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Some thoughts on *Christian Believing*

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Christian Believing (SPCK, 1976, £2.50) has been before the public for a good many months and has already been widely commented upon. It seems best not to attempt a general review, but to confine comment to matters of particular concern to evangelicals, with a view to saying something constructive about our stance in the field of apologetics.

Christian Believing is a report of the Doctrine Commission of the Church of England on 'The Nature of the Christian Faith and Its Expression in Holy Scriptures and Creeds'. The members of the commission are distinguished academics, who (it may be safely said) do not fairly represent the balance of opinion among clergy and laity of the church, and whose report can carry no official authority unless accepted by the General Synod (which is most unlikely). Amongst its eighteen members there are broadly three groups: radicals, such as Dennis Nineham, Christopher Evans and Maurice Wiles; those with more traditional views, such as J. R. Lucas and H. E. W. Turner; and two evangelicals, Michael Green and Jim Packer. The first forty pages of the report have been 'carefully worked out and subscribed to by all the members of the Commission'. The remaining 114 pages consist of individual contributions by nine of them, expressing a wide range of views, but including no contribution by either evangelical.

The joint report reads like a typical, even searingly, liberal account of the Bible. It is of course intended to represent the slim highest common factor held by the commission, but on the most charitable supposition it is difficult to see how those who have subscribed to the infallibility of Scripture could subscribe to the view that some of the different 'pasts' 'were plainly misunderstood by other biblical writers' (p.21) or that 'the men of the New Testament . . . corrected . . . earlier histories' (p. 28). Some of the dubious statements in the report have presumably been passed because, though on first reading they sound very unevangelical, they are in fact ambiguous. For example, 'radical questions are opened up by . . . "It was said by the ancients" and "I say to you" . . . if Jesus may himself have handled scriptural material very freely or even criticized it . . .' (pp.22f.). We have here 'radical questions' and an 'if' clause. An evangelical would not accept the conditional clause 'if Jesus criticized Scripture' as a true supposition, nor would he answer the radical questions by an assertion that Jesus rejected parts of the Old Testament. But the report does not make it clear that any members of the commission reject the view which the words most naturally suggest.

This, alas, is typical of the whole joint report. In its drafting the radicals clearly had the initiative. The evangelicals had little opportunity to say the things they would wish said, but found themselves confined to the question as to whether they could or could not allow to pass statements devised by others. Thus almost throughout a conservative view is not stated, but a liberal view (even if not unambiguously stated) is suggested. For instance, divine authorship of Scripture is not upheld, but it is suggested that verbal inspiration was a third-century development (p.23). We are not told that the Bible gives the words of the One Spirit, but great stress is laid upon diversity of authorship ('some . . . were traditionalists, some radicals or sceptics') and upon their 'violence of language that verged at times on the frenzied or the obscene' (p.28). We are not told of the consistency of Scripture, but the allegorists are censured because by them 'the whole Bible . . . was . . . effectively converted into a handbook of Christian doctrine' (p.23), whereas 'in the Old and New Testaments we find side by side, strikingly different, if not absolutely incompatible, readings of events' (p.27). We are not told of the perspicuity of Scripture, but they have the 'feeling that . . . the past . . . may . . . be ultimately indescribable' (p.15). The objectivity of the inspired Word is not upheld, but we are told that 'Jesus himself lives in the world of today not so much in his recorded words and actions as through the community which he founded but which may . . . in its teaching . . . have changed radically from anything he envisaged' (p.11). We are not told to contend for the faith delivered once for all to the saints, but we are warned against the error in which 'revelation came to be thought of as a static thing, delivered to men once for all in these sacred and inspired texts' (p.30). We are not told that schism may be a lesser evil than heresy, but we are told of the temptation 'to rule out one or more of these competing attitudes' (p. 38), and we are discouraged from denunciation of error in biblical terms, since these (as we have seen) are liable to be almost frenzied or obscene.

It is not for me to attempt to defend this report, which I read with horror and amazement, but I think we should at least try to understand how it has come about, even

if this involves conjecture. Dr Packer's short answer to the question, 'Do you still stand where you stood when you wrote *'Fundamentalism' and the Word of God*?' would, I know, be a firm 'Yes'. That little book spoke of 'faultless autographs' (p.90), 'the accuracy of all Bible history' (p.162), the 'need to insist . . . on the factual truthfulness of the Word of God' (p.100), 'error-free' (p. 169), 'wholly God-given' (p.170), 'any disharmony . . . is only apparent, not real' (p.110). It insisted that 'our approach must be harmonistic' (p.109); that 'faith does not wait on historical criticism' (p.166); that the attitude which 'presumes to correct the inerrant Word of God' is 'a conceited affront to divine grace' (p.174). It denounced as blasphemy 'the delusion that human creatures are competent to judge and find fault with the words of their Creator' (p.170).

There have always been in the IVF (UCCF) divergences of view as to the precise formulation of the doctrine of inspiration. In the early days we were advised to read two books, both entitled *Revelation and Inspiration,* one by James Orr and the other by B. B. Warfield. Orr was a great apologist and probably the most effective opponent of Wellhausen's views in the English-speaking world in the early part of this century, but he was distinctly chary about affirming the inerrancy of Scripture in all its details. He thought that biblical authors might have transcribed sources which contained trivial errors which were irrelevant to the message they were setting forth. (Funnily enough, the one specific example which he cites is the disparity between the synchronisms in the regnal years of the book of Kings and the Assyrian synchronisms, which has since been largely cleared up by E. R. Thiele, *The Mysterious Numbers of the Hebrew Kings.*) I have always supposed Michael Green, the doughty defender of *2 Peter,* to be a modern Orr and Jim Packer a modern Warfield! Warfield, at any rate, could find no justification in Scripture for the idea that the divine utterances were true in major matters, but uncertain in minor ones.

Now the question arises, why was no attempt made to secure a statement of the conservative point of view in *Christian Believing*? I can think of only three possible reasons, any or all of which may have contributed. (1) They felt unable to state it adequately; (2) they felt unsure as to what precisely 'the conservative point of view' should be; or (3) they felt it to be *comparatively* unimportant in the greater struggle with radicalism.

With all these possibilities one can have a good deal of sympathy. It is no easy matter for a systematic theologian with little interest or expertise in biblical criticism, to sit down in a friendly and informal way over a period of years with clever men who have devoted their lives to biblical criticism, and hold his own; and it is not to the glory of God to appear to be an obscurantist. Nor is it easy to maintain a strong dogmatic position when the new generation of evangelical scholars is itself in high confusion as to the relation between revelation and historical criticism; an enormous amount of work needs to be done in the fields of dogmatics and of criticism, both separately and together, if a strong evangelical theory is to emerge; if there is weakness on one front, it is difficult to maintain the other. Nor is there any denying that the struggle between traditional Christianity and its radical alternative is more serious than that between those who are united in accepting the creeds in their historic sense, yet differ in their views of biblical inspiration; it is certainly an attractive proposition to abandon the 'obscurantist' position for the time being, in order to unite the anti-radical forces.

None the less I consider it a thousand pities that these or any other reasons should have led to this result. If evangelicals feel inadequate to state their case, it looks to the outside world as though evangelical theology is in retreat, and theological retreat can only be a prelude to general retreat by the whole movement. It needs to be said loud and clear that many of us have no intention of moving from our position until we are persuaded that it is untrue to the teaching of Christ. Spiritual integrity must come before academic respectability. If necessary we must incur the charge of obscurantism rather than that of deserting Christ. We see no reason, however, for justly incurring either charge, providing adequate time can be found for the study of the points at issue. If the teaching of Christ is true, His teaching about Scripture is true, and it will prove a most helpful guide when we approach the jungle of biblical criticism. It will head us off many a false trail and keep us intellectually in the narrow way. He who undertakes this task must be prepared for immense toil, otherwise the adversaries are entitled to regard our confident, dogmatic statements as bluff, bluff which they will call by presenting us with real problems.

As to the uncertainty about 'the conservative position', it is certainly a source of weakness that we are not more united. There is a need for a full and careful articulation of the doctrine of Scripture, which takes into account the findings of modern research and which irons out the misunderstandings rife about the ideas of infallibility and inerrancy. I have little doubt that the Warfield line is basically right in standing for the objective truth of the Bible in all its parts. Some years ago some of us attempted to develop a doctrine of inspiration a little broader than Warfield's, which would allow room for error in historical details. But we found in the end that the new ideas were inconsistent and unnecessary. We came to realize that the teaching of Christ (and of Scripture as a whole) treats both the historical facts and the doctrines of the Bible as true (indeed its facts are part of its doctrine), and it treats the details (the jots and tittles) as true as well as the great events.

We also found the quest for demonstrable errors which

might falsify the Warfield doctrine most instructive. Although alleged errors are numbered in their thousands, our experience has been that on examination most of them melt away, some of them disappear after careful study, a tiny handful remain unsolved, but none of them even begins to look like an error proved beyond reasonable doubt.

The notion of Scripture as the God-given record of revelation, true in all its parts, comes naturally out of the teaching of Jesus and is easy for the simplest Christian to understand. It is also a bold doctrine which is open to test. Its thousand pages of fact and doctrine, derived from several cultures over a period of more than a thousand years, lie exposed to the unimpeded scrutiny of an army of sceptics, equipped with sophisticated scientific weaponry. The sceptics start with an enormous advantage, because they have conditioned the scientific era to disbelieve in miracles and so to discredit every Bible witness who testifies to such. They are also at a great advantage numerically, which gives them superiority in weight of scholarship, even if perhaps not intellectual penetration. The temptation to retreat from the defence of a myriad outposts to a few strongposts is very attractive. But in apologetics the strongest position is the truth, and to concede outposts on the basis of invalid arguments is eventually to concede the strongpoints also.

The fundamental argument of the scientific era has been that the truths of science are testable, but the supposed truths of religion are not. There is a sense in which this is true, in that the Word of God cannot be measured by man's reason; it is tested only when (with the Spirit's aid) it is accepted. Yet in another sense it is untrue, since Christianity is a full, clear, even elaborate, revelation in history. Its historical statements are in principle open to justification. If this were not so, science and history would go into one compartment and religion into another quite separate one. The essence of religion would become a subjective experience and the objectivity of incarnation, resurrection and revelation would disappear. The Bible, however, claims that God spoke at various times in history through the prophets and at a particular period in history in the incarnate Son, and that holy men were moved by the Holy Spirit to record that history dependably. The word of the prophet is objectively true whether his hearers will hear or forbear. The word of Jesus is true whether His hearers believe or disbelieve. The inspired Scriptures are true whether they are accepted or not. Our faith is communicated to us through historical documents which are exposed to critical scrutiny. If they are approached in unbelief they will yield a mass of perplexities and disharmonies, but if they are approached in faith the perplexities and disharmonies gradually give place to blessed truths and delightful harmonies. In an extraordinary way each cunning new weapon freshly sharpened for a new attack upon the outposts seems to end up by illuminating the harmonies of the Word rather than destroying it. This goes to show that evangelical strength and unity will be found by holding fast to the objective truth of Scripture in all its parts.

Finally, as to the comparative unimportance of the doctrine of biblical infallibility, this might suggest the wisdom of forming a united front of 'trads' to oppose the 'rads'. It is true that we can share deep and thankful fellowship with the trad who accepts Christ's deity and atonement through His blood and who preaches from the Bible. But we have reason to be deeply troubled when we find him regarding Jesus' teaching about the Old Testament as mistaken. He has an inconsistency which, if pursued, cuts at the root of biblical theism. He worships Christ as Priest and King, but resists His claim to be Prophet. He does not accept the great stream of claims made by Jesus as to the eternal verity of His words. But this is to head for disaster, for when the truth of Christ's words goes, then the whole biblical concept of the speaking God goes. Religion is reduced to subjective experiences believed to emanate from a God who is ultimately unknown. Our evangelical forefathers regarded the infallibility of Scripture, not indeed as the central doctrine of the faith, but as one of the fundamentals — particularly important in the scientific era. And surely they were right. The alliance of liberal and conservative trads has not succeeded in putting up an effective answer to the rads. How could it? It is our earnest prayer that evangelicals engaged in dialogue in the future will confess the faith with uncompromising clarity, whatever the cost.

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