

Evangelical Disagreements About the Bible*

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I

The basic evangelical position

Ask anyone who answers to the name 'evangelical' how he expects to hear God speaking to him, and his answer will not only include something about the Bible, but will focus on the Bible as the final test of whatever claims to be the voice of God. Of course he will expect to find the guidance of God in other ways—through circumstances, through Christian advice, through prayer and meditation, through prophecy, through an indefinable 'awareness' of God's will—but if he is serious in his claim to be an evangelical he will recognize all these and any other sources of guidance as subject to the overriding authority of Scripture, by which he expects to check and correct whatever comes to him purporting to be the voice of God. Putting it negatively: if he is convinced that anything is contrary to Scripture, he will not accept it, however plausible it may be, or however august an authority it may be supported by. In Scripture, he believes, God has spoken his definitive message for his people for all time until Christ comes again. It is thus, for him, the Word of God.

It is thus true today, as it has been since the word 'evangelical' came to be used as the title of a distinct breed of Christian, that all who would wish to be included under this title would agree to at least the following three propositions:

- 1) Special revelation is necessary for a true knowledge of God.
- 2) The Bible is the supreme and only sufficient locus of such revelation.¹
- 3) The Bible is the inspired Word of God.

We would all want to elaborate and qualify these propositions in various ways, and in so doing we would reveal a wide range both in our theological understanding and in our practical approach to the business of discerning the mind of God; but we would all feel, I believe, that anyone who was unable to make these affirmations in good conscience could not meaningfully be described as an evangelical.

The traditional divide among Anglican approaches to revelation and authority has been between the Bible, tradition, and reason. No one, of course, believes that it is possible to lean on any one of these to the

total exclusion of the others, but the question is which carries the ultimate authority. Putting it crudely, we have identified those who major on the Bible as 'evangelicals', those who major on tradition as 'catholics', and those who major on reason as 'liberals'. Of course this is a caricature of the actual subtlety of all our positions, but it has been a workable distinction and I believe it still holds good. The evangelical will recognize the importance of both tradition and reason in the interpretation and the application of Scripture, but it will be the latter which he is trying to understand and to obey, however difficult he may find it in practice, and however much he may find himself divided in this from other evangelicals whose traditions and reason lead them to a different understanding of the Bible.

When I wrote an initial abstract of this paper, I began by saying that on all that I have said so far there would be no disagreement among evangelicals today, any more than there has ever been. Now I am not quite so sure, for there is an important current within evangelicalism which I had, in my academic isolation, left out of account. The renewal of interest in prophecy, which has come with the charismatic movement, has brought into the picture the claim to a direct revelation from God in the present day. So what does this do to the indispensability of the Bible? Does present-day prophecy bring messages from God which not only do not use the Bible as a means, but which convey truth from God which could not have been derived from the Bible? If so, and if on some occasions there is a *prima facie* conflict between the revelation in Scripture and the revelation through prophecy, which is accorded the last word?

It is hard for a 'non-charismatic' to judge, but it seems to me that there are different approaches to prophecy within the movement, both with regard to the prominence it is given relative to other means of hearing the voice of God and as to the degree of its self-sufficiency and its independence of the Bible. I have the impression that among charismatic Christians who would call themselves evangelicals, the vast majority, including virtually all who indulge in any theological reflection on the subject, would accept the ultimate authority of the Bible, and the need for prophetic revelation—like other means of discerning God's will and truth—to be subject to correction from Scripture. In that case, they would fall well within my earlier definition of an evangelical approach to Scripture. Prophecy, however important and exciting as a guide to God's will, serves like prayer, advice and circumstances as a means by which the scriptural revelation is interpreted and applied rather than as a 'third testament'. On the other hand, there are those within the charismatic movement, generally of a less reflective disposition, for whom prophetic revelation has an immediate and unquestionable authority which is not subject, at least in practice, to scriptural revelation. They would, I am sure, claim to be evangelical; but they apparently do not in fact, though they might in

theory, regard the Bible as the supreme and only sufficient locus of special revelation. Does this mean that my sketch of the evangelical attitude to the Bible was too narrowly drawn; or ought we to insist that such a person, insofar as he is not in practice subject to the authority of Scripture, has ceased to be an evangelical? Perhaps it is an unanswerable question, but for myself I find it hard to see the value of a term like 'evangelical' if it is allowed to be evacuated of such a central concept as that of the final authority of Scripture.

So I believe that on the *theory* of the divine inspiration and final authority of Scripture, it is still true today that evangelicals speak 'with one voice'. Where we are divided, and deeply divided, is over what this theoretical commitment implies for our understanding and application of what Scripture actually says. In other words, our internal disagreements are not over the doctrinal stance which makes us evangelicals, but over the corollaries which may be drawn from that stance.

II

Issues on which evangelicals are divided

I want to group these under three main areas of disagreement which seem to be important in debates over Scripture within evangelicalism.

1) Conservative critical positions

When I was a student you could recognize an evangelical by what he believed about the authorship of, e.g., Genesis, Isaiah, Daniel, or the pastoral epistles. It was axiomatic to us that the defence of the traditional conservative view on these, and many other issues of biblical criticism, was essential to the evangelical faith. It was darkly whispered about some eminent men, respected in evangelical circles, that they were a little shaky on the unity of Isaiah, or the Mosaic authorship of the whole Pentateuch except Deuteronomy 34; but if this were so, we had no doubt that to that extent they had ceased to be fully evangelical. And those evangelicals who may have held such views would have been cautious about expressing them openly outside the smoke-filled rooms of the academic coterie.

But now things have changed. Evangelical scholars speak openly of deutero-Pauline letters, and I suspect it would be quite a small minority among evangelicals involved in Old Testament scholarship who would accord Moses the final role in the compilation of the Pentateuch, though of course his contribution to its contents would be generally agreed, with a wide variety of estimates as to how much of it could be traced to him. There has been open discussion in print between evangelicals over the date of Daniel, something which would have been hard to imagine twenty years ago. The self-evident axioms of evangelical biblical criticism now seem to be open questions.

Where then do we draw the line as to what is an evangelical position

on such issues? Or is there no line to be drawn?

Now it is important that we distinguish between what is merely traditional among evangelicals (for evangelicals, like other Christians, have their traditions, however little they approve of 'tradition' as a source of authority) and what is a necessary corollary of the distinctive beliefs of evangelicalism. For it is undeniable that evangelical traditions can and do change with the generations, without thereby destroying the essence of evangelicalism. The swings in the pendulum of evangelical attitudes to biological evolution illustrate the point clearly enough. In biblical criticism, it does not seem to be felt to be so essential as it once appeared to maintain, for instance, that the author of Matthew was the apostle of that name. There may be good reasons for maintaining this position, but few would now believe, I think, that evangelical faith demands the acceptance of apostolic authorship. Matthew is, after all, an anonymous book, so the determination of its authorship is an open question. Even with a book which is apparently not anonymous, such as Ecclesiastes, there is, I believe, a fairly widespread swing within evangelicalism away from a dogmatic insistence on Solomonic authorship, even on the part of those who would have no truck with Deutero-Isaiah or a second-century Daniel.

This last case is instructive. An evangelical who wishes to maintain that Ecclesiastes was not written by Solomon will typically do so on the grounds that the portrayal of 'Solomon' in the first person in the book is a transparent literary device, which was never meant to be read as a claim to his authorship. It would be hard for anyone who took evangelical commitment seriously to claim that a book of Scripture made a claim about its own authorship which was intended to be believed, but which was not true. For here we go beyond evangelical tradition to the essential evangelical belief in Scripture as the Word of God. Evangelicals have not been able to accept that the Word of God could be either false or misleading. What it says must be true, and therefore to set aside what appears to be its meaning (e.g. that Solomon wrote Ecclesiastes) is only possible if we can show that it does not mean what it has been thought to mean.

Where then do we draw the line between evangelical tradition (which is dispensable) and the necessary corollaries of evangelical belief (which are not)? On this issue of biblical criticism, it must surely be at the point where a scholar claims that Scripture really intends us to understand something which is not in fact true. Now that sounds easy enough to apply; but in practice it is far from easy, for it brings into play the whole vast question of interpretation—of what Scripture 'really means'.

Take the pastoral epistles, for instance. For most evangelicals the issue has been simple enough: they are explicitly written by Paul, so that to claim that they were written by someone else is to accuse Scripture of falsehood. How then can anyone speak of them as written

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by a disciple of Paul after his death and still claim to be an evangelical, and to regard Scripture as the Word of God? Does God tell lies? Titus 1:2 itself seems to close the question.

But, it is argued, the same reinterpretation which allows evangelicals to deny the Solomonic authorship of Ecclesiastes is open with regard to other books of Scripture, including the pastoral epistles: the attribution to Paul is not intended to be taken as factual, but as an expression of respect and indebtedness by his disciple who wrote, so he thought, in the spirit of Paul. Such pseudonymous writing was an accepted literary convention, and would no more be taken literally by readers at that time than they or we would assume that Socrates actually spoke the dialogues composed by Plato in his name.

This, then, is a matter for careful literary and historical study, to establish whether such a convention was in fact current in the milieu out of which our biblical books came, and whether the particular books under discussion may properly be classified in that genre. Here there is scope for much difference of opinion on scholarly grounds, quite irrespective of doctrinal commitment, and such debate must continue openly and honestly. Its conclusions cannot be predetermined, whether by evangelical tradition or by critical orthodoxy.

Now I am not suggesting that we can or should divest ourselves of all our evangelical traditions. They are founded on generations of careful and reverent scholarship, and are not lightly to be disregarded. It should not be assumed that because a view is traditional it is therefore automatically suspect, and will not be able to stand up to scholarly scrutiny—and I fear that assumption does sometimes lurk behind the urge for emancipation from the critical traditions of the past. But if it is upheld, it must not be solely on the grounds of its traditional acceptance, but because it is vindicated by responsible critical study.

At what point, then, does a critical position become 'unevangelical'? *Not* necessarily, I have argued, at the point where it differs from what evangelicals have typically held; but at the point where it entails that Scripture, properly interpreted, is making statements which are untrue. And these are not the same thing.

If, for instance, someone who claims to be an evangelical argues that Isaiah did not write large parts of the book that bears his name, there are at least two separate questions involved. First, are his literary arguments sound? This is a matter for scholarly debate, using all the appropriate methods of literary and historical enquiry. But secondly, is his view compatible with evangelical belief? Does he agree that those parts of the book which he denies to Isaiah may properly be interpreted as claiming to be by Isaiah, or as so attributed in other parts of Scripture? If he does not, he may be mistaken, but in his own mind at least he is not denying the veracity of Scripture. Unfortunately, these questions are not always distinguished. If they are kept separate, we can see how someone who differs from the traditional view, even if we

believe he is wrong, may not necessarily be unevangelical (for it is, sadly, possible to be evangelical and to be wrong at the same time, in many areas of theology and practice!). If we believe that Scripture really does make the claim which he denies, it is for us to convince him of this by proper exegetical argument. If he becomes convinced, but still maintains that what he now agrees to be the meaning of Scripture is not in fact true, at that point he has adopted a position which seems formally incompatible with the claim to be an evangelical.

Examples could be multiplied, but I hope my main point is clear: that to define an evangelical biblical scholar by his critical views is not as easy as it might seem, especially to those who are not themselves involved in academic discussion in this area. What has emerged is that the point at which such issues do become relevant to defining an evangelical stance is when they are perceived to bear on the question of the veracity of what Scripture says. So our first area of evangelical disagreement points towards the second, that of the reliability of Scripture as the Word of God.

2) The reliability of Scripture

The classic evangelical Anglican term for defining the reliability of Scripture seems to have been ‘infallibility’.² In more recent years, particularly under the influence of American usage, the term ‘inerrancy’ has come to be more prominent; but it appears to be used to mean nothing very different from what ‘infallibility’ has generally been taken to imply—that what Scripture says may be taken to be reliable and true. A considerable emotive distinction has, for some people, developed between the two terms, which it would be hard to justify either by dictionary definition or by usage outside the confines of intra-evangelical debate. A recent American book was devoted to promoting ‘infallibility’ at the expense of ‘inerrancy’, on the understanding that the former allowed Scripture to be wrong about matters not concerned with faith and ethics. Earlier defenders of ‘infallibility’ would have been horrified at this devaluation. And, of course, even ‘inerrancy’ has had to be qualified in the same way, since some Americans argue for ‘limited inerrancy’, which seems to mean much the same as the distorted view of ‘infallibility’ just mentioned.

Words and slogans are useful for debate and may be emotively important, and I for one would like to keep the term ‘infallibility’ as the label by which the classic evangelical understanding of Scripture should be indicated.³ But, sadly, none of us have proprietary rights over English (or even American) usage, and few words could hold their own under the weight of such a lively theological controversy. We have reached the stage now, I think, where it is less important to reiterate the chosen slogan than to set out in more specific terms what we intend it to safeguard.

To state—as I take it all evangelicals would state—that the Bible is

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true and reliable, invites the response of Pilate: 'What is truth?' For us, if not for Pilate, it is a serious question.

Some would like to answer it by defining certain categories of subject-matter within which they expect to find the Bible true; usually those of faith and conduct, religion and ethics, as opposed to those of history, natural science and literary criticism. This, I take it, is the basic position of the American school of 'limited inerrancy'. I can understand in practical terms why this distinction is made, for it is precisely in the areas of history, natural science and literary criticism that Scripture's statements are testable and therefore vulnerable to falsification by 'hard' external evidence. Statements of religious belief and ethical precept are, however, practically unfalsifiable (and therefore, for some philosophers, meaningless), and may be held securely as a matter of my private choice. If in these areas I prefer to take Scripture as my guide, others may disapprove, but they can hardly prove me 'wrong'. Limited inerrancy is thus a very safe doctrine; those who prefer to go beyond it to claim *factual* inerrancy are immediately presenting hostages to fortune, vulnerable to any new (or old) scientific or historical discovery.

Theologically, however, I find it hard to justify a limited inerrantist view, for it draws a distinction between fact and faith, between the world and religion, which seems more appropriate to Gnosticism or existentialism than to evangelical Christianity. On what principle may we postulate that God is concerned with inculcating true attitudes in matters of faith and conduct but is not equally concerned with truths of history and science? The question is, of course, beside the point if you do not believe Scripture to be the Word of God, but, as I have indicated, I am taking that belief to be characteristic of evangelicals.

Yet I do not believe, any more than the next man, that the sun goes round the earth or that rain comes through windows in heaven. So obviously I must recognize the need to interpret the Bible in terms of a culture different from our own, and to make allowance for the use of 'unscientific' language. This is an obvious element in any responsible approach to interpreting a document from another culture. So how does this differ from the position of limited inerrancy?

I would suggest that, whereas limited inerrancy asks of the statement that the Bible is true and reliable the question 'In what areas?', the proper question to ask is rather 'For what purpose?'. I do not regard the teaching of natural science as the intention of any book of the Bible, and I believe that its truth must be measured in terms of what its authors are intending to convey. That in teaching truths about God the Creator they made use of 'prescientific' ways of describing the created order seems to me a necessary part of the process of the writing of inspired Scripture, and such prescientific language could only fairly be regarded as 'error' where there was a clear intention to instruct the reader on such matters. Such language is not erroneous or misleading

for any reader who has the interpretative common sense to read Scripture in its own cultural background. But sometimes Scripture *does* look as if it is intending to convey factual information, particularly in the area of historical events, and in such a case it must be interpreted accordingly and judged in terms of its apparent intention. I am well aware of the difficulty of establishing 'authorial intent', and I am quite prepared to accept that there may be more to a given passage than was consciously present to the author's mind; but I would want to insist that, in discussing questions of truth and reliability, we must focus on the apparent purpose for which the passage was written, and neither berate it for failing to produce what it was not designed to produce, nor dismiss as unimportant the factual truth of what purports to be a factual account.

The question 'For what purpose?' has also another bearing on our acceptance of the authority of Scripture, and that is in our recognition that there is no incompatibility between the belief that all Scripture is inspired by God and the recognition that not all of it is intended to be applied in the same way today as when it was written. The prime case here is, of course, the question of the applicability of the Old Testament laws as regulations in the Christian church. To believe, as Christians have always believed, following their Master's lead, that the Christian is not bound to literal observance of all the regulations of Leviticus, is not to flout the authority of Scripture nor to deny its divine origin, but to recognize that there is progress and development in God's revelation and in his dealings with men; so that what he commanded for Israel in the wilderness is not necessarily to be applied in the same way to the church in first-century Corinth or in twentieth-century Birmingham, and for some of it there may no longer be any practical application. This area calls for careful and responsible hermeneutical decisions, on the basis of theological principles derived from Scripture itself, rather than of *ad hoc* considerations of convenience or personal preference.

There are, then, far-reaching questions to be asked as to the purpose for which any given passage of Scripture was designed, both as regards its author's intention in his own time and place, and as regards its place in the unfolding revelation of God. But given a proper attention to these questions—which is to say, given a responsible interpretation of the passage rather than a hasty and superficial impression—I believe that an evangelical view of Scripture must include the truth and reliability of all that it intends to assert, whether 'religious' or factual. And this is what I mean by 'infallibility'.

It will be obvious, then, that if our talk of infallibility is to have cash-value, it must be worked out in terms of a proper interpretation of what Scripture says, and it is perhaps here that we find the real underlying cause for evangelical disquiet and disagreement which surfaces in the debates on infallibility and on critical issues outlined above. To this we now turn.

3) The 'plain meaning' of the text

James Barr⁴ makes great play of the fact—and it is a fact—that evangelicals ('fundamentalists') who are generally thought to stand by a literal interpretation of the text of Scripture, are in fact far from consistent in doing so. It is their practice, he suggests, to hold to a literal interpretation when it suits their prior assumption of Scripture's inerrancy; but when a literal interpretation would apparently involve Scripture in error, they are quick to shift their ground and to claim that the text does not 'really' mean what its literal sense demands.

Barr's observation is true, but the explanation for this supposed inconsistency is not necessarily (though it may be in some cases) as reprehensible as he suggests. For I wonder whether thinking evangelicals have ever claimed to be 'literalists' in their interpretation of Scripture. They are more likely, I think, to have spoken of the 'plain' or 'natural' meaning of the text, and if pressed further would have spoken of the meaning of the text as determined by responsible historico-grammatical exegesis. But the 'plain meaning' is only the literal meaning in a passage which is plainly intended to be read literally. Historico-grammatical exegesis is as likely to ascertain that a given passage is intended to be read as symbolic, schematic, or generalizing, as that it is to be read literally. Evangelical interpretation holds no brief for playing down the non-literal aspects of the biblical text; it aims only to discover what the text is intended to convey.

But it is here that there is much scope for evangelicals to differ from one another, and the difference generally corresponds roughly to the degree of the individual's acquaintance with, and involvement in, biblical scholarship. For what is plain to the non-academic reader of a passage may be far from self-evident to one who comes to it with an awareness of the cultural background and literary conventions within which it was written.⁵ Thus the 'plain man' coming to the book of Jonah will probably take it that he is reading what purports to be an account of actual events in the days of Nineveh's power. It seems, however, that some (though by no means all) evangelical Old Testament scholars have come to believe, on the basis of the comparative study of ancient Semitic literature, that it is not a historical record but a fictional narrative designed to teach certain theological and ethical lessons. As such, they would argue, it was never meant to be read as straight history, and to interpret it as such is to go against the 'plain meaning' of the text.

Similar areas of disagreement could be catalogued at all levels of interpretation. Some evangelical scholars now regard much of the infancy narratives of Matthew and Luke as imaginative fiction analogous to Jewish midrash. Others say that Jesus did not teach his disciples to keep the Old Testament laws as regulations for Christian living. Others again believe that apparently chronological phrases such as 'then', 'after six days', or 'immediately', are intended to signify a

logical or thematic connection, not a time-sequence. Others believe that evangelicals have been wrong to accept physical evolution as compatible with the statements of Genesis 1–2. We could go on *ad nauseam*, but the point I want to make is that when equally convinced evangelicals differ, as they do, over such issues, it is not necessarily because one is more loyal than another in his adherence to the authority of Scripture, nor because one is deliberately evading the plain meaning of the text; but because they genuinely disagree over what that plain meaning is, so that the more ‘liberal’ disputant may be as firmly convinced as the more ‘traditional’ that his opponent is doing violence to the text of Scripture by misconstruing its intended meaning. Neither right nor left wing has a guaranteed monopoly of true interpretation. It is for each to show why his interpretation is more faithful to what the text was intended to mean than the other.

I mentioned that these disagreements tend to be between the ‘plain man’ on the one hand and the professional biblical scholar on the other. It is inevitable that a fuller acquaintance with contemporary literature and cultural patterns will sometimes lead the scholar to modify the first impressions which may be natural to a modern western reader. It is the role of biblical scholarship to provide the background knowledge which will enable us to read the text with a more informed and responsible understanding, and we should not be afraid of reinterpretations which will lead us closer to what the biblical authors in their time intended to convey. But not even the biblical scholar is infallible, and it is unfortunate if he feels no need to listen to the insights or cautions of the ‘plain man’. For it is fatally easy for the scholar to be influenced by considerations other than ‘objective scholarship’. He may be over-influenced by the fashions current in his discipline at the time, overawed by the opinions of the great whose basic presuppositions may not be beyond question. Especially when we talk of ‘what a text was intended to mean’, it is tempting to tailor our assessment of its intention to the prevailing fashions of thought today. We may conclude that Scripture does not mean what it appears to mean simply in order to avoid an understanding of the text which might expose us to reproach or ridicule in the academic world. So neither the ‘plain man’ nor the scholar can safely disregard the opinions and arguments of the other when they find themselves in disagreement over what the Bible means.

It is disagreements of this nature—genuine differences over the right way to understand the text—which lie at the root of many, though certainly not all, of the issues we have classed under the headings of critical positions and of the reliability of Scripture. For one of the strongest evangelical arguments for many of the traditional conservative positions has been that they are required by the explicit statements of Scripture itself, such as ‘Moses wrote’, ‘Isaiah prophesied’, ‘Paul . . . to Timothy’, and even ‘Jesus said’. The classical opponent of

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these views has been the clear-cut 'liberalism' which says that such attributions are false, and must be discarded in favour of the findings of literary 'science'. But that is not, usually at least, the form the debate now takes within evangelicalism. The question is what such phrases really *mean*, when read in the context of the literary conventions of their day. If they were not *intended* to convey an actual attribution of authorship, and would not have been so interpreted by their first readers, then it is not only unnecessary to base our critical views on them, but it is actually to be unfaithful to the meaning of the Scripture. Similarly, in debates over the reliability of Scripture, it is often the case that those who are accused of denying the plain teaching of Scripture are in fact, in their own minds at least, not saying that the biblical writer was wrong, but that he has been misunderstood. If, for instance, what has been traditionally assumed to be a chronologically ordered account can be shown not to have been intended as such, it is futile to accuse a scholar of denying the veracity of Scripture if he refuses to make it the basis of his chronology.

Evangelical biblical scholarship has necessarily resulted in a greater awareness of the 'human' characteristics of the Bible. We have recognized how much it shares and is shaped by the cultural conditions and literary norms of its time. This is surely a proper study, for evangelicals do not believe in a Bible which came down from heaven inscribed on gold plates, but one which was written by *inspiration*, by the activity of God working in and through the minds and experiences and language of real men. It is possible that some of the disquiet that has been caused in traditional conservative circles by new approaches and interpretations arises from what has been effectively a 'Docetic' view of the Bible, as a purely divine product whose human form was a necessary accommodation to human infirmity, but was not to be taken seriously in discerning what God was saying. It is for this reason that a number of evangelicals have been calling recently for a more 'Chalcedonian'⁶ approach to Scripture: one which takes its divine and its human character equally seriously. This is not to call for a weakening of our belief that Scripture is in its entirety the true Word of God, but to recognize that the Word of God has come to us in the words of men, and that its two aspects are inextricably interwoven, so that to reach what God is saying to us in the Bible we can only come via what was the intended meaning of those whom he chose and directed in their writing. This is not to say that God meant *no more than* what the writers could consciously grasp: it is to say that his meaning comes to us *through* their meaning, so that we can no more say that the Word of God is to be discerned *in spite of* the way the biblical writers thought and wrote, than we can dismiss some parts of their writings as 'merely human' and dispensable.

If this is, as I believe, the authentic evangelical view of Scripture, then it is inevitable that interpretations will change and differ as we

progress and disagree in our grasp of the literary form of the Bible. Such disagreement is not unhealthy, but rather a sign of life; our grasp of the fulness of God's revelation to us can never be more than partial and imperfect, and it is in challenging and correcting each other's interpretations that we are likely to grow closer to a proper understanding. The danger is only when we forget that what we are studying is not *only* the words of men but the Word of God, and when we allow our human reason and conventions to be the arbiter of what may and may not be believed of that which we discover to be its intended meaning. When that happens among us, we have cause to be afraid for the future of evangelical belief. But what I want to say here is that the mere fact of disagreement does *not* mean that that stage has been reached, but is rather a natural and constructive aspect of a faithful evangelical attempt to do justice to the Word of God in the words of men.⁷

III

Where should evangelicalism go from here?

I have tried to present the current lack of unity among evangelicals over our approach to the Bible as not necessarily an unhealthy thing. But I do not therefore wish to suggest that there is no cause for concern—no need to stop and examine ourselves and ask where we are going. For disagreement is one thing, but division and mutual excommunication is another, and in at least some evangelical circles that seems to be the way we are going.

An easy answer, and one which clearly appeals strongly to many on the right wing of evangelicalism, would be to declare a moratorium on evangelical biblical scholarship and to lay down the traditional critical positions and interpretations as the canon of orthodoxy, much as the Roman Catholic hierarchy has at times attempted to do. Fortunately, however, evangelicalism has no mechanism for such a procedure, and I hope we will never develop one. If we take our commitment to Scripture as the Word of God seriously, we cannot be content to be controlled by tradition alone, but must aim by all proper means to increase our knowledge and understanding of Scripture, and that means that we must remain open to the new conclusions to which responsible evangelical scholarship may come. Of course there is (and always has been) the danger of creeping liberalism, of losing our grip on the fundamentals of evangelical belief under the influence of the liberal scholarship with which all biblical scholars must live and interact. It has happened before, and it can happen again; we need to be constantly on our guard. But the sort of differences which I have been outlining are not debates with liberalism, but matters on which equally convinced evangelical scholars are divided. It is not necessarily that the evangelical commitment of some scholars is weak or insincere, but that we

genuinely disagree over the hermeneutical implications of an acceptance of Scripture as the Word of God.

So let the biblical scholarship continue, with a firm commitment to the essential evangelical belief in Scripture as the true and reliable Word of God, but without undue deference to the traditions which have grown up within evangelicalism as to how it is to be understood. Of course we must all have traditions, and traditions founded on the careful and reverent scholarship of earlier evangelicals are not lightly to be discarded. But no tradition is above correction, and evangelical scholarship has the proper and necessary task of ensuring that we are not carrying unnecessary baggage from the past.

I am not afraid, then, of the raising of these issues. What I fear is the spirit in which they are often raised, and that from both sides of the debate.

Thus the professional scholars tend to press doggedly on with their researches without considering how their results are likely to affect the evangelical public, and sometimes perhaps without asking how they relate to their own evangelical commitment. What has taken a professional scholar years to arrive at, with all his background knowledge and training, can hardly be expected to be immediately self-evident to the ordinary man. There is need for care in presenting our material so that the non-specialist reader will not be misled. It is an exercise in communication, which is sadly not always the scholar's greatest aptitude. So unnecessary hostility is sometimes created towards new interpretations because they have not been presented with sufficient care and consideration for the natural reactions of the ordinary Christian. Indeed, some scholars seem to set out deliberately to shock the 'simple believer' by unnecessarily abrasive presentations of untraditional views. If we are concerned for the unity and progress of evangelical Christianity, the confidence of the non-specialist must be won, not assumed, by scholars whose boldness he may find unsettling.

On the other hand, those who have not been involved in academic biblical studies, and may not be aware of the complexity of some of the issues involved, may easily become suspicious of scholars whom they believe to be 'evading the plain meaning of the text' by endless qualifications and reinterpretations. They may refuse to accept that there are real questions to be answered, and real grounds for doubting the validity of some traditional evangelical positions. They cannot see why the stance which characterized evangelicals a century and more ago should be inadequate for evangelicals today. And so they suspect liberalism in what is in fact genuinely evangelical exploration, and are impatient with scholarly 'equivocation'.

What is so often lacking on either side is a willingness to listen to one another, to understand why the other man holds the position he does, and to accept the possibility of honourable disagreement between evangelicals.

Evangelicals have always been known for their strongly held convictions. This is both their strength and their weakness. It leads to a sturdy unwillingness to yield on the fundamentals of the faith, which has maintained evangelicalism as a continuing witness to the essential truths of the gospel. But it can also lead to an obstinate unwillingness to yield over matters which are not fundamental, and it is this which has made evangelicalism notorious for its ability to split up into hostile camps. I fear that, in our proper concern to stand firm for the authority of Scripture as the Word of God, we are in danger of confusing the inessential traditions with the fundamentals, and so dividing evangelicalism along traditional lines, to the inevitable impoverishment of both sides.

I believe, therefore, that it is vitally important in these days, when strong forces on both sides of the evangelical camp are threatening to split us up into 'traditionalists' and 'modernists', that we accept our responsibility to talk and to listen to each other as fellow evangelicals, trying to understand and sympathize with one another's views as together we explore what it means to hear God speaking to us in Scripture.

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NOTES

- * This paper was presented as a discussion-starter at the 1981 Anglican Evangelical Assembly in London.

I would emphasize that this is no more than what it claims to be—a discussion-starter, presented here almost unchanged from the form in which it was originally made available. There is much in it that needs further elaboration or qualification, as the discussion on that occasion made plain, but that would take a book. (These notes take up just a few of the more important matters raised in discussion.) The above is offered not as a definitive statement, but as some personal reflections on an area of disagreement among evangelicals which many of us find a matter for concern.

- 1 This sentence was properly criticized, in that it apparently ignores Jesus Christ as himself God's Word to man. This was, of course, taken for granted in what I wrote. I was concerned with the question of how we apprehend God's revelation, and therefore with the fact that it is only in the biblical record that we have access to God's supreme self-revelation in Christ. Perhaps for 'locus' I should have written 'means of apprehending'.
- 2 David F. Wright, 'Soundings in the Doctrine of Scripture in British Evangelicalism in the First Half of the Twentieth Century', *Tyndale Bulletin* 31, 1980, pp.87-106.
- 3 Oliver Barclay, 'The Inerrancy Debate', *Christian Graduate* 32, June 1980, pp.16-17.
- 4 James Barr, *Fundamentalism* (SCM, London 1977) especially pp.40-55.
- 5 I do not wish to suggest that the biblical writers were bound to follow slavishly the conventions of pagan society, and could not develop their own approach to the writing of history, etc., in the light of their distinctive theological concerns. They could and did. But this does not absolve us from the obligation to assess their

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intentions, whether by comparison or by contrast, against the background of their own culture rather than that of twentieth-century Europe.

- 6 This analogy from the doctrine of the person of Christ is not meant to be pressed to a detailed equivalence. It is simply a short-hand way of saying that in our approach to Scripture, as in our understanding of Jesus as both God and man, we must beware of allowing the 'both/and' to become, in practice if not in theory, an 'either/or'.
- 7 The contents of this section led to lively discussion of the role of 'scholarship'. I am unrepentant in saying that the specialist has an important role to play in informing, guiding and correcting our understanding of Scripture in the light of the cultural and historical context in which God caused it to be written. If his 'expert' contribution in this area is not taken seriously, the danger of misinterpretation is greater than it need otherwise be. But this is not to say that the ordinary Christian cannot understand the Bible; he will, if he is wise, use the help which the 'experts' offer, but their scholarship does not guarantee their spiritual perception. In the study of the Word of God, historical scholarship, important as it is, is not the only guide to truth, and all of us depend, and need to be constantly reminded that we depend, on the guidance of the Holy Spirit for the perception of God's truth. In this endeavour parishioner, pastor and professor all need each other. But what I am concerned to emphasize is that we should not normally expect God to communicate with us in defiance of proper exegesis of his Word (though sometimes he has, in my own experience as well as that of others!), and that here the specialist has an important, if 'back-room', role to play.