

THE APPROACH OF NEW SHAPE ROMAN CATHOLICISM TO SCRIPTURAL INERRANCY: A CASE STUDY FOR EVANGELICALS*

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At the beginning of each meeting of the Second Vatican Council, participants and observers witnessed an ancient oriental custom, newly reintroduced at the Council: the enthroning of the Book of the Gospels. This rite well symbolized the powerful biblical revival in twentieth-century Roman Catholicism and reminded Protestants that Holy Scripture is not the private domain of the heirs of the Reformation. Indeed, Vatican II displayed at its very heart the concern for biblical understanding characteristic of Roman Catholic scholarship since the founding of the Ecole Biblique at Jerusalem by Pere Marie-Joseph Lagrange;¹ as Jesuit R. A. F. MacKenzie has recently said of the Council's work: "Important as the Constitution on the Church is generally agreed to be, it is equaled in stature by the Constitution on Divine Revelation; the two are the most fundamental documents produced by the Second Vatican Council."² This laudable stress on the doctrine of revelation should goad contemporary Protestantism—too often preoccupied with achieving vaster ecclesiastical unions and nontheological goals—to re-examine its own biblical foundations. More particularly, the current Roman Catholic emphasis on revelation should receive the closest attention from evangelical Protestants who are endeavoring to clarify their historic position on the absolute authority, infallibility, and inerrancy of Holy Writ. It is the judgment of the present essayist that recent developments in Roman Catholic thinking on the revelational issue can provide an invaluable case study for evangelicals facing similar problems. No apology is offered for the negative thrust of later sections of the paper: I praise the Lord of the Church for all genuine enthronements of His scriptural Word, but I must also seek to distinguish what is truly honoring to His Word from what is not. And a valuable lesson can have a negative moral; as a very wise man once said, "Those who refuse to learn by history are forced to repeat its mistakes."

The Classical Roman Catholic Position on Biblical Inerrancy

Rome's position on the inspiration of Holy Scripture has, through the generations preceding our own, seemed exceedingly clear-cut and unambiguous both to her friends and to her enemies. The Council of

* An invitational presentation at the Seminar on the Authority of Scripture (Harold John Ockenga, chairman), held at Gordon College, Wenham, Massachusetts, June 20-29, 1966.

1. Cf. Montgomery, "The Fourth Gospel Yesterday and Today: An Analysis of Two Reformation and Two 20th-Century Commentaries on the Gospel According to St. John," *Concordia Theological Monthly*, XXXIV (April, 1963), 197-222 (containing an examination of Lagrange's *Evangile selon Saint Jean*).
2. *The Documents of Vatican II*, ed. Walter M. Abbott (New York: Guild Press, America Press, Association Press, 1966), p. 107.

Trent, though reacting strongly against the Reformation's formal principle of *Sola Scriptura*, stated in no uncertain terms the full inspiration of the Bible. In the Fourth Session of the Council (8 April 1546) a "Decree Concerning the Canonical Scriptures" was set forth, describing the Holy Writings as "vel oretenus a Christo, vel a Spiritu Sancto dictatas":

The holy, ecumenical and general Council of Trent, lawfully assembled in the Holy Ghost, the same three legates of the Apostolic See presiding, keeps this constantly in view, namely, that the purity of the Gospel may be preserved in the Church after the errors have been removed. This [Gospel], of old promised through the Prophets in the Holy Scriptures, our Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, promulgated first with His own mouth, and then commanded it to be preached by His Apostles to every creature as the source at once of all saving truth and rules of conduct. It also clearly perceives that these truths and rules are contained in the written books and in the unwritten traditions, which, received by the Apostles from the mouth of Christ Himself, or from the Apostles themselves, the Holy Ghost dictating, have come down to us, transmitted as it were from hand to hand. Following, then, the examples of the orthodox Fathers, it receives and venerates with a feeling of piety and reverence all the books both of the Old and of the New Testaments, since one God is the author of both, and also the traditions, whether they relate to faith or to morals, as having been dictated either orally by Christ or by the Holy Ghost, and preserved in the Catholic Church in unbroken succession.³

The succeeding centuries display the reinforcement of this strong biblical position over against heresies of various kinds.⁴ Pius IX (1846-1878) condemned the pantheists, naturalists, and rationalists of his day for holding that "prophetiae et miracula in sacris Litteris exposita et narrata sunt poetarum commenta" and that "utriusque Testamenti libris mythica continentur inventa" (Denzinger, 1707). By the turn of the present century the Roman Church faced the Modernist controversy, and advocates (such as Loisy) of a partially inspired Scripture or of a Scripture erroneous in "non-theological" matters were condemned in no uncertain terms. In the Holy Office decree of 3 July 1907 ("Lamentabili"), Pius X (1903-1914) labeled as illegitimate the Modernist claim that

3. Denzinger, 783; *Canons and Decrees of the Council of Trent*, ed. H. J. Schroeder (St. Louis, Mo.: Herder, 1941), pp. 17, 296. It is not our purpose here to discuss the exact force of the word "dictatae"; surely it did not represent, even for Roman Catholics of the sixteenth century, a "mechanical" inspiration theory that cancelled out the personalities of the human authors of Scripture, but at the same time it leaves no room whatever for a biblical inspiration of limited or partial scope (cf. Montgomery, "Sixtus of Siena and Roman Catholic Biblical Scholarship in the Reformation Period," *Archiv fuer Reformationsgeschichte*, LIV/2 [1963], 214-34).
4. See the numerous documents collected in *Rome and the Study of Scripture*, ed. C. Louis (7th ed.; St. Meinrad, Indiana: Abbey Press, 1964).

"inspiratio divina non ita ad totam Scripturam sacram extenditur, ut omnes et singulas eius partes ab omni errore praemuniat" (Denzinger, 2011.) Pius X's famous Encyclical "Pascendi dominici gregis" (8 Sept. 1907) warrants extended quotation to show how firmly the Church rejected non-inerrancy views of Holy Writ:

The result of [the Modernist] dismembering of the records, and this partition of them throughout the centuries, is naturally that the Scriptures can no longer be attributed to the authors whose names they bear. The Modernists have no hesitation in affirming generally that these books, and especially the Pentateuch and the first three Gospels, have been gradually formed from a primitive brief narration, by additions, by interpolations of theological or allegorical interpretations, or by parts introduced only for the purpose of joining different passages together. . . .

In the Sacred Books there are many passages referring to science or history where, according to them, manifest errors are to be found. But, they say, the subject of these books is not science or history, but only religion and morals. In them history and science serve only as a species of covering to enable the religious and moral experiences wrapped up in them to penetrate more readily among ancient people. The common people understood science and history as they are expressed in these books, and it is clear that the expression of science and history in a more perfect form would have proved not so much a help as a hindrance. Moreover, they add, the Sacred Books, being essentially religious, are necessarily pulsating with life. Now life has its own truth and its own logic—quite different from rational truth and logic, belonging as they do to a different order, viz., the truth of adaptation and of proportion to what they call its living medium and living purpose. Finally, the modernists, losing all sense of control, go so far as to proclaim as true and legitimate whatever is explained by life.

We, Venerable Brethren, for whom there is but one and only truth, and who hold that the Sacred Books, "written under the inspiration of the Holy Ghost, have God for their author,"⁵ declare that this is equivalent to attributing to God Himself the lie of expediency or the officious lie, and We say with St. Augustine: "In an authority so high, admit but one officious lie, and there will not remain a single passage of those apparently difficult to practise or to believe, which on the same most pernicious rule may not be explained as a lie uttered by the author

5. Here Pius X quotes the "Constitutio dogmatica de fide catholicae," c. 2 ("De revelatione"), approved at Session III of Vatican I (24 April 1870), which in turn cites the Tridentine decree quoted earlier; see Denzinger, 1787.

willfully and to serve some higher end."⁶ And thus it will come about, the holy Doctor continues, that "everybody will believe and refuse to believe what he likes or dislikes in them," namely, the Scriptures. . . . In short, to maintain and defend these theories they [the Modernists] do not hesitate to declare that the noblest homage that can be paid to the Infinite is to make it the object of contradictory statements! But when they justify even contradictions, what is it that they will refuse to justify?⁷

Loisy was excommunicated, and Pius X's successor, Benedict XV (1914-1922), underscored the inerrancy position of "Pascendi gregis" in his Encyclical "Spiritus Paraclitus" (15 September 1920).⁸ To all intents and purposes, the partial and limited inspiration views of Catholic Modernism had been dealt the death blow. In point of fact, as George Lindbeck of Yale has correctly noted, Modernism went underground in the Roman communion, only to surface decades later after men sympathetic to a more radical biblical approach had attained positions of authority and influence in the Church.⁹

Biblical Criticism in New Shape Roman Catholic Scholarship

With the classic Roman Catholic stance on inerrancy before us, let us now observe the way in which representative scholars of that Church are presently approaching Holy Writ. The contrast will be instructive.

In 1958, Belgian Jesuit Jean Levie published a work which offers a synoptic view of the New Shape in Roman Catholic biblical scholarship. Its original title is significant (*La Bible, parole humaine et message de Dieu*)¹⁰ for, unlike the title of the 1961 English translation (*The Bible, Word of God in Words of Men*), it well represents its author's major stress: the human rather than the divine aspects of the biblical writings. The book has two major sections, an overview of what Levie calls "progress in history and biblical exegesis" in recent Roman Catholicism, and a hermeneutic examination of Scripture problems, most of which display for him "the human traits in the inspired book." Here are some of his representative conclusions:

Scientific ideas current in those [biblical] days, but which have now been abandoned, may enter into the formulation of teaching which alone the inspired writer wishes to assert. It is, moreover, of little consequence whether he did or did not believe in the ideas current in his time, for they are not what he is claiming to assert.¹¹

6. Augustine, Epist. 28, c. 3, in Migne's *Patrologiae cursus completus. . . series latina*, XXXIII (August. ii), 112, 3.
7. Denzinger, 2100, 2102.
8. *Ibid.*, 2186-2188.
9. So Lindbeck, an official observer at Vatican II, stated in a course of lectures on contemporary Roman Catholic Theology which he delivered at the Chicago Lutheran Theological Seminary (Maywood, Illinois) during the summer of 1961.
10. Paris-Louvain: Desclée de Brouwer, 1958.
11. Levie, *The Bible, Word of God in Words of Men*, trans. S. H. Treman (New York: P. J. Kenedy, 1961), pp. 216-17.

It has been possible to discover in the Pentateuch a certain number of doublets—two accounts of the same events, but derived from different sources. There are divergencies in these accounts, since the two traditions are themselves divergent, but they have been combined in a single text by the inspired writer. . . . In J, the deluge lasts for forty days and Noe then opens the window to release the birds (8. 6) and fourteen days later, he leaves the ark. In P, the period between the beginning of the Flood to the exit from the ark lasts for more than a year (7. 11 and 8. 14).¹²

There may be [in Scripture] fictional historical forms. . . . books which though apparently historical in form, seem in fact to be didactic writings, philosophical and religious discussions or theses.¹³

In the last days of Judaism, we meet a special literary form, the. . . Haggadic Midrash. . . . It often became a list of marvels full of extraordinary or even fantastic events. . . . The hypothesis of an "inspired Haggadah" here and there (that is, an existing literary form used, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, for nobler ends), should not be necessarily excluded *a priori* by Catholic exegesis.¹⁴

Every nation writes the history of ancient times with the help of ancestral traditions, accounts that are partly historical, partly poetical, which in their passage from one generation to another, gradually simplify the facts, group them around some more outstanding personality, and artificially link stories which are independent of one another. . . . It is easy to discover significant concrete examples of this literary form in many of the Pentateuch narratives, for instance in the story of the patriarchs (Gen. chapters 11-50), and to throw into relief their character as collective, popular accounts, as ancestral traditions. In fact it was the study of these accounts which gave rise to the earliest applications of *Formgeschichte* (with H. Gunkel).¹⁵

The perspective on biblical truth expressed in these quotations from Levie is shared by his British confrere R. A. F. MacKenzie, S. J., whose 1963 publication, *Faith and History in the Old Testament*, has acquired considerable popularity both in England and in the United States. In the author's summation of his key chapter on "The Problem of Myth and History," one reads:

For them [the Israelite historians], what really happened

12. *Ibid.*, pp. 221-22.
13. *Ibid.*, pp. 222, 225.
14. *Ibid.*, pp. 226-27.
15. *Ibid.*, pp. 228-29.

was what God did, and the material phenomena on the level of sense perception could be freely heightened and colored in their accounts, the better to express the reality that lay behind them.

But when they had no history and traditions of their own, namely, for the period preceding the call of Abraham, then they were of necessity driven to take their materials where they could find them, and that meant only in the tradition and mythology that had originated among other peoples.¹⁶

American Jesuit John L. McKenzie, the first Roman Catholic to hold a chair at the University of Chicago Divinity School, offers a more generalized account of the same view, employing the personalistic-existential imagery of Martin Buber:

Surely there now ought to be little room for timidity and misunderstanding if we call Hebrew literature in some passages mythical, or wisdom discourses couched in mythopoeic patterns. Even if the rigorous ethics of scholarship do not clearly demand the adoption of this terminology, they do demand the recognition of Israel's community with the ancient Near East in patterns of thought and language. . . . The Hebrew intuition of the ineffable reality which revealed itself to man as the personal reality behind the succession of phenomena, the agent of the great cosmic event which we call creation, the reality from which all things came, in which they exist, and to which they must return, was not the creation of mythical form or of logical discourse, but a direct and personal experience of God as the "Thou" to whom the human "I" must respond. But they had no media through which they could enunciate the ineffable reality except the patterns of thought and speech which they inherited from their civilization.¹⁷

In a strictly analogous way, Roman Catholic scholars in the New Testament field have been re-evaluating their materials. Myles M. Bourke's paper on "The Literary Genus of Matthew 1-2" is characteristic; in a manner strongly reminiscent of Loisy, he uses the fact that the infancy narrative parallels in literary genre a haggadic commentary to dispense with the historicity of many details of the Biblical account.¹⁸ The door had been opened for such an orientation by the Encyclical *Divino afflante Spiritu* (1943), which, though it did not advocate a

16. R. A. F. MacKenzie, *Faith and History in the Old Testament* (New York: Macmillan, 1963), pp. 80-81.
17. John L. McKenzie, *Myths and Realities: Studies in Biblical Theology* (Milwaukee: Bruce Publishing Co., 1963), p. 200. In line with his general existential orientation, McKenzie, as banquet speaker at the 7th Annual Meeting of the American Society of Christian Ethics (Seabury-Western Theological Seminary, Evanston, Illinois, January 22, 1966) severely criticized the traditional code morality of his Church and claimed that the New Testament requires only the *agape* ethic of responsible, personal decision in the situational context.
18. *Catholic Biblical Quarterly*, XXII (1960), 160-75.

radical approach to Scripture, clearly allowed the use of the *formgeschichtliche Methode* and made it possible for Roman Catholic scholars to doubt, for example, that given biblical miracles occurred historically if their doubt stemmed from conviction that the miracles were included as literary devices to illustrate theological points. Indeed, Roger Aubert has stated that Catholic exegetes could theoretically on this basis remain in full fellowship with the Church while denying all biblical miracles but the Virgin Birth and the Resurrection.¹⁹

Thus we arrive at the most recent official Roman Catholic statements on the nature of Scripture: the 1964 Instruction of the Biblical Commission on the historical truth of the Gospels, and Vatican II's Constitution on Divine Revelation. The Biblical Commission implicitly countenances Gospel interpretation by literary forms—not excluding miracle stories and midrash—and allows for *Redaktionsgeschichte*; and in this connection the Instruction "speaks of 'truth' only and not historical truth."²⁰ Vatican II, in its Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation, affirms that "the books of Scripture must be acknowledged as teaching firmly, faithfully, and without error that truth which God wanted put into the sacred writings for the sake of our salvation."²¹ Explains the commentator:

An earlier draft of the Constitution had joined the adjective *salutaris* ("tending to salvation") to the word "truth." Another last-minute change substituted the phrase "for the sake of our salvation," to avoid seeming to limit the truth itself. The point remains the same. . . .

The Bible was not written in order to teach the natural sciences, nor to give information on merely political history. It treats of these (and all other subjects) only insofar as they are involved in matters concerning salvation. It is only in this respect that the veracity of God and the inerrancy of the inspired writers are engaged. This is not a quantitative distinction. . . . It is formal, and applies to the whole text. The latter is authoritative and inerrant in what it affirms about the revelation of God and the history of salvation. According to the intentions of its authors, divine and human, it makes no other affirmations.²²

That this interpretation of the Constitution is eminently just can be

19. If it is argued that the Encyclical *Humani generis* (1950) seems to restrict the liberty permitted by *Divino afflante Spiritu*, one need only consider Jesuit Gustave Lambert's well-received interpretation that *Humani generis* does not function in this manner; this is likewise the conclusion of Count Begouen, the eminent French anthropologist (see James M. Connolly, *The Voices of France; a Survey of Contemporary Theology in France* [New York: Macmillan, 1961], pp. 189-90).
20. Joseph A. Fitzmyer, S. J. (ed.), *The Historical Truth of the Gospels (The 1964 Instruction of the Biblical Commission) with Commentary* (Glen Rock, N. J.: Paulist Press, 1964), p. 14; Fitzmyer's edition of the Instruction appeared first in *Theological Studies*, XXV (September, 1964), 386-408.
21. *The Documents of Vatican II* (*op. cit.* in note 2 above), p. 119.
22. *Ibid.*

seen from the history of the schema on revelation. "It is no secret that the first draft of the schema *De fontibus revelationis* contained two paragraphs which incorporated the terminology of the *Monitum* of June, 1961, and leveled anathemas against those who would call in question the genuine historical and objective truth of the words and deed of Jesus *prouti narrantur*. This was rejected along with the rest of the schema."²³ Conservatives had attempted, unsuccessfully, to stem the tide; a recent article describes their views in the following terms:

There exists a numerous and fairly articulate group convinced that the four Gospels and the Acts of the Apostles are genuine and objectively accurate historical documents, which can be used as such legitimately in the science of apologetics. These individuals insist that they have reason to hold and to teach that these events set forth in these books took place in the very way in which they are described in these works. They hold that the words and the deeds attributed to Our Lord were actually uttered and performed by Him.²⁴

Clearly this position (with its evident affinity to the biblical orientation of classic evangelical Protestantism) is no longer officially advocated or even required of the Roman Catholic theologian. New Shape Catholic biblical scholarship displays a very different alignment: with the historical-critical method which won the day among non-evangelical Protestant scholars during the Modernist era and which has continued as the operating methodology in those circles even to the post-Bultmannian present. Thus James M. Robinson, a leading figure in the Protestant "New Quest of the Historical Jesus," comments favorably on Bourke's midrash interpretation of Matthew 1-2:

The main difference between Bourke and Renan on this point would seem to be that Renan lived at a time when this position was inadmissible within the Roman Catholic Church and Bourke is living in a time when it is admissible. Form criticism has made it possible for the Catholic scholar to assert that the literal sense of a given passage is not to present a true story but rather a story conveying truth.²⁵

In the same vein, Robinson approvingly cites Raymond E. Brown's dissertation, *The Sensus Plenior of Sacred Scripture* (1955), which in the last decade has shifted the attention of Roman Catholic exegetes from the *sensus literalis* to a "fuller sense" allegedly conveyed by the biblical text:

23. Fitzmyer, *op. cit.*, p. 18, n. 19.

24. J. C. Fenton, "Father Moran's Prediction," *American Ecclesiastical Review*, CXLVI (1962), 194-95.

25. James M. Robinson, "Interpretation of Scripture in Biblical Studies Today," in *Ecumenical Dialogue at Harvard: The Roman Catholic-Protestant Colloquium*, ed. Samuel H. Miller and G. Ernest Wright (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1964), p. 102.

The interest in *sensus plenior* has some affinities with Gerhard von Rad's interest in the successive reinterpretation of the Old Testament *Heilsgeschichte* within the successive oral and written layers of the Old Testament itself, or with Rudolf Bultmann's detection that the Christology implicit in Jesus' mission becomes explicit in the Christological titles attributed to him after Easter.²⁶

From Trent and Pius X to Von Rad and Bultmann is a leap of staggering proportions. Let us now attempt to understand how it happened and to draw forth its implications for a contemporary evangelical theology of the Word.

The Rationale of Revolution

The historian can easily remind us of shifts in the twentieth-century theological climate which made the Roman Catholic acceptance of radical biblical scholarship seem more understandable. For example, by the 1940's when *Divino afflante Spiritu* was promulgated, the less theologically radical Protestant Neo-Orthodoxy had sufficiently replaced Protestant Modernism that a more liberal approach to the Bible no longer appeared to pose any direct threat to the Church. But such considerations only scratch the surface of a revolution so radical that, without any change of traditional terminology ("inerrancy," "dictation by the Holy Ghost," etc.) a Church which once set itself unequivocally against literary dismembering of biblical books and against errors of any kind in their inspired contents, now allows these very positions to be held by her scholars.

Protestants are frequently bewildered by such changes in the face of the supposedly unchanging Rome. Not too many years ago a Roman Catholic priest in Boston was excommunicated for maintaining strictly the medieval position, hallowed by a famous bull of Boniface VIII, that salvation absolutely necessitates submission to the Roman pontiff; in holding that non-Catholics would not be saved, the priest violated the conviction of present-day Catholic theology that non-Catholics will be judged by the "natural law" known to them. The priest in question was bewildered; but even more so were Protestants who observed what appeared to be a blatant inconsistency in a Church claiming to be utterly consistent.

More recently, Father Hans Kung of Tübingen University electrified the theological world with his book, *Justification: The Doctrine of Karl Barth and a Catholic Reflection*, in which he argues in all seriousness

26. *Ibid.*, p. 105. Cf. the Protestant and Roman Catholic contributions to *Scripture and Ecumenism: Protestant, Catholic, Orthodox and Jewish*, ed. Leonard J. Swidler ("Duquesne Studies. Theological Series," 3; Pittsburgh, Pa.: Duquesne University Press, 1965).

that the Canons and Decrees of Trent, which were written in large part as an answer to the Reformers' central principle of *Sola Gratia*, are fully compatible with Barth's exposition of the historic Protestant doctrine of justification. Barth, in his Preface to Kung's book, wryly comments:

All I can say is this: If what you have presented in Part Two of this book is actually the teaching of the Roman Catholic Church, then I must certainly admit that my view of justification agrees with the Roman Catholic view; if only for the reason that the Roman Catholic teaching would then be most strikingly in accord with mine! Of course, the problem is whether what you have presented here really represents the teaching of your Church.²⁷

Here Barth betrays his Protestant mind-set: he questions whether Kung's reinterpretation of Trent can be squared with "the teaching" of the Roman Church. This is how a Protestant operates, to be sure; he assumes a permanent and perspicuous revelatory teaching in Holy Scripture, and then evaluates current theological interpretations against that standard. But this is not the way Rome does business theologically. Kung's activity looks bizarre to a Protestant, and *is* bizarre from the standpoint of Protestant theological methodology; but, when viewed from within the Roman Catholic understanding of theological truth, Kung's work is, in principle (wholly apart from the question of scholarly soundness), quite legitimate.

Rome's ultimate standard of religious truth is Rome itself: and by "Rome" is not meant a static body of historical creeds which impose their objective authority upon later generations, but rather a living organism which, as the extension of Christ's incarnation in time and as the vehicle of God's Holy Spirit, can creatively reshape its past. Listen to one of the greatest modern exponents of "the spirit of Catholicism," Karl Adam:

In reality Christianity is an intimate organic unity, a vital unity, which unfolds itself indeed to its fulness progressively, and yet in all the stages of its unfolding is a unity and a whole, The Christianity of Christ. Just as I first appreciate the totality of that potential life which is in the acorn when I see before me the mature oak, fully developed in all its grandeur, in a way that no mere study of the embryology of the acorn can enable me to realize it, so can I first discern the width and depth of Christ's Gospel, the whole vast richness of His mind and His message, His "fulness," when I have before me the fully-developed Christianity, and then only in the measure in which I appreciate its inner unity. . . . So there is in Catholic Christianity a unitary life-stream, a life of unity in fulness, a single

27. Barth, "A Letter to the Author," in Kung's *Justification*, trans. Collins, Tolk, and Granskon (New York: Thomas Nelson, 1964), p. xx.

mighty life. And if I would determine the content of the original cell of this life, the content of the Christianity of Christ, I must not approach the tree of Christianity with the knife of the critic and mutilate it in order to discover this original cell. On the contrary I must accept the Christian life as a whole and appraise it as a whole. Unlimited criticism, faulty and sterile historical or philological research: these things do not conduct us to the mystery of Christ. But we attain to Him by steeping ourselves lovingly in the abundance of life which has gone forth from Him.²⁸

Once one understands the organic conception of truth at the heart of the Roman Church, one can see how ill-conceived was the excitement of many Protestant theologians and Vatican II observers when the Council did not incorporate into its Constitution on Divine Revelation the "two-source" theory (revelation is contained partly—*partim*—in Scripture and partly in the traditions) but stressed the unity of revelation: *Sola Scriptura in ore ecclesiae*. In point of fact, however one defines the source of revelation, the living Magisterium of the Church is the dynamic interpreter of it, shaping the Church's belief from age to age. Thus Adam describes the relation between Scripture and Magisterium:

Christianity is not a religion of dead documents and fragmentary records, but a life in the Holy Spirit preserved from generation to generation by the apostolical succession of commissioned preachers. . . . The surging life of the Christian present flows over the dead records of primitive documents, or rather, these documents are themselves nothing but that life grown stiff and numb, nothing but a deposit of that holy and supernatural life which still enfolds us in the present. Therefore those documents can be fully deciphered and yield their true revealed sense only in the light of this life.²⁹

In precisely the same vein, R. A. F. MacKenzie summarizes the viewpoint of Vatican II's Constitution on Divine Revelation:

A written record is a dead letter, needing constant interpretation and commentary in succeeding ages. It cannot of itself answer new questions, or explain what was once clear and has now become obscure. But the writings transmitted in a living community, from one generation to another, are accompanied by a continuous tradition of understanding and explanation which preserves and re-expresses their meaning, and which applies them, from time to time, to the solving of new problems. If this tradition were only human, it would be liable to grave

28. Karl Adam, *The Spirit of Catholicism*, trans. Justin McCann (rev. ed.; Garden City, N. Y.: Doubleday Image Books, 1954), pp. 62-63.

29. *Ibid.*, p. 232.

error. But such a consequence is avoided by the Church's magisterium.³⁰

This approach to the foundational documents of the Roman Church (the Holy Scriptures) is of course applied to the subsequent documentary history of that body: all of its past records are subject to perennial "decipherment" and "re-expression" by the living Magisterium. Thus the about-face on *Extra ecclesiam nullus salus*; thus the possibility of a re-reading of Trent in terms of Sola Gratia; and thus the totally new understanding of biblical inerrancy.

It is vital to note that from the Roman Catholic viewpoint, no changes in doctrine actually take place in such cases. Once the Magisterium reinterprets a teaching (e.g., the meaning of biblical authority), then all previous authoritative expressions of the teaching are held to have this meaning. The powerful role of casuistry in Roman Catholic moral theology parallels and encourages the casuistial re-expression of documentary meaning in the Church's dogmatic theology. To the non-Catholic, this procedure invariably suggests the Marxist rewriting of history and George Orwell's apocalyptic novel, *1984*, where Winston, the hapless victim of a totalitarianism so complete that it continually redefines truth, searches in vain for a way to convince his persecutor, O'Brien, that the state has fallen into the worst epistemological hell of all, solipsism.³¹

Whether or not Roman Catholicism's organic view of theological truth amounts to solipsism is too large a question for us to answer here.³² But we do need to see that in its re-interpretation of the concept of biblical inspiration and inerrancy, the Church has in fact sapped all significant meaning out of these doctrines. Any assertion—religious or otherwise—which is compatible with anything and everything says precisely nothing.³³ If I claim that my wife is an excellent driver, and yet cheerfully admit that she has a serious accident weekly which is invariably her fault, then my original claim (though I may continue to voice it) is nonsense. By the same token, when Roman Catholicism continues to insist that the Holy Scriptures were dictated by the Holy Ghost and are inerrant, while at the same time allowing internal contradictions through source conflation, external contradictions with known fact, employment of Midrash fictions, etc., the Church speaks nonsense. The argument that Scripture is in any case inerrant *theologically* is of no help

30. *The Documents of Vatican II* (*op. cit.* in note 2 above), p. 109.

31. On Marxist historiography and Orwell's *1984*, see Montgomery, *The Shape of the Past: An Introduction to Philosophical Historiography* ("History in Christian Perspective," Vol. 1; Ann Arbor, Mich.: Edwards Brothers, 1963), pp. 8-9, 74-75, 80-81, 217-56, 275-77.

32. For further discussion on the subject see my article, "Evangelical Unity in the Light of Contemporary Orthodox Eastern-Roman Catholic Protestant Ecumenicity," *The Springfielder*, XXX (Autumn, 1965), 8-30 (published in shorter form under the title, "Evangelical Unity and Contemporary Ecumenicity," in *The Gordon Review*, IX [Winter, 1966], 69-90).

33. Cf. Montgomery, *The 'Is-God-Dead?' Controversy* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 1966), *passim*.

at all, since the biblical writers make no distinction whatever between "theological" and "secular" fact, and indeed ground heavenly truth in earthly reality ("If I have told you earthly things, and ye believe not, how shall ye believe, if I tell you of heavenly things?"—Jn. 3:12).³⁴ And the redefinition of biblical truthfulness in personalistic, existential categories ("I-Thou") by such Roman Catholic writers as John L. McKenzie only begs the question, for "encounters" are not self-authenticating,³⁵ and the Scripture itself makes truth-as-encounter dependent upon truth-as-factual reality ("If I do not the works of my Father, believe me not"—Jn. 10:37). In New Shape Roman Catholic biblical theology, the words "authority," "infallibility," and "inerrancy" have been suffering what R. M. Hare has called the "death by a thousand qualifications": they have been qualified again and again—to such a point that they mean little or nothing. This is particularly evident from the fact that Roman Catholic biblical scholars now accept many of the radically critical arguments espoused by Protestant exegetes such as Von Rad and Bultmann, who use these very arguments to support their *rejection* of theopneustic biblical authority.

To be sure, for Roman Catholics this problem is not particularly acute. The final authority is the living Magisterium, which, a priori, stands above criticism. Words, documents, and entire epochs of Church history have suffered the death of a thousand qualifications, and Rome still remains: ever-changing, ever the same. But what about the Protestant evangelical who, without a Magisterium, contemplates the path taken by his Roman Catholic counterpart?

The Evangelical Sine Qua Non:

Biblical Authority Defined Hermeneutically

In some quarters today, evangelical Protestants are apparently of the opinion that, like the Church of Rome, they can use the general terminology of biblical authority ("infallibility," "inerrancy," and the like) without committing themselves to any view of biblical truthfulness in the particulars. Thus a recent news item reported: "Canadian representatives of the Missouri Synod, The American Lutheran Church, and the Lutheran Church in America have agreed that a 'discrepancy' or an 'error of fact' can't affect the inerrancy of the Bible, according to a Canadian Lutheran Council report."³⁶ To which the present essayist replied:

34. I have developed this point at some length in my essay, "Inspiration and Inerrancy: A New Departure," *Evangelical Theological Society Bulletin*, VIII (Spring, 1965), 45-75 (reprinted in revised form in my *Crisis in Lutheran Theology*, Vol. I—see below, note 37).

35. See Frederick Ferre, *Language, Logic and God* (New York: Harper, 1961), chap. viii ("The Logic of Encounter"), pp. 94-104; C. B. Martin, "A Religious Way of Knowing," in *New Essays in Philosophical Theology*, ed. Antony Flew and Alasdair MacIntyre (London: SCM Press, 1955), pp. 76-95; and Kai Nielsen, "Can Faith Validate God-Talk?" in *New Theology* No. 1, ed. Martin E. Marty and Dean G. Peerman (New York: Macmillan Paperbacks, 1964).

36. *Lutheran Witness Reporter: Great Lakes Edition*, May 8, 1966, p. 1.

Whenever we reach the point of affirming on the one hand that the Bible is infallible or inerrant and admitting on the other hand to internal contradictions or factual inaccuracies within it, we not only make a farce of language, promoting ambiguity, confusion, and perhaps even deception in the church; more reprehensible than even these things, we in fact deny the plenary inspiration and authority of Scripture, regardless of the theological formulae we may insist on retaining. . . . I must—if only on the basis of common sense—protest the idea that “error can’t affect inerrancy.” This is like saying that the presence of corners can’t affect a circle.³⁷

My strong reply was an effort to remind my fellow churchmen of the centrality of unqualified biblical authority in their heritage. The Reformation irrevocably stated its theological claims upon a totally reliable, perspicuous Bible; it explicitly denied the notion of a living Magisterium as interpreter of Scripture. Indeed, the Reformers categorically refused to allow any human writing or teacher to stand above Holy Writ; they recognized fully well that if God’s Word were not entirely trustworthy, then man would be forever incapable of distinguishing its truth from its non-truth and even the salvatory Gospel would be imperilled.

During the heyday of Protestant Modernism, evangelicals were especially sensitive to the erosion of theological vocabulary among their Liberal opponents. They were well aware without an infallible Magisterium the redefinition of terms such as “atonement” and “miracle” through pressure from the non-revelatory human situation would cause the Gospel—the material principle of the Reformation—to die the death of a thousand qualifications. Now, I submit, the same danger faces the formal principle—Scriptural authority.

And how are we to avoid this deleterious state of affairs? By a realistic recognition that *our statements of biblical inspiration, whatever their terminology*—whether positive (“entire trustworthiness”) or negative (“infallibility,” “inerrancy”)—*having been derived from the general pronouncements of Scripture itself on the subject and particularly from the attitude of Christ and His chosen Apostles toward Scripture, must yield concrete hermeneutic guidelines for treating specific exegetical difficulties.* A doctrine of inspiration imposed upon the Bible from without is a denial of inspiration; a doctrine of limited biblical authority derived from passages manifesting difficulties is as false an induction and as flagrant a denial of the analogy of Scripture as is a morally imperfect Christology derived from questionable acts on Jesus’ part (in both

37. *Lutheran Witness Reporter: Great Lakes Edition*, May 22, 1966, p. 7. Cf. Montgomery, “Lutheran Hermeneutics and Mermeneutics Today,” in his *Crisis in Lutheran Theology* (2 vols.; Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Book House, 1967), I, 45-77.

cases, proper induction requires that we go to the express teaching on the subject and allow this to create the inductively-derived *Gestalt* or pattern for treating particular problems);³⁸ and any doctrine of biblical authority without expres shermeneutic application is already in the throes of the death by a thousand qualifications.

Quite obviously it would be beyond the scope of this paper to set forth a full-orbed doctrine of biblical authority governed by these criteria. But some suggestions can and ought to be made. When one observes the teaching and example of Christ and His chosen Apostles³⁹ on the subject of scriptural authority, one is overwhelmingly impressed by the attitude of *total trust* involved; nowhere, in no particular, and on no subject is Scripture subjected to criticism. Passages are quoted authoritatively from the most obscure corners of the Old Testament; individual words are forced to bear the weight of heavy doctrinal teaching; passages from diverse periods and from the pens of many authors are quoted together and sometimes conflated, obviously implying their consistency and common Divine authorship; no attempt is made to distinguish truth “in faith and practice” from veracity in historical and secular matters; and we are told that man lives ἐπὶ παντὶ ῥήματι ἐκπορευομένῳ διὰ στόματος θεοῦ.

(Mt. 4:4, quoting Deut. 8:3).

A scripturally grounded doctrine of biblical authority thus implicates (in the strictest sense) an inerrant, non-contradictory Bible, and qualitatively distinguishes Scripture from all extra-biblical materials, such that none of them can be used to judge or criticize Holy Writ. If it is objected that we are implicitly importing a standard of consistency into our doctrine of scriptural authority, we can only reply that man is incapable of comprehending anything apart from the law of contradiction (as Emerson said of Brahma, “When me they fly, I am the wings”), so a “revelation” involving contradiction reveals nothing at all. Moreover, from a contradiction anything follows, so that the presence of any contradictions in God’s Word would require the immediate testing of all its alleged truths—an impossible task in the very matters most vital to salvation. Thus the popular analogy breaks down between the Scripture and a sermon (“Can’t a sermon reveal truth even with mistakes in it?”): the only way one knows that a sermon *does* reveal truth is by

38. A non-biblical example may help here. In understanding modern stream-of-consciousness writing (e.g., portions of James Joyce’s *A Portrait of the Artist As a Young Man*; his *Ulysses*; parts of Faulkner’s *The Sound and the Fury*; Salinger’s *Catcher in the Rye*), the reader is hopelessly led astray by the *indicia* until he discovers, through the express teaching of the novel, the actual age of the character involved. Having learned this, he has an inductively derived *Gestalt* for understanding the particulars of the stream-of-consciousness narration; to reverse the procedure would be to lose all hope of meaningful interpretation.

39. Christ gave His Apostles a special gift of the Holy Spirit which we today would probably term “total recall” (see John 14:26-27; 16:12-15; cf. Acts 1:21-26); this is the basis of the scriptural authority of the New Testament writings, which were produced in Apostolic circles. On this and the status of Paul as an Apostle, see my *Shape of the Past* (*op. cit.* in note 31 above), pp. 138-39, 171-72.

comparison of its teachings with Scripture; but there is no Bible-to-the-second-power by which to test the veracity of the *Bible's* salvatory teachings. And (to repeat the warning Jesus gave to Nicodemus when He preached the Gospel to him): "If I have told you earthly things, and ye believe not, how shall ye believe, if I tell you of heavenly things?"

In conclusion, then, let us set forth the basic hermeneutic implications of this evangelical view of biblical authority, thereby preserving it from the death of a thousand qualifications to which New Shape Roman Catholic inspiration doctrine is unhappily subject. Though other hermeneutic guidelines could doubtless be added, the following six principles should make clear the over-all interpretive implications of biblical authority for our day:

1. A passage of Holy Writ must be taken as veracious in its natural sense (*sensus literalis*) unless the context of the passage itself dictates otherwise, or unless an article of faith established elsewhere in Scripture requires a broader understanding of the text.
2. The prime article of faith applicable to the hermeneutic task is the attitude of Christ and His Apostles toward the Scriptures: their utter trust in Scripture—in all it teaches or touches—must govern the exegete's practice, thus eliminating in principle any interpretation which sees the biblical texts as erroneous or contradictory in fulfilling their natural intent.
3. Harmonization of scriptural difficulties should be pursued within reasonable limits, and when harmonization would pass beyond such bounds, the exegete must leave the problem open rather than, by assuming surd error, impugn the absolute truthfulness of the God who inspires all Holy Scripture for our learning.
4. Extra-biblical linguistic and cultural considerations must be employed ministerially, never magisterially, in the interpretation of a text; and any use of extra-biblical material to arrive at an interpretation inconsistent with the veracity of the scriptural passage is to be regarded as magisterial and therefore illegitimate. Extra-biblical data can and should put questions to a text, but only Scripture itself can in the last analysis legitimately answer questions about itself.
5. Not all literary forms are consistent with scriptural revelation; the exegete must not appeal to literary forms (such as the midrash) which cast doubt on the truthfulness or the morality of the Divine author of Scripture.⁴⁰

40. A point well made by Augustine Cardinal Bea in his valuable syllabus, *De inspiratione et inerrantia Sacrae Scripturae; notae historicae et dogmaticae quas in usum privatum auditorium composuit* (new ed.; Rome: Pontificium Institutum Biblicum, 1954), pp. 44-45, but unfortunately ignored by most representatives of New Shape Roman Catholic biblical scholarship.

6. The exegete should employ all scholarly research tools that do not involve rationalistic commitments. Rationalistic methodologies are identifiable by their presuppositions, which either (like Bultmann's demythologizing) do violence to articles of faith, or (like certain documentary theories) oppose the perspicuity of the received biblical texts and the facticity of the events recorded in them, or (like the "circularity principle" of the so-called "New Hermeneutic") give to the sinful cultural milieu, past and present, a constitutive role in the formulation of biblical teaching.⁴¹ These and other rationalistic techniques are to be scrupulously avoided in carrying out the hermeneutic task.

But to conclude an essay on the perfection of Scripture with a less than the perfect number of principles seems woefully inappropriate; and to terminate an essay focusing on the Roman Church without quoting one of her greatest saints would be indeed ungracious. So let us hear again from St. Augustine, who will provide our seventh and foundational principle for the reading of those Sacred Books which brought him, and by God's grace brings each of us, into the presence of the saving Christ:

7.

In an authority so high, admit but one officious lie, and there will not remain a single passage of those apparently difficult to practise or to believe, which on the same most pernicious rule may not be explained as a lie uttered by the author willfully and to serve some higher end.⁴²

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41. On the incompatibility between the "New Hermeneutic" (represented by Ebeling, Fuchs, Ott, Conzelmann, G. Bornkamm, *et al.*) and the hermeneutic of the Reformation, see my essay, "Lutheran Hermeneutics and Hermeneutics Today" (cited above in note 37).

42. See above, note 6 and corresponding text.