

The Emancipating Word of God

George A. Turner

A commonly held view is that the orthodox, conservative or traditional view of the Bible as the inerrant Word of God is static, authoritarian, binding. Against this Luther, Calvin, modern criticism, liberalism and neo-orthodoxy, have successfully protested, leading to a liberation of the mind and of the real power of the "Word of God" within the Bible. To identify the Bible as the Word of God is to shackle the revelation. This viewpoint, with varying perspectives, is advocated in such representative works as A. Sabatier, *Religions of Authority and the Religion of the Spirit* (1904), and Edwin Lewis, *The Biblical Faith and Christian Freedom* (1952), pp. 30 ff. There is some truth in this widely accepted viewpoint.

By the middle of the nineteenth century, it is widely held, a combination of factors made "the old biblicism" completely untenable. These factors included the application of the doctrine of evolution to Old Testament history, the application of Hegel's dialectic by Strauss and Bauer to New Testament studies, the influence of "higher criticism," the rise of "the social gospel," and the increased knowledge of comparative religions. The total effect of this "new learning" left no phase of biblical research unaffected.

The antithesis to "modernism" or "liberalism" was "fundamentalism" which challenged the "new learning" in the interest of the trustworthiness of the Bible and the basic truths of the Christian faith. In so doing fundamentalism overstated its case at points and came to espouse views of biblical literalism and homogeneity more rigid than otherwise would have been articulated and defended.

In times of theological controversy, when important truths are felt to be in jeopardy, extreme positions tend to be taken, defended and enshrined. A fixed canon of the New Testament was thus the result of Marcion's abbreviated canon and several heretical "gospels." The Pelagian-Augustinian anthropological controversy of the fifth century defended the doctrines of

human responsibility and divine grace respectively, with the result that both factions defended positions more extreme than would otherwise have been the case. Throughout history this has been a contributing factor to what Hegel called the movement of thesis, antithesis and synthesis. Arminianism was an attempt to effect a synthesis between Pelagianism and Augustinianism and to conserve the best insights of both.

The issues of the fundamentalist-modernist controversy have recently been softened by a new synthesis currently best known as "neo-orthodoxy." After a second look many liberals, concerned with conserving the basic truths of the Christian faith, have sought to correct the admittedly negative results of higher criticism. Typical of these is John Knox, *Criticism and Faith* (Abingdon-Cokesbury, 1952).

The purpose of this essay is to suggest a defensible view of the authority and inspiration of the Bible which does justice to the Bible and to contemporary scholarship. As a label for the view herein set forth the overworked term "evangelical" seems most appropriate. While this view is essentially conservative the term "conservative" is not precise because this view welcomes research and new light and is not reluctant to leave the old simply because it is old. While this view is in rapport with most "fundamentalists" it eschews the connotations of verbalism, literalism, and pugnacity often associated with this term. The term "evangelical" seems most appropriate for this view since, in common with primitive Lutheranism, Pietism, early Methodism and their successors, it stresses the factor of Christian experience in sound biblical interpretation.

Methodology is important in the quest of truth. It is deemed best to place alternative or opposing views in their best rather than worst light and to undertake to prove no more than necessary to substantiate one's position.

It should be generally accepted that no one should make claims for the Bible greater than those made by the Bible itself. This has actually been done in the heat of controversy. Conversely, it ill becomes one to divest the Bible of qualities it claims, unless, of course, the truth demands it. It should be recognized that the Bible is the work of many hands over many years--is actually a library. The surprising thing is not its diversity but rather the degree of unity which it possesses in view of its diverse origins. The solid results of critical biblical scholarship are something for which all may be grate-

ful. Among them are the findings of archaeologists which in the past generation have revolutionized biblical research. The import of these has been to authenticate the Scriptures in many areas, especially in the Old Testament field. The Graf-Wellhausen hypothesis, once the corner-stone of Old Testament criticism, and held as almost axiomatic (Pfeiffer, Introduction to the Old Testament, p. 812), has been all but abandoned as one result of archaeological research.¹ No informed person would consider defending a "pre-critical" viewpoint, although some current apologetics do just that. But, since the "assured results" of higher criticism are less sure now than a decade ago, a conservative attitude would seem timely and appropriate.

Fundamentalism, commendably seeking to safeguard the essentials of "the faith once delivered to the saints," has often overstated its case. In too many instances a priori considerations have pre-judged the case and prevented an impartial weighing of evidence. Sometimes a fear of conclusions has short-circuited investigation and the follow-through of evidence. But it is to their credit that fundamentalists have insisted on taking the Bible as it is. Most of them are really more objective in their methodology than their liberal and neo-liberal critics.

The positions of the "neo-orthodox" are more difficult to define since they have been in a formative stage and only now are crystallizing. Their great contribution is the re-discovery of the basic insight of the great Reformers that man is a sinner and can only be saved by the grace of God. It has brought in or rather recovered a third dimension in biblical interpretation--the factor of man confronted by God and in so doing discovering his true nature. The movement has done service in calling attention to the Person of whom the Book speaks rather than the Book as such. But while the theology of crisis has accepted one of the two cardinal principles of the Reformation--justification by faith--it has not fully accepted the other--that of the sole authority of the Scriptures. Since this school accepts most of the results of higher criticism it is left with a Bible which contains much of "the Word of God"

¹ Only one Old Testament scholar in Israel today adheres to this theory, according to statements made by members of the faculty of Hebrew University, Jerusalem, in 1958. In 1941 Pfeiffer knew of no scholar who had rejected the hypothesis (*loc. cit.*).

and much that is only the fallible words of men. The interpreter is compelled to select the inspired and authoritative utterances in the Bible from those which are uninspired, unauthoritative and erroneous. Unfortunately the student is left with no norm or touchstone by which to make this selection. The typical neo-orthodox student is of necessity subjective in his value-judgments. This means that the final authority is not in the Bible itself but in the "existential moment" in the Bible reader, that moment when he is confronted with the presence of God speaking through his written Word. This means that the Bible does not possess within itself a self-authenticating quality; its authentication is dependent upon the reader's response, a subjective validation. It is analogous to the old argument as to what constitutes sound. Does a tree falling in a distant forest make a sound if no ear hears the reverberation? Is the Bible the Word of God if there is no response to its message? Is it authoritative for one who rejects its authority? The neo-orthodox view would say that there is no sound unless someone hears it; no Word of God in the Bible unless the reader-auditor responds to its stimulus. Does it not follow that I am not responsible to God unless I find within me a response to his written Word? It points back to Barth and Augustine who while commendably laying stress on the grace and sovereignty of God fail to leave enough room for responsibility and hence morality.

To make the Word of God conditioned upon man's response relieves man of responsibility for obeying. Such a view must be basically antinomian and amoral. It would be analogous to saying that a traffic law is not law to the man who understands it but in whom it evokes no favorable response. It makes man's ratification a necessary ingredient in divine revelation. Is it not truer to say that the Bible remains the Word of God regardless of one's personal response, but those who do respond discover that it leads to the Incarnate Word by whose grace is given "the engrafted word which is able to save your souls" (Jas. 1:21)?

The "new biblicism," while professing acceptance of the view that all Scripture should be interpreted in the light of Jesus Christ the Word of God, does not share Jesus' reported view of much of the Old Testament; instead it accepts most of the results of higher criticism. Illustrative of this is the view that Genesis reflects the ideas of the Kingdom period rather than being a revelation of God's will "in the beginning" as

Jesus viewed it, according to the Gospel writers.² It is like arguing in a circle to say that the New Testament does not present one with the actual works and words of Jesus, but that one knows Christ through "the eyes of faith" alone. Whence comes faith? Does the Word of God come as the result of faith as the "new biblicism" says, or does faith come as a result of the word of Christ as Paul affirmed (cf. Rom. 10:17).

Against the necessity for the subjective validation of the Word of God (the Bible) the evangelical would have to protest. He believes instead that the Bible has a certain self-authenticating quality. He has learned, moreover, that external evidence has often confirmed the Scripture testimony concerning itself. From this self-styled "evangelical" viewpoint the whole Bible in its present form is inspired and authoritative; but, contrary to the viewpoint of some ultra fundamentalists, not all of the Bible is equal in degree of revelation. In other words, some parts of the inspired record more clearly reveal God's mind and will than do others. There is progressive revelation. There are even instances in which the sequence is reversed, where an earlier revelation has been temporarily superceded as a concession to expediency. As an instance of the latter, when the Pharisees questioned Jesus concerning divorce they cited the Mosaic law (Deut. 24:1, 3) which granted divorce on relatively easy grounds (although in its historical setting was a limitation on contemporary practices). Against this Jesus set the ideal "in the beginning" as recorded in Genesis 1:27; 2:4; 5:2, according to which the marriage bond is indissoluble. By appealing to one Scripture against another Jesus was indicating that one more truly revealed the will of God than the other, although equally inspired and authoritative. The command in Deuteronomy was a reluctant concession to man's "hardness of heart"; it was within the permissive will of God, but did not represent his highest thought and purpose (Mark 10:2, 12). Likewise, in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus clearly indicated that the ethics of the New Covenant are higher and more demanding than those sanctioned under Mosaic law. The prohibition of adultery is more demanding (Mt. 5:27, 28) than in the Decalogue. The same is true of the command to love one's neighbor (Lev. 19:18, cf. Mt. 5:43-48). An attitude towards one's enemies that was commendable in Elijah is sub-

² Mark 10:6, cf. G. E. Wright, "From the Bible to the Modern Mind," *Biblical Authority For Today*, p. 231.

Christian in the New dispensation (II Kings 1:10,12; cf. Lk. 9:54). The imprecatory Psalms (e.g., Ps. 137:9) are below the level of Christian ethics and attitudes as defined by Jesus. The Proverbs do not profess to be revelations direct from God, like the works of the prophets, but are "the voice of experience," the accumulated wisdom of the sages (Pro. 4:1-5). So, obviously, not all of the Bible presents to an equal degree God's highest will.

But in this viewpoint there is still not sufficient evidence to justify the conclusion that the divine revelation is mixed with error because of its human mediators. It is no better to assume that because fallible humans produced the Bible it must perforce contain error than to conclude that because God inspired it it must therefore be inerrant. The evidence should determine the conclusion, not vice versa. While the revelation is conditioned or refracted by the human media it is not thereby necessarily rendered erroneous. To say that the revelation is accurate only in matters of faith is a subjective judgment for which the Scriptures themselves afford no warrant. "If part is fallible, then all must be" in logical consistency.³ To conclude, however, that because the Bible is inspired it must be infallible is the a priori method which must be renounced. Rather "it is something whose nature is strictly dependent upon an inductive study of what the contents of the Bible actually are."⁴

What is that view of scriptural authority which may be derived from a study of the Bible itself, following the inductive approach? The Word of God is not to be equated with a book. It is rather the expressed thought of God which was revealed in act and thought to the Old Testament prophets and culminated in the "Word made flesh" at the Incarnation. It is more correct to say that the Bible is the record of God's revelation than simply that it is God's revelation. This revelation was a living witness, transmitted not in writing but in saving acts, in the living voice and in inspired interpretation of events, culminating in Jesus' words and acts, including the resurrection, and the descent of the Spirit at Pentecost. Seen in broad perspective the Old Testament finds its unity in a series of redemptive acts and the prophetic interpretation thereof: 1) the Covenant with its three phases--

³ John Murray, *The Infallible Word*, p. 5.

⁴ H. Cunliffe-Jones, *The Authority of the Biblical Revelation*, p. 115.

to Abraham, to Moses, and to David; 2) the Exodus; 3) the Captivity; 4) the Restoration; 5) the Scriptures (involving the Law, the prophets, sayings of the wise and the institution of the synagogue); 6) the Incarnation; 7) the passion and resurrection (analogous to the Exodus); and 8) the Parousia.

The prophet under the Old Covenant and the evangelist in the New are more than reporters of an audible message; they are primarily witnesses of their experience of God.⁵ It is God's saving presence which is the most important factor in the revelation; the words used to report the experience are secondary. It follows that it is more correct to say that the prophet's thoughts are inspired than that words were placed in his mouth. The latter is more in keeping with the Koran or with Greek oracles than with biblical inspiration. This accounts for the factors of the writer's personal experiences (e.g., Isaiah), contemporary events, and style which influence the formal expression of the revelation of God. This accounts also for the variety in the Bible and justifies research into the environmental factors which conditioned the expression of the revelation. Moreover, the authority of the Bible is further evidenced in the essential unity with which the writers speak, in the harmony of basic doctrines rather than in verbal similarities of expression. Paul speaks of being a "new creature" (II Cor. 5:17), John of the "new birth" (John 3:3), II Peter of "partakers of the divine nature" (II Pet. 1:4). In the usual connotations of the term it follows that "plenary" rather than "verbal" inspiration is the better way of describing the process of inspiration.⁶ It seems probable, however, that both proponents and opponents of "verbal" inspiration have overstated their respective positions. How else can thought be transmitted except through words? Any use of language is "verbal."

The Bible writers often used incomplete or incorrect documents in the compilation of Scripture. Divine inspiration did not necessarily supply lacunae in their written sources or correct misspelled words and erroneous dates. These are errors of transmission which are limited to unimportant details. It has not been proved conclusively that, as originally given, the writers recorded what professed to be in-

⁵ Cf. Amos 3:8; Hab. 3:1; Acts 4:20, and J. K. S. Reid, *The Authority of the Scriptures* (Harpers, 1955), p. 271.

⁶ James Orr, *Revelation and Inspiration* (Scribners', 1910), p. 211.

spired thought from God which later proved to be contrary to fact.⁷ The freedom from such errors of knowledge and judgment, which one might naturally expect from a series of ancient documents, is too remarkable and have so often been confirmed that the conclusion that the original documents were free from statements contrary to fact seems well grounded. Said Orr,

...it remains a fact that the Bible...is free from demonstrable error in its statements, and harmonious in its teachings to a degree that of itself creates an irresistible impression of a supernatural factor in its origin.⁸

In support of this judgment is the testimony of the ancient Jews and the primitive Christian church, and the frequency with which charges of error have proven false.

What is the relation between the Word of God and the Bible? To say that the Bible contains the Word of God is inadequate because it implies a container with contents of varying merit. To say that the Bible becomes the Word of God is only a half-truth. To say that the Bible is the Word of God is more adequate if it be clear that the book and the revelation are not identical. The revelation of God is as true as God is true. It is believed to have been given historically and preserved in a written record by human instrumentalities under sufficient divine providence to assure a uniquely authentic and trustworthy end-product.

It has been stated that the orthodox or classical view of the Bible as "plenary inspired" and inerrant is authoritarian, static, and shackling to freedom of thought and experience.⁹ That is the same as saying that the view of the Bible shared by the apostles, church fathers, and evangelicals of the 17th, 18th, and 19th centuries was sterile and static. In spite of this alleged handicap much was accomplished by these men. Those who were instrumental in making the nineteenth "the greatest century" (Latourette) in Christian history were men with this "static" view of the Bible which "shackled the revelation." Christianity's finest chapters were written before the

⁷ The evidence for such alleged errors cited in C. H. Dodd, *The Authority of the Bible* (Nisbet & Co., 1948), p. 15, are not entirely convincing.

⁸ James Orr, *op. cit.*, p. 216.

⁹ Edwin Lewis, "The Emancipation of the Word of God," *Religion in Life*, XVIII, 542.

rise of negative "higher criticism" or the contemporary "new biblicism."

It remains to be seen whether those who consider themselves emancipated from the shackles of the "old biblicism" will write brighter chapters in Christian history. One is reminded of Homrighausen's question, "Where are the Neo-orthodox evangelists" who are reaching the masses with the life-transforming "Word of God"? What is now needed is not so much the "emancipation of the Word of God" from a "static biblicism" as the emancipating Word of God in its pristine power.

The antithesis is not between authority and freedom. Freedom comes by way of discipline as is too infrequently recognized.¹⁰ Actually, "the authority of God is the source of man's freedom."¹¹ There needs to be a rediscovery of the paradox between freedom and discipline. It was voiced by the Psalmist: "So shall I observe thy law continually for ever and ever, and I shall walk at liberty; for I have sought thy precepts." It is expressed with even deeper insight in the words attributed to Jesus: "If ye continue in my word then are ye my disciples indeed, and ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free" (John 8:30,31). The connection between emancipation and the Word of God which binds and liberates, kills and makes alive, is obvious. No one saw this more clearly than Luther as he wrote *The Liberty of the Christian Man* unless it be Luther's teacher--the author of the letters to the Romans and to the Galatians.

¹⁰It is so recognized in *ibid.* , p. 555.

¹¹Cunliffe-Jones, *op. cit.* , p. 11.