

The theological scene

*The Battle for the Bible*¹ has aroused considerable interest in the few months since its publication. It is not every day that an evangelical publication provokes a review article in *Time* (10 May 1976, p. 53), especially when the author is not even related to Jimmy Carter. It is not surprising that the book has received this attention, for it makes alarming reading. This article will focus on two major causes for alarm: the trends highlighted by Lindsell and the reaction to them evidenced by his book.

Lindsell's main thesis is that a substantial proportion of American evangelicalism (which has a constituency of 40 million, according to *Time*) is moving away from the traditional doctrine of the infallibility of Scripture. This thesis is thoroughly documented with chapters each devoted to the Missouri Synod of the Lutheran Church, the Southern Baptists and Fuller Theological Seminary. Briefer mention is made of other 'denominations and parachurch groups'. One virtue of the book is the mass of evidence presented by Lindsell, but it should be noted that his interpretation of this evidence has been questioned. (Fuller Theological Seminary has produced a brochure challenging Lindsell's conclusions.)

Lindsell discerns not a sudden rejection of biblical infallibility but a gradual drift away from it. He shows how this leads, first, to a doctrine of limited inspiration—the Bible is infallible in matters of faith and practice, but contains errors in the realm of history, geography and science. This position leads on to the recognition of some theological errors in Scripture. Once this admission has been made there is little to prevent the eventual loss of all the doctrines of historic Christianity—the deity of Christ, the atonement, the bodily resurrection of Christ, *etc.* Those who undermine the doctrine of Scripture may well themselves be held in a relatively orthodox position by their evangelical piety, but such a position is fundamentally inconsistent and their successors will move beyond it to less orthodox positions. This theory of the 'slippery slope' is well known, especially through the works of Francis Schaeffer. Lindsell supports it with careful documentation of what has happened in past generations in the USA and what is happening again in some quarters today.

Lindsell uses a telling illustration. The Continental Divide is the watershed for Canada and the USA. All water to the east ends in the Atlantic, all to the west in the Pacific. He argues that the inerrancy of Scripture is such a watershed in the realm of theology. 'Whether it takes five or fifty years any . . . group that forsakes inerrancy will end up shipwrecked. It is impossible to prevent the surrender of other important doctrinal teachings of the Word of God when inerrancy is gone' (pp. 142 f.). This is the warning that Lindsell wishes to sound to his fellow American evangelicals.

Lindsell sees ethical as well as theological implications in the drift from Scripture. He points to the dishonesty of many who have moved from a belief in inerrancy. They have continued to assent to statements of faith which they have confessedly ceased to believe and which they wish to see altered. Lindsell gives examples of those who have had the integrity to resign positions for which they are no longer eligible because of their changed views, but many others have remained within institutions while fighting against the very doctrine which was a major *raison d'être* of those institutions.

Lindsell also notes the practical consequences of abandoning inerrancy. 'It has always been attended by a decline in Christian zeal and evangelistic outlook as well as in one's ethical life' (p. 159). This is spelt out elsewhere in more detail (pp. 206 f.). Although he may be guilty of some exaggeration, it is hard to deny that there is much truth in Lindsell's charge. The practical as well as theological consequences of the drift from Scripture underscore the importance of the issue. It would not be an exaggeration to state that the future of evangelicalism will be greatly influenced by the outcome of the current debate.

Lindsell clearly shows that error is creeping into evangelicalism and that it must be met. He demonstrates the need to draw a firm line. The 'slippery slope' theory may be extremely unpopular in some circles, but experience and history alike bear it out. It is true that the abandonment of a firm doctrine of Scripture weakens the basis for theology and leads on eventually to further error. But this leaves open the question of *where* to draw the line. Lindsell convincingly shows the dangers of losing an orthodox doctrine of Scripture, but it does not follow that the remedy lies in adopting *his* doctrine of Scripture. The

¹ Harold Lindsell, *The Battle for the Bible* (Zondervan, 1976). 218 pp. \$6.95.

second cause for alarm in this book is Lindsell's proposed remedy which can itself be seen as one of the causes of the drift from orthodoxy. I agree with Lindsell that a firm stand must be made on the issue of Scripture, but I aim to show that it is misguided and potentially disastrous to make that stand on the ground chosen by Lindsell.

Lindsell responds to the threat by reaffirming a traditional conservative view of Scripture. But there are two serious deficiencies in his approach. First, his emphasis throughout is on the inerrancy of Scripture. The Bible itself claims to be the inspired Word of God. Inerrancy is simply a corollary of this and one that is rarely treated explicitly in the Bible. Yet for Lindsell it is not unfair to say that inerrancy is the primary and most important characteristic of Scripture. He does not *explicitly* affirm this, but it is clearly implied by his preoccupation throughout with inerrancy. But one can mislead as much by stressing the wrong points as by making incorrect statements. In Lindsell's defence it could be argued that his opponents are attacking the inerrancy of Scripture and that he is therefore forced by them into fighting on this ground. But while Lindsell is forced by his opponents to begin with the issue of inerrancy, he has only himself to blame for his continuing and ending there. He ought rather to have shifted the ground of the controversy to the positive nature of Scripture as the inspired Word of God. He does indeed mention this, but only in passing and as a theological proof of inerrancy (pp. 30 f.). The clear implication (but not *explicitly* stated) is that for Scripture to be the inspired Word of God simply means that it is inerrant. But this is not sufficient, as it removes the uniqueness of Scripture. Sets of multiplication tables, for instance, can also be free from error and in a more rigorous sense than can be true of Scripture. Inerrancy on its own is a negative concept and falls short of the positive implications of being the inspired Word of God, which are far more important. It is also a negative concept that leaves one with what the President of Fuller Seminary has called 'the gas-balloon theory of theology'. 'One leak', he continues, 'and the whole Bible comes down' (*Time* review cited). Lindsell's book gives the impression that defending the evangelical view of Scripture is like protecting a large and fragile vase in the open from mobs of stone-throwing hoodlums—*i.e.* a virtually impossible task.

In summary, it is true that, faced with the issue of error in Scripture, inerrancy must be affirmed. But it is not true that this is the central attribute of Scripture and to write a whole book which focuses on this issue to the almost total neglect of other aspects is dangerously misleading. It is misleading in that it stresses a secondary aspect of Scripture to the neglect of primary aspects, and thus distorts the evangelical and biblical doctrine of Scripture. It is dangerous in that it presents evangelical theology with a Herculean apologetic task. The one-sidedness of Lindsell's stress on inerrancy is especially unfortunate because he has a naive concept of error. Many of the 'errors' found in

Scripture by liberals present no difficulty at all once one considers carefully what the biblical writers were setting out to do. But Lindsell, instead of pointing this out, indulges in fanciful and unconvincing 'solutions' to problems that do not really exist. This can best be seen by considering some specific examples.

a. Job 38:7. 'The morning stars sang together'

Clearly this is poetic language and to call it error because stars don't sing is simply naivety and lack of literary sense. But Lindsell objects that 'it has even been thought of as figurative language. But scientists now tell us that in the air there is music that comes from the stars' (p. 38).

b. Peter's denial of Christ. While Luke says that Peter will deny Christ before the cock crows (22:34), Mark states that the denials will come before the cock crows *twice* (14:30) and records two crowings (14:72). (Lindsell, pp. 174 ff.).

To those who view the Gospels as strict word-for-word records like Hansard this constitutes an error. But there is an easy explanation. Luke has simplified the account by removing the reference to *two* crowings. The story remains the same while a simple non-essential detail is lost. In everyday recounting of incidents such compression in the interests of brevity and simplicity is universally accepted. No-one would dream of making charges of error or deception. Yet Lindsell sees this as a potential error. He circumvents it by the implausible theory that Peter denied Christ *six* times and that Mark and Luke are recording separate incidents! Maybe someday someone will suggest that there were four different crucifixions, each with a different superscription on the cross (Mt. 27:37; Mk. 15:26; Lk. 23:38; Jn. 19:19).

c. Lindsell seems to treat the teaching of Jesus recorded in the Gospels as if it were a word-for-word record. Thus he has to defend the differences between the different Gospel accounts from the charge of verbal inaccuracy (p. 164 and *b.* above). But this is tantamount to handing the victory to his opponents. It is impossible to reconcile the Gospels if they are assumed to give a verbatim record of Jesus' teaching. But what grounds do we have for that assumption? If Jesus taught in Aramaic, as seems likely, his teaching must have been translated into Greek which, as every translator knows, introduces an element of interpretation. What the Gospels give us is a faithful, accurate, true account of the teaching of Jesus and this can be done without keeping to His *ipsissima verba*, which were probably not in Greek anyway. The evangelists were concerned to convey to us the *teaching* of Jesus, not necessarily the precise words which passed His lips. The 'Hansard concept' of the Gospels is unrealistic and unnecessary. Once we abandon it and recognize that the truthfulness of the Gospels consists simply in their giving a faithful account of Jesus' teaching, the majority of problems disappear. Most of the 'errors' which so worry Lindsell are not errors

at all when one considers the aims and intentions of the evangelists.

In summary, Lindsell is right to oppose the advocates of an errant Scripture, but doubly wrong in his approach to this task. He is wrong in that he accepts inerrancy as the primary issue and does not lay more stress on the primary characteristics of Scripture as the inspired Word of God. He is also wrong in that he works from a naive concept of error and seeks to maintain for Scripture a Hansard-type accuracy that is inappropriate to the literary forms employed and impossible to defend.

It is necessary to maintain an orthodox doctrine of Scripture and to make a stand against theories of errancy. Such a stand must be made, but not where Lindsell makes it. The way to keep people from sliding down the slippery slope is not to maintain a rigid position that is indefensible. This is where Lindsell's book is liable to be counter-productive. Many will read it and conclude that if his position is the conservative position, they are not conservatives. Thus the book will ironically force many down the very slippery slope from which it purports to be defending them. Unrealistically rigid theories of inerrancy are not to be politely tolerated but must be opposed, as they have the effect of driving others into the opposite camp. Extreme expositions of any viewpoint hurt rather than help the cause.

Lindsell would doubtless retort that he is simply restating the traditional conservative position. To a certain extent this is true, though not as true as he seeks to demonstrate in his chapter on infallibility in the history of the church. But it does not follow that his position is therefore correct. For some time it was traditional and conservative to maintain that the world was created in six times twenty-four hours. But few of us now would consider such a belief to be essential to orthodoxy and most of us would agree that to *insist* on such a belief today would hinder the cause of Christ. Lindsell's approach to Scripture comes in a similar category. It may have sufficed once, but in the present day, with our further insights into the nature of Scripture (and especially its humanity), a restatement of the doctrine is necessary. I am not suggesting that we should become liberals, but rather that we need a fresh statement of orthodoxy which retains our essential belief in the divine origin and truthfulness of Scripture while incorporating newer insights into its humanity. Lindsell's position can only disappoint today because it leads people to expect things of Scripture which can now be seen not to be there. Ironically, his own book bears witness to this. The drift from Scripture, which he so carefully documents, leads to a disturbing conclusion. It seems to be next to impossible to maintain an academic institution studying the Scriptures at a high scholarly level without an ensuing departure from Lindsell's doctrine of Scripture. Such a departure seems also to be common in non-academic institutions like denominations. Now the explanation may be that

Christians have become more sinful in the last few years. But a more likely cause is a real inadequacy in the doctrine of Scripture being defended. The way to defend our historic heritage is not to cling to lost causes, but rather to discern what really is of the essence of our faith. We are to defend the doctrine of an inerrant inspired Scripture, not the conservative idiosyncrasies of pre-scientific generations. Then we can have a doctrine which will not repeatedly provoke defection.

Lindsell's book confronts us with the task of stating an orthodox doctrine of Scripture for the 1970s and 1980s. As has already been argued, it is not sufficient merely to repeat the old orthodoxy. Orthodoxy is not monolithic and unchanging. The anti-Arian doctrine of the fourth century went beyond earlier doctrine because of the *new* threat of Arianism. The reformation doctrines of the sixteenth century went beyond earlier doctrines because of the *new* controversy. Likewise our doctrine of Scripture today must go beyond earlier statements because of the *new* situation that has arisen in the last 150 years. Historically, orthodox Christians have been clear in affirming the divinity of Scripture. This need to be defended against liberal denials. I am not advocating a rejection of our belief in Scripture as the inerrant, inspired Word of God. But over the ages Christians have not been so clear on the humanity of Scripture. It is this that needs affirming today, alongside and not against our affirmation of its divinity. Scripture is both the Word of God and the words of men. To deny *either* is error. 'Liberalism' errs in denying the former. Lindsell and those like him minimize, if they do not explicitly deny, the latter. The Lord Jesus, being a true man, suffered from weakness (Jn. 4:6; 11:33 ff.) and ignorance in the sense of not knowing everything (Mk. 13:32). But it does not follow that he taught error. Likewise, Scripture manifests human weakness and ignorance but without teaching error. We do not need to quote Isaiah 40:22 to try to prove that the biblical writers had a modern scientific view of the universe. It is much simpler, more convincing and more satisfactory to say that they thought of the sun as 'rising', as this is how it appears. No-one accuses us of error or deception for continuing to talk of sunsets. An acknowledgment of the humanity of Scripture will help us to appreciate that, while the writers did not teach error, their words share in the common weakness of all human words (*cf.* Ps. 106:2) and that they were not omniscient (they did not know the theory of relativity, for example).

Lindsell's weakness on the humanity of Scripture appears especially at two related points. First, he rejects 'the historical-critical method' of studying Scripture (pp. 81 f., 98). Maybe these words have a different meaning for him, but if he wishes to reject the historical study of the Bible as human literary documents (the historical-grammatical study of the Bible) he is evidencing his docetic² doctrine of

² *I.e.* his failure to allow fully for the humanity of Scripture.

Scripture. To assert that 'orthodoxy and the historical-critical method are deadly enemies that are antithetical and cannot be reconciled' (p. 82) is a damning admission. It means that Lindsell recognizes that *his* doctrine of Scripture cannot survive the scholarly study of the text of Scripture. To do him justice, it may be that he is using the term 'historical-critical method' in a sense different to that with which we are familiar. But even if that is so, it is significant that he has nothing to say about the importance of the historical-grammatical study of the Bible, a serious omission in the present context.

Secondly, Lindsell shows great hesitancy with the doctrine of 'intention'. He is not altogether happy with the suggestion that the teaching of a passage is determined by what the author *intended* it to teach. This again reveals the weakness of his grasp of the true humanity of Scripture. He attacks those who affirm 'the facticity of what Scripture intends to present as facts' (pp. 80 f.). While such a principle can be abused, it is hard to see how the principle itself can be faulted. Lindsell does not seem to perceive that the principle of intention can offer a better approach to difficult passages than either declaring them errors or finding implausible 'solutions'. Yet at the same time he can himself employ the concept of intention to explain some difficult passages (pp. 169, 172). It seems that Lindsell's attitude at this point is not wholly consistent as he attacks the concept while also using it himself (*cf.* also pp. 165, 205).

The great need in a doctrine of Scripture today is to hold together the divinity and the humanity of Scripture. Dr J. I. Packer outlines how this should be done in an article in the first issue of *Themelios* (Vol. 1 No. 1, Autumn 1975). (This article first appeared in *The Churchman* 81, 1967.) There Packer maintains his well-known position on the inspiration of Scripture while insisting that we must take seriously the phenomena of Scripture and allow our study of the text to modify our doctrine of Scripture. Those who rightly admire Dr Packer's defence of the divine authority of Scripture ought to be as diligent in heeding his insistence on its humanity.

Our need today is for a doctrine of Scripture with the firmness that Lindsell both demands and offers together with a flexibility that he neither manifests nor allows. This flexibility is not to be sought in the way attempted by some—by affirming the errancy of Scripture. This is flexibility at the price of firmness. What is needed is flexible firmness and firm flexibility. The means to this end is the concept of intention. We are committed to the truthfulness of Scripture, but only in the sense *intended* by its authors. This principle is ably applied by Dr R. T. France in another article in the first issue of *Themelios*, entitled 'Inerrancy and New Testament Exegesis'. Dr France, whose conservative convictions are well known, shows how much room for manoeuvre is offered by the concept. He shows how to handle the chronological differences between the Gospels

relating to the cleansing of the Temple and the cursing of the fig tree. While some would detect error here, and Lindsell might well postulate several cleansings and several cursings, France far more convincingly shows that the chronological differences are not errors, as the authors did not *intend* to give the chronological order. The same principle is applied to other difficulties in the Gospels. This approach takes seriously the humanity of the Gospels (unlike Lindsell) while avoiding the theologically unacceptable charge of error in the Gospels (unlike Lindsell's opponents). The solution to difficulties lies not in implausible and far-fetched harmonization, nor in the imputation of error to Scripture, but rather in a serious examination of the authors' intentions. If they did not aim to offer a strictly historical chronology or a Hansard-type record of Jesus' actual words, it is as foolish to accuse them of error as to attempt 'harmonization'.³

Lindsell's book raises a vital issue. It is hardly an exaggeration to state, as does Lindsell, that the outcome of the current controversy will determine the future of evangelicalism. The issue that faces us is the phenomenon of Scripture with its apparent errors. To ascribe error to Scripture is to launch oneself onto the slippery slope. To adopt Lindsell's stance is to direct evangelicalism towards becoming a small obscurantist sect. The need is for a middle path which will combine a firmness on the doctrine of Scripture with a flexibility in critical questions and in handling the text of Scripture. The solution is not to be found in either the liberal flexibility of Lindsell's opponents or the obscurantist firmness of Lindsell. While Lindsell is as firm as a fragile vase and his opponents are as flexible as a polythene bag, we should seek to combine the two qualities, like a tupperware container which is firm and solid while being flexible. Such a combination is to be found in the work of scholars like Packer and France, who are seriously striving to give weight to both needs. We should all pray that evangelicalism will become neither obscurantist nor liberal, but may rather follow a path of radical conservatism which will remain faithful to the authority of Scripture while taking seriously its text.

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³ For a provocative development of the theme of intention, *cf.* J. Goldingay, 'Inspiration, Infallibility and Criticism' in *The Churchman* 90, 1976, pp. 6-23. Goldingay argues that the evangelical doctrine of inspiration and infallibility is compatible with a wide range of critical conclusions on questions of authorship and historicity. While many may feel that he goes too far, his basic principle and method are in line with an orthodox doctrine of Scripture.