Confession of 1967* by what was then the United Presbyterian Church.

However, in the last decade the emerging debate over hermeneutics has altered the focus of Westminster's attention to Scripture and has become the main agenda item within broader evangelicalism. The key questions raised by the debate over hermeneutics have to do not simply with the *meaning* of the text, but with the *significance* of the text's meaning for the contemporary reader. Of particular importance in this discussion is the attention given to the historical and cultural matrix within which the Scriptural text arose and apart from which it cannot be understood, and the historical and cultural matrix of the contemporary reader of Scripture. Form criticism, redaction criticism, and an interest in the diverse literary genre of Scriptural texts, have given rise to debates about the way in which the meaning of the text is communicated and imparted faithfully to the present-day reader. According to Conn, the various contributions to this symposium address this issue from several perspectives, unified however by fidelity to the historic Westminster view of Scriptural infallibility.

The following chapter, "Inerrancy and Westminster Calvinism" by D. Clair Davis, addresses the question whether Westminster's view of Scripture was influenced by its Calvinistic confessional tradition. Davis finds this influence firstly in the Calvinistic doctrine of God's providential superintendence over the affairs of his human creatures, a superintendence which does not detract from or obliterate the exercise of human responsibility. This understanding of God's providence, for example, contributed to Warfield's development of a doctrine of "organic" inspiration, wherein the Scriptures were understood to be wholly the product of God's creative breath ("God-breathed") and at the same time the product of human agency with all the factors of history and personality which attend it. Davis also notes the substantial contribution of Dutch Calvinism, with its emphasis upon a covenantal biblical theology, to the Westminster view of Scripture. He concludes the chapter by arguing that the Westminster approach to Scripture has always been characterized by a willingness to face new questions and challenges from the standpoint of fidelity to the historic Reformed view of biblical inerrancy.

Sinclair B. Ferguson addresses in chapter 3 the question, "How Does the Bible Look at Itself?" Ferguson observes that it is commonly argued among "critical" interpreters of the Scripture that the Bible has no unified "view of itself." It is alleged that the doctrine of Scripture that Westminster, for example, has historically defended is a theological construct that has been applied deductivistically to the Scriptures. Ferguson provides a helpful response to this denial by considering two questions: first, what is involved in saying that Scripture bears witness to its own nature; and second, what view does the Bible present of itself? In reply to the first of these questions, he cites four propositions that are involved in any claim that the Scripture bears witness to its own nature: one, the presence in the Old Testament of a "canonical self-consciousness," that is, an awareness that what is written is given by God for the direction of his people; two, the New Testament's clear recognition of the Old Testament canon; three, a consciousness among the authors of the New Testament that their writings are on a par with those of the Old Testament as revelation; and four, indications in the New Testament of a recognition of the existence of New Testament writings that belong to a class of literature that is revelatory. In his consideration of the second question, Ferguson identifies four features of Scripture's self-testimony which confirm the existence of a unified Scriptural view of itself. These features are the Scripture's own testimony to its inspiration, authority, reliability and necessity. Ferguson's discussion of these features, though synoptic, provides a compelling case for his thesis that we may speak of "Scripture's *view* of itself."

The following chapter by Moises Silva, "Old Princeton, Westminster, and Inerrancy," summarizes and evaluates the historic position of "old" Princeton and Westminster on the doctrine of inerrancy. Silva attempts to clarify this position in the context of some common misconceptions of this position. He particularly wishes to defend the definition of inerrancy "as that doctrine has been understood by its best exponents," since the contemporary debate regarding inerrancy has been "hopelessly vitiated by the failure--in both conservative and nonconservative camps--to mark how

carefully nuanced were Warfield's formulations" (68).

Thus, Silva defends Warfield against the charge of presenting a "deductivistic" doctrine of biblical inerrancy which did not do justice to the phenomena of Scripture. He notes, for example, that Warfield was prepared to distinguish between the apostle Paul's "official teaching" and "personal opinion," as well as his recognition that the divine origin of Scripture preserved not only its divine truth but also the unique personality of each writer. This requires, argues Silva, that we consider the issue of "authorial intent" in our understanding of biblical texts. It also implies that the issues of hermeneutics are unavoidable in exegesis. We may not, for example, presume that the infallibility of Scripture demands an affirmation of the "historicity" of Genesis 1-3 *apart from exegesis* of the text. Nor may we presume that particular understandings of any texts are necessarily required by a commitment to biblical inerrancy.

Though Silva is undoubtedly correct in arguing that a commitment to biblical inerrancy does not by itself guarantee the interpretation or understanding of any given text, he introduces a number of problems by stressing the importance of discovering a biblical author's intent in order to interpret the text. How, for example, can we determine an author's intent *in order to understand* the text he wrote, when understanding the text itself is the only permissible way to determine its author's specific purpose? Silva's discussion of the author's intent or purpose suggests that it is discovered in some manner other than by way of a grammatical-historical reading of the text. This of course creates the further difficulty of removing the understanding of the text from those who are not privy to those scholarly resources which enable the exegete to determine an author's intention. The problem here is that Silva has drawn too sharp a distinction between an author's intent and the meaning expressed in the text.

The following chapter, "What Does God Say Through Human Authors?," written by Vern Sheridan Poythress, deals with the complexities which face the reader of the Bible who confesses that ultimately it is God's Word, though it comes to us in the "words of men" and progressively in

the history of redemption. Poythress recognizes the problem addressed by the notion of a *sensus plenior*, namely, that a human author whom God used to communicate his Word might not have fully understood or known what God was revealing through him and that this only becomes clear in the context of the history of revelation. This complexity is especially prominent in the speeches of the incarnate Christ, through whom God himself speaks and yet for whom, as one who bore wholly our human nature, the full meaning of his words was not a matter of exhaustive self-consciousness. Some of the same complexity arises in connection with the progressiveness of revelation; every passage must be read not only in its immediate context, but also in the context of the total canon extant at the time of its writing (and ultimately in the context of the completed canon).

Dan G. McCartney, in a chapter entitled "The New Testament's Use of the Old Testament," addresses the difficult question how we are to understand the New Testament's citations of the Old Testament. Succinctly stated, the problem derives from our ordinary allegiance to a grammatical-historical exegesis of the Bible; and yet the New Testament references to the Old Testament appear to violate the canons of grammatical-historical exegesis. McCartney expresses his dissatisfaction with Earle Ellis' designation of this usage as "grammatical-historical exegesis *plus*" and Richard Longenecker's argument that the New Testament authors were permitted liberties with the text not given us due to their writing under divine inspiration. The burden of McCartney's chapter is the argument that we may not be restricted by a kind of rigid attachment to a grammatical-historical approach to the text, since this is more the product of a post-Enlightenment rationalism than a fair reflection of the Bible's own understanding and interpretation of itself. McCartney suggests that we adopt four theses: one, hermeneutical method is a product of a world view; two, hermeneutical method is subservient to hermeneutical goal; three, our world view must be compatible with that of the biblical writers; and four, our hermeneutical goal must, like that of the New Testament writers, be focused upon Jesus Christ and his redemptive program. Within the framework

of these theses, he argues that we need to recognize that the Bible is less a book about "specific life problems" than it is a focused account of God's relationship to humankind.

Bruce K. Waltke, in a chapter on "Oral Tradition," critically evaluates two principles that long have marked form criticism, tradition criticism, and canonical criticism. These principles are: that much of the literature of the Pentateuch had a long prehistory before it was written down; and that this material during its oral stage was often substantially altered in meaning and context. Waltke, noting the negative conclusions which these principles require regarding the historical accuracy of the biblical accounts, proceeds to challenge five assumptions that form and tradition critics of the Pentateuch have employed to defend these principles. He maintains that the most important indirect evidence, the literature of the ancient Near East, does not support the form and tradition critics' assumption that the early history of Israel was likely oral and not written. Furthermore, he maintains that there is no evidence for the idea that oral traditions in Israel or among neighboring peoples were transmitted in a fluid state.

In a chapter that considers some of the more difficult questions raised by the diversity of literary genre in the Bible, "Storytellers and Poets in the Bible: Can Literary Artifice Be True?," Tremper Longman III notes that we must recognize the literary features of the Scriptural texts. Unhappily, we operate in a modern context which presumes that literary artifice is inevitably "fictional" and "not true," and which draws a sharp distinction between the artificial language of literature and the normal everyday language of communication. The Bible however is for the most part not written in the straightforward prose of modern historians, scientists and philosophers; it is written often in the form of well-told stories and poems in which literary artifice is clearly evident. Longman cites as illustrative the Book of Job and the Flood Narrative in Genesis. He maintains that, provided we reject the notion that literary artifice is marked by "fictionality," "invention," and "imagination," we may acknowledge the literary artifice which is employed in the

biblical writings as consistent with a commitment to inerrancy. Because God himself superintends the writing of the Scriptures, the employment of such literary artifice as is evident in the biblical materials is not inconsistent with an insistence upon a high view of the historicity of the text.

Raymond B. Dillard contributes a chapter entitled, "Harmonization: A Help and a Hindrance," in which he raises the question whether harmonization is a "necessary and inevitable consequence of the doctrine of inerrancy." If we are committed to an inerrant Bible, are we not compelled to harmonize alleged contradictions and inconsistencies in the text when these are singled out by critics?

As Dillard's title suggests, he considers this question firstly by noting the helpfulness of some forms of harmonization and secondly by noting the disadvantages harmonization may present to the exegete. In his consideration of the value of harmonization, he notes that harmonization is as natural a part of biblical exegesis as it is in ordinary human life where apparent discrepancies are frequently reconciled. Furthermore, the biblical writers themselves engage in forms of harmonization. Most importantly, however, harmonization is a legitimate, even necessary, implication of the doctrine of inerrancy; there are no real discrepancies or contradictions in the biblical texts and harmonization is a legitimate aid to apologetics in the defense of this truth.

This does not mean, according to Dillard, that all harmonization is legitimate. Dillard observes that frequently harmonization has been characterized by arbitrariness in application, and that it is an inadequate tool for resolving the difficult question of intrabiblical citations (where there are clear and evident differences between the texts cited). Dillard also properly argues that forced harmonizations have often detracted from rather than contributed to a persuasive defense of biblical authority and inerrancy. He makes the helpful comment that the standards of historiography employed by those who engage in forced harmonization are more consistent with a historical-critical than a biblical view of historical truth. Unfortunately, he does not elaborate upon this point in any detail.

In what is perhaps the most helpful and persuasive chapter in this symposium, Richard B. Gaffin, Jr., treats the issue of "The New Testament as Canon." Gaffin observes at the outset that the issue of canon can be approached from either an historical (how did the canon come to be formed and recognized, historically?) or a theological (upon what basis or ground did the church recognize the canon?) perspective. Gaffin does not address the historical perspective, but focuses upon the theological perspective and isolates the problem of the canon's *completed* or closed character as of paramount importance. In my judgment Gaffin correctly argues that there are no "criteria of canonicity" which are necessary and sufficient to distinguish the present books of the New Testament as a completed canon. He argues that any attempt to establish such criteria of canonicity is self-defeating, since these criteria themselves relativize the authority of the canon. The only legitimate approach to the canon is that which recognizes the canon as a "self-establishing," "self-validating" entity in which God is confessed to be its author and validator. This means that the origin of the New Testament canon is not the same as its reception by the church; the existence of the canon does not derive from the fact of its recognition by the church.

This does not mean, according to Gaffin, that the *a priori* of faith may be isolated from its relation to the historical-redemptive context in which the canon was formed and given to the church. Upon the basis of a theological recognition of the canon as self-validating, there are several dimensions to this context which must be developed. The first is the christological; the apostles who authored or contributed to the writing of the New Testament canon were themselves authorized and empowered by Christ to impart the gospel of his person and work in all its ramifications to the church. The second dimension is the ecclesiological; because the apostles stood in a peculiar redemptive-historical relationship to Christ, their writings constitute the once-for-all, unrepeatabe foundation of the New Testament church. In this respect, Gaffin well observes that the expression "apostolic succession" is a misnomer, since the presence of the apostles was foundational and therefore temporary. A third

dimension that Gaffin isolates is the revelatory; the witness of the New Testament apostles to the person and work of Christ was a once-for-all witness and revelation which has an "infallibly authoritative, legally binding" character. Thus, this witness embodies a canonical principle, being a new body of revelation corresponding to the covenantal revelation of the Old Testament. Finally, Gaffin identifies the historical-redemptive dimension of the canon's formation; all verbal revelation occurs within the context of the epochal movement of the history of redemption. With the establishment and confirmation of the new covenant in Christ, there is the formation of a new covenant scripture which constitutes the canon for the church until the next great epoch in the history of redemption, the parousia of Christ. Consequently, Gaffin argues that the New Testament canon is, consistent with the nature of verbal revelation and the course of redemptive history, completed and we should not expect any continuing revelation which would relativize its authority for the church.

The following two chapters, the first, "Normativity, Relevance, and Relativism" by Harvie M. Conn, and the second, "The Use of the Bible in Ethics" by David Clowney, are perhaps the most disappointing in this symposium. Both of these chapters address a key problem raised in contemporary discussions of hermeneutics--how does the biblical text with its historical and cultural relativity become understandable and continue to function with absolute authority for the present?--without providing a helpful contribution to a resolution of this problem.

In his discussion of "Normativity, Relevance, and Relativism," Conn endeavors to deal with the question, how do we insist upon the normativity and relevance of Scriptural ethics in view of the cultural and historical conditioning of its imperatives? Particularly, how do we avoid relativism while acknowledging the cultural "relativity" of biblical texts?

Conn adopts the idea of a "hermeneutical spiral" in which, recognizing both the cultural conditioning of the text of Scripture and the cultural conditioning of the interpreter

of this text, we strive for genuine growth in understanding by allowing the text to correct and control the questions we bring to it and the answers we receive. In approaching the text within this "hermeneutical spiral," we must avoid a number of false leads that have sometimes plagued traditional approaches to Scripture. Among these false leads Conn mentions the idea that Scripture teaches a number of "eternal" or "timeless" principles, and the idea that we may distinguish between the "center" and the "periphery" of Scriptural teaching.

For Conn our approach to Scripture within this hermeneutical spiral must be governed by two sets of clues, those derived from what he terms the "Godward" and the "human" side of hermeneutics. In terms of the Godward side of hermeneutics Conn mentions the necessity of being subject to "the original intent of the biblical text," of recognizing the unfolding of the history of redemption as the link between the biblical text and our situation (we belong to and are included within that history of redemption), and of acknowledging the Holy Spirit as the One who communicates the meaning and significance of the text for our setting. In terms of the human side of hermeneutics Conn mentions the necessity of "distancing" ourselves from the "horizon" of the biblical text, of recognizing the benefits our presuppositions may have for understanding the text, and of doing justice to the cultural particularity of the "horizons" of the text and interpreter. Though he provides little indication of the consequences of this approach for adjudicating the present debate over the role of women, Conn notes that these considerations are vitally important with respect to interpreting biblical passages which address the "propriety" of women performing certain roles.

Clowney introduces his chapter by noting the common predicament faced by a contemporary interpreter of the Bible's directives. How do I determine, for example, what "relevance" the apostle Paul's directives concerning women in I Corinthians 11:3-16 and Galatians 3:28 have for my situation in the present? Clowney's answer is developed in three ways. First, he argues that the Bible guides us by

giving us God's will as a *law* for our life in Christ. This does not mean that the Bible gives us a list of commandments which may be applied legalistically and simply to every possible situation. Rather, Christ by his example and Spirit enables us to apply the biblical imperatives in a mature and responsible fashion, recognizing the goals of his kingdom and the need for the spontaneous response of a loving heart. Second, he notes that the Bible gives us a description of the meaning and direction of our lives in terms of the history of redemption whose center is the person and work of Jesus Christ. And third, he suggests that no biblical ethics is complete without recognizing the covenantal relationship between God and his people within which we are called to respond in love to God and neighbor. By utilizing all three of these biblical approaches to ethics we are able to avoid the dangers of legalism, "situation ethics" and subjectivism. The major weakness of Clowney's discussion is his failure to show clearly how his approach would assist in resolving such a notoriously difficult question as the role and function of men and women in the home and church. Though he provides some suggestions of the direction in which the discussion should go, Clowney leaves his reader without much clarity as to how to proceed on this ethical question and others.

In the following chapter, "Bible Authority: When Christians Do Not Agree," George C. Fuller and Samuel T. Logan, Jr., offer an apology for an irenic and loving spirit in dealing with differences among Christians on the doctrine of Scripture. Recognizing that consistent Christianity requires a clear affirmation of the inerrancy of Scripture, they nonetheless argue that we must avoid the twin dangers of regarding as non-Christian all those who teach the errancy of Scripture or of glossing over the "fundamental inconsistency of affirming the incarnate Word while denying the written Word." They plead for an articulate, uncompromising affirmation of the authority of Scripture against all forms of contemporary denial of this authority. And yet they simultaneously plead for a recognition that not all differences on questions of Scriptural interpretation evidence unacceptable compromise and attenuation of Scriptural authority. They

cite, for example, the Westminster faculty's conviction that the Bible prohibits the service of women in the office of teaching or ruling elder. This conviction does not mean, however, that those who come to a different position must be approached as though they held a view of Scripture fundamentally at odds with their own.

The last chapter, "Evangelicals and the Bible: A Bibliographic Postscript" by John R. Muether, provides a comprehensive and helpful survey of the major studies devoted to the subject of Scripture in recent decades. Muether describes the seventies as a decade in which the focus was upon the doctrine of inerrancy and the eighties as a decade in which the focus was upon hermeneutics. He also observes that recent discussions have given a great deal of attention to the hermeneutics of liberation theology.

Having briefly summarized the various contributions to this symposium on inerrancy and hermeneutics by the faculty of Westminster Theological Seminary, a few summary observations are in order.

The first is that this symposium typically reflects the strengths and weaknesses of most symposia or collections of articles dealing with a single theme from a variety of perspectives. The quality of the chapters is uneven and it is not always clear how the individual chapters address the theme of "inerrancy and hermeneutics." Some of the chapters are especially helpful (those of Ferguson, Waltke, Longman, Dillard and Gaffin), while others (Silva, McCartney, Conn and Clowney), due in part to the relatively brief treatment accorded to the specific topic, raise more questions than they provide answers.

The unevenness in the quality of the contributions and the relative brevity of the chapters contribute to the most serious defect of this volume. Nowhere is the reader treated to a summary statement of Westminster's traditional doctrine of inerrancy or an explanation of the precise challenge/s of the contemporary debate over hermeneutics. Though ostensibly devoted to the common theme of "inerrancy and hermeneutics," the volume nowhere provides the reader with a

clear statement of the problem or summary statement of the particular issues it means to address. For this reason it becomes difficult at times to see the relation between the various essays and the announced theme of "inerrancy and hermeneutic." Strikingly, some of the more valuable chapters do not directly address the central issue of the book, the problem of inerrancy and hermeneutics. Without this kind of clear definition of theme and related issues, the reader will find this volume helpful more as a collection of essays of uneven value on various topics related to Scripture than as a helpful guide in sorting out issues related to the theme of inerrancy and hermeneutics.

It is also worthy of notice that those essays which address most explicitly the problem of inerrancy and hermeneutics leave the reader uncertain as to the proposed solution. There are some statements made in several articles that are hard to reconcile with the historic Westminster (and Reformed) view of Scripture. Dan G. McCartney, for example, seems to treat "general revelation" in a broadly expansive fashion when he speaks of a "double hermeneutical circle" in which the creation itself, alongside of the Scripture, may inform us of God and his interpretation of the world (p. 111). This unqualified statement appears to be inconsistent with a confession of the final and supreme authority of Scripture. He further argues for the view that "the Bible is primarily a book about God and humankind's relationship to him" in which "specific life problems are therefore only secondarily addressed" (p. 114). A similar view of the Scripture and its relation to specific life issues is evident in the essays of Conn and Clowney; the Bible only provides us with a broad redemptive framework, focused in Christ, by which to approach life and questions of normativity. It is difficult to distinguish this position from one which would restrict the Scripture's authority and "relevance" to its "redemptive center," and which would deny to Scriptural directives (especially those which bear evident marks of their cultural relativity) any direct normativity. Since this is one of the critical problems raised by contemporary discussions of hermeneutics--how can the text of Scripture have direct bearing upon those who live in a different historical

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situation?--it is disappointing to find these essays echoing the hermeneutical problem without providing much in the way of a helpful way out.

Perhaps the most important feature of this symposium is the window it provides upon the present-day grapplings of the Westminster Seminary faculty with the issue of inerrancy and hermeneutic. What we see is that the historic Westminster consensus on biblical inerrancy is being tested and challenged by its interaction with the problem of how we are to understand the meaning and significance of the biblical texts for our lives today.