The Inspiration and Authority of Scripture:

J. D. G. Dunn versus B. B. Warfield (*continued*)

ROGER NICOLE

III

Dunn's performance in terms of his proposal

There would be much to say under this heading if a detailed scrutiny were conducted, not only of Professor Dunn's article in *Churchman* but of some of his other printed contributions, particularly his last two books, *Unity and Diversity in the New Testament* and *Christology in the Making*. On the other hand, the reader may judge that so many reservations were already registered here about his article, that nothing more need be said. I propose to follow a middle course and to engage in a very summary survey of the practical impact of Dunn's view of inspiration on his handling of Scripture. The order will relate to his conception of authority, and the three elements he lists as constituting a tripod: 1) Scripture and exegesis; 2) Freedom of the Spirit and twentieth-century developments; 3) Tradition and Professor Dunn's emancipation.

1) Scripture and exegesis

Professor Dunn recognizes that the text of Scripture is the first major element in the doctrine of authority. It is on this basis that the importance of exegesis arises. What the text of Scripture is acknowledged to be, depends upon textual criticism and the determination of the canon. He does not provide us with any extended textual critical discussions, and I have no reason to take issue with him on this score. On the subject of the canon, however, he insists that, consciously or not, all people in practice have a canon within the canon,[127] and that '*all* Christians must work with a canon within the canon',[128] for otherwise they would be bound by Old Testament ceremonial laws. It must be noted, however, that the recognition of a text as canonical, does not preclude a proper consideration of context, historical or spiritual. Thus the provisional character of some of the Old Testament laws does not imply their elimination from the canon. This serious mistake the church did not commit. John Calvin, notably, who so clearly perceived the similarities and differences between the old and the new covenants, was very staunch in his adherence to the Massoretic Canon of the Old

Testament.[129] The perception of the way in which the whole of Scripture functions as a canon exhibiting a fundamental unity, is precisely the point at which the systematic theologians must complement the efforts of the exegetes, for it is the specific task of systematics to exhibit the organism of Christian truth, with its various facets in structural relationship with one another. Since this is a task performed in good measure by human beings, fallibility in performance must always be viewed as a possibility, and it is therefore proper to challenge the structure in terms of any text, if proof is provided that it does not find a proper place in the system. To abandon the possibility of systematics, and to envisage the Bible as a jarring conglomerate of contradictory facts, doctrines and mandates, does not remove the factor of human fallibility; this, too, is a system of sort—poverty-stricken and unworthy of God's image in humanity to be sure, but system, nevertheless, in its dogmatic opposition to order and harmony, which makes a virtue of chaos.

The evangelical Christian, therefore, should never settle for a 'canon within the canon', but should steadfastly strive to accept and validate the full canon of Holy Scripture as established through the witness of the Holy Spirit to God's people, to whom the oracles of God were entrusted (the Jewish people for the Old Testament, and the Christian people for the New) and made manifest by the overwhelming consensus of these people as to the scope of the canon of that part of Scripture entrusted to them.[130]

Professor Dunn's exegetical practice involves at least five features that need to be very seriously challenged.

a) His frequent practice is to *minimize the meaning or import* of certain texts. In the discussion of the 'pillar texts' for inerrancy he has repeatedly done this, as I attempted to show in the first instalment of this article. He has also done it by choosing to bypass important evidence and to limit himself to the consideration of texts which he viewed as supporting his contention. At three points at least his work is statistically very defective.[131]

Perhaps the most questionable use of his minimizing technique may be found in *Christology in the Making*,[132] where he discounts the significance of one text after another that had generally been viewed as bearing witness to the deity of Christ. And so we encounter statements like 'we cannot claim that Jesus believed himself to be the incarnate Son of God',[133] and again, 'only in the Fourth Gospel can we speak of a doctrine of the incarnation.'[134] This is really stupefying, and it involves the wholesale downgrading of expressions and passages which have almost universally been thought to reflect a Christian consciousness about the deity of Christ and/or the incarnation (e.g., Son of God, Lord [*kyrios* = *Yahweh*], Mark 1:1–3; Rom. 9:5; Eph. 4:9,10; Phil. 2:5–11; 1 Tim. 3:16; Titus 2:13; Heb. 1:5–8; 10:5–7; 2 Peter 3:18; Jude 4). In the Arian controversy, the

major weapon which gave Athanasius the superiority over assorted opponents was his consummate knowledge of the Scriptures and skill in using them. But now we would be instructed by Professor Dunn that it is really the Arians who were right, except for some Johannine statements, which came late at the end of the first century. According to this outlook, early Christians did not make claims for Jesus Christ that would be sharply differentiated from various pre-Christian movements, and they should really be viewed as a garden-variety of Judaism, until the Johannine school came forward with its revolutionary claims![135] This approach 'out-Harnacks' Harnack, whose main thesis in his *History of Dogma* was that a simple moralistic message presented by Jesus had been made captive to, and displaced by, Greek metaphysics. Harnack, however, was unhesitatingly recognized as a notable opponent of evangelical Christianity, while Dunn, if I am not mistaken, would want to be known as an 'evangelical theologian'.

b) Another of Professor Dunn's frequent exegetical practices may be described as *maximizing differences* between texts, and positing that the Bible confronts us with a jarring multiplicity of irreconcilable accounts and teachings. This tendency is perhaps most clearly exhibited in *Unity and Diversity in the New Testament*, in which the 'diversity' is accentuated and the 'unity' called into question at every turn. The two main divisions, 'Unity in Diversity?' and 'Diversity in Unity?', might more aptly have been titled respectively: 'Unity [?] in Diversity' and 'Diversity in Unity [?]'.

In the present article this proclivity of Dunn surfaces repeatedly. It is apparent in his loathing for what he calls 'casuistic harmonizations',[136] in the apparent pleasure he finds in pointing out difficulties in Scripture,[137] in the large speculative developments he builds on minor differences of wording in parallel synoptic accounts[138] or between quotations in the New Testament and their source in the Old Testament.[139] This feature reaches its most damaging form when the position is advanced that the New Testament contains several irreconcilable views of divorce,[140] or even worse, that Paul and James present radically opposite views of justification.[141] 'The simple fact is', says Dunn, 'that *different* schemes and systems of faith and practice can be drawn from Scripture and claim legitimate grounding in Scripture'.[142] One is at a loss to understand how then he still can say that 'in its overall instruction "unto salvation" (2 Tim. 3:15) the message of the Bible is quite clear enough and consistent'.[143] Yet it was also Dunn who wrote a little earlier '... uncertainty affects the most central elements in New Testament teaching'.[144] I must confess that my harmonizing skills are strained to the breaking-point here! What this does to the perspicuity of Scripture will be discussed a little more amply below.

c) Professor Dunn shows a propensity for *relativizing the absolute*. This is apparent in his very strong emphasis on the historical relativity of the Scripture.[145] We must sharply differentiate between what God said and what he says. I did not discuss earlier the question of historical relativity and I am eager to acknowledge that the Scripture comes to us in a historical context which needs to be considered for an appropriate understanding of its meaning. Definitely the Bible is not a mass of independent maxims descending from heaven in a bag of Chinese biscuits! But to press a fundamental disjunction between what God said in the past and what God says in the present is to undermine at a crucial point the contemporaneousness of Scripture. God *says to us now* that he said this to Adam, and that to Moses and that to the Corinthians, etc. It is by virtue of this contemporaneity that Scripture continues to be 'useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness' (2 Tim. 3:16). This is why, in spite of elements that are individualized and features that are provisional, Christ could appeal to the irrefragable (John 10:35), permanent (Matt. 5:17,18) authority of the Word of God. These passages relate to the Old Testament, the very part of Scripture where the 'covenant-relativity' functions at its maximum. We need, therefore, to safeguard the absoluteness of Scripture, while taking account of its historical moorings. To do otherwise leads us irresistibly to the neo-orthodox position that Scripture is the Word of God, only if and when God chooses to speak to us individually through it. I am not accusing Dunn of being a Barthian; I am saying that he appears to me to be moving in a direction that leads us thither.

d) Professor Dunn shows a tendency to *absolutize the relative*. This is apparent in his readiness to consider a modern methodology in exegesis as binding beyond contestation.[146] This may appear also in his acceptance of Christian claims to be acting or speaking with divine authority where these do not have an adequate basis in Scripture.[147] Another tendency in the same vein is found in his disposition to list tradition as one leg of a three-footed stool of authority.[148]

e) Dunn shows a tendency to separate various strands of biblical teaching or representation and then to deal with them singly as if they functioned in isolation. In this way he takes what was meant to be a rope of several strands, whose strength is the sum of the individual strengths of the strands, and makes out of it a chain with each individual strand providing one link, so that the strength of the chain is only that of its weakest link. This methodology is clearest in *Christology in the Making*, for here various representations and designations of Jesus Christ are discussed singly and (except for Johannine writings) argued not to imply true deity, with disastrous results for the whole scope of theology (Trinity, Christology, atonement, salvation).

In the present article the same tendency appears in the discussion of the four pillar passages.[149] Professor Dunn seems to be eager to overcome this in his concluding effort 'towards an evangelical hermeneutic',[150] but some further reflection about the motto 'distinction without separation',[151] might well be profitable to him.

The net effect of these exegetical and hermeneutical principles is the shipwreck of the doctrine of the perspicuity of Scripture. Along these lines the Bible inevitably becomes a basically obscure book, and only those who have a great mastery of the whole historical background may venture forth to state what any text meant, and whatever meaning and mandate it may still carry for us today. Even in matters like justification through faith, an essential first step in the way of salvation, we cannot be too sure what Paul meant;[153] in the matter of divorce and remarriage we are in a complete quandary, since there are three different teachings in the New Testament,[154] and Dunn generously expands this still further in a footnote.[155]

Pity then the simple lay Christian who would like to find spiritual food in Holy Scripture (Deut. 8:3; Matt. 4:4; Luke 4:4) but who simply cannot take the message at its face value, lest he should exegete with 'unacceptable standards'!

Pity the minister of the Word of God, who needs to debunk wholesale misunderstandings before he/she can allow a mere trickle of the refreshing water to descend upon his/her congregation! No wonder Dunn is somewhat inhospitable to the place given to the sermon in Reformed and Puritan worship.[156]

Pity the seminary professor who has to prepare candidates for such a difficult task, which is bound to arouse antagonism in countless parishes.

Pity the Reformers, such as Luther, Calvin, Knox, Cranmer and Whitaker, who thought that God had provided a book for his children which they could basically understand, even if they did not have a special scholarly training!

Pity the scholars, who have the keys of knowledge, but who often do not enter themselves and prevent others from having access (Luke 11:52).

Pity Philip, the evangelist, who asked the right question ('Do you understand what you are reading?'), received the right answer ('How can I unless someone explains it to me?'), only to proceed then with a development presumably 'unacceptable' by the standards of modern exegesis (Acts 8:30–35)!

2) Freedom of the Spirit and twentieth-century developments

It is not really surprising that after having so severely restricted the biblical data available through proper exegesis, Professor Dunn feels the need to have an area where God still speaks to us now and where

people do not need the information that only scholars can have in order to hear God's voice. This he calls 'faith in the interpreter Spirit'.[157] This concept was examined earlier[158] and we need simply to note some of the ways in which Dunn has exercised this freedom in the present article.

In note 112[159] he writes, 'Remarriage of divorced Christians can be given properly scriptural legitimacy once this point is recognized'. And the principle in view is that some Scriptures will be understood differently from their meaning in the original context, although not in a 'sweeping way'. Here, however, he appears to 'sweep away' the clear restriction set forth by Christ, and himself to move out on a limb.[160]

Similarly, after having asserted that we are not at liberty 'to weaken or detract from the authority of the New Testament, since that provides the primary norm',[161] he appends a footnote in which he states that an exception might be 'NT passages which remained within the limitations of the old covenant as judged in the light of the overall NT witness to Christ'.[162] There he agrees with Professor Jewett, who in *Man as Male and Female* had stated that, in 1 Corinthians 11 and 1 Timothy 2, Paul had abandoned his Christian insight and reverted to his rabbinic training. This, of course, was accusing Paul of making a grave error in his religious teaching, and the blunder was judged so severe that Jewett was censured for it by Fuller Seminary, an institution that does not appear over-enthusiastic about inerrancy!

In still another note,[163] Dunn avers that a biblical case can be made for the ordination of women. I would agree with him here, but only on the basis that there is absolutely no Scripture which forbids it. Reassuringly, he continues by saying that 'acceptance of homosexual practice' cannot be made, 'since the biblical position is so uniform'. Perhaps some homosexuals might want to differ with him after he has given the weapons to press their point!

3) Tradition and Professor Dunn's emancipation

I discussed earlier the place of tradition in his structure of authority.[164] It remains to see how he allows himself to be guided by tradition.

In his exegesis of the 'pillar passages' and his interpretation of the scriptural base for the authority of Scripture, he has manifestly propounded an exegesis which is much at variance with the traditional understanding of the Christian church. Even a volume like that of J. Rogers and D. McKim,[165] in which no effort was spared to ransack the pages of history in order to discover some deviances from a doctrine of plenary inspiration and inerrancy, cannot overturn the plain fact that, from the start, and until late in the seventeenth century, Christians accepted without demur the view that the Bible as

God's word was free of all errors. Exceptions are very rare and usually found in thinkers who are otherwise heretical, until well into the nineteenth century.

If we are therefore to be influenced by tradition, as Dunn suggests we should, this would drive us away both from his exegesis and his systematic formulation of the doctrine of Scripture. What a contrast with the statement of G. Schrenk:

> According to the later Jewish view, Scripture has sacred, authoritative and normative significance. It is of permanent and unassailable validity. As the dictate of God it is given by His Spirit ... The implication of the doctrine of inspiration is that the revealed truth of God characterizes every word ...
>
> Early Christianity did not free itself from the Jewish doctrine of inspiration nor even from the influence of its exposition at certain points.[166]

In other areas Dunn also seems to depart rather widely from the traditional understanding in a number of issues. His opinion about the historicity of the fourth gospel and its possible ascription to Jesus of statements he never made in the days of his flesh;[167] his views on the possible legitimacy of pseudonymity, when it is a well-known fact that apostolicity was a primary factor in the early church's discussions on canonicity;[168] his emphasis that there was no such thing as 'orthodoxy and heresy' in the early church;[169] his downgrading of the significance, as evidence of the deity of Christ, of many passages that were so construed over the centuries: these are some of the areas in which he does not follow a traditional path. Thus we are led to ask: 'What tradition, if any, does he follow?' Here an examination of his two latest books may be helpful.

In his bibliography of *Unity and Diversity in the New Testament*, I have counted 493 titles of books or articles. Of this number, only three are dated more than 100 years ago: F. C. Baur on New Testament Theology, J. B. Lightfoot on Philippians, and Edwin Hatch on the organization of the early Christian church. Five more titles were published between 1888 and 1899, and fifty-three between 1900 and 1938. 432 titles, or 87.6 per cent, originate from the period 1939 to 1977. Most of the names of the earlier writers are those of very critical scholars such as Baur, Bousset, Bultmann, Burkitt, Dibelius, Dodd, Gunkel, Harnack, Heitmüller, Lake, Lietzmann, Loisy, Otto, Reitzenstein, H. W. Robinson, Schweitzer, E. F. Scott, Streeter, Tröltsch and J. Weiss. The index does not add too much in this area, for hardly any name appears between the beginning of the fifth century and F. C. Baur; there is one reference to Calvin, and six to Luther. No mention is made anywhere of Athanasius, Augustine, Basil, Gregory Nazianzen, Chrysostom, Anselm, Thomas Aquinas,

Melanchthon, Beza or Cranmer. And among the moderns, critical scholarship predominates widely. We find no mention of Warfield, or of Machen, one of whose masterpieces covers some of the issues dealt with in chapters XI and XII. In the main, Professor Dunn's tradition starts with the year of his birth (1939), and the forays outside of it are in the literature of biblical times or in critical scholarship.

In *Christology in the Making*, matters are even worse. In the forty-eight-page general bibliography, I counted 1084 titles. Of these, only one is more than 100 years old: J. Drummond, *The Jewish Messiah*. Nine more date from 1888 to 1899; ninety-five were issued from 1900 to 1938; and 979, or 90.2 per cent, originate in the period 1939 to 1950. Among the scholars who published before 1939, I recognize the names of Güttsberger, J. G. Machen, H. B. Swete and G. Vos, each with one title, as eminent conservative writers, but here again the names of critical scholars predominate widely: B. W. Bacon, Bousset, Bultmann, Creed, Dibelius, Dodd, Fuchs, Gunkel, Harnack, Lietzmann, Loofs, T. W. Manson, Mowinckel, Norden, Otto, Rawlinson, Reitzenstein, H. W. Robinson, E. F. Scott, J. Weiss and Windisch. In the index, Anselm, Augustine and Gregory Nazianzen appear once each, and Athanasius twice. Among modern authors, after Professor Dunn himself, E. Schweizer and R. E. Brown are most often referred to, followed by Bultmann, Dodd, Hammerton-Kelly, Hengel, Jeremias, I. H. Marshall and Strack-Billerbeck. The names Basil, Chrysostom, Thomas Aquinas, Calvin, Luther, Cranmer and Wesley are not listed, and neither are Machen, Swete or Warfield. G. Vos is referred to once. And yet these men made important contributions in the very area covered by *Christology in the Making*.[170] Professor Dunn's tradition, therefore, appears limited largely to his own lifetime, with some meagre forays into patristics and among critical writers of the last two generations. He simply does not appear to be influenced by a Reformation tradition or an evangelical tradition. At best his traditional roots appear very shallow, and at worst very critically oriented.

Even though I do not agree with Dunn's assessment of the place of tradition in religious authority, I could have wished that he might have been more deeply influenced by tradition and less by critical scholarship with respect to his doctrine of Scripture and of the person of Jesus Christ!

'Exegetically improbable, hermeneutically defective, theologically dangerous and educationally disastrous'. Whom does this judgement fit better—Dunn or Warfield? Let the reader judge!

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NOTES

127 J. Dunn, 'The Authority of Scripture According to Scripture', *Churchman*, 96, 2, p.115. See also his extensive and very stimulating essay 'Levels of Canonical Authority', *Horizons in Biblical Theology*, 4, 1 (June 1982), pp. 13–60. In this paper some of the positions asserted in 'The Authority of Scripture according to Scripture' find also expression.

128 ibid.

129 Note for instance his sharp opposition to Castellion on the matter of the canonicity of the Song of Solomon.

This may also be the place to say a word about Luther's stance with respect to canonicity, to which Dunn refers in his note 70 on pp.222–3. From the statement quoted by Dunn, it does indeed appear that Luther had hesitations concerning the proper canon of the New Testament. Applying his test of canonicity that a book must press Christ (*Christum treiben*) in order to receive acknowledgement, he expressed doubts on the standing of Hebrews, James, 2 Peter, 2 & 3 John, Jude and Revelation. But he steadfastly asserted the verbal inspiration and inerrancy of the *Hauptbücher*. And it is precisely because he found in the other books some materials he questioned, that he opined that they were not part of the canon! For a full discussion of Luther's stance on Holy Scripture, see Franz Pieper, *Christliche Dogmatik* (Concordia, St Louis 1924), I, 334–60, 398–408. *Christian Dogmatics* (ET, Concordia, St Louis 1950), I, 276–98, 330–8.

130 cf. on this topic L. Gaussen, *Le canon des Saintes Ecritures*, 2 vols (Bridel, Lausanne 1860), also (ET, Nisbet, London 1862, XXXII, 667 pp.). Also Auguste Lecerf, *Introduction à la dogmatique réformée*, II ('Jesers', Paris 1938), pp.173–208. (*Introduction to Reformed Dogmatics*, ET [Lutterworth, London 1949], pp.319–47; reprint, Baker, Grand Rapids 1931.)

131 In the consideration of Warfield's output (J. Dunn op. cit., p.105); in the limitation to four pillar passages of the evidence for inerrancy to be examined (ibid., pp.107ff.); in the presentation of only ten texts to articulate the way in which Jesus and the New Testament authors used the Scripture (ibid., pp.203ff.).

132 J. Dunn, *Christology in the Making: A New Testament Inquiry into the Origins of the Doctrine of Incarnation* (Westminster Press, Philadelphia 1980), xviii, 443 pp.

133 ibid., p.254.

134 ibid., p.259. In note VII, 105 on p.347, Dunn takes issue with Maurice Wiles, who had claimed that 'incarnation, in its full and proper sense, is not something presented directly in scripture.'

Wiles must be overjoyed, however, to see the evidence dwindle to just one small part of the New Testament. The strategy appears analogous to that of a commander-in-chief of British forces who would decide to shorten his lines of defence, confine himself to the Orkney Islands, and abandon everything else to the enemy!

135 J. Dunn, *Unity and Diversity in the New Testament: An Inquiry into the Character of Earliest Christianity* (Westminster Press, Philadelphia 1977), xviii, 470 pp.

136 J. Dunn, 'The Authority of Scripture According to Scripture', pp.116–17, 219; cf. also pp.115, 214, 221.

137 For instance, chronology in the cursing of the fig tree (ibid., p.117), manner of Judas's death (ibid., pp.111, 210), chronology of Peter's denials (ibid., p.122, n.57).

138 ibid., pp.206, 211–12, 213–14, 218.

139 ibid., pp.209, 210.

140 ibid., pp.206, 211, 214, 218.

141 ibid., pp.214, 217. Of course Luther made this mistake too, but then he consistently decided that James could not be a part of the canon. See J. Dunn, op. cit., pp.222–23, n.70.

142 ibid., p.114.

143 loc. sit. It is true that at one point Dunn speaks of 'apparent conflict between Paul and James' (ibid., p.214), but this might appear to open the way to 'casuistic harmonization'!

144 ibid., p.113. Meanwhile it is a pleasure to take note of Dunn's recognition that 'the gap between the synoptics' handling of the Jesus-tradition and John's handling of the Jesus-tradition is not so wide as it is sometimes asserted' (p.212).

145 ibid., pp.205, 206, 212–14, 216–17.

146 ibid., p.119, n.21; pp.202, 209, 220, 221; p.222, n.69; p.224, n.91.

147 ibid., pp.218–19. (See my discussion above, *Churchman*, 98, 1, pp.21f.)

148 ibid., p.221. (See my discussion above, ibid., p.23.)

149 ibid., pp.108–10.

150 ibid., pp.215–22.

151 This motto could easily be developed from the four adverbs of Chalcedon: 'without confusion, without transformation, without separation, without division.'

152 This is the title of a notable volume by Jacques Maritain, *Distinguer pour unir ou les degrés du savoir* (Desclée, Paris 1932).

153 J. Dunn, 'Authority of Scripture', p.113.

154 ibid., pp.206, 211, 214, 218.

155 ibid., p.225, n.112.

156 ibid., p.115.

157 ibid., p.218.

158 R. Nicole, 'The Inspiration and Authority of Scripture: J. D. G. Dunn versus B. B. Warfield', *Churchman*, 98, 1, pp.22–3.

159 J. Dunn, op. cit., p.225, n.112.

160 ibid., p.219.

161 ibid., p.216.

162 ibid., p.225, n.108.

163 ibid., n.113.

164 R. Nicole, op. cit., pp.23–4.

165 J. Rogers and D. McKim, *The Authority and Interpretation of the Bible. An Historical Approach* (Harper, San Francisco 1979), xxiv, 484 pp.

166 G. Schrenk, '*Graphé* in Kittel, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, 1, pp.755, 757 (Eerdmans, Grand Rapids 1964). I am indebted to my colleague Jack Davis for this quotation.

167 J. Dunn, op. cit., pp.111–12 and ns.39 and 42 (p.121).

168 ibid., pp.112–13.

169 J. Dunn, *Unity and Diversity in the New Testament*, pp.1–7. This is flying in the face of passages like Matt. 24:10f., 23f.; Mark 13:5,21,22; Luke 22:8; Acts 20:30; Gal. 1:6–8; 1 Tim. 1:3–6; 4:1–3; 6:3–5,20f.; 2 Tim. 2:14–19; 3:6–9,12; 4:3f.; Titus 1:10f.; 2:1; 3:9; Heb. 13:9; 2 Peter 2:1f.; 1 John 4:1–3; Jude 18f.

170 J. G. Machen, *The Origin of Paul's Religion* ([Macmillan, New York 1921], reprint 1965) and *The Virgin Birth of Christ* ([Harper, New York 1930], reprint 1967).

H. B. Swete, *The Holy Spirit in the New Testament* ([Macmillan, London 1910], reprint 1967).

G. Vos, *The Self-Disclosure of Jesus* ([Doran, New York 1926], reprint 1954).

B. B. Warfield, *The Lord of Glory* ([American Tract, New York 1907], reprint 1950, 1974) and *Christology and Criticism* ([Oxford University Press, New York 1929], reprint 1981).

It seems also unfortunate that, in his *Churchman* article, Dunn does not make any reference to some recent works on the inspiration and authority of Scripture which might function as representative of 'the Warfield position' as well as some publications of the International Council on Biblical Inerrancy and the two volumes of Dr Lindsell: e.g.

Harris, R. Laird, *The Inspiration and Canonicity of the Bible* (Zondervan, Grand Rapids 1957), 304 pp.

Henry, Carl F. H., ed., *Revelation and the Bible* (Baker, Grand Rapids 1958), 413 pp. and *God Revelation and Authority*, 6 vols (Word, Texas 1976–83). It is of course true that only volumes 1–4 were in circulation when Dunn presented his paper, but one should think that some reference to this monumental work would surface if Dunn were well acquainted with it.

MacDonald, Hugh D., *Ideas of Revelation: An Historical Study 1700–1860* (Macmillan, London 1959), 300 pp. and *Theories of Revelation: An Historical Study 1860–1960* (Allen & Unwin, London 1963), 384 pp. Both of the above titles have been reprinted by Baker, Grand Rapids 1979 under the title: *Theories of Revelation: An Historical Study 1700–1960*

Montgomery, John W., ed., *God's Inerrant Word* (Bethany, Minneapolis 1974), 288 pp.

Nicole, Roger and J. R. Michaels, eds, *Inerrancy and Common Sense* (Baker, Grand Rapids 1980), 203 pp.

Pache, René, *The Inspiration and Authority of Scripture* translated by H. I. Needham (Moody, Chicago 1969), 349 pp.

Pinnock, Clark, *Biblical Revelation* (Moody, Chicago 1971), 256 pp.

Preus, Robert, *The Inspiration of Scripture: A Study of the Theology of the Seventeenth Century Lutheran Dogmaticians* (Oliver & Boyd, Edinburgh 1955), 216 pp. and *The Theology of Post-Reformation Lutheranism: A Study of Theological Prolegomena* (Concordia, St Louis 1970), 462 pp.

Runia, Klaas, *Karl Barth's Doctrine of Holy Scripture* (Eerdmans, Grand Rapids 1969), 416 pp.

Tenney, Merrill C., ed., *The Bible—the Living Word of Revelation* (Zondervan, Grand Rapids 1968), 228 pp.

Walvoord, John, ed., *Inspiration and Interpretation* (Eerdmans, Grand Rapids 1957), 280 pp.

Westminster Theological Faculty, *The Infallible Word* ([Presbyterian Guardian, Philadelphia 1946], ix, 300 pp., reprinted 1953).

It is regrettable also that no reference is made to the superb work of C. Pesch, *De Inspiratione S. Scripturae* (Herder, Freiburg 1906), xi, 653 pp. This includes a very helpful historical survey of views of inspiration from biblical times to 1900.

As a further contribution to the debate, and with the agreement of the writers, we are publishing the following correspondence:

Prof. R. Nicole
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Dear Dr Nicole,

It was kind of you to send me a copy of your article, 'The Inspiration and Authority of Scripture: Prof. Dunn versus Warfield', which you are submitting to *Churchman* in response to my earlier piece. It is an act of courtesy which is insufficiently practised in the circles within which we move and I have greatly appreciated it. Although I am under considerable pressure in my new post (having only now been

able to move house from Nottingham to Durham, while I'm still learning the ropes), I do feel the matters you raise are of such importance that I have tried to squeeze in time to reply.

There are various points where I felt your criticisms were unnecessary, which smacked somewhat of point-scoring. I won't bother with those here, though I will append a list of the ones I found most annoying in a PS. There were also quite a number of other sections of your response in which I felt you had missed my point or not taken its full force. Rather than clutter up the body of the letter I will also list these separately at the end.

But the chief value of your response for me was that it helped bring into sharper focus several key points on which our disagreement really turns. These are the fulcrum points on which I suggest further discussion should focus. Indeed, I would strongly recommend that if the evangelical constituency wants to take this present debate forward in a positive spirit (rather than retreating into the carping, point-scoring, sniping-from-fixed-positions arguments which too often dominate), it is precisely on the following points that it should concentrate.

1 How *valid* is the proposition that inerrancy is *the necessary implication* of Scripture being God's Word?: God is without error; therefore his spoken word is without error; therefore the Bible is without error. In your words: 'Inerrancy is simply the form which the unadulterated affirmation of the divine is bound to take' (*Churchman*, 97, p.209). I note how often you appealed, in effect or explicitly, to this key principle, what I shall call briefly 'the inerrancy proposition'. But is it so secure as you seem to think? For myself the inerrancy proposition is too simplistic: it is compelling on neither logical, nor theological nor scriptural grounds.

a) We cannot exclude on *a priori* grounds the possibility or probability that the limitation which God imposes upon his Word by speaking it through the limitations of human mind and voice extend to the sort of detail which inerrantists feel so sensitive about ('all Scripture touches').

b) The proposition cannot stand without reference to the question of intention. Which is sounder—to say that God ensured that the meaning he intended was clearly enough expressed in what was written, or to say that God's perfection extends to every aspect of the spoken or written words which he inspired? The latter is nearer the logic of the inerrantists, but even they do not press their primary proposition so far (divine perfection has not extended to grammar and syntax!). The former would seem to me the sounder proposition—one which can be maintained fully without pressing for the inerrancy position, *and* without damaging the honour of God.

c) The inerrancy proposition cannot be posed without asking the *exegetical* question: *How* has God spoken in the event? If Scripture is

God's Word, what does Scripture show us about the way God's Word actually was spoken? I remain of the firm opinion that the inerrancy position only *appears* to respect the text of Scripture; it does not, however, *properly* subordinate itself to the text, i.e. by letting the text speak for itself, by acknowledging the priority of exegesis over the *a priori* logic of the inerrancy proposition or the priority of exegesis in determing the scope of biblical statements about inspiration in the event of Scripture itself.

There is surely space here for a proper debate, where we examine the meaning and propriety even of basic axioms without feeling threatened by it all. I hope you will agree.

2 The issue of *how* one determines the *extent* to which the logic of the inerrancy proposition *must be qualified*. Inerrantists seem willing to recognize several qualifications: a) diversity of interpretation is acceptable in such areas as baptism and the second coming—we cannot achieve agreed certainty on what God's will is, even on such important elements in NT teaching; b) the perfection of Scripture ('the absolute character of revealed truth' is your phrase) does not extend to such features as imprecise quotations, rounded numbers, grammatical irregularities; c) the historical relativity of various scriptural instructions (which you acknowledge in your comment on 1 Cor. 14:26), and the covenant relativity of much of the OT law, particularly the regulations in Leviticus.

The question to be debated is this: How do these qualifications emerge? How can their validity be tested and demonstrated? The answer surely is, by studying Scripture itself. *It is the recognition of what Scripture actually consists of which makes such qualifications of the inerrancy proposition necessary.* But once you grant this methodological principle (the character of Scripture determining the meaning of our definition of Scripture as God's Word), you must surely also recognize that my position emerges from an application of that same principle. What needs to be debated is, why inerrantists stop at the qualifications listed in ICBI's Article XIII, and why the status of Scripture as God's Word should be threatened if we recognize the further qualification that scriptural writers were not always concerned with the historical accuracy of details in all that Scripture touches. The need for *some* qualification of the inerrancy proposition is evidently not in dispute. So a crucial area for clarification in further discussion is, how we determine the extent of legitimate qualifications.

3 The significance of the fact that Jesus and/or the first Christians *abandoned* some key prescriptions in the law, *set aside* clearly formulated scriptural instructions. In what proper sense, e.g., can we speak of the law of clean and unclean foods as having 'perennial validity' (*Churchman*, 97, p.204)? It is certainly no longer binding for Christians, and so no longer valid as an expression of God's will for

today in what was its most obviously intended meaning. If you reply that it is still authoritative in that it was fulfilled in Christ, then I have to ask: In what sense can we speak of the law of clean and unclean foods as 'literally "fulfilled" in Jesus Christ' (*Churchman*, 98, p.13)? My historical and covenant-relativity point has the merit at least of recognizing the full Word-of-God force of such a prescription as such, up until it was abrogated for Christians. And you may not like my talk of a 'canon within the canon', viz., the revelation of Jesus Christ. But you really do operate with it yourself. How could we call the commands of Genesis 17:10–14 'provisional' on any other grounds, or abandon the clear command regarding the sabbath without *any* explicit NT justification? Just how all this bears upon our doctrine of Scripture does need clarification in the current debate.

4 *The problem posed by any historical method in the study of Scripture.* How legitimate is it to demand '*proven* error'? In historical reconstruction we can only deal in probabilities; you recognize this to the extent that you acknowledge that your interpretation of a passage like 2 Timothy 3:16 can only claim acceptance as 'most probable'. The demand that 'errors' be 'proven' is inconsistent with this. And it is precisely this demand which sets up the tension for many students when they are instructed in the techniques of historical study. Please note, I do not refer here to the 'historical-critical method' as such, but to *any* historical method. The ramifications of historical study on this issue need further exploration: both the tension the demand for proven error sets up for anyone concerned with the study of history at a scholarly level; and the pastoral problem of the evangelical student who is asked to deal with historical difficulties in Scripture using a different methodology, often resulting in a kind of intellectual schizophrenia.

5 Do inerrantists *take with sufficient seriousness even the most basic exegetical findings*, particularly with regard to the synoptic gospels? I refer here not to any particular theory of the relation between these gospels, on which there is dispute, but to the fact of *literary dependence* between the material within these gospels when that material was already in Greek, on which there is no dispute as far as I am aware. Where literary dependence at the level of the tradition in Greek is so clear, the sort of harmonizations which depend on postulating several incidents/sayings rather than different versions of the one incident/saying become increasingly improbable. Insistence on such harmonizations is one of the ways in which the character and text of Scripture is not taken with sufficient seriousness. More important, it is one of the factors which cause greatest stress to students from an inerrancy background, when they find that the most self-evident character of the text is being ignored and denied as a way of escaping a 'difficulty' or 'error'.

I hope you will agree that these are all points worthy and deserving of further discussion, and that you will encourage such discussion. Perhaps you will be willing also to support the suggestion that a moratorium be called on evangelical in-fighting on the issue of Scripture until such time as these issues have been properly ventilated in appropriate forums.

With greetings and all good wishes,

Yours sincerely,

James D. G. Dunn
University of Durham 5 October 83

PS I append the following list, lest you think that, in focusing my letter on 'fulcrum points', I have neglected or indeed been persuaded by some of your counter-arguments. I have not included all my marginal notations, but tried to concentrate on the more important issues.

Unnecessary criticisms

What I have in mind here, in particular, was your charge that I failed to deal sufficiently with Warfield (97, pp.199, 201). But as I made clear at the beginning of my lecture (96, pp.104–7), the brief and intention of my paper was to address the *current* state of play; so it is the Warfield position *in its continuing influence* which I was seeking to deal with. Similarly, I refer to 'the Warfield position' simply because Warfield is the name most often cited, by the proponents of the position I was criticizing, as the best apologist for that position. In a lecture already too long, I could only focus on the principal arguments. I did feel you were over-reacting on this issue.

Likewise with the criticism of my using only a limited number of texts (98, p.8). If you insist that every discussion of the subject treats the bulk of the relevant texts, we will have to resign ourselves to dialogue by means of 200-page monographs. Are all brief treatments by definition 'clearly abusive'? The condemnation is surely too sweeping.

Among other lesser matters, one of the things I found most disturbing was the fierceness of your language at a number of points. Why do you speak of me 'attacking' the importance of the sermon (97, p.214, n.51)? And why talk of 'loathing', 'apparent pleasure', etc. (98, p.200)? Is it part of your polemic to paint your opponents in as black terms as possible? And why should Matthean redaction, say, of Mark be described as 'tampering', 'purely arbitrary', 'whimsical', 'doctoring', 'corrects' (98, p.19)? Such straw-men parodies of an exegetical argument hardly serves to forward the discussion.

Exegetical disagreements and points not taken

On 2 Timothy 3:16, the charge of *eis*egesis is more justly directed against your position, I would have thought (97, p.202); to extend the scope of Scripture's profitability to the full range of details which ICBI regard as necessarily errorless is to argue from silence = eisegesis. The same observation applies to Dr Morris's interpretation of John 10:35 (97, p.203). What you call 'necessary implications' (97, p.208) are not in fact *exegetically* 'necessary'; they are interpretations made 'necessary' by the dogmatic *a priori* to which the first point of my letter refers.

On 2 Peter 1:21 (97, p.203), I must simply put it to you that it is *not* eisegesis to point to actual diversity of interpretation, and therefore to uncertainty as to the author's intended meaning.

Should we make 'face-value validity' an exegetical criterion (97, p.205)? Not, I would insist, unless it is correlated with the criterion of author's intention, which should have the priority. You no doubt accept the need for such a correlation in handling other parts of Scripture.

Like you (97, p.206), I seek to achieve 'a sober analysis of the text'. The issue of intention is also the issue of meaning within historical context. Your whole argument is constantly in danger of making the primary context of the passages discussed a twentieth-century discussion about inerrancy! If we take the first-century context seriously, including the recognition that some twentieth-century issues were *non*-issues in the first century (questions of detailed historicity being a case in point), we are more likely to achieve the mutually desired aim.

Regarding the parallel I drew between first-century Pharisees and twentieth-century inerrantists (to which you refer on 97, p.209): unless you recognize that your interpretation of Scripture *is* an interpretation, you will miss the parallel. My charge is that inerrantists, by insisting that their interpretation is the *only* valid understanding of Scripture, are making the same mistake as the Pharisees, who insisted that their interpretation of the law (the 'oral law', e.g. on the sabbath) was the only way to understand and observe the law.

The charge of bibliolatry (97, pp.209f.) does not of course imply that anybody puts the Bible on a plinth and bows down before it. But I would claim that some conservative evangelicals at least in effect put the Bible in the place of the Spirit, i.e. by identifying the revelatory work of the Spirit too completely with Scripture, so that the Spirit is shut up in the book. My quotation from Saphir shows clearly my drift (96, p.122, n.59).

My pastoral concern, which you treated in a surprisingly light-hearted manner (97, p.211), was of course directed to the many *students* who, instructed in an 'inerrantist' view of the Bible, find

themselves unprepared for the kind of open inquiry which should characterize university study, and who being left with the choice of all or nothing are forced *by that logic* to choose nothing. You must be aware that there are many students who not simply abandon an inerrantist position during university study, but who go from inerrancy to unbelief. That is pastorally very worrying, and should cause you concern too. Inerrancy is pastorally disastrous because it depends too much on a mind being closed to questions (and answers) which on every-day academic grounds are inescapable questions (with often obvious answers).

In note 59 (97, p.215) you impute to me a contrast which I do not make. I do not speak of 'emancipation from the text'—such would be quite contrary to my understanding of exegesis, in which the text is primary. You miss the point again on 98, p.22, where you argue that 'proper exegesis' might rule out 'helpful diversity' and 'throw us into "casuistic harmonization"'. If that were the outcome of 'proper exegesis' I would welcome it. My point, however, is that 'proper exegesis' will often indicate diversity and whether harmonization is justified. The position I was arguing is very much in accord with the first chapter of the Westminster Confession, which you quote on 98, p.23.

In describing Paul's exegesis as 'no longer acceptable', my point (to which you take exception [98, p.16]) was that we today regard it as unacceptable exegesis to take a collective singular and argue that it was not collective. In warning against thinking we can simply take over the hermeneutical techniques of the NT writers, I was echoing a point made by R. N. Longnecker in a special NT lecture at Tyndale House in Cambridge ('Can We Reproduce the Exegesis of the New Testament'?, *Tyndale Bulletin*, 21, 1970, pp.3–38).

In *Christology in the Making* (*CiM*), the issue I was addressing is the first century conceptuality of pre-existence; 'the deity of Christ' is not the same thing (98, p.199). With regard to Colossians 1:15–20: it is simply an exegetical fact that a text like Colossians 1:15–20 is not so clear-cut in respect of later controversies as we might have liked. I was disappointed that you seemed to miss my concern to achieve a proper exegesis in *CiM*, i.e. to understand texts within their original context of meaning, and particularly your ignoring of the concluding emphasis in *CiM*, with its clear pointer toward Nicea. Among other things in that book, I hope I have demonstrated a closer continuity between the pre-Christian Jewish (OT) understanding of God and the Christian reshaping of that monotheism in the light of Christ.

I'm afraid I do not recognize your tendentious description of my *Unity and Diversity* thesis ('a jarring multiplicity of irreconcilable accounts and teachings' [98, p.200]). My emphasis in that book is on diversity of form and content, as determined in large part by the diversity of situations and issues addressed. It is the interpreter who

abstracts such passages from their often very particular historical contexts who creates the irreconcilability by that very act of abstraction. I made this point, you will recall, on page 214, in the part of the sentence you did not quote in your note 144.

Your attempt to push me into self-contradiction (98, p.200) is matched only by your antithetical concern to harmonize biblical texts. I can be instructed unto salvation without being wholly clear on what 'the kingdom of God' is, or whether Luther had fully understood Paul's conflict with Pharisaic Judaism, or what *logos theou* meant to the fourth evangelist.

JDGD

Professor James Dunn
University of Durham

Dear Professor Dunn,

I thank you very much for your recent extensive letter in response to my proposed articles in *Churchman*. I very greatly appreciate your taking time to consider and discuss the issues that I raised, even though the burdens of your office made it difficult for you to take the time to do this.

I also appreciate your distinction between substantial issues that deserve further examination, and matters of lesser moment which could be bypassed for the sake of saving time and effort. I believe that the points that you see as major are in fact substantive, and I agree with you that certain other strictures in my article need not be the object of extensive consideration.

My knowledge of you comes entirely from reading very carefully your arguments and perusing your books. I gathered especially from the tone of your article that you were very markedly 'turned off' on a strict evangelical doctrine of Scripture (Gaussen, Warfield, ICBI, etc.). I thought that your position might approximate that of James Barr, only in a less vitriolic tone, and I concluded that there was no point in attempting to reach you for the purpose of encouraging you in a right-wing direction. As a result, I wrote my article as one would function in a debate, where the aim is to relate to the gallery rather than to persuade one's opponent! It is on this account that I ventured to register dissent on a number of points which must impress you as a personal attack, rather than a sober consideration of issues. In doing so I deviated from a settled principle which I have established for myself in polemics, to the effect that one should be more concerned

with winning an opponent than to score points in discussion. Even so I did not consciously misrepresent you but functioned in terms of what I thought was apparent from your article. I am therefore glad that you might take opportunity to correct any misapprehensions and that you might contribute to *Churchman* some statement which would insure that you will not be misjudged on account of what I wrote.

I will be very eager to pursue discussion with you and others with respect to the substantive issues which you single out in the beginning of your letter. In order to move in this direction, I am taking the liberty of enclosing a Xerox copy of two articles which I published in the recent past and which might not be readily available in Great Britain. These might be helpful in pin-pointing an adequate defintion of 'error' and in showing by what methodology, deductive, and inductive, a biblical doctrine of inspiration may be ascertained. Perhaps in examining these articles you will find that we do not need to have a fundamental cleavage at the start, but there may be more common ground between us than one might assume in reading our respective contributions to *Churchman*!

In sending these I do not mean to add to your burdens at the present time. I only wish to register my great eagerness to respond to your suggestion for continued interaction. May the Lord bless you in the very significant place of leadership which has been entrusted to you. Please accept my cordial greetings in Christ,

Roger Nicole
Andrew Mutch Professor of Theology
Gordon-Conwell Seminary 25 October 83