

What's The Bible?

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Believe it or not, pornographers sometimes solicit *me*. But they don't want me to pose; they want me to purchase. Sometimes a sample is enclosed within a sealed second envelope on which is printed the obligatory and entrepreneurial copy: "WARNING! Adult material enclosed. Open at your own risk or discard unopened."

Maybe Bibles should come that way—sealed inside plain brown wrappers with big, bold letters: "WARNING! Adult material enclosed. Open at your own risk or discard unopened." That would put both Christians with their domesticated dogmas and non-Christians with their domesticated doubts on notice that there are real shockers inside—much more scandalous to both than the predictable sex shots. Typically, the Bible turns the predictable upside down, as when Jesus says that prostitutes are entering God's kingdom ahead of religious leaders. That is still surprising to both the prostitutes and the preachers, though today's headlines prompt us to ask: If the prostitutes are entering, can the preachers be far behind?

Actually, the Bible has been an x-rated book for a long time. Yet *The New York Times* began its story on our New York Bible study by saying: "It is no one's image of what homosexuals do in New York City on a Friday night." In 1828 a Bible published by Quakers placed at the bottom of pages passages thought unsuitable for mixed company. In 1833 Noah Webster published his own revision of the King James Version because, as he put it, "many words and phrases [in the Bible] are very offensive to delicacy, and even to decency." It was his notion that "such words and phrases ought not to be retained." According to Webster, "Language which cannot be uttered in company without a violation of decency, or the rules of good breeding, exposes the Scriptures to the scoffs of unbelievers, impairs their authority, and multiplies or confirms the enemies of our holy religion." Perhaps it was not the "unbelievers" who would have been so offended. They may even have welcomed the fact that the Bible speaks their language. For his 1909 Study Bible, C. I. Scofield revised the King's English to get rid of what he considered indelicate vocabulary. He didn't think the Bible should speak of "the men which sit on the wall [and] eat their own dung

and drink their own piss." He preferred that they drink their own "water." In King James' day, by the way, "piss" had itself been a euphemism borrowed from the French. Modern English translations obscure what the servant in Genesis 24:9 was doing when he swore an oath to Abraham. Americans read that the servant "put his hand under the thigh of his master." What the servant really did was to swear his oath while holding fast to Abraham's testicles. That's why we call them testicles—from the Latin *testis*, "witness." Today we swear while holding fast to the Old and New *Testaments*.

The Bible can be particularly graphic when it comes to sex. For example, the Song of Solomon celebrates Solomon's favorite harem girl's "rounded vulva, like a bowl always full to the brim with sweet liquid." She, in turn, sings of "my lover thrusting his shaft into the hole and my guts seething for him." The bawdy Bible pictures cherubim with flying phalluses under their wings. These are hardly the cute Christmas card chubbies modeled after the youths later boy-lovers chased. The Bible speaks of "well-hung" Egyptians and of the Lord's threat to shave the pubic hair of the unfaithful King Ahaz, one of Jesus' ancestors. But this is all generally hidden away in euphemisms about "hands" and "feet" or it's not translated at all. The New International Version does manage to expose the lovers "whose genitals were like those of donkeys and whose emission was like that of horses." But the prudish Living Bible deprives readers of that entire line of scripture. To put that one in Living vernacular would perhaps be just too much for American fundamentalists to swallow.

One recent example of how silly fundamentalists can get in their unbiblical revulsion to the human body, especially the genitals, is shown in *Moody Monthly's* full-color ads for a Moody Bible Institute film on the human body. The ad uses Michelangelo's depiction of Adam and God with their index fingers just short of touching. In the original masterpiece on the ceiling vault of the Sistine Chapel, Adam has both a navel and genitals, the navel at odds with the Genesis story and the genitals in full conformity with it. But by the time the *Moody Monthly* airbrushes had "improved" on both Michelangelo's and God's creations, Adam was left with his navel but he'd lost his genitals. Although Moody Bible Institute preaches Adam's creation out of the dust of the ground, it is obviously not as embarrassed by the biblically-incompatible mark of a discarded umbilical cord as by the biblically-compatible picturing of that organ through which Adam was to do his part in obeying God's command to "be fruitful and multiply." The ad copy describes the film as "reveal[ing] how every cell, every nerve, every bone in your body points unmistakably towards the Master Craftsman who created us all." Evidently though, some fundamentalists don't think that a penis points in that same direction. But doesn't it do so when erect? Don't fundamentalists usually think of God as being "up there?"

Not all of the sex in the Bible is graphically genital. One whole book of the Bible, though, is virtually nothing but "soft-core" erotic poetry with no really evident theology at all. But the prudish couldn't stand it as it was and for centuries they insisted on turning the Song of Solomon into an allegory of love between God and the church. As one commentator has observed: "interpreters who dared acknowledge the plain sense of the Song were assailed as enemies of

truth and decency. The allegorical charade thus persisted for centuries with only sporadic protests." [Pope] And even today the erotic imagery is yet too sexy for many fundamentalists. D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones wrote a 1960 Foreword to a reprint of an 1853 commentary in which he misrepresented the view of modern commentators. He claimed that because they "regard it as but the love song or poem of a king, written to one of his loves when he was probably under the influence of wine ... They feel that it should not be in the Bible at all, that it has no spiritual value whatsoever, and that it is scarcely a fit book for good and moral people to read." This is not true of those who regard the Song as a celebration of human sexuality, but it may well represent the evaluation of the allegorizing fundamentalists to whom Lloyd-Jones declared the Song to be strictly an exposition "of the relationship between the believer and his Lord"—the unintended homosexual implications of the pronoun notwithstanding. On the other hand, Charles C. Ryrie of Dallas Theological Seminary correctly asserts that the allegorical interpretation of the Song "is contrary to all principles of normal interpretation and must be rejected." Ryrie says that it is "rightly [understood] ... to be an historical record of the romance of Solomon with a Shulamnite woman." He notes "the rightful place of physical love" in this love story. But then, without textual warrant here, he adds that the Song makes that place to be "within marriage only." He goes so far as to say that this is, in the Song, "clearly established and honored." But such is not the case. Ryrie himself concedes that "Solomon does not furnish the best example of marital devotion"—not with his harem of 1,000—but he tries to save the situation for fundamentalists by positing that this account "may reflect the only (or virtually the only) pure romance he had." Whatever could Ryrie mean by "virtually the only" if he's championing the Song as celebrating monogamous marriage? Although there are very good reasons for supporting monogamy, this celebration of Solomon's sex life is hardly one of them.

Evangelical theologian Donald Bloesch of Dubuque Theological Seminary laments that, for fundamentalists and much of the older orthodoxy, "the Bible offers no surprises [because] ... Too often it is used to support a dogmatic system—whether it be Lutheranism, Calvinism, Arminianism, or some other ism—instead of being treated as a vehicle of the Holy Spirit who uproots our man-made systems and confounds the vanity of our reason." After reading straight through the Bible in two weeks on vacation in the Colorado mountains, Phil Yancey of *Christianity Today* says: "Above all else, this is what struck me in my daily reading: Our common impressions of God may be very different from what the Bible actually portrays." The same can be said about our common impressions of the Bible itself. The Bible is *queer!* That is, it deviates from what is expected. It's abnormal, odd, quite unconventional. That's why it's called the *Holy Bible*,—it truly is *different* from other books, literally *set apart*. If they'd but read it, both anti-gay preachers and anti-preacher gays might learn what poet George Herbert meant when he wrote *The Temple* in 1633: "Bibles laid open, millions of surprises."

Pulitzer Prize winning author Annie Dillard, in her book, *An American Childhood*, remembers the adults who pushed the Bible at her and her adolescent friends and she wonders: "Why did they spread this scandalous document before our eyes? If they had read it, I thought, they would

have hid it. They didn't recognize the vivid danger that we would, through repeated exposure, catch a case of its wild opposition to their world. Instead they bade us study great chunks of it, and think about those chunks, and commit them to memory, and ignore them. By dipping us children in the Bible so often, they hoped, I think, to give our lives a serious tint, and to provide us with quaintly magnificent snatches of prayer to produce as charms while, say, being mugged for our cash or jewels."

Not everyone is up for a full-bodied jocularity when it comes to spirituality. But as G. K. Chesterton observed: "It is the test of a good religion whether you can make a joke about it." If the Bible is not exactly a book of jokes it is at least a book full of humor. That itself is surprising and maybe even shocking to those who have thought of the Bible as a pompous and prudish party-pooper. Even the philosopher Alfred North Whitehead mistakenly said that "The total absence of humor from the Bible is one of the most singular things in all literature." What did he do with the Bible's wealth of puns (admittedly not always evident in translation), irony, satire, sarcasm, farce, absurdities? Can a reader really miss the chaotic hilarity of the scene where Elijah taunts the prophets of Baal with the possibilities that their god has dozed off or may be out cruising and they'll have to yell a little louder? Can anyone miss the humor in God's prophet's ridiculing those who bow down to idols made from left-over scraps of wood? Isn't the story of Jacob's hairy drag show worthy of the Marx Brothers or Robin Williams? Picture holier-than-thou priests sipping from cups that are all polished up on the outside and full of stinking crud on the inside. Isn't that a joke? Picture hypocritical preachers straining a gnat out of their soup while trying to swallow a whole camel. Even apart from the Aramaic pun in Jesus' joke, this is funny. Is it too "Freudian" to see what the Jewish Theological Seminary midrash scholar Burton Visotzky sees in the "lovely phallic symbol" of the ladder in Jacob's dream: "your seed will burst forth." Why else, he asks, do the angels go up and then down the ladder rather than down and then up? Visotzky notes that modern readers are at a disadvantage because they "don't see whether [the biblical writers] are winking at you. You don't hear the lilt in their voice." Paul's letters are especially peppered with sarcasm and a reader who misses this will miss many of Paul's points.

Recently the Supreme Court refused to hear the last appeal of seven Tennessee families who complained that their rights had been violated when their children were suspended from school for refusing to read so-called "godless" and "unbiblical trash." These parents and their preachers had described the unread material as advocating "secular humanism, evolution, disobedience to parents, pacifism, and feminism." Right-wing anti-feminist fundamentalist Beverly LaHaye lost no time in capitalizing on defeat: "A dark cloud of religious oppression looms over America's schoolhouses today," she bemoaned. Translation: Send money today. Does LaHaye know that the secular humanist evolutionist Thomas Henry Huxley also endorsed Bible reading for kids? He once asked rhetorically: "By the study of what other book could children be so much humanized?" LaHaye wants the kids to read the Bible, not that awful stuff urging them to disobey their parents? So let the kids read the Bible. And don't forget the part where Jesus said

that they'd have to disobey their parents to follow him. LaHaye wants the kids to read the Bible instead of that awful stuff about pacifism? So let the kids read the Bible. And don't forget that part where, Jesus tells them to turn the other cheek and do good to those who do them harm. LaHaye doesn't want the kids exposed to awful feminism? So let them read the Bible. And don't forget the part where Jesus supports equality for women in his debates with the conservative religious leaders of his day. And LaHaye should know that in all these things, Jesus was overturning *traditional* interpretations of Exodus, Leviticus, and Deuteronomy.

With all their Bible-thumping, the biblical illiteracy among Right-wing religionists might seem surprising. But their bibliolatry is not so much an excessive veneration of the Bible as such—much less is it a high regard for major biblical themes such as justice, grace and mercy—as it is the veneration of nostalgia for the "good old days" when injustice for the poor and oppressed was the majority's sanctioned way of life. In the words of one prominent evangelical, Senator Mark Hatfield, "The New Right religionists ... are creating an anti-biblical theology of power politics." With a cold leftward glance, William F. Buckley, Jr. says: "The diminished Bible, in our culture, is in part owing to ... opportunistic uses of the Bible by those who wish to see in it authority to ply their special positions in world politics." Thus we shouldn't be surprised when Right-wing religionists view the Bible as a political weapon to be wielded as deftly as Left-wing religionists do.

People have tended to regard Bibles with superstition. The editor of *The Banner* of the Christian Reformed Church, Andrew Kuyvenhoven, notes that even "'Fundamentalists' ... tend to get superstitious about the holiness of the Bible as Book." He wisely cautions that "it simply is *not* so that everyone who extols the book is a Christian," however. He points out that "When a preacher claims that he believes the book (he holds it up in the air) from Genesis 1:1 to Revelation 22:21 is God's infallible, inerrant, holy, inspired (and so on) revelation, he has not yet proclaimed the Word. He has merely assured his audience that he 'is not a liberal.'" Such misuse of the Bible to distance oneself from dreaded "L-word" Christians is just what Right-wing fundamentalists do. At the San Antonio meetings of the Southern Baptists, for example, fundamentalists called their moderate yet evangelical opponents "liberals" and W. A. Criswell of Dallas linked them with "secularists, humanists and the atheists and infidels."

But it isn't only the preacher in the pulpit who tends to regard Bibles with superstition. People in general do the same thing. They may not even be church-goers. An old Bible may go unread for years. It may be handled only when dusting. Yet its owners cannot bring themselves to throw it in the trash. They may even religiously avoid ever placing anything on top of it. Yet the \$26-million Florida Lotto winners reported that they stacked their forty Lotto tickets on a Bible, turned on the TV to hear the winning number, and prayed. The winning ticket, they said, "was the last ticket ... next to the Bible." Swearing on a stack of Bibles is supposedly a way of increasing the chances that one is telling the truth. Even in pluralistic modern America, public officials are expected to take the oaths of office with their hands placed squarely on top of a Bible. Whenever Emperor Menelik II of Ethiopia was not feeling well, he'd *eat* a page of his

Bible. A three-year survey of youths in evangelical churches concluded in 1986 that although "many seemed to have an almost magical view [of the Bible] they did not read it." Such neglect is no doubt compatible with their rocking religiously to Bash 'n the Code's *The B-I-B-L-E*.

Reader's Digest, which once published a condensed version of the Bible, calls the Bible "the most unread best seller." And though the Bible is the best seller of all time, commentaries and other Bible study materials are not best sellers even in so-called Bible book stores. The best sellers in these stores are Right-wing religious knock-offs of the best sellers at secular book stores. They're the slick and often unbiblical "feel good" pop-psych paperbacks for a "me-generation" and an "us-them" mentality, together with ghost-written celebrity fluff promoting personalities and prosperity.

But of course it's not only fundamentalists and their charismatic cousins who are so often biblically illiterate. Secular humanists are also often beyond their depths when it comes to the Bible. And it doesn't seem to matter that, otherwise, they may be very well educated. A major writer for the smirky and pretentious *New York Review of Books* referred in passing to the *Saint James Version* of the Bible and her mistake was not caught by any editor or proof-reader. No letter to the editor corrected her—at least in print.

Every year, 500 million copies of the Bible are sold worldwide. It comes in print, in Braille, on film, on audio and video cassettes, and on computer. Ninety-three percent of Americans own a copy. But half say they never read it, including 23% of self-identified "born again" Christians. Only 10% of Americans read the Bible every day. Maybe that's because the Bible nowhere mentions cats.

In George Gallup's words, we're "really a nation of biblical illiterates." At an excellence-in-education conference sponsored by Burger King, educators were asked to compile a list of books students should read before graduation from high school. They recommended Shakespeare of course, and Mark Twain, E. B. White, Judy Blume, J. D. Salinger, and even Dr. Seuss. The great book that was not on the list: the Bible. But we hardly need Burger King, the Gallup Poll, or Elizabeth Struthers Malbon to convince us that, as she stated in *The New York Times Book Review*: "Literate people no longer have a daily intimacy with the Bible." We can forget *daily* intimacy, most literate people nowadays no longer have any real intimacy with the Bible. "One is, indeed, tempted to define modernism in Western culture in terms of the recession of the Old and the New Testaments from the common currency of recognition," writes George Steiner in *The New Yorker*. He goes on: "Such recognition ... was [once] the sinew of literacy, the shared matter of intellect and sentiment from the late sixteenth century onward. ... not only in the spheres of personal and public piety but in those of politics, social institutions, and the life of the literary and aesthetic imagination." To whatever extent it may be true that as Virginia Stem Owens observes, "All Western literature ... is a midrash on the Bible," how many people today can see this? Might we not agree with Steiner, that "Like an unplayed Stradivarius, the once-holy text inhabits the air-conditioned glass case of dispassionate disregard."

Merely a hundred years ago, when the Revised Version of the New Testament arrived in America from England, the entire text was rushed into print in the pages of both major Chicago daily newspapers. Three hundred years before that, Christians risked their very lives to translate the Bible into English. Some lost their lives for doing so. Even Bible *readers* were not safe. Benjamin Franklin related that one of his ancestors tied a Bible to the underside of a stool. As it was being read, a lookout was posted at the door to signal when it was no longer safe to be reading it.

Today, "Gospel" is much more likely to be a synonym for black soul music than for God's good news of grace and peace. "Gospel" reviews in *The New York Times* and the gay *New York Native* have yielded respectively the following statements of secular reassurance: "You don't have to ... believe in bed-rock Christianity to enjoy this music" and "One need not believe in a Judea-Christian God to clap and stomp along with these roof-raisers." A *Newsweek* review of two new books on the Bible promised readers: "If you can't subscribe to the Bible as scripture, you can nevertheless revere it as a magnificent literary masterwork." But poet Donald Davie, reviewing one of these books for *The New Republic*, argues that to view the Bible as only a literary masterwork is to reduce it to what essentially it is not. He says that "to be blunt about it" the author of this new literary look at the Bible "writes as an unbeliever, to convert us to his unbelief." Davie isn't the only literary professional to voice suspicion about those who handle the Bible as merely a source for aesthetic delight while resisting any claim upon their hearts. In 1961, C. S. Lewis, the Oxbridge literary scholar, charged that "Those who talk of reading the Bible 'as literature' sometimes mean, I think, reading it without attending to the main thing it is about." Earlier, Lewis had written that Scripture "does not invite, it excludes or repels, the merely aesthetic approach. You can read it as literature only by a *tour de force*. You are cutting the wood against the grain ... it will not continue to give literary delight very long except to those who go to it for something quite different." T. s. Eliot, the poet and literary critic, was less restrained. Said Eliot: "The persons who enjoy these writings solely because of their literary merit are essentially parasites; and we know that parasites when they become too numerous, are pests. I could easily fulminate for a whole hour against the men of letters who have gone into ecstasies over 'the Bible as literature.'"

There are men and women even today who cannot afford the entertaining luxury of the Bible as simply great literature or mere intellectual curio. To them, the Bible has been a matter of life and death. The witness of Anatoly Sharansky is one such example. During nine years of political imprisonment in Soviet jails and work camps, he taught himself enough Hebrew to read a little Psalm book given to him by his wife. Before his imprisonment he was an assimilated secular Jew, a graduate of the Soviet equivalent to MIT. He says he "didn't know anything about the Psalms." At one point, however, he risked further punishment by getting Hebrew lessons through toilet pipes from the cell of a fellow prisoner, a Hebrew scholar. Just before Sharansky's release in a prisoner exchange in 1986, the Soviet guards tried to take away his little book of Psalms.

Sharansky recalls that he told them he would not leave without "the Psalms that had helped me so much. ... I lay down in the snow and said, 'Not another step.'"

How Simple-Minded Do We Have To Be To Take The Bible Seriously?

One of William Blake's less poetic companions once asked the mystic artist: "What, when the sun rises, do you not see a round disk of fire somewhat like a guinea?" "O no, no," Blake replied, "I see an innumerable company of the heavenly host crying, 'Holy, Holy, Holy is the Lord God Almighty.'" That was hardly the response of a biblically-illiterate poet to an awe-inspiring natural phenomenon. That was a biblically-inspired poet, with the aid of Isaiah, recalling the seraphim's antiphonal song above the throne of the Lord. Blake saw the sun, but because of scripture, he also saw beyond the sun. The light of even the rising sun was now not bright enough, now too blindingly bright, to so clearly see beyond it without the light of the Bible. Even the general revelation of which we read in David and Paul and other parts of the Bible—the revelation in the natural world—cannot shed the light which shines forth from the Bible. It is that something beyond both the world around us and the Bible-as-literature that Lewis had in mind when he asked us to go to the Bible "for something quite different" from mere literary delight and that Blake urged his friend to see as more than a golden coin in the sky. In what Lewis called "the greatest poem in the Psalter and one of the greatest lyrics in the world," David sings: "The heavens are proclaiming the glory of God, and the sky manifests the work of his hands. Day unto day pours forth speech, and night unto night unfolds knowledge. Without speech and without words, their voice is inaudible."

But as we read on in this 19th Psalm, we find that the poet "moves in a climactic fashion from macrocosm to microcosm, from the universe and its glory to the individual in humility before God. But," as one commentator says, "the climax lies in the microcosm, not in the heavenly roar of praise. ... though the vast firmament so high above us declares God's praise, it is the Torah of God ... that reveals to [us] that [we have] a place in the universal scheme of things." [Craigie] In David's words, "The law of the Lord is perfect, reviving the life. The testimony of the Lord is sure, making wise the simple." This is what the theologians call "special" revelation—God's communication to us in writing as over against God's communication to us in nature or "general" revelation. Special revelation is found in the Bible. But just as the blazing sun is not the revelation itself but points beyond to the Creator, so as Herman Bavinck states, "Scripture is ... not the revelation itself, but the description, the record, from which the revelation can be known." Otherwise, as Bloesch points out, we'd have bibliolatry, the Bible as an idol.

But of course there is much that is not revealed. It should make sense to us that there is so much that makes no sense to us. "Truly, You are a God who hides yourself, O God and Savior of Israel." [Isaiah] Pascal knew that "A religion which does not affirm that God is hidden is not true." Harry Boer, theologian and retired missionary to Nigeria, writes: "Wherever the divine and the human meet, there is mystery." And Leon Morris of Australia's Ridley College writes: "... the Bible was never intended as a handbook of Christian doctrine, a compendium of Christian

knowledge. It is the record of God's saving acts ... it leaves much unexplained." Know-it-all religionists are as much in the dark as know-it-all atheists. Those who have a sense of how very little they really do know, nonetheless do see. But as Paul cautioned, it's now "through a glass darkly." It's partial. It's indirect. It's not at all "face to face." And as C. W. Lewis put it in his *Reflections on the Psalms*: "Taken by a literalist, He will always prove the most elusive of teachers. Systems cannot keep up with that darting illumination. No net less wide than a man's whole heart, nor less fine of mesh than love, will hold the sacred Fish."

When Julian Huxley wrote that there is "no different kind of inspiration in the Bible from that in Shelley's poetry ... that there is no literal revelation, no literal inspiration," he was stating his faith about the nature and knowledge of reality. When Anna B. Warner wrote "Jesus loves me, this I know," she too was making a statement of faith about the nature and knowledge of reality. How did Warner and Huxley know what they were talking about? One knew because the Bible told her so; the other because he talked to himself.

The most basic question of any statement of faith is this: On what authority do you rely? Who says so? Either we speak to ourselves or we receive revelation. Atheistic naturalists like Huxley believe that they have what it takes, on the basis of their own powers of observation and analysis, to know reality truthfully. They literally trust themselves to speak the truth to themselves. They say they have no need to speak with a supernatural being. Christians, on the other hand, have always believed that we are recipients of revelation coming from outside ourselves. And we trust we're not ventriloquists.

Are Christians the only ones who believe that we are recipients of revelation coming from outside ourselves? No. Some of our friends these days put crystals to their foreheads and claim that they receive information channeled through these modern "crystal sets" to their "third eye"—an organ which itself is taken on faith. They say the information comes from outer space, from other worlds. But there is a big difference between what they're saying and what we're saying. They think that the source of the messages is one with themselves and we do not think that. In a sense, of course, they're right, but not in the sense they have in mind. What they're getting from "outer" space may be what they're projecting from *inner* space—their own wishes writ large. Or they may be hearing from other creatures—other *created* beings with whom they share their *creaturehood*. But they are one with it all even though they are not one with God. (Neither are we.) Their pantheism—for that is what they believe is, as Lewis observed, "the attitude into which the human mind automatically falls when left to itself." By contrast, Christians have always believed that there is a decisively significant difference between ourselves and the ultimate source of revelation. We're not of the same stuff. The good news we get from "out there," so to speak, is news we're in no position or, indeed disposition, to generate. What self-respecting, self-justifying human being would *project* the good news of the Christian gospel, predicated as it is on the bad news that we're all hopelessly lost without the utterly unmerited love of a gracious God? It is the invariable bent of humanity, confirmed by historical and cross-cultural anthropology, to endeavor to put the gods in our debt, to earn salvation—if it

is at least admitted that we are wrong in the first place. That all our own self-love won't work is not viewed as good news by those who say they are capable of loving themselves into salvation. The good news of the Christian gospel, as revealed in the Bible, is not good news to those who want to save themselves from such "good" news.

Are we right? Are they right? We, as well as they, might be deluded. But we cannot all be right. Either the God of whom we read in the Bible is "out there," separate from ourselves, and takes the initiative to reveal Love to us or God is not and does not. In response, we are trusting that God is and does—that God is Love and loves us. Who's to say? How do we know for sure? Has any skeptical inquirer brought back eyewitness accounts of the whole universe?

We all know *by faith*. We all know by trusting the witness in the Bible or by trusting the witness in something else. No matter how much we all think about it though, at bottom it is a matter of trust. No matter how we search it out, at bottom it's a matter of reliance, dependence, trust. On whom or what are we depending? For the Christian as well as for the atheist, the agnostic, the New Age pantheist, and the indifferent materialist, at bottom each of us makes a central faith commitment based in pre-theoretical and pre-scientific presuppositions. In an even more radical sense, we all trust our very own abilities to know who to trust. But Christians believe that even our ability to trust God is somehow itself one of God's undeserved gifts.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the young German theologian hanged by the Nazis, wrote: "Either I determine the place in which I will find God, or I allow God to determine the place where he will be found. If it is I who say where God will be, I will always find there a God who in some way corresponds with me, is agreeable to me, fits in with my nature. But if it is God who says where he will be, then that will truly be a place which at first is not agreeable to me at all, which does not fit so well with me. That place is the cross of Christ. ... The entire Bible, then, is the Word in which God allows himself to be found by us. Not a place which is agreeable to us or makes sense *a priori*, but instead a place which is strange to us and contrary to our nature. Yet the very place in which God has decided to meet us [reveals a God] who is altogether strange to us, whose ways are not our ways and whose thoughts are not our thoughts. ... God is completely other than the so-called eternal verities. Theirs is an eternity made up of our own thoughts and wishes. But God's Word begins by showing us the cross." Haven't we, too, found in the Bible a most unexpected God? Haven't we been surprised, even shocked and bewildered that God is, indeed, so different from what we'd been told? Instead of a moralistic judge we see a jealous Lover, instead of an omnipotent despot we see a suffering Servant, instead of a foolishly indulgent grandpa we see a wise and disciplining Parent.

But can we really have any confidence in the Bible? Haven't we heard that it's full of mistakes? Instead of its being the *Holy* Bible, is it not really more a *holey* Bible? Maybe it's just *wholly babble!*

Can We Trust the New Testament? is the title of a book by New Testament scholar J. A. T. Robinson of England, best known for his earlier block-buster, *Honest to God*. Though Robinson was hardly a card-carrying conservative, he concluded that so far as the New Testament is concerned, "On purely critical grounds I am far more convinced of the trustworthiness of the historical tradition. This is simply the way the evidence seems to me to point." He argues for the average Christian's gaining a greater familiarity with the results of modern biblical research, "For the best knowledge I do not believe to be shattering to faith—even if it is at first disturbing to ignorance. For the results of what has gone through the finest critical sieve that has ever been applied to any literature I find encouraging." Robinson concludes that all four of the Gospels—Matthew, Mark, Luke, and even John—were written before the fall of Jerusalem in AD 70 and he states that "most of the material [is] traceable a good deal further back. This would mean a gap of a single generation" between Jesus' ministry and the writing of the Gospels. Even Hugh J. Schonfield, author of the infamous *Passover Plot*, has had the following to say in his book, *The Bible Was Right*: "It is in such matters [i.e. "the trivial but significant details"], of no particular importance to the narrative, which continually crop up in the pages of the New Testament quite casually and incidentally, and which demonstrate its veracity." Schonfield's conclusion: "I have utilized the results of modern research and exploration to make a considerable test of the accuracy of the New Testament, and I think it will be agreed that the evidence of reliability is remarkably strong."

No literature in the history of the world has been subjected to more thorough scrutiny, by both friend and foe, by philosophers and scientists, as well as by humble believers, over a longer time and across more varied cultures than has the Bible. No literature on earth has withstood more stringent tests and come through with colors flying as high as those of the Bible. But one would not realize this from the sophomoric anti-Bible sentiments in scoffing American urban centers, the mass media, and gay society. Instead of even looking into the Bible these days, many people are gobbling up the most bizarre and untested assortment of trendy notions and gimmicks imaginable. They're demonstrating the keen observation of Chesterton: "When people stop believing in God, the problem is not that they believe in nothing but that they believe in everything."

People do have an understandable spiritual hunger as well as a natural desire for certainty and control. But because so many people have little or no training in critical theoretical thought and the history of ideas and have been exposed to greedy and hate-filled religious ignoramuses as well as anti-Christian professors and peers, they are turning to a whole range of simple-minded solutions under the New Age umbrella and they are giving no serious thought to the Bible. Ignoring or rejecting the Source of all the power and love that ever was or ever will be, they desperately want to believe that the impotent message of the New Age movement is true: "*You* are your own creator; *You* create your own reality." But *desire* for control is not the same as control itself. Experiencing human limitations and surrounded with painful reminders of mortality, they try to blind themselves to those limitations, deny the reality of obvious evil in the

world, and fail to learn the hard lessons of history. In the New Age movement, "We have," says historian Martin Marty of the University of Chicago, "a phenomenon that reveals how desperate is the search for meaning, and how exploitable are the searchers." Eighty years ago, Chesterton commented on his contemporaries with words that exactly describe today 's New Age devotees: "It is possible to meet the skeptic who believes that everything began with himself. He doubts not the existence of angels or devils, but the existence of men and cows. ... He created his own father and his own mother. "

Nowhere is this more tragically exemplified today than in the matter of gay men and AIDS. With a background of Religious Science, est, Silva Mind Control, The Advocate Experience, and Rebirthing, Louise Hay is teaching that the solution to AIDS is to chant hundreds of times a day: "I love myself; I approve myself." Obviously anyone who undertakes such an assignment in order to love himself already loves himself. But unfortunately, he doesn't think he's lovable. Chanting, however, won't change his mind. It won't change his self-experience or his feelings, either. And it won't change his illness. It does, though, reinforce a defeated sense that he doesn't experience what he should and that it's his fault. Hay teaches that "we choose anger, we choose sadness." Nonsense. These are emotions. We don't choose emotions. Emotions are automatic responses to our beliefs. We feel involuntarily as a result of what we think. She tells people with AIDS what they want to hear: that recovery from AIDS is a *choice*. Her stupid notions are cruel because they heap frustration and guilt on top of tragedy and suffering that's already bad enough. If and when people get sicker and die she has a slick out: "Some people would rather leave the planet than change." And gay leaders who should know better rally around her preaching—largely because they see no other option. Understanding neither his own nor Hay's judgmental approach, a gay minister judges that "Anything nonjudgmental has got to be good, and Louise Hay," he judges, "is nonjudgmental." Nonsense. She's as judgmental as any of us. She simply judges in a different direction from that of the so-called judgmental and most people don't seem to "get it." Some gay leaders may be so open-minded their brains may have fallen out.

The Bible begins with God, creator of everything. New-Agespeak begins with me, I create everything. In the monotheistic Bible God says "I am your God," but in monistic New-Agespeak we are god. In the Bible, God saves us. In New Age thinking, we're not lost, we have no need of such salvation, and besides, if we do get a bit deviated, we'll save ourselves. In the Bible we're commanded to love God with everything we are and have and we're to love each other as we already do love ourselves. In NewAgespeak we're commanded to love ourselves as gods, with everything we are and have—a needless command since we already love ourselves inordinately, if unwisely. Even when we don't *like* ourselves, we *love* ourselves. If we didn't give such an almighty damn about ourselves we wouldn't care so much about what we don't like about our selves and what we're afraid others then won't like about us. In New-Agespeak we're told that there are no absolutes,—except, I guess, for *that* absolute. We're told there is no right and wrong,—except, I guess, for *that* right absolute.

More than 2,500 New Age-oriented book shops—not to mention the trade bookstores—sell books entitled, for example, *Rebirthing Made Easy* and *Born Again and Again: How Reincarnation Occurs* and *The Guru in You: How to Play and Win the Game of Life*. The books promise insight, health, and wealth but most of all, power and control.

Men and women flock to New Age classes—even "intensives"—in the use of tuning forks and sacred geometry in healing, ecstatic dance techniques for personal dialog between spirit and flesh, training in picking up mental pictures transmitted by animals in zoos, at racetracks, and at home, and lessons in musical communication with turkeys, buffalo, and mosquitos. Where they find buffalo in Manhattan, where this course is offered, is anybody's guess. A dogmatic description in a New Age catalog reads: "The Gods and Goddesses are real and we are always under the influence of one or the other of them. Come and learn how we may approach them and invoke their blessing, using the ancient imaginal language of astrology." Not even the curse of Nancy Reagan's endorsement seems to have put this course out of vogue. Other promises: "The human capacity to heal is limitless. Learn breathing, gentle movement, visualization and massage." "Learn how to receive the spirit of the tarot." "Learn the Grand Design of Existence in a workshop that includes practical exercises to experience the various halls of heaven." "Learn to awaken the sacred pipe." "Invoke the spirits of your ancestors through identification with the Goddess. Please bring a candle of your favorite color and a stone you love."

What does all of this have to do with our discussion of the Bible? I've pointed to some of these current spiritual alternatives not simply to poke fun at them as such but to make the point that to follow them requires no less a fundamental *faith commitment* than to believe the Bible. Indeed, it may be said that if for no other reasons than the centuries of rigorous testing of the Bible and the already easily discredited claims of New Age notions, a greater suspension of rationality and common sense is required with these alternatives than is required with biblical revelation. At bottom though, in trusting biblical revelation or extra-biblical "revelation," we all do it all by faith. So how simple-minded do we have to be to take the Bible seriously? We have to be as simple as any other mind at its most simple starting point of reliance and trust.

How Big Is The Bible?

In speaking of the Bible, just what literature do we mean? How inclusive a book are we talking about? What's in? What's out?

Within the fundamentalist and evangelical communities, much is often made of a cardinal memory verse, II Timothy 3:16. It reads: "All scripture is inspired by God." This verse headlines full-page Bible college ads and provides the major anchorage for doctrinal statements on the Bible. Article 1 of the Dallas Seminary Doctrinal Statement boldly begins: "We believe that 'all scripture is given by inspiration of God,' by which we understand the whole Bible is inspired." When Ryrie uses this verse to begin his defense of "The Biblical Doctrine of Inspiration" in his *Basic Theology*, he likewise equates the "all scripture" with "the entire Bible." He uses the two

phrases synonymously and interchangeably and firmly asserts that. "The entire Bible is God-breathed." According to Ryrie, "the verse teaches that the entire Bible came from God." The Living Bible of fundamentalism actually inserts such extra-biblical terminology and usage into the very text itself, making Paul commit an anachronism in writing: "The whole Bible was given to us by inspiration of God." Paul, of course, never said that. Nobody in Paul's day *could* have said that.

Readers of these theological paraphrases are misled into thinking that II Timothy 3:16 is a text that proves, or at least that claims, that God inspired everything in their very own Bible, from Genesis through Revelation. But, of course, this verse does not say that. When Paul wrote what he did he was making a statement, in part, about books fundamentalists no longer have in their Bibles and he cannot have been making a statement about some of the books fundamentalists do have in their Bibles since these latter books had not yet been written. Those who have been taught to memorize II Timothy 3:16 and use it as fundamentalists do would be shocked to know that II Timothy 3:16 historically applied, for example, to such literature as Bel and the Dragon, Tobit, Judith, Susanna, and the Song of the Three Holy Children. Most fundamentalists have never even heard of these titles. They would be shocked, too, to know that II Timothy 3:16 no doubt wasn't intended to apply to Paul's letters, much less to II Timothy 3:16 itself and, of course, it cannot apply to the Letters and the Gospel of John, the Book of Jude, The Revelation, and other books in fundamentalists' Bibles that were written years after II Timothy was written. Even Ryrie himself dates seven to nine New Testament books as having been written from between two and over thirty years after the date that he himself assigns to II Timothy. And since Paul speaks of the sacred scripture that Timothy has known "from infancy," and assuming that Timothy's infancy was at least twenty years before the writing of this letter, there is *no book of our New Testament* to which Paul could have been referring here, even according to Ryrie's own conservatively early dates.

We must remember that Paul of Tarsus, in present-day Syria, was a Jew of the Diaspora, a Jew born and reared and living outside Palestine. When, in his letters, he makes reference to the Hebrew scriptures, understandably he does so in the words and phrasings of their Greek translation known as the Septuagint (LXX). We must remember that Timothy was a native of Lystra in present-day Turkey. His father was a pagan and even though his mother was Jewish, Timothy was never circumcised until adulthood, when he became one of Paul's early assistants. Who can doubt that the scripture the Greek-speaking Timothy knew from his childhood was the Septuagint scripture contained those favorite stories of childhood such as Tobit and Daniel's adventure with Bel and the Dragon?

The LXX was clearly the scripture of the Diaspora Jews but as F. F. Bruce of the University of Manchester reminds us, its use spread "throughout the Greek-speaking world, not excluding Judaea itself." R. Laird Harris of Covenant Theological Seminary says that the first "Christians took over the Septuagint." F. C. Grant of Union Theological Seminary in New York says: "the Septuagint was the church's Bible, from the first." The LXX is quoted frequently by the authors

of the Gospels as well as by Paul. The author of Hebrews makes use of it and it's even quoted by Palestinian James.

The LXX scripture included books which fundamentalists reject today—and with some good reason. These books comprise the Apocrypha. According to T. W. Davies, writing in *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia* (familiar to Bible college students as ISBE): "all the evidence goes to show that the LXX and therefore the other great Greek versions included the Apocrypha from the first onward." According to R. P. C. Hanson: "The Apocrypha denotes those books regarded as sacred by Greek-speaking Jews at the time of our Lord, and then extant in Greek, but not included in their canon by Aramaic-speaking Jews at that time. ... Because they all appeared in the LXX, they were all accepted as part of the Bible by all Christian authors up to the fourth century." Davies and Hanson could not be clearer. The Apocrypha was sacred scripture to Greek-speaking Jews of Jesus' day and for hundreds of years after that. The Apocryphal books were given, as Bruce says, "some measure of scriptural status" by the very earliest Christians.

Needless to say, all of this can be a big embarrassment to fundamentalists who habitually superimpose the authority of II Timothy 3:16 on all the scriptures *they* read, but not on all the scriptures *Timothy* read. Fundamentalist preachers don't seem to realize their predicament when citing II Timothy 3: 16 as they do. Why should they? Their Bible institute teachers may not have known better. But what about those better educated evangelicals who should, and in some cases do, know better? Some deny, without any basis, the information referenced in the quotes from Davies, Bruce, Hanson, Grant, Harris, et. al. And some are obviously not above intellectual dishonesty and chauvinism, often exercised under political and economic pressures. As Bruce candidly observed to Ward Gasque in a *Christianity Today* interview: "A [Bible scholar] who always has to be looking over his shoulder, lest someone who is in a position to harm him [in terms of "personal comfort, income, and the like"] may be breathing down his neck, has to mind his step." Bruce says that he was fortunate enough to always earn his living as a biblical scholar employed by a non-religiously affiliated university. Very few evangelical scholars are so fortunate.

Unger's Bible Dictionary asserts that the Apocryphal books were "written after the O.T. canon was closed." But in fact, the Apocrypha was composed around the turn of the eras, "during the last two centuries B.C. and the first cent. A.D.," as R. K. Harrison of the University of Toronto puts it in *The Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible*. An important Jewish conference on the Old Testament canon was held as late as the end of the first century AD. The Christians did not close the Christian canon for many more centuries, some finally including the Apocrypha within the canon and some excluding it. D. H. Wallace overstates his case in *The Evangelical Dictionary of Theology* when he asserts: "The Jews uniformly denied canonical status to [the Apocrypha]." The Jews enjoyed no such uniformity. Writing in *Christianity Today* Ronald Youngblood denies that the early church read the Apocrypha as authoritative scripture. But according to Charles T. Fritsch of Princeton, the very survival of the books of the Apocrypha

was "due entirely to the Christians" of the first centuries. One of the most outrageous fabrications about the Apocrypha is that of a fundamentalist who goes far beyond the evidence when he insists flatly that "the apostles did not receive [the Apocrypha], that the Early Church did not receive it, and that the Roman Catholics adopted it only in Reformation times in reaction to Protestantism and to bolster their shaky position with respect to certain dogmas." [Harris] But he himself elsewhere concedes that the first "Christians took over the Septuagint" and the Septuagint, as has been indicated, "included the Apocrypha from the first onward." Harris goes on: "Perhaps we may suppose that Roman Catholics can retain the Apocrypha in their Bibles only because they do not, generally speaking, read and study their Bibles faithfully." But what about the many excellent Roman Catholic biblical scholars who devote their lives to the study of scripture? Does Harris not think that Augustine read and studied his Bible faithfully? Augustine championed the Apocrypha. And what about Paul, whose scripture included apocryphal books?

The influence of the Apocrypha is to be found in everyone's Bible today. Paul's writings show the mark of his familiarity with, for example, The Wisdom of Solomon (13:1-9) underlying his letter to the Romans (1:18-32). By contrast, Paul fails to cite any scripture that's still in Protestant Bibles in his two letters to the Thessalonians or in his letters to the Philippians, the Colossians, Titus or Philemon. For that matter, there is no such quotation in the three letters of John and in Jude. Hebrews 1:1-3 draws directly from the Wisdom of Solomon (7:25-27). Hebrews 11:35-37 refers to the martyrdom of the seven brothers in II Maccabees 6-7. James contains many Apocryphal allusions. Some fundamentalists object that, at best, the New Testament only alludes to Apocrypha instead of quoting verbatim. But it should be noted that it is by just such allusion that the vast majority of New Testament references to the Hebrew scriptures are made.

Since the first Christians' scripture was the LXX containing the Apocrypha, it's not surprising that during the first two centuries at least, all of the Apocryphal books were accepted. At the end of the first century, The Wisdom of Solomon was listed as a New Testament book in what is now the very earliest known list of New Testament books, the Muratorian Fragment. I Clement (c. AD 95) quotes The Wisdom of Solomon. Polycarp (died c. AD 156) quotes from Tobit. Ecclesiasticus, II Esdras, and the Wisdom of Solomon are all cited in the early second-century Letter of Barnabas. Tertullian and Irenaeus cited several Apocryphal books as scripture before the third century had gotten much underway.

Throughout the second-century church, the Gospels and Paul's letters were used as scripture but Princeton's Bruce Metzger says that they were treated as "witnesses to the Christian preaching" or oral tradition "rather than identified with it." But as the canonical Gospels themselves indicate and as Metzger states: "Jesus had claimed to speak with an authority in no way inferior to that of the ancient Law, and had placed his utterances side by side with its precepts by way of fulfilling or even correcting and repealing them." Outside the books of the New Testament, quite early evidence for identifying the words of Jesus as scripture comes from the second-century sermon known as II Clement (2:4). It reads: "Another scripture also says, 'I come not to call the righteous

but sinners." This logion of Jesus (cf. Mark 2:17; Matthew 9:13; Luke 5:32) is given equal standing with the prophet Isaiah.

Irenaeus quoted from the Shepherd of Hermas after an introductory formula: "Scripture says." This shows that even works outside the LXX and those that later became part of the Christian canon could be treated as scripture.

According to Geddes MacGregor of the University of Southern California, "down to at least A.D. 300, all the books of the Greek Septuagint Bible were generally accounted Scripture by Christians." In his commentary on Daniel, the early third-century church father Hippolytus included Susanna and the Song of the Three Holy Children. According to Origen and Cyprian of Carthage, the Apocrypha belonged in the Christian Bible. To Origen, however, the books of James, Hebrews, II and III John, Jude, and II Peter were still "disputed books." Between AD 367 and about AD 400, a formal canonization of all 27 New Testament books took place in the Western church. But even into the fourth century, Paul's letter to Philemon, for example, was perceived in the Syrian church to be unedifying and therefore uninspired, so not canonical. Barnabas and The Shepherd of Hermas are still part of the New Testament in Codex Sinaiticus as late as the fifth century.

Augustine, whose writings were to become second only to the Bible itself to the 16th century Reformers, and the Councils of Hippo (AD 393) and Carthage (AD 397) favored inclusion of the Apocrypha in the canon. In 1548, the Council of Trent attested full canonicity to all the books of the Apocrypha except the Prayer of Manassess and I and II Esdras. This was Rome's move in the era of the Protestant Reformation. Trent was confirmed at the First Vatican Council in 1870. In 1672, the Eastern church retained only Tobit, Judith, Ecclesiasticus, and The Wisdom of Solomon from the Apocrypha. Although ever since the Reformation, Protestants have relegated the Apocrypha to a lesser status, it was nevertheless fully translated, for example by Luther himself, and included in all Bibles used by the early Protestants.

It was just 300 years ago that the Baptist tinker and preacher, John Bunyan, wrote his autobiographical *Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners*. In it he tells his readers that at times, "the whole Bible hath been to me as dry as a stick." He confides that he was, for weeks, "oppressed and cast down [and] quite giving up the Ghost of all my hopes of ever attaining life" when the scripture hit him: "Look at the generations of old and see: Did ever any trust in the Lord and was confounded?" Bunyan says that at this reassuring thought, which he was amazed to learn later was in the Apocryphal book of Ecclesiasticus (2:10), he was "greatly lightened, and encouraged in my Soul." Metzger asks: "Is it too far-fetched to speculate that if the Apocrypha had not been included in a poor man's Bible in 1652 or had not been read as Lessons in Church [of England] services even in the days of the Commonwealth, Bunyan might never have overcome his spiritual despondency and consequently might never have written his immortal allegory, *Pilgrim's Progress*?"

The Bibles of John Wycliffe, John Newton, the Wesleys, Whitefield, Toplady et. al. included the Apocrypha. Alexander Cruden's originally even more *Complete Concordance* included the Apocrypha. But in 1827, the British and Foreign Bible Society decided not to circulate the Apocrypha anymore. The decision was largely one of political and economic considerations. For similar reasons, the American Bible Society followed the British lead, as did many other publishers. But the Apocrypha is retained in Roman Catholic, many Eastern Orthodox, and Anglican Bibles as well as in the 1989 Revised English Bible, a joint project of Baptists, Methodists, Salvation Army members and other Christians under the leadership of evangelical Anglican Donald Coggan.

There are even non-biblical Jewish and *pagan* sources in the Bible. In Galatians 3:19 Paul refers to angels who had a go-between role in the giving of the Mosaic Law. In I Corinthians 10:4 he speaks of a moving rock in the wilderness, an apparent idea from an old rabbinic midrash. Calvin Roetzel is not going too far when he posits that "Paul's willingness to cite these legendary materials ... shows how broad his understanding of the sacred tradition is." After all, Paul quotes pagans (e.g. Menander at I Corinthians 15:33 and Epimenides at Titus 1:12, cf. Acts 17:28). When Paul illustrates his argument at Athens by quoting from Aratus' *Phainomena*, it is to Zeus that Aratus refers when he says "for we are his offspring." As Ned B. Stonehouse, a founder of Westminster Seminary, once said: "Thoughts which in their pagan contexts were quite un-Christian and anti-Christian, could be acknowledged as up to a point involving an actual apprehension of revealed truth."

Jude quotes the Book of Enoch as other New Testament writers quote the Hebrew prophets, as having divine authority (Jude 14f). The Book of Enoch obviously influenced other passages of New Testament literature, e. g. Jude 6; I Peter 3: 19; II Peter 2: 4, 9-10. In both Jude 7 and II Peter 2 this Pseudepigraphic Ethiopian Enoch is depended upon to back up warning based on the punishment of disobedient angels. "Jude himself ... regarded the Book of Enoch as inspired Scripture" according to Matthew Black, New Testament scholar at St. Andrews University. He says that for Jude, "the Book of Enoch had the authority of Scripture. This suggests that it was once regarded as Scripture among those churches, perhaps in Asia Minor, to which the Epistle of Jude was originally addressed." Indeed, as Black points out, "in some copies of the Ethiopic Bible, the Book of Enoch is not only included in the canon, but is the first book of the Bible, preceding even Genesis." Jude also cites the Apocalypse of Moses. No less an evangelical scholar than Bruce acknowledges: "Here and there in the New Testament, we find introduced by a formula which normally indicates a Scripture quotation something which cannot be identified in any Old Testament text known to us (or for the matter of that, in any other text known to us)." Examples of such are found in Luke 11:49; I Corinthians 2:9; Jude 9; James 4:5.

There are Bible texts today that were not in their contexts when these biblical books were written. For example, I Corinthians 14: 34f was probably not even written by Paul but by someone in the late first or second century. Because of both transcriptional and intrinsic improbability, evangelical New Testament scholar Gordon D. Fee of Regent College concludes:

there are "more than sufficient reasons for considering these verses inauthentic .. it seems best to view them as an interpolation. ... the exegesis of the text itself leads to the conclusion that it is not authentic." Fee's conclusion is approved by Bruce and other evangelical scholars. And what about the now lost material that originally closed the book of Mark? What about the present end of Mark? It must be viewed as a late addition. According to Walter W. Wessel of Bethel Seminary, "Mark did write an ending to his Gospel but ... it was lost in the early transmission of the text. The endings we now possess represent attempts by the church to supply what was obviously lacking. " Wessel nonetheless does write commentary on these additional non-Markan verses in his contribution to *The Expositor's Bible Commentary* series edited by James Montgomery Boice and Merrill C. Tenney. According to evangelical Bible scholar William L. Lane, "the form, language and style of these verses [Mark 16:9-20] militate against Marcan authorship." Lane therefore does not offer commentary on these verses in his contribution to *The New International Commentary* series edited by Bruce.

So how big a Bible do Christians have? What's in? What's out? Is the Bible only the Old Testament? Is it only the New Testament? Is it the Old and New Testaments? And how much of the New Testament is included? Is it the Old and New Testaments plus the Apocrypha? Is there even other material? How big a Bible Christians have depends on the time and place in which God calls us as Christians.

How Did We Get The Bible?

Naive skeptics think of ancient "smoke-filled rooms" in which dastardly deals were cut, good books burned behind locked doors, and bad books dressed up by a bureaucratic screening committee of rich and powerful dogmatists. But it didn't happen that way. In fact, it was precisely Marcion's second-century attempt to do it that way—to include arbitrarily only Luke and Paul and to exclude the Old Testament—that utterly failed.

If it didn't happen that way, just how did it happen? How did we wind up with the Bible we have today? Just how did the church produce the Bible? Or did it? Can it not just as well be asked how the Bible produced the church? Metzger asks it this way: Is the Bible "a collection of authoritative books or an authoritative collection of books?" As with all "chicken or egg" puzzles, we can say safely that the Bible produced the church *and* the church produced the Bible.

The evidence suggests that the *use* of the Hebrew Bible and certain more recent writings by early Christians determined the standard, the list or canon of authoritative books rather than did any official pronouncement by church leaders in convention. This is because the use of these writings served as powerful witness, to all of these faithers, to that to which they looked in eager faith: the coming of the Kingdom of God in Jesus, the Christ.

As the original apostles began to die off, either in old age or by martyrdom, there was a need to get into writing, or to preserve what was already in writing, that which witnessed to the faith the Christians were living. It was in view of the experience of events, especially the resurrection of

Jesus Christ—that the early followers of Jesus' Way began to find divine fulfillment of Old Testament scripture in what they witnessed in Jesus. They then had to confront opposition from non-Christian Jews. Thus the sayings of Jesus and written accounts based on eyewitness reports by Peter and others as well as letters of Paul and others were saved and edited into books.

Both the individual letters of Paul and the later individual Gospels circulated for a time by themselves and from assembly to assembly before being collected together as The Epistles and The Gospels. A saying of Jesus quoted in Luke's gospel is cited as scripture along with a passage from the Torah in the mid-60s (I Timothy 5:18). Paul's letters were collected and published in Ephesus about AD 90 and II Peter (3:16) regards them as "scripture" sometime in the second century. According to Justin Martyr, in the first half of the second century, the believers read "the memoirs of the apostles or the writings of the prophets" in their Sunday assemblies. Thus, as the Hamburg theologian Helmut Thielicke writes: "the real reason [for canon inclusion] was that the transmitted texts were used as a basis for liturgical proclamation and were the objects of spiritual experiences, i.e., there was experience of their evidence as truth." He continues: "The formation of the canon is thus the church's seal to the spiritual experience of the texts." This same symbiosis between the early church and its literature is given expression by C. F. D. Maule of Cambridge: "the living community was indeed constantly subject to check and correction by the authentic evidence—by the basic witness, first of accredited eyewitness apostles and later of the written deposit of that witness; yet also the documents which soon began to circulate in considerable numbers were themselves in some measure subject to check and correction, whatever their origin, by the living community." According to MacGregor, "By AD 200 there was little doubt about most of the books that were eventually included in the New Testament. Later synods and councils of the Christian Church, in setting forth lists of canonical books, did not do much more than put their seal to what had been already established in practice."

Thielicke goes into more theological detail when he writes that "the canon was not produced by the church, or by man at all, but ... it came from outside to the church, was disclosed and made audible to it by the Spirit, and was received by it, so that the church did not constitute the canonicity of Scripture but could only confirm it as the received Word of God." Thielicke remarks that "It will always be astonishing with what sure instinct Christians at the beginning of the third century perceived and retained the original material. There is nothing to show that other material was then present which the church abandoned and rejected for dogmatic reasons. It did not set aside but accepted and acknowledged even Galatians, which Marcion had perhaps rediscovered and put at the head of his collection of Pauline letters, and whose contents were highly discomfiting." This last point of Thielicke's is a most instructive one, for as anyone familiar with the canonical books knows, the point of view is not the most readily received by religious leaders and the depiction of the early church and its leaders is not the most flattering. They're portrayed, even sarcastically, as seriously unfaithful.

The good news that the first Christians received and some even practiced by faith became, with that use, what Paul was already by the beginning of the 50s calling "the tradition" (II

Thessalonians 2:15; 3:6; I Corinthians 11:2). The collection was thus an organic expression of its own production. Were any deliberate standards applied? Precise information on this is hard to come by. "Nothing is more amazing in the annals of the Christian Church than the absence of detailed accounts of so significant a process," as Metzger observes. It's as though the eyewitness tradition was so firmly believed and incorporated in all proclamation of the first Christians that the collecting of the tradition in writing was simply confirmation of what had been accepted by word of mouth and common practice. In Moule's words: "no genuine apostolic Gospel could contain an interpretation of Jesus contrary to what the *communis sensus fidelium* had come to recognize as authentic." He says that "while the earliest Church was shaped and controlled by the evidence of all the eye-witnesses, and especially the authenticated Twelve, there came a brief period when this evidence had become so entirely a part of the life and thinking of the leaders of the Church that they automatically refused to assimilate into their system what was contrary in doctrinal tendency to the now indigenous standards."

It is clear, too, that what was accepted did not have to come from apostles as such, for neither Mark nor Luke were apostles. On the other hand, real or supposed apostolicity did not ensure inclusion in the canon, as is evident in the cases of The Gospel of Peter and the Apocalypse of Peter, both claiming the authority of the primary apostle upon whom Jesus had said he would build his church. And even when a work was orthodox and written in the name of Paul, such as the fictional Acts of Paul and Thecla, it was not automatically guaranteed a place in the canon.

Thielicke summarizes concerns of the Christians during the formation of the canon by stating: "The Word of God is menaced by human falsifications, by sectarian teachings and acts of human self-will as well as by the rank growth of uncontrollable tradition, by extravagances of the imagination, and the like. The history of the formation of the canon shows plainly ... how far the issue is that of defense against these threats. ... By forming the canon the early church also acknowledged that from that time on tradition could no longer be a criterion of truth."

How long did it take for the canon to "close?" It was not accomplished overnight. Richard B. Gaffin, Jr. of Westminster Seminary grants that, regarding even the New Testament canon), "there were significant differences at earlier stages [in "a slow process covering roughly 300 years"] even among orthodox figures."

During the early church, even the Old Testament was not a settled canon. The Pharisees had a canon that was not finally formalized until AD 90 at a meeting that seems to identify, for the first time perhaps, an official Jewish canon of scripture. But as Moule notes, "even that was only official for a section of Judaism: there was no such thing as an ecumenical organ of Jewish opinion, and doubtless the Jews of the Alexandrine and other dispersions continued to be without a defined 'canon' of scripture." In Jesus' day, the Sadducees accepted only the Torah as authoritative. It is thus interesting that when Jesus discussed the doctrine of resurrection with the Sadducees he is not said to have argued over their canonical exclusivity and apparently didn't use the Pharisees' texts from Isaiah and Daniel to support resurrection. Rather, more effectively or

appropriately, he used part of the Torah (Exodus 3:6) to make his point. The Samaritans' canon was also only the Five Books of Moses or Torah. As with his discussion with the Sadducees, Jesus' discussion with the woman of Samaria reveals no suggestion that she enlarge her canon. Indeed, the only scripture all Jews agreed was authoritative was Torah. Even among those who revered the Prophets and the Writings as well as Torah, it was the Torah that was supreme. The Hellenized Jews' canon, of course, included the Apocrypha and the Essenes' collection may have included Pseudepigrapha. "When the Christian church arose this choice of canons lay before it," says Roger Beckwith of Wycliffe Hall, Oxford, "so the subsequent uncertainties of Christians on the matter are only the natural consequences of the uncertainties into which the church was born."

What About The "Lost Books" Of The Bible?

We know from Luke's preface to his own Gospel that "many" others had already written their own narratives concerning Jesus. Certainly one of these other writers was Mark, whose own ending has been lost. Both Luke and Matthew depend on Mark for much of their material. But just however many more accounts there really were remains as lost to us as their identities and their writings. This is not to say, however, that there are books of the Bible that have been lost or suppressed. The so-called "lost books" of the Bible, including lost letters of Paul and other biblical writers, were never a part of the Bible.

Nonetheless, there are rumors today, spread by ill-informed people, that a cache of "lost" or "secret" material has been suppressed by church authorities. Much of this allegedly hidden literature is, of course, a perfectly accessible collection of Gnostic gospels, acts, apocalypses, and epistles. No church conspiracy of silence has been at work to suppress these would-be New Testament writings. As Metzger puts it: "certain books excluded themselves ... it is a clear case of survival of the fittest." As W. H. Auden once said: "Some books are undeservedly forgotten; none are undeservedly remembered." Some writings do get lost but survivors withstand the test of time. With reference to the so-called "lost" or suppressed books, Metzger states: "To call them, as some have done, the 'excluded' books of the New Testament is to suggest circumstances of their circulation and position which are entirely false. To suppose that such Apocryphal books were ejected from their rightful place in the New Testament by a council or an assembly of ecclesiastics is to suppose what, as a matter of cold historical fact, never happened." But the rumors are persistent. There is, it seems, something always intriguing about secrets, gossip, cover-up, conspiracy theories, and hidden or "privileged" information known only to the initiates on the "inside." It's older even than these second and third century writings themselves.

"When one compares the ... rather widely-used apocryphal gospels (along with the more widely divergent specimens that were found at Nag Hammadi)," Metzger observes, "one can appreciate the difference between the character of the canonical Gospels and the near banality of most of the gospels dating from the second and third centuries." A quick survey of examples of these demonstrates the point Metzger makes.

First for some so-called gospels. We read, for example, in the Arabic Gospel of the Infancy of a boyhood Jesus making mud birds that actually fly and mud animals that actually walk. This boy magically compensates for his none-too-skilled father's inferior craftsmanship in the carpentry shop. In the Docetic Gospel of Peter, Pilate is exonerated in the crucifixion of Jesus and only the Jews are said to be to blame. Three figures emerge from Jesus' tomb and a talking cross follows them. The heads of two of the men stretch to the heavens and the head of the third rises beyond the heavens. The Gnostic Gospel of the Egyptians demands sexual asceticism. The Gospel of the Hebrews claims that Jesus was born two months prematurely. In the Gnostic Gospel of Thomas, Jesus tells his disciples that he will be revealed to them "when you undress without being ashamed." Jesus says he will lead Mary in order to make her a male so that she too may become a living spirit: "For every woman who makes herself male will enter into the kingdom of heaven."

Turning to the various so-called Acts, we find them falsely attributed to Andrew, Thomas, Philip, Bartholomew, Thaddaeus, Barnabas, John, Peter, and Paul. They're cleaned-up versions of the Graeco-Roman novel genre. They're without any real historical basis. The Gnostic Acts of Peter depicts Peter ministering in Rome with the assistance of a talking dog. This work is the source of the famous *Quo Vadis?* legend. Peter tells wives to leave husbands and singles not to marry. He heals his crippled daughter only to then re-cripple her so that she won't be a sexual temptation to men. In the Docetic Acts of John, Jesus floats a few millimeters above the ground and leaves no footprints. In the Acts of Paul, Paul converts and baptizes a lion. Later he meets up with this lion in the Ephesus amphitheater where the authorities unleash it to attack Paul. But the lion refuses to hurt Paul and, instead, greets his fellow believer with a human voice: "Grace be with thee."

Among the letters is a series of alleged correspondence between Paul and Seneca, the influential Stoic philosopher and jurist forced by Nero to commit suicide. These letters are forgeries.

The second-century Apocalypse of Peter tells of blasphemers hanging by their tongues over the fires of hell, adulterous women hanging by their hair and their male partners hanging upside down. Other pre-Christian images of hell in the Apocalypse of Peter come from Homer, Plato, Vergil, and other pagans. It was used by Dante as the basis for his *Inferno*. The third-century Apocalypse of Paul was allegedly written by a tenant in Paul's house in Tarsus. This person is supposed to have found a marble box in the basement, under the foundations. Inside the box he is said to have found the "unutterable things" of II Corinthians 12:4 giving the inside dope on heaven and hell. One of these scoops: those in hell have Sundays off.

Who Wrote The Bible?

It was already past 11 PM when Lily Tomlin stepped to stage center at New York City's Minskoff Theater to announce the 1988 Tony Award for Best Play. Before reciting the nominees, she quoted from the Prologue of the Gospel of John. Tomlin said: "The Bible says: 'In the

beginning was the Word.' Just think, someone wrote that!" Who was that someone? Just who did write the Bible?

While some would answer that God wrote it, others would then roll their eyes heavenward—or at least to the ceiling—and say: "Don't be stupid. People wrote it." Both of these responses miss key understandings of orthodox Christians in that both reduce it to an either/or. A sound and traditional understanding was voiced by Herman Bavinck when he said that "the scriptures are the product wholly and entirely of the Spirit of God ... and at the same time are wholly the product of the activity of the writers." His colleague at the Free University of Amsterdam, Abraham Kuyper, put it this way: "The 'spoken words,' however much aglow with the Holy Spirit, remain bound to the limitations of our language, disturbed as it is by anomalies." Fundamentalists have sometimes tended to minimize the human side of the Bible but orthodox Christians have always taken the human side seriously. For example, the Free University's G. C. Berkouwer writes: "God's revelation must not be seen as a timeless and suprahistorical event but as a manifestation in history." According to Kenneth Kantzer of Trinity Evangelical Divinity School: "From first to last, the entire Bible is a human book and can only be understood and rightly interpreted as a thoroughly human book." Harry R. Boer of *The Reformed Journal* puts it this way: "Inspiration is *always* organic, that is, always congenial in its operation to the divine Revealer and to the human receiver of the revelation. It is always effected *by* the divine Logos *in* a human logos existing in the image of its archetype." Says Donald Bloesch: "The Bible contains a fallible element in the sense that it reflects the cultural limitations of the writers." Baptist theologian Clark Pinnock avers: "The writers of the Bible were not mere copyists or secretaries, but flesh-and-blood people like ourselves, giving us the fruit of their efforts to hear God speak to them in the context of their special places in history. "

Today we're plagued with the ghosts of a virtual mechanical dictation theory of inspiration, one in which the writers of scripture were said to be sort of human pens or God's PCs—God FAXed the Bible to earth! Therefore, fundamentalists are sometimes uncomfortable with acknowledgments such as those just cited even though the men cited are thoroughly orthodox and evangelical. "Threats to the authority of the Bible usually come," as Thieliicke observes about fundamentalists' reactions, "through discussion of its human elements." But we must take the human elements seriously, or we will make the same mistake with the written Word of God that was made by the heretical Docetists with the incarnate Word of God. Just as heretics have failed to see that Jesus Christ was both a human being and God in the flesh, we are in danger of failing to see that the Bible is both a book of human words and the Word of God. Early heretics tried to blow away the dusty footprints of Jesus as later heretics would try to wipe away the inky fingerprints of the writers. This comparison of the Word of God written and the Word of God enfleshed is a useful one, for as Metzger explains, "no analogy drawn from the realm of our experience is adequate to express the relation of the word of God to the Bible. That relation is unique." But he points out that "its closest parallel is the relation of the divine and human natures in the person of Jesus Christ, the Word made flesh.

Even though, as Kampen's Hermann Ridderbos states: "Reformed theology has always spoken of the humanity of Scripture" and Luther contended that the biblical authors composed their books with both "gold, silver and precious stones" as well as with "wood, hay, and stubble," such ideas in today's climate of controversy are resisted and even rejected by many short-sighted and historically-illiterate fundamentalists. Therefore, as Boer argues, "It is high time ... that we make available *to the body of believers* the liberation that comes from the realization that the Bible is not only *the Book* among the many books, but also *a book* among the many books. Indeed, one will never fully see the Bible as *the Book* unless he sees its incarnation in a book." Berkouwer cogently explains that "fundamentalism, in its eagerness to maintain Holy Scripture's divinity, does not fully realize the significance of Holy Scripture as a prophetic-apostolic, and consequently human, testimony. ... Fundamentalism has hardly come to grips with the problem of whether attention for the human character of Holy Scripture might be of great importance for its correct understanding." He warns that "fundamentalism greatly obscures the contexts in which God himself gave us Scripture." The same observation is made by Pinnock: "In the name of defending the Bible, conservatives have often resorted in the past to elaborate theories about the biblical text which have the effect of denying that the Bible is in any real sense a truly human as well as divine word."

In thus fabricating overstated notions of the divine side of scripture, fundamentalists have forced thinking people to overstate notions of the human side and to neglect serious attention to the divine side. And the overstated notions of the divine side, once exposed, have caused some evangelicals steeped in an either/or mentality to think they had to stand on one side or the other. Sadly, some have tried to resolve their problem by throwing out the baby with the bathwater, so to speak. The all-or-nothing way of thinking means to them that if the Bible is not exactly what they were told it is in Sunday School, it isn't worth anything at all. (This is the same sad state of affairs in which many former "ex-gays" are left in the wake of the discovery that the overstated promises of change to heterosexuality allegedly to be found in turning to Jesus amount to nonsense. Tragically, they conclude that any and all turning to Jesus is just such nonsense.)

It took fifteen centuries to write the Bible. Included among its half a hundred or so authors are numbered murderers and adulterers and even one man who kept a thousand women on hand for his sexual pleasure. He's known as the wisest man who ever lived. There were, among the writers, shepherds, priests, prophets, poets, story tellers, and kings as well as a rabbi and a doctor. Virtually all were Jews,—except the doctor. And perhaps two or three of the Wisdom authors were Gentiles.

Virtually all of the biblical material was evidently written by men. But with reference to the Old Testament, there is good reason to attribute the composition of at least one verse, the "Song of the Sea," to the ecstatic prophetess Miriam, Moses' sister (Exodus 15:1a-18 and/or 15:21). With reference to the New Testament, it's been suggested that Priscilla, Paul's co-worker at both Corinth and Ephesus and Apollos' teacher, may have written the Letter to the Hebrews.

The writers of much in the Bible remain unknown to us. Did Moses write The Five Books of Moses (Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy)—the Torah? We don't know how much was actually authored by Moses. Some of it undoubtedly does come from Moses and perhaps more than recent critics have assumed. Did Peter write II Peter? John Calvin said no. Did Paul write Hebrews? Luther said no. Did Isaiah write all of Isaiah? E. J. Young of Westminster Seminary said yes. Did Solomon write Ecclesiastes? Young said no. Did Paul write Ephesians? Fuller Seminary's Ralph Martin says no. Did Samuel write all of I and II Samuel? Dallas Seminary's Ryrie says no. Even fundamentalists admit that they don't know who wrote Job, Judges, Ruth, and Hebrews, for example. For much of the Bible, it seems best to concede in frank humility what Origen did regarding the authorship of Hebrews: "only God knows."

Even when an author is named within a biblical book itself—and many book titles have no support within the text—we must appreciate the custom of attributing a work pseudonymously. "It was a deeply ingrained tradition in Jewish circles," Moule explains, "that certain genres of writing should, as a matter of course, be written under the name of their representative authors: Law was by Moses, Wisdom by Solomon, Psalms mostly by David," But it doesn't even really matter if we can identify the authors in many cases, for as it is noted by J. L. Houlden, "little is gained if a virtually unknown figure (such as Luke or Mark) is credited with this writing or that."

As the unknown writer of Hebrews is translated as saying in the King's English, it was at "sundry times and in divers manners" that these authors wrote history, law, gospel, letters, religious poetry, erotic poetry, philosophy, parables, apocalyptic and much more.

How Big Is *Your* Bible?

"Since," as Westminster's Vern Poythress says, the Bible "was written over the course of a number of centuries, not all of the Bible applies to us or speaks to us in the same way." Different approaches were taken, different levels were reached, different purposes pursued and different insights shared. There is clear progress and repeal and even what has been understood as contradiction.

Naturally, readers find some parts of the Bible more to their liking than other parts. As Thomas Jefferson literally tore into his Bible with his scissors and paste in order to keep only the "diamonds in a dunghill," as he put it, he was clipping away in the time-honored tradition of both Christians and non-Christians. Everyone does the same thing Jefferson did, even if in many cases it's done with a greater flair of traditional piety. We don't like something in the Bible? We get rid of it. We read very selectively. Luther snubbed James because he thought that it didn't fit with his Pauline theology. He didn't like Esther either. Zwingli had no time for Revelation. John Wesley urged his followers to overlook Psalm 137:9 as it was, he concluded, "highly improper for the mouths of a Christian congregation." Alexander Campbell largely ignored much of the Old Testament and his followers have done the same. Fundamentalists today are quick to use a

poorly-translated I Corinthians 6 in their anti-gay battles and yet they completely ignore a well-translated I Corinthians 6 in their battles with other Christians in the secular law courts. In spite of Paul's very clear outrage and instruction to the contrary, they press their lawsuits against fellow Christians in secular courts across America. Do the ministerial graduates of Bob Jones University or Dallas Seminary, for example, allow in worship services what Paul does in I Corinthians 14:26? Does each person have "a revelation, a tongue, or an interpretation?" No. But why not? Do fundamentalists heed Paul's advice that speaking in tongues not be forbidden? No. But why not? They certainly otherwise pay very close attention to something else they insist,—contrary to the best evidence—is in this very same chapter: an alleged Pauline proscription against women speaking in church. Do inerrantists apply Paul's admonition that we "Let no debt remain outstanding" to their credit card accounts, their home mortgages, or their nation's unbalanced budget? No. There is really a little something Jeffersonian in all of us. We all carry big, fat Bibles that we keep all zippered up. We also carry Bibles that are very thin and very well-worn. We sip our Pepsi-Light and read our Bible-Light. The very lightest of our "lite Bibles" is what evangelicals sometimes call a "life verse"—a favorite Bible verse which we think says best what we find most agreeable.

These condensations-- the Bible's "Greatest Hits," so to speak—are, in themselves, not a bad thing. Even the most extreme fundamentalist would have a hard time arguing convincingly for the equal value of John 3:16 and Ezekiel 23:20!

When anyone engages in such selectivity, he or she is forming, in effect, what theologians call a canon within the canon. This part is taken to be more important than that part; this part is taken to be more important sometimes than the whole. Preachers preach canons within the canon. Congregations sing canons within the canon. Denominations were founded and are sustained around canons within the canon. Dogmas are organized around canons within the canon. Programs are promoted by the use of canons within the canon. Individual Christians dizzily revolve around canons within the canon.

Even biblical writers themselves had their own canons within the canon. James D. G. Dunn of Durham sees such in books throughout the New Testament and identifies it as witness to "the historical actuality of Jesus who himself constitutes the unifying center of Christianity." Marcus Barth interprets the writer of Hebrews as having the following canon within canon: "The promise and the fulfillment of the promise of the Lord's coming into the world."

Christianity claims both the Old and New Testaments (and Roman Catholic and some Eastern Christianity claims the Apocrypha as well), but all of the books within either canon are not valued at the same level and they therefore are not all used with the same frequency or given the same sort of attention. Services at so-called Bible churches may regularly neglect great portions of the Bible while services at liturgical churches, viewed as less than Bible-centered by the so-called Bible churches, may regularly include a much wider range of Bible reading through the use of lectionaries. But do these liturgical churches spend the time and effort in Bible study and

exposition of the text that Bible churches seem to do? Not really. But do the Bible churches really study the Bible or their systematic theologies propped up with proof texts? Clearly there are favorite passages that we all use over and over while there are some passages, perhaps most, that we virtually never use. This is an understandable state of affairs and, again, one that is not without sound theological and pastoral justification.

Bavinck's statement that by no means everything "that is included in Scripture has normative authority for our faith and life" is, in effect, an important attack upon the leveling process advocated in at least the rhetoric of fundamentalists who preach a plenariness that they don't actually practice. At the same time, they do engage in what Ned Stonehouse of Westminster called "the reduction of the organism of the revealed truths to isolated fragments."

In practical terms, the most rationalistic arguments for the absolute inerrancy of the Bible and its plenary verbal inspiration come from the pens and pulpits of Dispensationalists whose very systematic theology holds certain portions of the Bible above others, going so far as to restrict even some of Paul's own preaching to the first century only and thereby escaping its application to themselves and other Christians today (e.g. Paul's statements against the use of secular law courts to settle disputes between Christians, his urging that Christians not forbid the speaking in tongues, etc.). Thus a variable valuing and usage of the different parts of the Bible is not only the practice of even the most fundamentalist of Christians but it is also the polemic, the hermeneutic, the theology they champion.

While Thieliicke states that "The principle of 'Scripture alone' makes all Holy Scripture the norm of saving truth to which faith looks and which is set for every theological doctrine," he goes on to explain that "The adjective 'all' cannot mean that this normative rank applies to each portion of Scripture [for] ... the part has to be seen in the context of the whole and can be criticized by it."

Both Jesus and Paul viewed as sacred scripture more than either man is reported to have used and more than Paul does use in his extant letters. Each of them had his canon within canon. Each summed the Law and the Prophets in love of God and love of neighbor. The way in which even they reduced scripture was, indeed, quite innovative. For example, in Matthew, Mark, and Luke, Jesus is presented as quoting the Shema, the Jews' confession of faith dating from the time of Josiah. This pledge of love to God was recited every morning and evening. Jesus combined this most familiar prayer with the very much neglected Leviticus 19:18 to show that our fuller duty is to love our neighbor. But contrary to the original meaning in Leviticus where neighbors were "the sons of your own people"—fellow Jews—Jesus applied it to relations between Jews and Samaritans (Luke 10:25-37) and, in the so-called Sermon on the Mount, Jesus extends the duty of love to enemies (Matthew 5:43). Cf also Mark 12:30ff; Matthew 22:37ff.

According to Dunn, in view of their use of scripture, "we cannot treat the Old Testament as though what Jesus and Paul did and said was irrelevant to the question of how *we* understand and use the Old Testament." He continues: "The Old Testament does not stand for us as word of God

independent of the New Testament and of Jesus." Dunn says that "As Christians the Old Testament continues to exercise normative authority for us only when we read it in the light of the revelation of Christ." This is what Bloesch is saying: "The Law of God is both fulfilled in and transcended by the Gospel, and this means that it is properly understood only in the light of the Gospel." With reference to the books of the Old Testament, Dunn says: "They *were* the word of God to millions of Israelites down through many centuries. But they no longer are for us—certainly not in their obvious and intended sense. We honour these passages as God's word in a historical sense, invaluable as ways of understanding how God dealt with his people in times past. We do not honour them by calling them God's word in the same sense today." Lest this sound too radical, we must remember again that in practice, this is exactly what Dispensationalists do with the prevailing systematic rationale of fundamentalism. And this is what the churches of Christ and all theological heirs of Alexander Campbell do. And this is really what all Christians do.

And what about the New Testament? Is there canon within canon even there? According to the Swiss theologian Emil Brunner, "Not all that is Biblical, not even all that is in the New Testament, is in like manner and to the same degree a bearer of God's Word." Dunn reasons: "The obvious corollary [to Jesus' and Paul's use of the Old Testament] is that it must be entirely possible that certain New Testament requirements, good words of God in their time, in the same way become restrictive and corruptive of the grace of God today." He well cites the example of slavery. "If we define the canon within the canon not just as the New Testament as a whole but the revelation of Christ to which the New Testament bears normative and definitive witness, we must allow that canon to exercise a similar sifting and evaluating function of our faith and lives, our proclamation of the gospel and our ordering of our common lives today." Dunn is here, too, saying only what all conservative Christians do in practice, albeit with their own peculiar selectivity. It is, for example, put succinctly in the First Article of the Southern Baptist Convention's *Baptist Faith and Message*: "The criterion by which the Bible is to be judged is Jesus Christ." At the beginning of Protestantism, it was put in similarly brief terms by Luther himself: "What promotes Christ!"

A word of caution is nonetheless in order at this point. We must be careful with such an overly-reduced formula for as Thielicke warns, one may not know what "Jesus Christ" among many false christs one may be meaning. In Thielicke's words: "May not the christological criterion become a bolt rather than a key if we have in mind a Christ who is the teacher of the new law or a cult-god or an ethical example, while the friend of sinners and the victim of crucifixion fade into an invisible background?" Such a warning should always be a watchword. We're being bombarded today with talk of a "Christ" who's said to be a "man's man" and resembles nobody so much as he does a Right-wing, white heterosexual American suburbanite. That "Christ," too, is no criterion for the New Testament.

The Bible's Diversity

"The Bible says" is a much-overused expression of preachers who do not sufficiently appreciate the Bible's diversity and who thereby instill a most troublesome perspective in their congregations. As Bruce puts it: "It is not enough to say 'the Bible says ... ' without at the same time considering to whom the Bible says it, and in what circumstances." When the phrase is used to introduce pet ideas and when Sunday School teachers push the indiscriminate memorization of Bible verses out of context, as though the Bible were a book of famous quotations to be looted promiscuously for twenty-second Bible bites, erroneous thinking is reinforced. The Bible is handled haphazardly, as if one may dip into it by hit or miss to sip a magic potion rather than drink deeply but wisely from its many different brews. In Hannah More's wonderful phrasing, too many people "ruin half an author's graces by plucking *bon-mots* from their places." We then tend to remember the tiny text isolated from its all-important context and we're ripe for the imposition of proof-texts on ourselves and others.

A current example of such endlessly careless Bible quoting is televised daily by *Success 'n Life* pitchman Robert Tilton of Texas. His pet idea is jerked into Job as though it is there as the very promise of God. In its biblical context, however, it's in fact the theological nonsense of Eliphaz of Teman, Job's self-appointed, self-righteous chaplain bent on convincing Job that his suffering must be due to his sin. In the book's last chapter, the Temanite's theological moralism is condemned by God because he had "not spoken of [God] what is right." But Tilton sanctimoniously dips right down there into the condemned advice of Eliphaz to come up with his tricky tenet as if it's God's truth: Decree a thing and it will come to pass—if you send money to Tilton. Such a misuse of the Bible resembles age-old magical efforts at control rather than the faithing of Job. And one may wonder just whose success 'n life Tilton has in mind.

Not surprisingly, we find such diversity in a book that is actually a *library* of books written and edited over fifteen centuries by many different authors and editors in many different places for many different reasons under many different circumstances—"at sundry times and in divers manners." That these many writings were collected together between the covers of one big book does nothing to remove that diversity. But systematic theologians have been trying to remedy this "problem" for centuries. Indeed, it would be an indication of contrived homogeneity if we were to find little or no diversity in such a collection. "It would be unrealistic to expect that texts which arose in so many different ways and were transmitted in so many different times and places would be in complete harmony," Thielicke reasons. "If they were," he says, "one would have to suspect editorial manipulation, whereas the tensions are a sign that the faith attested here was a living one and could not therefore be pressed into a rationally concocted book. ... The canon would lack credibility from the outset if canonization meant the one-sided selection of what agrees or seems to agree."

Asbury Seminary's John Oswalt admits in the *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* that evangelicals "have for too long ignored the wholeness of Biblical books in our preoccupation with proof-texts." Viewing each book as a separate whole is one way to honor the Bible's rich diversity. Unfortunately, in efforts to defend a dogma of doctrinal unity for the Bible,

there has been an aversion among many evangelicals to speaking of or to studying, for example, Pauline theology as such as compared or contrasted with Matthean theology or Johannine theology. Systematic theology has been the approach to the study of scripture by most fundamentalists and evangelicals. So-called "topical" Bibles and "topical" Bible studies have popularized and reinforced a misleading mindset among grassroots conservatives. The wholesale misuse of concordances in which a reader jumps centuries, genres, languages, and other contexts while his "fingers do the walking" has further established false assumptions of unity at the expense of real diversity. Yet it is commonplace for fundamentalist preachers and lay people to go to their English concordances to find out what "the Bible says" about this or that.

Restricting his comments to only the New Testament, Metzger notes "the several traditions embodied within the entire range of the New Testament," explaining that "the differences that exist among the books ... and even within the several writings of the same author, are ... reflections of theological pluralism within the primitive Christian community themselves." For example, the New Testament contains a diversity of christologies which arose over the course of the earliest years of the new community of faith. We must honestly resist the temptation to artificially harmonize them on the assumption that such pluralism is bad or embarrassing. Fuller Seminary's Donald Hagner warns that "It is all too easy to read later perspectives into the christological language of these authors" of the New Testament. Each author makes a contribution to the whole and no one invalidates another.

"The New Testament is not a homogeneous collection of neatly complementary writings" since, as Dunn goes on, "the apostles did not all preach the same message and disagreed strongly on several important points." Paul and Peter, for instance, were in severe conflict in their respective ministries. The New Testament itself reports such conflict. Why shouldn't it also reflect such conflict? The conflict between the Pauline mission and the church back in Jerusalem has been read out from the works attributed to Paul and James, as well as to Matthew and Luke. It has been a basis for battle between churches throughout the history of Protestantism and Roman Catholicism. When Paul and James have not been seen to be in harmony, one church has gone with Paul and another with James. Apart from misunderstandings of either what Paul meant or what James meant, can we not ask with Metzger why all the writers have to think exactly alike on all subjects anyway? Paul's pastoral tactic in Romans 14 is a beautiful but little heeded example of the toleration which should characterize Christians who come to widely divergent positions on even apparently fundamental issues. A healthy dose of John Wesley's maxim that if we can't all think alike, at least let's all love alike, could be helpful here. But Metzger also cautions that the "tensions ... must not be exaggerated into contradictions as a result of giving inadequate consideration to the divergent situations in the early Church to which the writers addressed themselves." He continues: "each writer [James and Paul] in his historical individuality has served to guard the other against the extremes of misinterpretation."

Another example has to do with the matter of cursing. Luke reports that Jesus forbids cursing (6:28). Jesus' brother James laments cursing of persons he notes are made in God's image (3:9).

Paul joins them in his letter to the Romans (12:14), instructing that Christians not curse even their persecutors. Yet Paul himself curses others in both his Galatian (1:8-9) and Corinthian (I Corinthians 16:22) correspondence (this latter in his very own handwriting) and James' brother Jude (also a brother of Jesus?) pronounces a long curse on certain teachers in his brief letter. Here we have not only differences from book to book or from author to author but even within the writings of the same author.

The Bible's diversity also stems from the fact that the Bible may be said to be a two-way conversation. It is not God's lecture or rule book, as some fundamentalists seem to think of it. "The Bible is a dialogue," writes Marcus Barth, "God and man are partners in a conversation which is meant to be overheard. ... But the reader of the Bible does not always, or only, hear God speaking. There are many words which—if he is honest—he must admit he does not understand, and which he cannot, or cannot yet, respect as the word of God. ... The ample place which is given to men's responses, wise or unwise, and even to their murmurs and outbursts, distinguishes the Bible from mere collections of divine laws or revelation."

We are urged by Metzger to learn from the diversity within the scripture, to see the Bible "as a perpetual reminder to the several Churches of the need to examine critically their own interpretation and proclamation of the apostolic witness, and to listen attentively to the interpretations offered by other believers."

Much of the Bible's diversity is due to the *progressive* nature of the revelation (cf. e.g. Hebrews 1:1-4; Exodus 3:6; Daniel 9:2; etc.). The Anglican co-founder of Dallas Seminary, W. H. Griffith Thomas, explained in 1930 that "Revelation having been mediated through history has of necessity been progressive." One of his Dispensational heirs observes that progressive revelation means that "God may add or even change in one era what He had given in another. ... What God revealed as obligatory at one time may be rescinded at another." [Ryrie] He warns that "fail[ure] to recognize this progressiveness in revelation will raise unresolvable contradictions between passages if taken literally." Ryrie cites some examples: Matthew 10:5-7 with Matthew 28:18-20; Luke 9:3 with Luke 22:36; Genesis 17:10 with Galatians 5:2; Exodus 20:8 with Acts 20:7, John 1:17, John 16:24, and II Corinthians 3:7-11.

There is obvious development within the Old Testament, between the Old and New Testaments, and within the New Testament. As Oswalt puts it: "There is a progressive unfolding on God's part, and there is a deepening response on the part of certain segments of the community ... to a divine initiative." Baptist theologian Bernard Ramm explains that "Revelation ... unfolds as an organic whole with a measure of progressive development. ... What is meant in saying that revelation is progressive is that in its main sweep, in its broad outlines, it moves on to clearer expression and higher notions of God and more refined ethical teachings." Fundamentalists in the pew may find such expression unfamiliar and even uncomfortable, but there is nothing sub-evangelical in Ryrie's, Oswalt's, and Ramm's comments. On the contrary, as J. I. Packer of Regent College says, "the phrase 'progressive revelation' is one which evangelical theology may

with advantage reclaim for its own use." Westminster Seminary's Richard Gaffin agrees that "biblical revelation is given as an organically unfolding process" but he concedes that the "traditional Reformed consensus" hasn't recognized this sufficiently. Packer acknowledges that "a real development—though not an evolutionary one—is plain to see not only in the history of revelation that the Bible writers themselves record, but also in their own grasp of God's purpose in and through history." Ridderbos avers: "The Bible itself includes various interpretations of salvation. Life is changing and people are changing in their different situations; and the reality of God's revelation is more than one prophet or apostle can bring to expression." Writing in *Christianity Today*, Leon Morris comments: "Our Master refused to go along with a hidebound conservatism. ... He accepted as fully as any that the ancient Scripture was authoritative. But he saw that the traditional attitude to it had prevented some of his contemporaries from seeing its real meaning." One of the most important examples of this was in regard to the role of the Messiah himself. As Dunn concludes, "If Jesus and Paul provide a model, it is of a surprising, disturbing, boundary crossing, breaking down or disregarding of religious conventions." Writing about movement within the work of Paul and the rest of the New Testament and even beyond, Richard Longenecker asserts in *Perspectives on Evangelical Theology* that "to deny development in Paul, the New Testament, and/or Christian theology is to devalue [the Theology of Christian Theology], turning it into a symbol for the mere repetition of past formulations rather than a discipline that is both constructive and properly creative. ... the apostle must be understood in terms of both continuity and development, with circumstances and alien ideologies often being employed by God's Spirit to stimulate thought." Among the many important parts of the Old Testament abandoned by Paul and the early church were the scriptural laws of animal sacrifice, Sabbath, clean and unclean foods and other things, circumcision, levirate marriage, etc.

In his 1987 Griffith Thomas Lectures, Dunn took note of the progress from the Old Testament to the New and he risked asking: "Is there any sense in which the New Testament's relativizing of the Old becomes a paradigm for the way in which new revelation might relativize the authority of the New Testament?" In reply to his own question, he said that "we can give a cautious Yes." Warning that care must be taken "lest we erode the definitive role of the New Testament," he nonetheless argues that the biblical example itself teaches us that there may be some New Testament scripture which needs to be interpreted in a new light today. After all, Paul's own revisions of biblical teaching were not scripture when first advanced. But wisely, Dunn is quick to say that this must take place only within the same concerns as in the first century: to enlarge understanding of the grace of God where traditions have narrowed and restricted it by way of "an over-evaluation of certain scriptures." Dunn is much more conservative than Paul was. He goes on to note that the early Christians had no scriptural warrant as such for their revisions on circumcision, for example. Rather, it was "historical circumstance" which triggered their changes. The more recent revision on slavery is, Dunn argues, another example of an enlarging sense of grace discarding assumptions about scripture itself. Not one Bible verse used down to the 19th century by the Baptists, Presbyterians, and Methodists of the "Old South" to defend the institution of slavery has been deleted from the Bible. Not one Bible verse used by

fundamentalists in the 1950s and 60s to support segregation has been dropped from the Bible. But in view of a growing sense of justice—with significant persuasion coming from even outside the faith community—we now read these verses differently. Even fundamentalists' assumptions and agendas have changed, though the texts themselves have not.

Some Christians today, alert to the Bible's overarching attention to issues of love and justice, see a parallel example in the matter of the church and homosexuality, although biblical scholars note that the Bible itself has never provided the anti-gay passages in the unambiguous way it provided the pro-slavery passages. Asbury Seminary's George Turner also calls attention to the fact that it was "Experience [that] played a decisive role in the apostles' interpretation of the Old Testament." He recalls, for example, how reports of what was happening among Gentile "dogs" effectively "enabled James to interpret familiar passages in a new light." Is it too much to expect modern day conservative Christians to hear reports of the integration of saving faith and sexuality among homosexuals and respond as did their first-century sisters and brothers?

In the words of Ridderbos: "The contents of the Christian message will always appear to have new answers to new questions." Perhaps as in the past, it will have new answers to old questions as well. "There are always risks in living in a new age," Morris notes, but he says that "there is disaster in trying to live in a past age." Thieliicke likewise observes that "In the course of history every age has not had the same problems: Thus the same biblical words are not significant in the same way in every age. Rather, at any given time only a part of the canon bears fruit 'unto its time.'" We should add that in the course of a person's own life history, at different stages in his or her life and faith adventure, the same words are not significant in the same way at every point. Both individual Christians and assemblies of Christians grow, mature, and develop in grace. In his biography of Calvin, T. H. L. Parker says: "As his understanding of the Bible broadened and deepened, so the subject matter of the Bible demanded ever new understanding in its interrelations within itself, in its relations with secular philosophy, in its interpretation by previous commentators." The same can, of course, be said of the earlier and later Luther. The same can be said of any other important church leader who *grew* over his lifetime. That's what makes random quotation from any one theologian so often confusing.

Bruce understands that to adhere to the Bible "is not tantamount to shutting the Holy Spirit up in a book or collection of books." As he sees it, "Repeatedly, new movements of the Spirit have been launched by a rediscovery of the living power which resides in the canon of Scripture." Packer points out that "The Spirit's work of illumination and instruction is also progressive, in the sense that those whom the Spirit teaches learn one thing after another. This principle applies not only to the individual but also to the church, within which a 'progressive orthodoxy' appears as one doctrinal issue after another is raised and resolved." But are these, in turn, resolved for all time? The history of biblical interpretation says no. Fuller Seminary's Old Testament scholar William S. LaSor argues in the *Tyndale Bulletin* that we must not be content simply with the original meaning of a biblical text. He explains that the text has a *sensus plenior*, a fuller sense, that becomes clearer only with the passing of time. Packer, speaking even of "revelation from the

beginning of time to the present day," affirms that "revelation continues at the present time." He means by this statement that the Holy Spirit "fulfills His teaching role to us today by using the inspired Scriptures as His textbook, either directly or indirectly." In Morris' words: "The Spirit is continually manifesting Himself in new ways" and Westminster Seminary's Moises Silva says: "God's truth remains sure, while our perception of that truth may need to change. " And in major matters it *has indeed* changed over the history of God's people. Bloesch reminds us that "the Word of God is not fettered (II Timothy 2:9). It leaps and runs and is not even bound to the means of grace—the Bible, the sermon, the sacraments—though we are so bound." The Word of God is not bound even by the Bible! As the Bible translator J. B. Phillips puts it: "We have to beware of confining God to the pages of the Bible (though He certainly does speak there)." Says Ramm: "Scripture is not the totality of all God has said and done in this world." Bloesch says that we need to recover the biblical concepts of the Word's freedom and unpredictability. He reminds us of John Robinson's famous farewell: "The Lord has more light and truth yet to break forth out of his holy Word." This Puritan's oft-quoted statement is also cited in this regard by Turner in his Evangelical Theological Society essay within a book edited by Dallas Seminary's John F. Walvoord and it is the motto of Presbyterians for Lesbian and Gay Concerns. Bruce also cites Robinson's wisdom when he says that good Christians "will always be prepared to accept and obey that further light which (in the words of John Robinson of Leiden) God may yet cause 'to break forth out of his holy word.'" Bruce says we should "indeed *expect* such light to break forth. ... tradition is not the ultimate authority ... 'This is what we were always taught' cannot be the most conclusive argument." Sadly, too many evangelicals are oriented in the very opposite direction, like Lot's wife they're looking back in a deluded nostalgia that precludes the expectation of anything new and fresh. "Fundamentalism stumbles," says T. F. Torrance of Edinburgh, because "it rejects the fact that revelation must be continually given and received in a living relation with God." Torrance told his Payton Lectures audience at Fuller Seminary that fundamentalism "substitutes a static for a dynamic view of revelation."

Thielicke takes so seriously that there is always yet more light to shine forth from the Word of God that he states: "A final form of the Word of God is the witness which on the basis and under the guidance of the kerygma [the apostolic proclamation of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ] is given in later ages by witnesses of the Word. Between this verbal form of past, present, and future witnesses and the original witness enshrined in the New Testament no qualitative distinction need be made, for both share the promise that in the Word no less and no other than God's Word is proclaimed and the Kyrios links his own ongoing presence with this proclamation (Matthew 18:20). The promise applies to the Word proclaimed today and always that it will be endowed with the Pneuma and become God's own Word in spite of the weakness of human lips and the fragility of earthen vessels."

The Bible's Unity

Notwithstanding all the diversity in the Bible, it can be well recognized that there is a great unity there as well. Regarding the Hebrew Bible, the new comprehensive *Encyclopedia of the Jewish*

Religion states that "an underlying spiritual unity is apparent." Brown University's Jacob Neusner sees the Hebrew Bible as "an example of [the] very activity that, over all, the university is meant to nurture, seeing things whole, all together, and within a single, unifying field-theory of explanations." As Neusner has it: "The very quest for connections, for the explanation of many things in some one way that characterizes all forms of learning, finds in the very canon of Judaism a stunning expression and exemplification." The much-heralded new Harvard University Press *Literary Guide to the Bible*—another hardly evangelical enterprise—has as its primary editorial principle: the search for unity, both within the books and between the books, from Genesis all the way through Revelation. Such unity between the Testaments should not be unexpected since, as the Jewish biblical scholar Samuel Sandmel reminds us: "Earliest Christianity was a movement in Judea, of and by Jews, for a Jewish purpose." Bible scholar Norman K. Gottwald writes in *The New York Times*: "Most New Testament language [even including that] about Jews, including Paul's, was spoken by Jews in the midst of intense religious and political family fights."

But if it is easy to exaggerate the Bible's diversity into meaningless contradiction, it is even easier to exaggerate the Bible's unity into a forced uniformity. Thus we must be careful to discover even in the diversity the *nature* of the *organic unity* and not foist onto the Bible our own assumptions about what unity should be.

When discussing the unity of the Bible we are again thinking in terms of a canon within the canon. We're speaking of a distillation down to the very essence. That basic core around which all else is commentary is suggested in the following.

In October, 1987, hundreds of thousands of gay men and lesbians, together with many heterosexual supporters, traveled to our nation's capital to march for more federal aid for research and treatment of AIDS and for an end to discrimination against gay people. *Christianity Today* editor-at-large Philip Yancey was there that day. He reports that in front of The White House "About forty policemen, many of them on horseback, had formed a protective circle around a small group of outspoken Christian protesters." These people were "yelling inflammatory slogans at the marchers." Their chants included "Faggots go home, faggots go home" and "Shame-on-you-for-what-you-do." Yancey reports that "the last taunt in the protesters' repertoire and the one shouted with the most enthusiasm [was] 'AIDS, AIDS, it's comin' your way!'" Yancey says he "could not fathom how anyone could wish that fate on another human being." At one point, he witnessed a group of gay Christians from among the marchers. They gave "a poignant reply to the ... Christian protesters: they drew even and stopped to face them, then sang, 'Jesus loves you, this we know, for the Bible tells us so.'" Yancey says that "the abrupt ironies in that scene of confrontation stayed with me long after I left Washington. On the one side were 'righteous' Christians ... on the other were 'sinners' ... one side spewed out hate and the other sang of Jesus' love."

This incident illustrates the two basic spiritual ways throughout the world throughout all history. Unlike all other writings of all other religions, the Bible in its unity does not present a call to search out or earn salvation through self-seeking morality, asceticism, or liturgical and cultic religiosity. And it is anything but a call to lord one's own powers and purposes over the poor and oppressed. If there is a basic message of the Bible it is exactly summed in what those gay Christian marchers sang in the phrases of Anna Warner's children's hymn: Jesus loves us, this we know, for the Bible tells us so. The Bible is not a rule book; it's a love letter. As Marcus Barth puts it: "the Bible is an invitation. to learn of God's love, to enjoy it, and to respond to it. ... *The Bible is a Magna Charta of Liberation.*" Bruce says that "The Bible's central message is the story of salvation." And that story of salvation is presented as salvation history, as Richard Gaffin argues in his *The Centrality of the Resurrection*. It's not, he says, primarily focused on the individual's salvation but even Paul's "primary interest is seen to be in the *historia salutis* [salvation history] as that history has reached its eschatological realization in the death and especially the resurrection of Christ." That story, that history, is one that is, from beginning to end, from promise to fulfillment, the story of God's acts of free grace, mercy, love and peace to us that is most dramatically revealed in God's Self-sacrifice at the cross. And because of that enfleshed love nailed to the cross, Christ is risen. And because Christ is risen, we too shall rise from death to eternal life. This is the very good news of the gospel. To Paul, this was the *only* really good news. This gospel is the one word that makes the Bible one book. The unifying word of the Bible is that in spite of all else, Almighty God is Love. And because God loves us so much we are free to obey God's command that we, in our own turn, also love each other,—even our enemies. Only the Bible speaks this way.

God's Self-sacrificing love is revealed throughout the Bible but it is nowhere more familiarly summed than in the third chapter of John's Gospel, the Bible in miniature: "For God loved the world so much that He gave his only Son that whoever trusts him should not perish but have everlasting life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world but to save the world through him. Whoever trusts in him is not condemned, but whoever refuses to trust stands condemned already because he has not depended on God's one and only Son."

In the Prologue to his 1526 translation of the New Testament into English, William Tyndale wrote of this gospel: it "signifyth good, mery, glad and joyful tydings, that maketh a mannes hert glad, and maketh hymn synge, daunce and leepe for joye." Karl Barth was the 20th century's prolific and greatest theologian. But when it came to his own personal response to the God he met in the Bible he simply said: "I am told and let myself be told that my creator is gracious, that he is on my side—I do not really know why, but he tells me so and I believe it." When Gypsy Rose Lee was told that "God is Love" her retort was this: "Get it in writing." Thank God we've got it in writing. That's what the Bible is.

An Appendix: The Inerrancy Question

In Gilbert and Sullivan's *The Pirates of Penzance*, little Frederick's nursery maid "did not catch the word aright" and the boy found himself apprenticed to a pirate instead of to a pilot. Communication frequently turns on getting just one word right—or in poor Frederick's case, just the last syllable. But experience teaches that it's pretty common to get some words wrong. In a 1653 edition of the King James Version, the infamous clobber passage of I Corinthians 6:9 was rendered: "the unrighteous shall inherit the kingdom of God." In 1631 the Mosaic commandment was rendered: "Thou shalt commit adultery." The 119th Psalm once read, in part: not princes, but "printers have persecuted me without cause."

Typographical errors can be funny as well as thought-provoking. For example, those who are unrighteous in themselves *are* those who enter the kingdom. But translation errors can be tragic.

The unfortunate King James translation of a singularly rare adverb modifying behavior (in an unworthy manner) in I Corinthians 11:27 as though it were an adjective modifying the person ("unworthily") has been "a dire threat for generations of English-speaking Christians," as Gordon D. Fee of Regent College observes. He says that "The tragedy of such an interpretation for countless thousands, both in terms of a forboding of the [Communion] Table and guilt for perhaps having partaken unworthily, is incalculable." The same evaluation can be made about the tragic translations allegedly pertaining to homosexuals. For example, the King James Version's insertion without textual warrant of "sodomites" for cultic prostitutes in Deuteronomy and I and II Kings as well as the National Council of Churches' newest Revised Standard Version's insertion without textual warrant of "practicing homosexuals" for an unknown term that Paul seems to have coined in I Corinthians and that Fee concedes "subsequent authors are reluctant to use ... especially when describing homosexual activity," mean horrible consequences for millions.

Besides typographical and translation errors, though, are there any more basic errors in the Bible? We do find errors in everything from Plato to Shakespeare to the Manhattan phone directory. On the other hand, everything from a hastily-scribbled memo to a carefully-prepared audit can be literally inerrant—without any errors. Is the Bible absolutely error-free as the strict inerrantists insist or is it full of errors as some others say? Fortunately, as Fuller Seminary's Jack Rogers explains, these "are not the only two choices."

For the past several years, though, a so-called "Battle for the Bible"—after the title of a book by fundamentalist Harold Lindsell—has been waged throughout Evangelicaland. It's led by advocates of total inerrancy that include Lindsell, Gleason Archer, John Walvoord, George Sweeting, Jimmy Swaggart, Jerry Falwell, Norman Geisler, Tim LaHaye, Paige Patterson, W. A. Criswell, Jimmy Draper, Bill Bright, Carl Henry, James M. Boice, Bob Jones, Jr. and other fundamentalists and Right-wing evangelicals. They are fighting the more moderate evangelicals who hold to a very high but less rigid or wooden view of the trustworthiness of the Bible. Representatives of this more moderate view include A. T. Robertson, E. Y. Mullins, W. T. Conner, G. C. Berkouwer, F. F. Bruce, Thomas F. Torrance, C. W. Lewis, J. B. Phillips, William

Barclay, Ralph Martin, Jack Rogers, George Eldon Ladd, Paul King Jewett, Bernard Ramm, Donald McKim, Donald Bloesch, Millard Erickson, I. Howard Marshall, Harry R. Boer, Helmut Thielicke, Robert G. Bratcher, Leon Morris, and Clark Pinnock, among other evangelical scholars. The "Battle" shows no signs of ending in the near future.

It should be noted that even though some in the former group have majored in this fight and have been most intemperate in their castigation of the latter group—for instance, Criswell has thrown them in with "liberals" and even "atheists"—others within the first camp admit that, as Kenneth Kantzer does in *Christianity Today*: "biblical infallibility is not essential to the existence of Christian faith." Since Kantzer defines "infallibility" as an even stronger term than "inerrancy," his acknowledgment is significant. Kantzer continues: "No instructed evangelical, moreover, would suggest that belief in an infallible Bible is necessary for either salvation or godly living." Overlooking what some of the evidently "uninstructed" evangelicals are actually doing with inerrancy issues and concentrating rather on what they should or should not be doing, Kantzer adds: "Neither is belief in the infallible authority of Scripture a requirement for church membership. The church is a body of those who profess faith in Christ and seek to live under his lordship." The issue of inerrancy is, from F. F. Bruce's trans-Atlantic view, "Happily ... a North American phenomenon which one does not find very much in Britain." One finds it even less on the Continent or in other parts of the world. So what's this "Battle" in America all about?

Fundamentalists in this country, of course, are not the only religionists who claim they have an absolutely inerrant sacred book. Pseudo-Christian cults that champion absolute inerrancy include the Jehovah's Witnesses, the Christadelphians, the Jesus-Only Pentecostals, and the Mormons. Islam says that the Qur'an is inerrant. The Qur'an is believed by Moslems to have existed forever—in the Arabic language! It's said that there's nothing human about it; it's entirely divine. Moslems thereby go beyond claims made by even the most absolutist of Christian fundamentalist inerrantists. But as Harry Boer of *The Reformed Journal* notes, the Qur'an is not what Islam claims it is: "From a higher critical point of view," writes Boer, "nothing is more far-fetched than [the] claim" that the Qur'an is inerrant. Islam mocks the Christian Bible, asking rhetorically how it can be the Word of God if it contains any of the human elements acknowledged by even the most fundamentalist of Christians. Long before Muhammad, the pagan philosopher Porphyry poked fun at Origen for holding to a Bible which presents the apostles as not able to agree on the eating of meat, for example. If the Bible is tainted by the debates between Paul and Peter, Porphyry argued, how could the Bible be the Word of God. Such all-or-nothing reasoning sounds much like the argumentation put forward today by fundamentalist inerrantists. For example, Paul Feinberg, who writes for the *Fundamentalist Journal*, insists that but "one error in Scripture ... would call everything in Scripture into question. We could not be sure that everything in it is true." This slippery slope line of argument is common among inerrantists. The only way for the Bible to be "entirely true and trustworthy," according to The Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy, is for it to be "free from all falsehood or mistake in all its assertions." The Dallas Seminary tract on inerrancy is peppered with slogans such as these: "There is no such thing as

inspiration which does not carry with it the correlate of infallibility. A Bible that is fallible ... is a Bible that is not inspired." Of course it's one thing to boldly assert such a statement and it's quite another thing to back it up with solid evidence.

It should be noted without further delay that the Bible which the total inerrantists say is totally inerrant is not the Bible any of them use. They would finally admit that they've never read that inerrant Bible. They claim such inerrancy for only the autographs, not, strictly speaking, for their King James or New American Standard Versions. And each of the originals is now lost.

Though the total inerrantists claim inerrancy for only the lost autographs, they believe that Paul's Bible, the Bible of the earliest Christians, and the Bible Christians read and studied for many centuries, was riddled with errors—even in the original manuscripts! In the words of Merrill F. Unger of Dallas Seminary, books of the earliest Christians' Bible contained "what is false in fact, erroneous in doctrine [and] unsound in morality ... abound[ing] in historical, geographical and chronological inaccuracies and anachronisms." The Moody Press *Wycliffe Bible Encyclopedia* states that the Bible of the earliest Christians had "historical mistakes and represent[ed] questionable ethics and theology." R. Laird Harris of Covenant Seminary wrote that the Bible of the earliest Christians was "full of geographical, chronological and historical mistakes." And these fundamentalist Bible teachers and encyclopedia are right. Paul's Bible was full of errors. So was Timothy's Bible and the Bible of the other early Christians.

How can all of this be the case? It must, of course, be remembered that as R. K. Harrison of Wycliffe College at the University of Toronto says, the early Christians adopted the Septuagint (LXX), the Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible and the LXX contained the Apocrypha. All of the negative quotes cited in the paragraph above were made with reference to the Apocrypha. The historical facts allow us to hold these fundamentalists to saying what they did not mean to imply, that the earliest Christian Bible contained historical, geographical, chronological, and even theological errors.

Harrison acknowledges that the early Christians "felt no particular urge to repudiate those familiar compositions found in the LXX Canon which were not represented in the Hebrew Scriptures." And it should be appreciated that back then, the Apocryphal books were not relegated to a special "less canonical" section as they would later be. Writing in the *Wycliffe Bible Encyclopedia*, Jack P. Lewis of the Harding Graduate School of Religion acknowledges that the books of the Apocrypha were "an integral part of the canon and were scattered throughout the Old Testament, generally placed near the books with which they have affinity." Thus, it is neither the Bible of the early Christians, nor today's Roman Catholics, nor Eastern Orthodox, nor Anglicans that modern fundamentalists insist is the totally inerrant Bible. It's not even their own Scofield Reference Bible! The turf over which they wage their "Battle for the Bible" is something they cannot put their hands on: the biblical autographs of most American Protestant Bibles of the past 150 years. They concede that all of these are lost. So why do they wage this war?

Does the Bible itself anywhere claim inerrancy for itself? Total inerrantists say that it does. They cite their proof-texts, but none of them contains the term. The Bible itself, of course, *cannot* claim inerrancy for itself. Where would it do so? Where *could* it do so? It can't claim *anything* for itself, for that matter, because the Bible is a whole library of books, written over fifteen centuries by many different persons in many different places under many different circumstances and for many different reasons. Any statement cited from one book within this vast collection, from one time and place, even if it did claim inerrancy for itself or for some other book within the present collection, cannot automatically apply to all of the books simply because they have now finally all been gathered between the covers of one volume. At most, a claim that a biblical quote applied to the whole of scripture could pertain to a statement made in only the very last book written and then only if it could be believed that its author knew of all of the other books and knew that his own book and all others would be collected together as The Bible. That was never the case historically. And at any rate, at the time of the writing of the Bible's last book, the other "biblical" books included the books of the Apocrypha.

The very last book to be written, called II Peter, made it into the New Testament canon only after relatively strong resistance from early Christians. As the Lutheran Petrine scholar John H. Elliott states: "no New Testament writing was so poorly attested among the Church Fathers or received into the canon with greater hesitation than was 2 Peter." Apart from the fact that the Apocryphal books were taken as "scripture" when II Peter was written and would have been meant had any sweeping statement been issued to cover all "scripture" at the time of II Peter, II Peter itself was for so long so dubious within the faithing community that such a statement would not have carried much weight.

But as we've indicated, no such endorsing scenario ever existed. "None of the biblical authors refers specifically to all of the books of the Bible," as I. Howard Marshall of Aberdeen University puts it. It's remarkable, though, how sloppy even fine scholars get when it comes to speaking of the Bible's words about "itself." Nonetheless, Everett F. Harrison of Fuller Seminary makes an important point in saying that "One must grant that the Bible itself, in advancing its own claim of inspiration, says nothing precise about inerrancy."

Clark Pinnock of McMaster Divinity College posits that "the biblical writers did not compose their work with the elaborate theory of inerrancy to guide them." There are hundreds of things in the Bible that Pinnock says inerrantists find "hard ... to reconcile" with inerrancy and he explains that this is to be expected whenever one tries "to impose on the Scriptures a human theory not itself scriptural. ... It just does not work. The text will resist it." Wheaton College philosopher Arthur F. Holmes correctly assesses that inerrancy is not explicitly taught in the Bible itself and is not a logical induction from Scripture's phenomena. He asserts that it is "a second-order theological construct that is added for systematic reasons." To R. Alan Culpepper of The Southern Baptist Seminary: *"Inerrancy is a modern theory regarding the accuracy of the original manuscripts of the Bible in matters that are irrelevant to its essential message."* No inerrantist himself, C. S. Lewis of Oxford and Cambridge wrote to Clyde s. Kilby of Wheaton

College: "The very *kind* of truth we [*sic*] are often demanding was, in my opinion, not even envisaged by the ancients."

If the modern idea of total inerrancy as taught by today's American fundamentalists is not to be found in the Bible itself, is it to be found as a doctrine throughout historic Christian orthodoxy?

The American fundamentalist movement traces its more immediate beginnings to the early 20th century. The word "fundamentalist" itself comes from a publication called *The Fundamentals* which was printed by the Bible Institute of Los Angeles between 1910 and 1915. One of the writers in this series was James Orr, a well-known evangelical theological teacher at the United Free Church College in Glasgow. In his work, *Revelation and Inspiration*, published in 1910, Orr wrote that the argument for strict inerrancy is "a most suicidal position for any defender of revelation to take up." Fundamentalist advocates of strict inerrancy today like to identify with the Old Princeton giants, Benjamin Breckinridge Warfield and Charles Hodge. What they don't seem to remember is that Warfield and Hodge once wrote that the biblical writers were "dependent for their information upon sources and methods in themselves fallible, their personal knowledge and judgment were in many matters hesitating and defective or even wrong." If today's fundamentalists heard one of their number make such statements as these from Orr, Warfield and Hodge, they'd demand their heads on a platter. Reformed theologian Herman Bavinck, who succeeded Abraham Kuyper at the Free University of Amsterdam, wrote: "The writers of Holy Scripture probably knew no more than their contemporaries in all these sciences, geology, zoology, physiology, medicine, etc. And it was not necessary either. For Holy Scripture uses the language of daily experience which is always true and remains so. If the Scripture had in place of it used the language of the school and had spoken with scientific exactness, it would have stood in the way of its own authority." It would have stood in the way of its own lucidity as well. This is an important point and it was picked up by the Yale alumnus Reuben A. Torrey who, at the time of the publication of *The Fundamentals*, was dean of the Bible Institute of Los Angeles. In 1907, Torrey wrote: "It is one of the perfections of the Bible that it was not written in the terminology of modern science. If it had been, it would never have been understood until the present day ... Furthermore, as science and its terminology are constantly changing, the Bible, if written in the terminology of the science of today, would be out of date in a few years." The Right-wing patriarch W. A. Criswell of Dallas says the same thing in his book, *Why I Preach That the Bible is Literally True*—the *very same* thing: "It is one of the perfections of the Bible that it was not written in the terminology of modern science. If it had been, it would never have been understood, nor would it even be understood in the present day. Science and its terminology are constantly changing, and if the Bible had been written in the terminology of science today, it would be out of date a few years hence." And yet the Criswell camp *does* use the Bible as a science textbook in its inerrancy crusades for creationism!

"The real object to which the Holy Spirit gives witness in the hearts of believers is," Bavinck says, "no other than the *divinitas* of the truth, poured out on us in Christ. Historical, chronological, and geographical data are never in themselves, the object of the witness of the

Holy Spirit." Kuyper spoke of even "innocent inaccuracies" in the Bible. Scottish Free Church theologian James Denney said: "For a mere verbal inerrancy I care not one straw. It is worth nothing to me; it would be worth nothing if it were there, and it is not."

Going back much farther in Protestant history, to the seminal minds of Luther and Calvin, what do we find regarding absolute inerrancy? Even Charles Ryrie of Dallas Seminary admits that for the Protestant Reformers, "the doctrines of inspiration and infallibility ... did not occupy a large place in their writings." He could have dropped the term "large" and have been more accurate. His is quite a concession regarding theologians who number among them the most prolific men of all time and men who put great store in getting the Bible into the language of the common people and on the keystone *sola scriptura* principle of the Reformation. According to Donald Bloesch of Dubuque Theological Seminary, "neither Calvin nor Luther made scriptural efficacy contingent on the errorlessness of the original biblical manuscripts. Instead, they affirmed that Scripture is authoritative and effectual because God in person speaks in and through it." Calvin said, for example, that Jeremiah's name got into Matthew 27:9 "by mistake." That Matthew's quotation is a conflation of both Jeremiah and Zechariah referenced by the name of only the major prophet, a conventional literary practice in Matthew's day, is beside the point. The point is that Calvin took it to be an error in the Bible and it didn't bother him. The book of II Peter claims Petrine authorship but Calvin doubted that Peter was its author. Calvin argued that when biblical writers touched matters of science—and he was, of course, speaking in terms of his 16th century science—they were speaking "in mere accommodation to mistaken, though generally received opinion." Luther stated: "I care not if you bring a thousand places of Scripture against me, we are prepared to hold fast to Christ against Scripture." The Bible proof-texts of Luther's enemies would not bother him, he said. And this was from the Wartburg exile risking his life to put that scripture into the language of his fellow Germans. But Luther reasoned: "What purpose other than the proclamation of Christ's redemption does scripture have from beginning to end?" Luther taught that the Old Testament prophets were often in error. He viewed the books of Chronicles to be less trustworthy than the books of the Kings on the same matters. He taught that some of the characters and scenes in Job had been created by the author of Job for literary effect. He saw errors of thinking in Hebrews. He called James' letter "a right strawy epistle ... [with] no evangelical character about it." Although the book of Jude begins with an identification of its author, Luther doubted that Jude wrote Jude. He wrote that Jude "need not be counted among the chief books which are supposed to lay the foundations of the faith." The Revelation was viewed by Luther, as well as by Karlstadt, Zwingli and other Reformers, as an inferior book. Luther expressed regret that Esther was included in the Bible. Zwingli, the Swiss Reformer, taught that the Word of God was not the merely external letter of the Bible, certainly not abstract propositional information that should be harmonized, but the Word of God was dynamic truth understood only through the act of faith. These Reformers were not bound to a slavish notion of inerrancy from the book of Genesis all the way through the book of Revelation.

Thus, from earliest Protestantism, inerrancy was of no concern. Ryrie admits: "It has been in the modern period that the doctrine developed." The term itself, he concedes, is "of much more recent use." James Bratt, in *The Banner* of the Christian Reformed Church, calls inerrancy a "distinguishing innovation" of modern American fundamentalism.

Advocacy of fundamentalist biblical inerrancy stems from fundamentalist biblical illiteracy. Instead of bowing to what the fundamentalists *want* the Bible to be about in this regard, let's look at what the Bible itself *reveals* in this regard. To get at this, let's first ask how biblical authors themselves treated other biblical material.

There are some two hundred fifty express citations of Old Testament scripture in the New Testament. There are over a thousand citations if we add partial quotations and allusions. The many inaccuracies which occur in these "show the lack of concern (more than memory lapse) of the biblical writers for verbal exactness," according to biblical scholar E. Earle Ellis of Southwestern Baptist Seminary. He says that it is the meaning rather than the words in themselves that are important. In a considerable number of cases variant renderings are deliberately chosen, *ad hoc* or from other known versions, in order to bring out the 'fulfillment' as seen by the New Testament writer (e.g. I Corinthians 15:54f) ... Often Old Testament passages are applied at variance with the original historical meaning." For instance, Paul changes Psalm 68:18 in Ephesians 4:7 from "*received gifts from men*" to "*gave gifts to men*"—a completely different meaning. Glasgow's William Barclay reminds us that "Paul seldom quotes accurately." No wonder. In Paul's day, as Barclay notes, scripture was on clumsy rolls of papyrus that were quite difficult to use. Also, of course, there were no chapter divisions until the 13th century and no verse divisions or concordances until the 16th, so Paul did what he could with what he had within his very busy schedule. Usually, it seems to have been from memory. His freedom in citing Old Testament texts is shown, for example, in his letter to the Romans (9:3) when he freely renders his favorite prophet (Isaiah 8:14 and 28:16). What scripture is Paul citing in I Corinthians 2:9? There is no Old Testament passage that precisely parallels Paul's reference here. At best it may be a very free use of Isaiah 64:4.

The four accounts of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John also well underscore the lack of careful concern with getting every single word exactly right. The reports of what Jesus said are not always in agreement when it comes to his parables, for example. Yet with all their variations, they were included within the same Bible. They were not "harmonized." They were not forced into conformity with each other. That indicates that the editors and compilers did not put a premium on verbal exactitude. This is evidenced in something as standard as the so-called Lord's Prayer. Bible scholar Francis W. Beare notes that the variations in the Prayer, as presented in Matthew as over against Luke, "tell strongly against any theory that the words of Jesus were committed to memory and that there was any great concern to preserve them exactly. ... The tradition of his sayings was not stereotyped."

We must honestly ask ourselves whether all these circumstantial and even deliberate discrepancies are reflective of a scrupulous interest in the very words? If the writers and editors did not think it important to remember and record each of the exact words used by Jesus in the incidents they relate, how much less were they interested in the exact words regarding everything else. Are the uses made of words in the biblical books themselves consistent with the viewpoint of total inerrancy and its emphasis on verbal inspiration? The biblical writers, by their own behavior and in their own words, show otherwise.

"The enlightened biblical Christian," Bloesch asserts, "will not shrink from asserting that there are culturally conditioned ideas as well as historically conditioned language in the Bible. ... the biblical writers were [not] faultless in their recording of historical data or in their world view, which is now outdated." This theologian was found by *Moody Monthly* to be rated by his evangelical colleagues as "the most brilliant, creative evangelical working in systematic theology." He goes even further to state that "We should also bear in mind that not only the historical and cultural perspective of the biblical writers was limited but also their theological and ethical ideas. ... The Law of God is both fulfilled in and transcended by the Gospel," Bloesch asserts, "and this means that it is properly understood only in the light of the Gospel. Any text when taken out of its proper context and when divorced from the culminating revelation in the Bible becomes susceptible to error."

Pinnock points out that "Inerrancy is not the firm and clear category we are being told that it is. It is supposed to be the very answer to all our problems, and yet the inerrantists themselves cannot agree on what it signifies." The arguments in favor of inerrancy slip into circular reasoning, shifting definitions, and double-talk. They eventually are "saved" by the most tortured explanations advocates can manage to fabricate.

In I Corinthians 10:8, Paul says that 23,000 Levites died in a single day but Numbers 25:9 and all other sources put the number at 24,000. How do absolute inerrantists handle this discrepancy? Harold Mare of Covenant Seminary, as well as Ryrie and other fundamentalists, say that the extra 1,000 died later on. But as Fee notes, this explanation doesn't "fit with the plain sense of the text." Gleason Archer of Trinity Evangelical Divinity School refuses to see that Paul is at all referring to the same incident of Numbers 25:9 and tries to slip out of embarrassment by maintaining that Paul is actually referring to an altogether different incident, one recorded in Exodus 32 concerning the golden calf apostasy. In that case, the Old Testament text gives no number for possible conflict with Paul's number. As Church Lady would say: "Well, isn't that convenient." Equally devout evangelicals who do not hold to absolute inerrancy say it doesn't matter that the two numbers are in disagreement.

When, for example, Matthew 27:5 reports that Judas hanged himself but Peter, in Acts 1:18, is said to have claimed that Judas fell and burst asunder, absolute inerrantists scramble to come up with a Rube Goldberg explanation. In the process of hanging himself, they say, the rope or branch must have broken and sent Judas crashing to the ground. According to Archer's contorted

fantasy: "If the branch from which he had hung himself was dead and dry—and there are many trees that match this description even to this day on the brink of the canyon that tradition identifies as the place where Judas died—it would take only one strong gust of wind to yank the heavy corpse and split the branch to which it was attached and plunge both with great force into the bottom of the chasm below. There is indication that a strong wind arose at the hour Christ died and ripped the great curtain inside the temple from top to bottom (Matt 27:51). This was accompanied by a rock-splitting earthquake and undoubtedly also by a thunderstorm, which normally follows a prolonged period of cloud gathering and darkness (Matt 27:45). Conditions were right for what had started out as a mere suicide by hanging to turn into a grisly mutilation of the corpse as the branch gave way to the force of the wind and was hurtled down to the bottom." Archer's explanation is an overly ambitious pseudoscientific attempt that capitalizes on a pre-critical hermeneutic and runs wild, even at the expense of the original author's purposes and descriptions of the supernatural. And like that brittle branch, it won't keep the corpse of inerrancy from plunging into a chasm of dry bones.

Archer has written a 475-page volume entitled *The Encyclopedia of Bible Difficulties*, crammed with similar heroic efforts to save fundamentalist face. It was supported by the International Council on Biblical Inerrancy. Following an Introductory chapter called "The Importance of Biblical Inerrancy," he has tried to explain away the "difficulties" encountered in well over 2,500 Bible passages. The *Criswell Study Bible* also speaks of such "problems" and even of what are dubbed "inadvertencies" which it too tries to explain away. Other fundamentalist efforts speak of "apparent discrepancies" and of "seeming contradictions."

Even though the Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy states: "We deny that biblical infallibility and inerrancy are limited to spiritual, religious, or redemptive themes exclusive of assertions in the fields of history and science," J. I. Packer states that "The Bible contains, strictly speaking, no scientific statements at all" and Kenneth Kantzer asserts in the Foreword to Archer's big book on "Bible Difficulties" this apparently required disclaimer: "Never do [the biblical writers] speak in the vocabulary of modern science." Although it is what the Chicago Statement says regarding the Bible vis-a-vis science and history that is what makes it so controversial, here are these two conservative inerrantists making statements that render the strong Chicago affirmation irrelevant. Packer concedes that there are, for example, even what he calls "symbolic modes of representation in the story of Adam and Eve." In speaking of "problem areas related to biblical inerrancy," Packer states that it is not at all certain "whether all the physical details of the [Genesis 2 and 3] narrative are meant to inform us what we would in fact have seen happen had we been there, or whether God means them to function as significant symbols only." He here suggests that the "snake" may mean Satan, the "fruit" may mean any "alluring option," and the "garden" itself may be any "state of unalloyed pleasure." In an evangelical Old Testament survey edited by William LaSor, David Hubbard, and Frederick Bush, it is asserted that "Surely, when an author of a story names the principal characters (i.e. Adam and Eve) Mankind and Life, something is conveyed about the degree of literalness intended." This may surprise Jerry Falwell

and his followers who like to smirk about "Adam and Steve" in their antigay crusade. And it no doubt offends many fundamentalists who think that had the Christian Broadcasting Network been on hand during that first week, we'd have a video of an incident in a garden in which a reptile is arguing with a woman who then offers a piece of fruit to the only other person on earth.

After looking into the arguments of the more articulate of the strict inerrantists, it's evident that, as Clark Pinnock has observed about them, "inerrancy ... requires major qualifications almost as soon as it is uttered." When one takes into account all of the fine-print cop-outs, it's hard to disagree with I. Howard Marshall of the University of Aberdeen when he concludes that the difference between what is claimed by strict inerrantists and other evangelicals is really a matter of the degree of imprecision acknowledged to be in the biblical text. Fisher Humphreys of New Orleans Baptist Seminary has written a fair appraisal of the controversy and has concluded that he is "unable to understand how sophisticated, qualified inerrancy ... differs substantially from non-inerrancy." Wheaton's Mark A. Noll agrees with Humphreys and adds: "I feel the word 'inerrancy' gets in the way of progress on the question of the Bible's authority." Pinnock joins him in regretting that the caveat-laden doctrine of inerrancy "directs attention at once to the small difficulties in the text rather than to the infallible truth of its intended proclamation ... [and the slogan of inerrancy, he says, promotes] internecine strife and dark suspicion" among evangelicals. Clearly the whole controversy is encrusted with pride and paranoia inside and out. And in the end, as Berkouwer keenly concludes, the issue of inerrancy "will damage reverence for Scripture more than it will further it."

Inerrancy seems to be advocated out of fear that the admission of even one obvious error in a nonessential passage on a non-essential matter will open gates to let in a tidal wave of heresy that will sweep everything into a sea of relativity and all that is precious will be lost. This anxious argument is most unfortunate for as Dunn reports, it is "*pastorally disastrous*." According to this Durham professor, "In my experience of teaching theology, the student who is most at risk as regards faith is precisely the one who has been previously instructed in [the all-or-nothing notion of inerrancy]. When such a student finds that some such peripheral matters cannot be harmonized without doing some exegetical violence to the text, he/she is forced by this logic to abandon all." This tragic phenomenon is not limited to students. Unfortunately, many of the Bible institute and seminary teachers employed by fundamentalists today have never outgrown the tyranny of the "thin edge of the wedge" mentality and so they pass along the same misunderstandings and anxieties to whole new generations of church members and pastors-in-training. Dunn's pastoral as well as evangelistic concern is given expression also by Paul Achtemeier, the Lutheran scholar: "Diversion of attention from the Bible's witness about God's saving acts to questions about the precise accuracy of minor details is, in the end, perhaps the most serious defect in the conservative equation of Scripture with its supposed inerrancy." Dunn puts it even more strongly: "I believe the proponents of inerrancy are in considerable spiritual peril and are putting the faith of their disciples seriously at risk—I would not be so bold were it

not that the issues are so grave." This is a serious word of caution that no evangelical Christian can afford to treat lightly.

Does advocacy of absolute inerrancy actually accomplish anything worthwhile? Does it do any good? Does it insure a better understanding of what the text is saying? Once there is agreement that the Bible is inerrant in those lost autographs, is there then agreement on what the Bible says? *Absolutely NOT!* Kantzer reports on meetings of the International Council on Biblical Inerrancy where all in attendance, of course, were absolute inerrantists and proud of it. He found that "no one seemed to agree with anybody. Every issue became a battleground." What a farce. Perhaps all the dogma of inerrancy does is to reinforce a battleground mentality of pride and paranoia among fundamentalists and rob the serious-minded of a life-proclaiming Bible.

Advocates of strict inerrancy do seem to be motivated by fear and a desire for control, for certainty. They do seem to prefer to walk by sight instead of by faith. This is Pinnock's personal testimony of his own former days as such an inerrantist. He says that he "defended the strict view of inerrancy in my earlier years because I desperately wanted it to be true." (We have a parallel here with the issue of homosexuality in the fundamentalist/evangelical camp: What they think the Bible needs to say about homosexuality and about a "way out" of it is what they insist against the evidence the Bible does say.) Pinnock tried to give himself what he calls "absolute rational certainty" of the truthfulness of scripture, something he later realized he doesn't need. It should be evident that the blinkered intellectual dishonesty and polemical acrobatics required of total inerrantists are sadly symptomatic of what Erich Fromm calls "The compulsive quest for certainty ... [that] is not the expression of genuine faith but is rooted in the needs to conquer unbearable doubt." Helmut Thielicke says frankly that "fundamentalists ... are naive because they *want* to be naive. ... And they want to be naive because they believe that otherwise they will lose their faith." Surely the shrieking defensiveness of the total inerrantists demonstrates the accuracy of Thielicke's diagnosis.

In one of his characteristically penetrating essays in *Between Heaven and Hell*, Thielicke writes that "verbal inspiration is not primarily in conflict with 'reason' and 'history' but with faith itself, namely ... it denies the gracious condescension of God into our history, ... it denies his accommodation to us, the incarnation of the Word, and besides... it must necessarily, because of its little faith, repress the question of truth and defame the work of the historical scholar as being antigod." This evangelical pastor/scholar of Hamburg properly warned the inerrantists "not against having too much faith ... but rather against having too little faith." He says he "wanted to oppose in the name and on the basis of faith the legalism, which comes in by the back door, disguised in a pious mask and posing as an 'angel of light,' and threatens to break down everything that is precious to us in the gospel." Westminster Seminary's Vern Poythress also warns against such false security systems: "We must ask ourselves, 'Are we seeking another security than that of being one of Christ's sheep?' Being a sheep means being secure, not because one has all the answers, but because one is in Christ's care." Pinnock understands that "The logic of orthodoxy taken to its full extent can lead on right to Rome," as he reasons, but

fundamentalists would no doubt rather opt for a paper pope over which they can exercise their own control. They can go on rationalizing for years to try to cover over all their doubts. Their method is, as Bloesch correctly assesses in his criticism of Carl F. H. Henry's defending of inerrancy, a defense that "betrays a philosophical orientation that is radically different from that of the Reformation, one that is much closer to the stream of rationalism associated with the later Renaissance."

The nervously pugnacious battlers for inerrancy would do well to learn from the simple faithing of the Scottish novelist George MacDonald: "God has not cared that we should anywhere have assurance of His very words; and that not merely perhaps, because of the tendency of His children to word-worship, false logic, and corruption of the truth, but because that words, being human, therefore but partially capable, could not absolutely contain or express what the Lord meant, and that even He must depend for being understood upon the spirit of His disciple. Seeing it could not give life, the letter should not be throned with power to kill."

Some Selections for Further Study

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