

ROGER NICOLE, Th.D.

I would like to call your attention very briefly to issues that are vitally relevant, that are the object of numerous discussions at present, and that may well be indicative of a major trend. In that sense they are issues that are of immediate importance for us. Therefore I am not dealing with the whole scope of the theological scene, but I am remaining within the scope of the evangelical outlook and I call attention to certain areas in which it behooves us as evangelicals to be particularly abreast of developments and alive to the issues.

The first of these issues may be termed foundational or basic. It deals with the source of our authority. The very presence of a panel on the inerrancy of Scripture on our program, the able and learned paper which we have heard this afternoon from Dr. Pinnock, and the amount of discussion which is carried on on this topic in book form and in published articles make it quite plain that the doctrine of inerrancy is an area in which it behooves us as evangelicals to be very careful in our thinking, and perhaps more explicit in our definitions. It is a very fine approach to say that we believe that the Bible is inerrant. Such a statement represents a basic attitude toward Scripture, an attitude of obedience and submission which is characteristic of the whole historic approach of the Church and particularly of the Lord Jesus Christ and his apostles. But the question remains, what precisely is meant by "error"? And this is the area in which, in my opinion, further discussion may well be possible and a further analysis of the full implications of the evangelical view may well be achieved. In attempting this one could become unduly involved in minor matters. In fact, if the discussion degenerates into an elaborate consideration of minutiae, we are likely to "major in the minors" and to cloud that which is major, which is our total commitment to the Scripture in humble submission to the Word of God. At the same time we should clearly perceive that the implementation of our doctrine of Scripture may demand at times rather a painstaking and extensive discussion of particular alleged discrepancies and we ought not to be reluctant to engage in this on occasion. It is unfortunate, however, if the whole line of discussion is carried on at this level, as Dr. Pinnock so very ably pointed out this afternoon.

The second area to which I would call attention may well be termed "central"; I am referring to the redeeming, atoning work of Jesus Christ. A good deal of discussion is going on here. There are some phenomena which are encouraging for the evangelicals. It may be noted, for instance, that recently Vincent Taylor seems in some respects to

have come to a closer approximation of what I consider to be the biblical message on this point than was the case before. This is a scholar who is widely accredited even among non-evangelicals and who substantially supports many of the traditions which we would like to espouse ourselves. He falls short, in my judgment, in failing to acknowledge fully the substitutionary nature of the atonement. By contrast in this area Leon Morris is highly satisfying. This is the place where it behooves us in the name of the Gospel to be especially insistent and thorough, and to make a most careful assessment of the terms which are used in the New Testament and of their implications. Thus far probably all of us can heartily agree.

But in my next suggestion we are moving into an area in which there is a wide diversity of opinions, and where my own view may be in the minority. I do believe that a true assessment of the substitutionary nature of the work of Christ bears implications upon the extent or the impact of his death. For whom did Christ make substitution in his death? How is his death related to the total purpose of God? In particular to the elective purpose of God? In my judgment it is very difficult to disconnect a truly substitutionary doctrine from a view of definite atonement to which many will no doubt raise serious objections. And so I project this as an issue, knowing that it will be one in which there will not be a unanimity of views but on which I should be happy to elucidate further if this is desired at question time.

In the third place, there is an issue that we might call proximate, because it is very close to us and pressing us urgently at the present time: that is the issue of church relationships, ecumenism, etc. What is the nature of the Church? What is the nature of Christian fellowship? With whom can we engage in prayer? With whom can we engage in worship? How should we view the alleged reconstruction of the Roman Catholic outlook? What is the impact of Vatican II? and of major assemblies of the World Council of Churches and other international bodies? And it is important that evangelicals should give careful attention to this general area of thought in order not to bungle through, as it were, in some of these important matters, but to have a thoroughly well thought out and biblically based position. I would confess, however, that I personally am not prepared at the present time to suggest guide-lines in this area, although I deem this a very important field.

Gordon Divinity School
Wenham, Massachusetts