

Precious Bible, What a Treasure

John Newton (1725–1807)

Precious Bible, what a treasure,
Does the Word of God afford?
All I want for life and pleasure,
Food or med'cine, shield or sword;
Let the world account me poor,
Having this, I want no more.

Food to which the world's a stranger,
Here, my hungry soul enjoys;
Of excess, there is no danger,
Tho' it fills, it never cloyes.
On a dying Christ I feed,
He is meat and drink indeed.

When my faith is faint and sickly,
Or when Satan wounds my mind;
Cordials to revive me quickly,
Healing med'cines here I find:
To the promises I flee,
Each affords a remedy.

In the hour of dark temptation,
Satan cannot make me yield;
For the word of consolation
Is to me a mighty shield.
While the Scripture truths endure,
From his pow'r I am secure.

ΤΩ ΚΡΟΝΟΥ ΚΑΙΡΩ

In the Nick of Time

The Seventies: Part Four

Kevin T. Bauder

The 1970s proved to be an important turning point for the evangelical doctrine of Scripture. Going into the decade, fundamentalists and other evangelicals shared a broad consensus (at least publicly) over the notion that inspiration was both verbal and plenary and that Scripture was inerrant. There had been a few efforts earlier to unseat this consensus, such as Dewey M. Beegle's 1963 volume on *The Inspiration of Scripture*. Nevertheless, as far as ordinary Christians could tell, the consensus held. One example is Clark Pinnock's work, *Biblical Revelation*, published in 1971. The book was a full-throated defense of verbal, plenary inspiration and of biblical infallibility and inerrancy. No one then could have guessed that Pinnock would become one of the leading deniers of inerrancy.

In 1970, agreement over biblical inspiration and authority seemed to rule the evangelical world. This apparent agreement was shown to be illusory when in 1971 the board at Fuller Seminary voted to remove inerrancy from its doctrinal statement. This move was made partly to accommodate the views of the founder's son, Daniel P. Fuller, and it was made quietly. By 1972, however, the change was being widely discussed within the evangelical world.

That year John W. Wenham published *Christ and the Bible*, in which he examined Jesus' attitudes toward Scripture. Wenham came to the unsurprising conclusion that Jesus' view of the Bible was very high indeed. The book is still useful after half a century. What is significant is that Wenham's book—prepared mainly before the Fuller revision—seems to have been the last major work on bibliology that assumed the older consensus within evangelicalism.

The following year (1973) Beegle was back with a revision of his book, now entitled *Scripture, Tradition, and Infallibility*. Writing for the *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society*, Gordon Clark labeled Beegle's discussion "an all-out, no-holds-barred, always aggressive, sometimes insidious attack on the truthfulness of Scripture. Its basic thesis, used both as an axiom and as a conclusion, is the occurrence of indubitable errors in the Bible" (*JETS* 20, 275). Clearly something was askew in evangelical bibliology, but what?



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The answer was provided by Harold Lindsell, who was a founding professor at Fuller and was presently serving as editor of *Christianity Today*, the flagship publication of the evangelical world. Lindsell had the distinction of being one of the original neoevangelicals. He could not possibly be mistaken for a fundamentalist. Yet in 1976 he published *The Battle for the Bible*, in which he claimed that biblical inerrancy was being undermined in multiple places within the evangelical world. Lindsell pointed specifically to the Lutheran Church, Missouri Synod, the Southern Baptist Convention, and the case of Fuller Theological Seminary. For the first time publicly, he told the story of Fuller's checkered relationship with biblical authority. He also argued that if the attack on biblical inerrancy was not halted, then evangelicals would begin to surrender the Bible's authority on substantial doctrinal and practical issues.

In fact, that surrender had already begun. The year before Lindsell published his book, Paul King Jewett of Fuller Seminary published *Man as Male and Female*. Jewett speculated that Paul's views on the relation between the sexes were a result of his rabbinical bias. He suggested that these views ought to be ignored in favor of Paul's more enlightened statement that there is neither male nor female in Christ (Gal 3:28).

The "battle for the Bible" was fought across several fronts in the evangelical world. On one front, the Lutheran Church, Missouri Synod reinforced a wavering stance on inerrancy with the result that several professors left Concordia Seminary to found a "seminary in exile," or Seminex. In 1976 the non-inerrantists were forced out of the denomination.

On another front, denials of inerrancy had permeated the Southern Baptist Convention. In 1978 a group of prominent leaders met in Atlanta to develop a strategy for reclaiming their denomination. The following year these leaders—including Adrian Rogers, Paige Patterson, Paul Pressler, and W. A. Criswell—launched what would become known as the "conservative resurgence" in the SBC. Pressler, a judge, had recognized that by controlling the election of the convention president, the conservatives could eventually shift the weight of the whole structure in favor of inerrancy.

Of course, non-inerrantists were quick to respond. Rogers of Fuller Seminary fired off a stammering reply to Lindsell, *Biblical Authority*, in 1977. Two years later he co-authored a more robust volume with Donald K. McKim, *The Authority and Interpretation of the Bible*. Rogers and McKim argued that inerrancy was not the traditional position of the Church. This book was widely acclaimed, and some took it to be the final word on the subject of inerrancy. Nevertheless, it would be answered decisively by John Woodbridge's *Biblical Authority* in 1982.

Meanwhile, in 1978, exegetes, theologians, and churchmen from across the evangelical world met in Chicago to organize the International Council on

Biblical Inerrancy. These individuals deliberately planned for the council to go out of existence after ten years, which it did. Over that decade the ICBI published multiple volumes defending biblical inerrancy. Perhaps its most important contribution, however, was the draft of the Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy. This statement gave the evangelical world its first definitive declaration of just what inerrancy meant—and what it did not mean.

During the intervening years Lindsell had left the editorship of *Christianity Today*. In 1979 he published his second blast in the inerrancy debate, *The Bible in the Balance*. Here he repeated and expanded his older accusations. He detailed developments in the SBC, the LCMS, and Fuller Seminary. He offered a critique of the historical-critical method. Perhaps most importantly, he devoted a chapter to the question of who or what is an evangelical.

In that chapter Lindsell argued that the word *evangelical* had "become so debased that it has lost its usefulness" (319). He found himself casting about for an acceptable alternative. Surprisingly, he—one of the original neoevangelicals—suggested that inerrantist evangelicals might go back to the label *fundamentalist*. Perhaps not as surprisingly, his suggestion was never widely implemented, even within the more conservative evangelical world.

What Lindsell did manage to do was to hardwire into the more conservative versions of evangelicalism an awareness that inerrancy is a watershed doctrine. For at least a generation other evangelicals echoed his insight that no one who denied inerrancy could properly be called evangelical. Still, Lindsell's generation had crested in its influence, and it would soon begin to die off. The next generation would change the question so that talk about inerrancy began to sound nonsensical (if meaning is person-relative, then truth and error are also person-relative). The generation after that would again attack inerrancy with a vengeance. The battle for the Bible has not gone away.



This essay is by Kevin T. Bauder, Research Professor of Historical and Systematic Theology at Central Baptist Theological Seminary. Not every one of the professors, students, or alumni of Central Seminary necessarily agrees with every opinion that it expresses.
