

## THE RATIONALITY, MEANINGFULNESS, AND PRECISION OF SCRIPTURE

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*The purity of Scripture includes, among other things, a freedom from irrationality. Biblical logic is rational and is distinguishable from secular logic. Examples of evangelical abuses of biblical rationality include charismatic irrationality and apocalyptic irrationality. Secular reasoning would call biblical logic irrational because it allows no room for God's plan and omnipotence. Scripture is connected with sin only when sinful man imposes his own opinions on the text instead of allowing the Bible to express its own meaning. Common practice among contemporary evangelicals imposes an interpreter's preunderstanding on a text at the beginning of the interpretive process, thus depriving the text of its own meaning. Each text is meaningful in its own right and deserves to be heard through an objective hermeneutical approach. Scripture is reliable because of its precision, evidenced frequently throughout Scripture itself. Its precision requires an appropriately precise response from those who submit themselves to it (see 2 Tim 2:14-26). Unfortunately, recent evangelical scholarship has not acknowledged the Bible's precision, which extends to the very words that Jesus spoke. Earlier evangelicals, however, did specifically support the verbal inspiration of Scripture.*

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The title for this article deserves an explanation. After mulling over the ground to be covered, I realized the necessity to clarify some definitions. That is where we begin.

### **The Purity and Rationality of Scripture**

#### **Denotations**

The purity of Scripture touches on some very significant trends in contemporary evangelical use of the Bible. By definition, purity of a written work entails at least the following qualities:

- undiluted or unmixed with extraneous material
- perspicuity or clarity
- plain-spokenness

- no nonsense
- straightforward communication
- right-to-the-point exchange of words
- no hidden meanings unless clearly specified
- no double-talk
- no gobbledegook (no informal pompous or unintelligible jargon)
- no double entendres unless clearly necessitated
- no foolishness unless clear from the context
- freedom from irrationality.

The last of these, “freedom from irrationality,” means that the Scriptures make sense. They are reasonable. Their Author is a reasonable person who seeks to communicate with those whom He created in His own image. The fall of man (Genesis 3) damaged the reasoning powers of created humans, but in spite of human fallenness, God through inspiration has provided the books of the Bible whose reasoning is flawless. Through Spirit-guided use of sensible interpretive criteria, human beings can recover the message of the Bible, thereby also recovering to a large degree an original ability to think rationally.

### **Rationality and Logic**

Two kinds of logic prevail in the world. Secular logic is to be expected among humans who are outside the body of Christ, but that logic is inevitably self-centered because of the blindness that fell on the whole race when Adam disobeyed God’s command. The other kind of logic is biblical logic, the logic of reality because it is God’s logic, a logic that appeals to man’s rational faculties enlightened by the new birth and the illumination of the Holy Spirit. Scripture appeals to this latter kind of mind.

“Come now, and let us reason together,”  
 Says the LORD,  
 “Though your sins be as scarlet,  
 They will be as white as snow;  
 Though they are red like crimson,  
 They will be like wool” (Isa 1:18).

To the obedient child of God, those words make perfect sense, but to the disobedient unbeliever they are utterly irrational.

To point out the blindness and irrationality of the unbeliever in the realm of biblical logic is hardly necessary. The apostle Paul wrote, “[A] natural man does not accept the things of the Spirit of God; for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually appraised” (1 Cor 2:14). The absence of the Spirit’s illumination in such a person’s life renders the natural man helpless when it comes to comprehending “the deep things of God” (1 Cor 2:10b) as found in His Word. That fact is regrettable, but it is explainable. What is not explainable, however, is how those who profess to be God’s children can attribute irrationality to the Scriptures. Yet such is commonplace among today’s evangelicals.

### Contemporary Examples of Irrationality

The psamist has written, “Your Word is very pure; therefore Your servant loves it” (Ps 119:140; cf. Ps 19:8b). Yet irresponsible interpretive methods can defile that purity on the receiving end, when the Word of God is taught or preached. That is certainly the case when evangelicals using nonevangelical hermeneutical principles interpret and expound the Scriptures. We can appreciate the purity of the Word more fully by contrasting its correct interpretation with the abuses it has suffered from recent evangelicals, particularly those who treat the Word as irrational.

**Charismatic irrationality.** Two types of such abuses illustrate a widespread practice. The first comes from charismatic circles. Timothy B. Cargal in his article, “Beyond the Fundamentalist-Modernist Controversy: Pentecostals and Hermeneutics in a Postmodern Age,” sees postmodernist provisions for multiple meanings of a single Bible text in a very positive light.<sup>1</sup> He criticizes both Fundamentalists and Modernists for their “philosophical presupposition that only what is historically and objectively true is meaningful.”<sup>2</sup> He agrees with postmodernism that “meaning is not limited by positivistic constraints”<sup>3</sup> such as single meaning. He notes that “the Holy Spirit may ‘illumine’ the words of the text so as to ‘make them speak’ to any number of situations unforeseen by the human author of the text.”<sup>4</sup> He justifies this position by erasing a distinction between “inspiration” and “illumination,” i.e., by saying that interpreters of the text are as fully inspired as were writers of the original text.<sup>5</sup> On that basis he contends,

I would say that indeed Pentecostalism does have something to contribute to postmodern discourse about the Bible—particularly within the church. Its emphasis upon the role of the Spirit in interpreting/appropriating the multiple meanings of the biblical texts is an important contribution as the Western church seeks to reclaim its sense of mysticism and immanence of the transcendent which was diminished by rationalism.<sup>6</sup>

He says that one’s interpretations of a text cannot be limited by rationalism to an objectivist view of one meaning of the text and its authority—that meaning

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<sup>1</sup>Timothy B. Cargal, “Beyond the Fundamentalist-Modernist Controversy: Pentecostals and Hermeneutics in a Postmodern Age,” *Pneuma: The Journal of the Society of Pentecostal Studies* 15/2 (Fall 1993):175. Professor Cargal is University Lecturer in Philosophy and Religion at Western Kentucky University in Bowling Green, Kentucky.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., 168.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., 171.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., 175.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid., 175-76. Pinnock is another who advocates the erasure of a distinction between inspiration and illumination (Clark H. Pinnock, “The Work of the Holy Spirit in Hermeneutics,” *Journal of Pentecostal Theology [JPT]* 2 [April 1993]:3-5). Specifically, he calls “both operations of the Spirit, not just the original inspiration which produced the Bible but also the contemporary breathing of the Spirit in the hearts of readers, inspiration” (ibid., 4).

<sup>6</sup>Cargal, “Beyond the Fundamentalist-Modernist Controversy” 186.

determined by authorial intent—but rather must make room for additional meanings provided by mystical experiences of the interpreter. If those additional meanings proposed by Cargal are beyond rationalism, they of necessity must be irrational and therefore introduce extraneous material, i.e., impurity, to an understanding of the biblical text.

Fee also exemplifies the charismatic abuse of the Bible's purity by discouraging a rationalistic approach to interpretation when he writes the following regarding τὸ τέλειον (*to teleion*, “the perfect” or “mature”) in 1 Cor 13:10:

It is perhaps an indictment of Western Christianity that we should consider ‘mature’ our rather totally cerebral and domesticated—but bland—brand of faith, with the concomitant absence of the Spirit in terms of his supernatural gifts! The Spirit, not Western rationalism, marks the turning of the ages, after all; and to deny the Spirit's manifestations is to deny our present existence to be eschatological, as belonging to the beginning of the time of the End.<sup>7</sup>

His disparaging word about Western rationalism negates a view of the Bible as a rational book.

Also, Pinnock has a negative word to say about rationalism when he contrasts rationalism with the work of the Spirit in illumining the text:

[T]here is the strong influence of rationalism in Western culture which fosters a neglect of the Spirit. There is a mystery when it comes to the Spirit which rationalism does not favour. It does not feel comfortable talking about God's invisible wind. It prefers to draw up rules for interpretation which will deliver the meaning of any text by human effort. It does not want to drag mysticism into hermeneutics. Therefore, the only thing we leave for the Spirit to do in interpretation is to rubber-stamp what our scholarly exegesis concludes. This is an obstruction to effective biblical interpretation which grieves the Spirit of God.<sup>8</sup>

He goes so far as to call rational exegesis “an obstruction to effective biblical interpretation which grieves the Spirit of God.” He takes strong exception to the use of human reason in understanding the Scriptures.

Charismatic Archer follows the same path:

This concern [i.e., a focus upon what the original inspired author meant and/or intended first readers to understand is inadequate as a Pentecostal hermeneutic] has led some scholars to articulate a hermeneutic that is more representative of the early tradition and ethos of Pentecostalism. These scholars desire to move away from a hermeneutical system that is heavily slanted toward rationalism which tends to downplay experience and/or the role of the Holy Spirit.<sup>9</sup>

Archer advocates a moving away from a hermeneutic that is slanted toward

<sup>7</sup>Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, NICNT, ed. F. F. Bruce (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987) 644-45 n. 23.

<sup>8</sup>Pinnock, “Work of the Holy Spirit in Hermeneutics” 8.

<sup>9</sup>Kenneth J. Archer, “Pentecostal Hermeneutics: Retrospect and Prospect,” *JPT* 8 [April 1996]:75.

rationalism. One can hardly contend that these scholars are free from irrationality in their handling of Scripture. They are thus among those who are imposing human impurity on the purity of Scriptures. A rational approach to the Bible must admit the importance of the Holy Spirit's guidance in using rational principles of interpretation, but admission of the Spirit's role is not equivalent to moving outside the realm of biblical reason.

**Apocalyptic irrationality.** A second group of abusers who spoil the Scriptures' rationality come from among those who have difficulty making the book of Revelation fit their preunderstanding of what the book should say. The difficulty results in a variety of "eclectic" hermeneutical approaches to the book, approaches which are void of rationality. Typically, hermeneutical eclecticism combines preterism which limits the book to speaking of the historical context in which it was written, idealism which has the book speaking to new situations of later generations time after time, and futurism which sees the book as having one final reference to real end-time tribulation and the second coming of Christ. G. K. Beale typifies this hybrid approach to the book:

A more viable, modified version of the idealist perspective would acknowledge a final consummation in salvation and judgment. Perhaps it would be best to call this . . . view "eclecticism." Accordingly, no specific prophesied historical events are discerned in the book, except for the final coming of Christ to deliver and judge and to establish the final form of the kingdom in a consummated new creation—though there are a few exceptions to this rule.<sup>10</sup>

A repeated vacillation between literalism and nonliteralism resulting from Beale's amillennial preunderstanding of Revelation easily fits into the category of irrationality.

G. R. Beasley-Murray finds glaring inconsistencies in the account of the locust plague in Revelation 9, but the inconsistencies are of no concern to him because he considers the details of the account of no consequence.<sup>11</sup> Such a stance raises questions about the rationality of Scripture. Robert H. Mounce describes that same fifth-trumpet description as the language of ecstatic experience, which eliminates any possibility of a consistent pattern.<sup>12</sup> In other words, the language is irrational. Leon Morris and George Ladd join the chorus of those who find the language of Revelation unscientific and rationally and logically inconsistent.<sup>13</sup> Both Ryken and Mulholland point out the necessity of what psychologists call "right-brain" activity (i.e., the ability to think by means of images and intuition) as opposed to "left-brain" activity (i.e., the ability to think logically) when dealing with

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<sup>10</sup>G. K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999) 48.

<sup>11</sup>G. R. Beasley-Murray, *The Book of Revelation*, NCBC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974) 157.

<sup>12</sup>Robert H. Mounce, *The Book of Revelation*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977) 184.

<sup>13</sup>Leon Morris, *The Revelation of St. John*, TNTC (1969) 123; George E. Ladd, *A Commentary on the Revelation of John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972) 124.

Revelation.<sup>14</sup> Ryken is explicit in his eclectic approach to Revelation. After naming and describing the preterist, the continuous historical, the futurist, and the idealist as the four major approaches to the book, he writes, "I think that the book is a combination of all of these."<sup>15</sup> Progressive dispensationalist Pate resembles Ryken in combining preterism, idealism, and futurism when dealing with the Apocalypse.<sup>16</sup>

The above-named individuals practice eclecticism in interpreting Revelation and are classic examples of people who attribute irrationality to the Word of God. In so doing, they are contaminating the purity of the Scriptures. Certainly, irrationality is an extraneous quality that defiles.

### **Biblical Rationality and Secular Irrationality**

To point out how such irrationality differs from what secular logic would call irrationality, a further word about biblical logic is in order. For a virgin to give birth to a son would be irrational from the viewpoint of secular logic, but not so from a biblically logical perspective. It is perfectly logical because of God's plan and omnipotence. The secularist would contend that Sarah's giving birth to a son when she and Abraham were beyond the age of childbearing is not rational, but the Christian would not view it so because of his faith in the God of the supernatural. God promised it and Abraham believed His promise. The result was that it happened. That God could be the absolute sovereign of a universe in which all people still have freedom to make their own choices in life does not make sense to one who has no confidence in God's Word. Those who believe God's Word do not consider that irrational, however, because the Word teaches it. In this life, Christians may not be able to harmonize those two facts with complete satisfaction, but they accept them as perfectly rational because that is what the Scriptures teach. In this life, "we see in a mirror dimly" (1 Cor 13:12a), but our failure to grasp the whole picture is not an adverse reflection on the rationality of the Bible, because in spite of our finitude, we recognize the Bible's reasonableness.

Our recognition of such a limitation is not a contradiction of biblical rationality as are the direct abuses cited earlier. Those abuses flatly accuse the Bible of illogical statements, but an admission of finite limitations in understanding the whole of divine truth respects the rationality of the Bible.

As long as one remains within the boundaries of biblical logic, he cannot impugn the purity of Scripture as have those who through convoluted hermeneutical procedures attribute irrationality to the Scriptures.

### **The Impeccability and Meaningfulness of Scripture**

"Impeccability" means not liable to or capable of sin. When I first saw this

<sup>14</sup>Leland Ryken, *Words of Life: A Literary Introduction to the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1987) 143-44; M. R. Mulholland, *Revelation: Holy Living in an Unholy World* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990) 18.

<sup>15</sup>Ryken, *Words of Life* 144.

<sup>16</sup>C. M. Pate, "A Progressive Dispensationalist View of Revelation," in *Four Views on the Book of Revelation*, ed. by C. M. Pate (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998) 173-75.

word applied to the Bible, I immediately thought of the classic blunder made by the scribe of Codex Bezae when he copied John 5:39. The verse should read, *aiJ marturou'sai* (*hai martyrou'sai*, “those [Scriptures] are *the ones which are bearing witness* concerning Me”), but the scribe of Bezae wrote, *aJmartavnousai* (*hamartanousai*, “those [Scriptures] are *the ones which are sinning* concerning Me.”) instead.<sup>17</sup> The reading is so ridiculous that even the Nestle-Aland 27th edition Greek text with its multiplied textual variants does not cite it.

Of course, the Scripture cannot sin, but those who interpret it can impose sinful interpretations on the text. Fallen man is prone to impose his own subjective opinions in explaining what the Bible means, and is therefore the source of whatever sin may appear to arise from Scripture. Several times the psalmist wrote about the positive effects of Scripture in promoting holy living: “Your word I have treasured in my heart, that I might not sin against You” (Ps 119:11); “The law of his God is in his [the righteous person’s] heart; his steps do not slip” (Ps 37:31); “I delight to do Your will, O my God; Your Law is within my heart” (Ps 40:8).<sup>18</sup> But the growing role of subjectivism among contemporary evangelicals distorts Scripture in such a way that it facilitates human sin by imposing human fallibility on the Bible.

I recently attended a lecture by a well-known British scholar who proposed a new direction in Pauline studies. His preunderstanding of the Judaism of which Paul had been a part was so strongly colored by his arbitrarily subjective opinion about first-century conditions that he chose to differ with traditional Protestant understanding of justification by faith alone.<sup>19</sup> The respondent to his lecture commended him for stating his preunderstanding and gave his opinion that the days of interpreting the Bible objectively belong to the past,<sup>20</sup> a profound claim with devastating implications.

Scott A. Ellington, a Pentecostal scholar, acknowledges the dangers of subjectivism when writing, “A question with which Pentecostal scholars must wrestle is ‘how can the Pentecostal approach to theology remain relational, while avoiding the distortions which are possible in subjective involvement?’”<sup>21</sup> His proposed solution is a dynamic balance between the individual, the Holy Spirit, the Scripture, and the community of faith. He notes the self-centeredness of subjectivism that

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<sup>17</sup>Bruce M. Metzger, *The Text of the New Testament*, 3rd ed. (New York: Oxford University, 1992) 193.

<sup>18</sup>Other passages that speak of the Bible’s role in avoiding sin are the following: “For all His ordinances were before me, and I did not put away His statutes from me. I was also blameless with Him, and I kept myself from my iniquity” (Ps 18:22-23); “Establish my footsteps in Your word, and do not let any iniquity have dominion over me” (Ps 119:133); “Those who love Your law have great peace, and nothing causes them to stumble” (Ps 119:165).

<sup>19</sup>N. T. Wright, “Paul and Jesus” (lecture at 55th Annual Meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society, Atlanta, Georgia, Nov. 21, 2003).

<sup>20</sup>Douglas Moo, response to “Paul and Jesus” (response at 55th Annual Meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society, Atlanta, Georgia, Nov. 21, 2003).

<sup>21</sup>Scott A. Ellington, “Pentecostalism and the Authority of Scripture,” *JPT* 9 (1996):28.

seeks the good of the believer over and against God's will, the proclivity to create God in man's own image.<sup>22</sup> Yet three-fourths of his proposed solution—the individual, human sensitivity to the Holy Spirit, and the community of faith—rely on subjectivity, and therefore compound the problem of self-seeking. Objective reflection on Scripture in formulating Christian doctrine occupies only a minority role.<sup>23</sup>

Subjectivity in evangelical interpretation is widespread. In their work on hermeneutics, McCartney and Clayton point out that the method of interpretation does not determine the meaning extracted from a text.<sup>24</sup> They contend that hermeneutical goal is more important than and antecedent to method.<sup>25</sup> One's systematic theology constitutes the grid for a person's interpretation of biblical texts, they say, and "a crucial part of this interpretive grid is the particular methodology by which a reader expects to obtain an understanding of what is read."<sup>26</sup> Thus, systematic theology, a product of one's conscious or unconscious experience and what he already knows about special revelation, determines one's method of interpretation and ultimately the meaning he derives from the text.<sup>27</sup>

In other words, whatever goal a reader wants to achieve—i.e., whatever theological position he wants to support—determines what meaning he will glean from Scripture. That approach to Scripture is purely subjective and typifies many contemporary evangelicals in their handling of the Bible.

Rare today is a biblical scholar who advocates letting the text speak for itself, in other words, one who strives for the goal of objectivity in interpretation, an objectivity that recognizes that the Scripture itself is meaningful and does not depend on meanings attributed to it by humans. Few strive for objectivity, but objectivity is the major guiding principle in traditional grammatical-historical interpretation. Ramm expressed it this way:

The true philological spirit, or critical spirit, or scholarly spirit, in Biblical interpretation has as its goal to discover the original meaning and intention of the text. Its goal is *exegesis*—to lead the meaning out of the text and shuns *eisogesis*—bringing a meaning to the text. . . .

It is very difficult for any person to approach the Holy Scriptures free from prejudices and assumptions which distort the text. The danger of having a set theological system is that in the interpretation of Scripture the system tends to govern the interpretation rather than the interpretation correcting the system. . . .

Calvin said that the Holy Scripture is not a tennis ball that we may bounce around at

<sup>22</sup>Ibid.

<sup>23</sup>Ibid., 30, 38.

<sup>24</sup>Dan McCartney and Charles Clayton, *Let the Reader Understand: A Guide to Interpreting and Applying the Bible* (Wheaton, Ill.: Victor, 1994) 65.

<sup>25</sup>Ibid.

<sup>26</sup>Ibid., 66.

<sup>27</sup>Ibid.

will. Rather it is the Word of God whose teachings must be learned by the most impartial and objective study of the text.<sup>28</sup>

Milton Terry in the nineteenth century advocated the same principle:

The objectionable feature of these methods [i.e., the Apologetic and Dogmatic methods] is that they virtually set out with the ostensible purpose of maintaining a preconceived hypothesis. The hypothesis may be right, but the procedure is always liable to mislead. It presents the constant temptation to *find* desired meanings in words and ignore the scope and general purpose of the writer. . . . The true apology defends the sacred books against an unreasonable and captious criticism, and presents their claims to be regarded as the revelation of God. But this can be done only by pursuing rational methods, and by the use of a convincing logic. So also the Scriptures are profitable for dogma, but the dogma must be shown to be a legitimate teaching of the Scripture, not a traditional idea attached to the Scripture. . . .

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 The systematic expounder of Scripture doctrine . . . must not import into the text of Scripture the ideas of later times, or build upon any words or passages a dogma which they do not legitimately teach. The apologetic and dogmatic methods of interpretation which proceed from the standpoint of a formulated creed, and appeal to all words and sentiments scattered here and there in the Scriptures, which may by any possibility lend support to a foregone conclusion, have been condemned already. . . . By such methods many false notions have been urged upon men as matters of faith. But no man has a right to foist into his expositions of Scripture his own dogmatic conceptions, or those of others, and then insist that these are an essential part of divine revelation. Only that which is clearly read therein, or legitimately proved thereby, can be properly held as scriptural doctrine.<sup>29</sup>

Once the goal of defending a particular theological position replaces that goal of objectivity, biblical interpretation becomes a matter of pitting my theological prejudice against yours. Such an approach is sinful in denying Scripture a right to speak for itself in expressing its own meaning.

Following the subjective route of investigation, one may come up with as many meanings as there are preunderstandings. It is no wonder that a well-known evangelical scholar has in the last several years left his prestigious position at a prominent evangelical seminary and turned in his ministerial credentials, because he lost his faith.<sup>30</sup> I respect his honesty and perception that the direction his subjectivism was taking him would keep Scripture from yielding propositional truth, including the fundamental doctrines of orthodox Christianity. He realized far sooner than many other evangelicals that incorporation of subjectivism into a hermeneutical system starts one on the road to deconstructionism, postmodernism, poststructuralism, and reader-response hermeneutics, movements that are quite common already

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<sup>28</sup>Bernard Ramm, *Protestant Biblical Interpretation: A Textbook of Hermeneutics* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1970) 115-16.

<sup>29</sup>Milton S. Terry, *Biblical Hermeneutics: A Treatise on the Interpretation of the Old and New Testaments*, 2nd ed. (reprint; Grand Rapids, Zondervan, n.d.) 171-72, 583-84.

<sup>30</sup>Confidentiality forbids the divulging of this scholar's name.

among nonevangelicals. I do not respect this scholar for leaving the traditional goal in interpreting Scripture, however, which is the goal of objectivity.

In a discussion of the need for objectivity, the rejoinder always comes, "Who can attain perfect objectivity? Every interpreter has his own biases."<sup>31</sup> That type of response dodges the issue, however. Having objectivity as a goal does not equate to a claim of achieving absolutely neutral objectivity. It is simply a recognition that objectivity in interpretation of Scripture is the only way to let the text speak for itself without injecting subjectivism into the process. When an interpreter begins his investigation with a preconceived idea of what a passage should say, he is committing the sin of depriving that passage of the meaning the Holy Spirit and the human author intended it to have. One does not surrender the goal of objectivity because perfect achievement is impossible. He keeps pursuing that goal through use of time-tested principles of hermeneutics in his exegesis.

The Holy Spirit through Peter commanded the readers of 1 Peter, "Be holy for I am holy." Who among living persons has in this life achieved the perfect holiness of God Himself? The fact that such a goal in this life is impossible to attain does not, however, relieve Christians of the responsibility of continuing to pursue that goal. Hopefully, through continued effort they draw closer to that goal as time passes.

So it is with a quest for objectivity in interpreting Scripture. Though one never reaches a state that he is completely free of bias, through careful use of sound principles of traditional, grammatical-historical exegesis, he may draw closer to that goal each time he engages in the challenging task of discerning the meaning of Scripture. Only such a goal as that will do justice to the impeccability and meaningfulness of Scripture.

### **The Reliability and Precision of Scripture**

What does the precision of Scripture on which is based its reliability or dependability entail, and how are followers of Christ to respond to that precision? Answers to such questions come from observing the pattern of Scripture itself, the response that Scripture expects, the contrasting contemporary response, and the example of heroes from the past.

### **The Pattern of Scripture**

About fifteen years ago, I exchanged letters with a well-known evangelical NT scholar whose written work I had critiqued in a journal article.<sup>32</sup> He wrote first and questioned, point-by-point, the accuracy of some of my criticisms of his work.

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<sup>31</sup>E.g., Moisés Silva, *An Introduction to Biblical Hermeneutics: The Search for Meaning*, coauthored by W. C. Kaiser, Jr. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994) 230-31, 244; W. W. Klein, C. L. Blomberg, and R. L. Hubbard, Jr., *Introduction to Biblical Interpretation* (Dallas: Word, 1993) 115; McCartney and Clayton, *Let the Reader* 99; G. R. Osborne, *The Hermeneutical Spiral: A Comprehensive Introduction to Biblical Interpretation* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1991) 290, 295, 334; B. Lonergan, *Method in Theology* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1972) 157.

<sup>32</sup>This was personal correspondence. Without permission to cite his side of the interaction, his name must be withheld.

I responded with point-by-point answers to his questions. His next response was to suggest that we not pursue the matter further, because it was to him obvious that we differed regarding the degree of precision we could expect when interpreting the Bible. Different views of precision created a wide gulf between his errantist view and my inerrantist view of the Bible.

In a November 20, 2003 parallel session of the Annual Evangelical Theological Society meeting in Atlanta, presenter Samuel Lamerson categorized one of my works inaccurately, forcing me to suggest a correction during the discussion of his paper. The discussion progressed to the point that I stated that every recent evangelical author in dealing with the Synoptic Gospels has at one point or another dehistoricized the Gospel accounts. At this point the moderator of the session, Leslie R. Keylock, entered the discussion on the side of the presenter and suggested that in Matthew's account of the Sermon on the Mount Jesus had spoken of the wise man who had built his house upon a rock and of the house's being founded upon the rock (Matt 7:24-25), but that Luke in his account of the same Sermon had altered the Lord's words to speak of digging deep to lay a foundation on the rock and of the house's standing because it had been "well built" (Luke 6:48). Keylock's reasoning was that in Greece, the Gospel of Luke's destination, people knew nothing about building a house on a rock as they do in Israel and that Luke had made the change to accommodate his reader(s). Keylock saw nothing wrong with such a change, but I replied, "You have just introduced a historical error into Luke's account of the Sermon." His hesitant answer, "It all depends on what you call a historical error." In other words, just how precise is Scripture in what it reports?

How precise is the history recorded in the NT? How much can we depend on it? Is it absolutely reliable, or do the writers "round off" certain aspects of that history to present a *generally* accurate picture? The answer comes in examining Scripture itself.

- In Matt 5:18 Jesus said, "For truly I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not the smallest letter (i.e., *yodh*) or stroke (i.e., *serif*) shall pass away from the Law, until all is accomplished." In other words, neither the smallest letter nor the smallest part of any letter will pass away from the OT until all is accomplished, i.e., until heaven and earth pass away.
- In Matt 22:31-32 Jesus said, "But regarding the resurrection of the dead, have you not read that which was spoken to you by God, saying, 'I am the God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob'? He is not the God of the dead but of the living." The Lord's proof of a future resurrection resides in the present tense versus the past tense of the verb: "I am" rather than "I was."
- In Matt 24:35 Jesus said, "Heaven and earth will pass away, but My words shall not pass away." Jesus assigned a permanence to the words that He spoke just as He did to the words of the OT.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>33</sup>It is rarely if ever noted that if Jesus spoke primarily in Aramaic during His incarnate ministry, Jesus words *have* indeed passed away. All that remains are approximations of His words reported in the Greek language if Aramaic was His main language.

- In Gal 3:16 Paul recalls, “Now the promises were spoken to Abraham and to his seed. He does not say, ‘And to seeds,’ as *referring* to many, but *rather* to one, ‘And to your seed,’ that is, Christ.” That Paul advocates a precise handling of the OT is unquestionable. By inspiration of the Spirit the author cites the explicit significance between a singular and a plural.
- In Jas 2:10 the author wrote, “For whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles in one point, he has become guilty of all.” Our God is a God of precision. He is interested in details. Showing respect of persons is in the eyes of the inspired writer the one point that condemns a person as a breaker of the whole law.

Without question, the Bible itself insists on the ultimate in precision for its contents.

Without referring to further biblical examples,<sup>34</sup> one would think that this electronic age would teach greater expectations of precision in handling the Bible, as did the Scriptures themselves in their use of other Scriptures. One and only one wrong pushbutton on a telephone or one and only one wrong letter in an e-mail address will condemn an effort to reach the desired party. Certainly the God whose providence provided for the discovery of all the electronic advantages of modern times is familiar with that kind of precision and has provided for such precision in His Word.

### **The Response to Precision That Scripture Expects**

The Epistle of 2 Timothy is quite appropriate in a study of the Scriptures, particularly in considering the precision of the Scriptures. The epistle divides into four parts:

1:1–2:13 — Paul tells Timothy to *Replenish the Earth* with people like himself. To do this Timothy must implement particularly the instruction 2 Tim 2:2: “The things that you have heard from me through many witnesses, these commit to faithful men, the kind who will be competent to teach others also.”

2:14–26 — Paul tells Timothy to *Rescue the Drifters*. This he is to do through personal diligence in interpreting the Word correctly, as directed in 2 Tim 2:15: “Be diligent to present yourself approved to God, [as] an unashamed workman, cutting straight the Word of truth.”

3:1–17 — Paul tells Timothy to *Resist the Times*. He can accomplish this by letting the Word guide his own life as prescribed in 2 Tim 3:14–15: “But you, abide in the things that you have learned and have been assured of, knowing from whom you have learned them, and that from a child you have known the holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise to salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus.”

4:1–22 — Paul tells Timothy to *Report the Scriptures* as Paul’s replacement

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<sup>34</sup>Among other Scriptures that could be cited to demonstrate the precision and reliability of Scripture are the following: “Then the woman said to Elijah, ‘Now I know that you are a man of God, and that the word of the LORD in your mouth is truth’” (1 Kgs 17:24); “The sum of Your word is truth” (Ps 119:160a); “Your word is truth” (John 17:17b); “holding fast the faithful word which is in accordance with the teaching” (Titus 1:9a); “And He said, ‘Write, for these words are faithful and true’” (Rev 21:5b); “And he said to me, ‘These words are faithful and true’” (Rev 22:6b).

on the front lines of gospel warfare. He can do so by being ready for every opportunity to preach the Word, as 2 Tim 4:2 indicates: “Preach the Word; stand by [for duty] in season and out of season.”

Notice how in one way or another each section of the epistle builds upon the Scriptures. For present concerns, however, the section of “Rescuing the Drifters” (2:14-26) is most appropriate in learning the right response to the precision of the Scriptures. First of all, 2:14-18 speaks about the drifters:

Remind them of these things, and solemnly charge them in the presence of God not to wrangle about words, which is useless, and leads to the ruin of the hearers. Be diligent to present yourself approved to God as a workman who does not need to be ashamed, handling accurately the Word of truth. But avoid worldly and empty chatter, for it will lead to further ungodliness, and their talk will spread like gangrene. Among them are Hymenaeus and Philetus, men who have gone astray from the truth saying that the resurrection has already taken place, and thus they upset the faith of some.

**The Cause of Drifting.** This part of the study might be entitled “How to Become a Heretic.” Those in Ephesus who were causing trouble for the church and for Timothy as Paul’s apostolic representative to the church did not become heretics all at once. In fact, some were not yet heretics, but they had launched on a voyage that would eventually lead them to shipwreck and heresy if someone did not head them off. That was what Timothy was supposed to do, head them off.

From what is known about this church, one can detect several steps these people must have taken on their way to heretical status. The steps are not necessarily sequential.

(1) **A hunger for something new.** First Tim 1:3 refers to their activity as “teaching other [things].” They became teachers of *other* doctrines before they became teachers of *false* doctrine.<sup>35</sup> They taught strange doctrines that did not exactly coincide with the true doctrine. They had a craving to be different. They did not begin by teaching radical error, but they put a wrong emphasis on a correct doctrine. A craving for something new is all it takes to launch oneself on the road to heresy. Many times it will be a quest for a shortcut or an easier way to explain Scripture. In this the novelty teachers differed from the Judaizers in the churches of Galatia, who taught a false gospel (Gal 1:6-7). Teaching novelty is the first step toward the teaching of error.

(2) **A wrong understanding of knowledge.** First Tim 6:20 tells Timothy to turn away from “profane chatter and contradictions of what is falsely called knowledge.” Without going into all the details in 1 and 2 Timothy, one can simply summarize the problem at Ephesus as a combination of incipient Gnosticism and a

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<sup>35</sup>Cf. 1 Tim 1:3; and W. A. Lock, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Pastoral Epistles*, ICC (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1924) 8; J. H. Bernard, *The Pastoral Epistles*, CGT (Cambridge: University Press, 1899) 23; Henry Alford, *The Greek Testament* (London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1903) 3:301-2.

wrong view of the law.<sup>36</sup> There were some inroads of Platonic dualism that these people had latched onto. Historically, an attempt at integrating that dualism with biblical teaching resulted in the second-century heresy of Gnosticism. But the dominant part of their system was a misguided emphasis on the OT. In current terminology, they had not properly worked out the issues of continuity and discontinuity between the two testaments.

(3) **A failure to guard against heretical influences.** In Acts 20:29-30 Paul warned the elders at Ephesus where Timothy was now serving, “I know that after my departure savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; and from among your own selves men will arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after them.” Paul’s warning to the church’s elders came only about ten years before he wrote 2 Timothy. Such a rapid decline in the church’s orthodox standards must have been a great disappointment to the apostle. The elders had failed to heed his warning.

(4) **Carelessness, shoddiness, and laziness in handling the Word of truth.** Second Tim 2:14 tells Timothy to remember the words about courage he has just read in 2:1-13. From there he turns to urge him to diligence. By their lack of diligence Hymenaeus and Philetus had come up short. They did not pass the test because of careless work. Paul wants Timothy to avoid “word fights” and to devote all his energy to mastering the Word of truth. In 2:16-17 he tells him to shun profane and empty words that will lead to further ungodliness and will spread like gangrene. Replace diligence in handling the Word of truth with disrespectful and empty words, and you are on the same path as Hymenaeus and Philetus, who provided case studies in the drifting about which Paul spoke.

The word sometimes translated “lead to” in 2:16 is προσκόπτω (*proskoptō*). It also has the meaning of “to progress.” The men to whom Paul was referring apparently viewed themselves as “progressives” and claimed to lead their followers to a more advanced type of Christian thinking.<sup>37</sup> All the while, though, they were going in a backward direction. Instead of moving forward, they were in reverse.

Preterism today is another example of doctrinal slippage to the point of heresy. Like Hymenaeus and Philetus, full preterism says the resurrection is purely spiritual and therefore has already passed.<sup>38</sup> Can’t you hear their reasoning? “Never mind a gospel to die by. The only thing that matters is a gospel to live by. My present relationship with Christ is all that matters. I died and was raised with Him when I became a Christian. That’s all that’s relevant. The historical basis of

<sup>36</sup>Lock, *Pastoral Epistles* 76; H. A. Moellering, *1 Timothy, 2 Timothy, Titus*, Concordia (St. Louis: Concordia, 1970) 121; Newport J. D. White, “The First and Second Epistles to Timothy and The Epistle to Titus,” vol. 4 of *Expositor’s Greek Testament* (reprint; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1956) 150-51.

<sup>37</sup>A. T. Hanson, *The Pastoral Epistles*, New Century Bible (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982) 87; W. Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Pastoral Epistles*, NTC (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1965) 264; Lock, *Pastoral Epistles* 99; E. F. Scott, *The Pastoral Epistles*, Moffatt New Testament (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1936) 110; Kenneth S. Wuest, *The Pastoral Epistles in the Greek New Testament for the English Reader* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1953) 137.

<sup>38</sup>Dennis M. Swanson, “International Preterist Association: Reformation or Retrogression?” *The Master’s Seminary Journal* 15/1 (Spring 2004):39-58.

the teaching —i.e., Christ’s own resurrection—doesn’t matter as long as the idea helps me in my present spiritual life.” That kind of reasoning evidences the inroads of pagan dualism that taught that everything spiritual is good and everything material is evil, so evil human bodies will not be raised from the dead. That kind of teaching became one of the bedrocks of second-century Gnosticism. Already in that day men were integrating the Bible with then-contemporary philosophy. They would say, “After all, ‘all truth is God’s truth,’ isn’t it?” Full preterism has already reached the point of heresy; moderate or partial preterism has begun drifting along the path of full preterism and is not far behind.

All it takes to start down the road to heresy is a craving for something new and different, a flashy new idea or something to gain attention, the urge to latch on to a new fad. Forget what true knowledge is all about and the warnings to guard against heresy. Combine such forgetfulness with a little carelessness, slothfulness, or laziness in handling the Word of truth, and before you know it, you have a full-blown heresy. Imprecision in handling the Scripture is the root of most heresy.

The challenge for Timothy’s leadership in Ephesus was halting the slide that had already ended in heresy for Hymenaeus and Philetus. Others were beginning to drift in the direction of these two men as 2:18 indicates. The two were upsetting “the faith of some.” According to 2:14 their war-words were turning people upside down (the Greek word *καταστροφῆ* [*katastrophē*] transliterated is our English word “catastrophe”).<sup>39</sup> Just shave the edge off the truth slightly, just put a wrong emphasis on a correct teaching, and you will find yourself on the road to doctrinal waywardness. Imprecision if nurtured will, increment by increment, ultimately lead to heresy.

**The remedy for drifting.** Second Tim 2:15 provides the remedy that would halt the doctrinal slippage in Ephesus. That verse and its context bring out several key elements of such a remedy.

(1) **The goal.** Notice Paul does not tell Timothy to attack the problem directly. He tells him to use indirect means. Don’t limit yourself to confronting these men directly, though that sometimes may be necessary as 2 Tim 4:2b indicates (“reprove, rebuke, exhort with all longsuffering”). Rather the goal is to gain the approval of God by making oneself an unashamed workman. Concentrate on the positive side of teaching the Word of truth. The man of God is to be a God-pleaser, not a man-pleaser. He is not to be distracted by merely human considerations. He is to have an eye that is single toward God’s will and glory. He is looking for His seal of approval. He strives to maintain His standards so that he has nothing to be ashamed of before Him.

*Dokimon*, the word translated “approved,” includes two ideas, that of being

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<sup>39</sup>Bernard, *Pastoral Epistles* 122; Charles J. Ellicott, *A Critical and Grammatical Commentary on the Pastoral Epistles* (Boston: Draper and Halliday, 1861; reprint; Minneapolis: James Family, 1978) 141; D. Guthrie, *The Pastoral Epistles: An Introduction and Commentary*, Tyndale (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1957) 147; A. Plummer, *The Pastoral Epistles*, Expositor’s Bible Commentary (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1891) 367; Scott, *Pastoral Epistles* 108; M. R. Vincent, *New Testament Word Studies* (reprint of 1887 ed.; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976) 1059; Wuest, *Pastoral Epistles* 134.

tested and that of being approved.<sup>40</sup> Sometimes the most challenging tests come while one is diligently training for vocational Christian service. It is a great privilege to be tested, but it is even more important to achieve the goal of passing the test.

An approved workman should also have as his goal not to be ashamed because of doing a shoddy job. Nor should he be ashamed of his work before men. Note Paul's elaboration on this theme at 1:8, 12, 16. Hold your head up, Timothy. Do the right kind of job and you will not have to apologize to anyone.

(2) **The means to reach the goal.** The instrumental participle ὀρθοτομοῦντα (*orthotomounta*) in 2:15 tells how Timothy can satisfy the standard set earlier in the same verse: "by cutting straight the Word of truth" or "by handling the Word of truth accurately." What figure Paul had in mind with this participle is uncertain. Sometimes in secular Greek writings it referred to a mason squaring and cutting a stone to fit exactly into a predetermined opening. Other times it referred to a farmer's ploughing a straight furrow in his field or to a tentmaker cutting a piece of canvass to exactly the right size. Still other times it referred to a road-maker constructing a straight road.<sup>41</sup> Whatever figure Paul had in mind entailed precision.

Because of the word's use in Prov 3:6 and 11:5 ("In all your ways acknowledge Him and he will make your paths straight"; "The righteousness of the blameless keeps their ways straight") and the use of similar terminology in Heb 12:13 ("make straight paths for your feet"), Paul probably had in mind the figure of road construction. The specifications for the construction have to be exactly right. The same must be true in constructing the road of truth.

Some have objected to trying to figure out just what figure Paul had in mind. They say that all we need is the general idea Paul expressed. They claim that knowing the broad sense of the word is sufficient, and pressing to figure out the specific meaning is an example of λογομαχία (*logomachia*, "striving with words," "hair splitting") that Paul forbids in the 2:14 just before his use of the word.<sup>42</sup> That is not what Paul meant by λογομαχεῖν (*logomachein*), however. In 1 Tim 6:4 the noun form of the word refers to quibbling over what is empty and profitless while playing philosophical word games. So here he probably refers to verbal disputes over peripheral issues that distract from the close attention that should be given the Word of truth (cf. 2 Tim 2:16).<sup>43</sup> "Truth" highlights the contrast between God's unshakable special revelation and the worthless chatter of the novelty seekers. There is a direct correlation between the high quality of a *detailed* analysis of Scripture and maintaining doctrinal orthodoxy.

In 2:15 the command impresses Timothy's mind with the importance of precision. Learning the general idea of what Scripture teaches is not sufficient,

<sup>40</sup>J. N. D. Kelly, *A Commentary on the Pastoral Epistles*, Harper's New Testament Commentary (New York: Harper, 1963) 182; Hendriksen, *Pastoral Epistles* 262; H. Haarbeck, "dokimos," *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, ed. By Colin Brown (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1971) 3:809.

<sup>41</sup>Lock, *Pastoral Epistles* 99; A. T. Robertson, *Word Pictures in the New Testament* (Nashville: Broadman, 1933) 4:619.

<sup>42</sup>E.g., Kelly, *Pastoral Epistles* 183.

<sup>43</sup>Ibid., 182; Ellicott, *Pastoral Epistles* 228.

because it gives the novelty teachers too much room to roam in search of their innovations. It allows them to shade the truth a little bit this way or that way in order to integrate the Bible with psychology, science, philosophy, anthropology, sociology, mathematics, modern linguistics, or some other secular discipline that allegedly has discovered additional truth from God's general revelation, truth not found in the Bible. Proper handling of Scripture has to be specific and right. It has to be accurate. It has to be right on target.

If Scripture is not interpreted very carefully, who will hold the fort for truth? Being able to develop the tools to understand the details of Scripture is a privilege, but it is also a great responsibility in a time when so much subtle error emanates from reputedly trustworthy leaders.

(3) **The work ethic in reaching the goal.** Paul commands Timothy, "Be diligent," and uses a verb form that emphasizes urgency. The word carries the notion of self-exertion. Paul is recommending strenuous moral effort, a ceaseless, serious, earnest zeal to obtain God's approval through a right handling of the Word of truth. Perhaps "do your utmost" captures the degree of effort to be expended. The absence of a conjunction to introduce v. 15 adds further emphasis to Paul's command. After you have reached your limit and gone beyond, Paul tells Timothy, push a little more so as to gain a better mastery of the text.

That kind of expenditure of one's energy and resources is a lifelong quest. Only by thus taking himself in hand can Timothy fulfil his responsibility toward others, that of solemnly charging others not to wrangle about words (2:14).

Exegesis of the Word of truth is hard work. The expression "Word of truth" refers to the gospel in general, the Christian message as a whole,<sup>44</sup> but in practical reality it is the same as "the things which you have heard" in 2 Tim 2:2, the same as the God-breathed Scripture that the writer refers to in 2 Tim 3:16, and the same word Timothy is commanded to preach in 2 Tim 4:2. "Truth" contrasts God's unshakable, inerrant revelation with the worthless chatter of the novelty teachers. The only way one can salvage the drifters is to gain a thorough hold on God's truth. Timothy dare not cut his efforts short.

That means learning the biblical languages, correct rules of interpretation, historical backgrounds, correct doctrines and how to state them, and all other data pertinent to reaching precise conclusions regarding God's truth. It means making only those applications that align with the correct interpretation. This is a mountainous task, but it is worth every bit of effort expended to accomplish it. It is part of the discipline in becoming an unashamed workman.

(4) **The pressure in attaining the goal.** Second Tim 2:22-26 recalls the manner for retrieving the drifters and at the same time points out that the process will not be easy. Verse 25 speaks of those who "are in opposition" to Timothy.

Pressure will come any time a person aims for accuracy in understanding and applying God's Word. He will encounter opposition. He will get a lot of heat. Not everyone will agree that such strenuous effort is necessary. They will not think precision is that important. Some in today's world are satisfied with rough estimates, particularly when it comes to theological matters. It will take a lot of "thick skin"

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<sup>44</sup>Kelly, *Pastoral Epistles* 183.

to put up with the criticism and outright opposition that will come to God's servant who insists on detailed accuracy.

In 2 Tim 2:9 Paul pointed to himself as an example of suffering hardship, hardship that will come from outside and even from some within the professing church. He urged Timothy not to bend under the pressure that was inevitable (see also 2 Tim 1:8; 2:3; 4:5).

Timothy faced it in his then-current ministry in Ephesus, and Paul told him to respond with kindness and gentleness. There is a wrong way and a right way to respond to the pressure. To approach the task as belligerent warriors, looking for a fight, is wrong. The "take no prisoners" approach in this spiritual battle is self-defeating. "Flee youthful lusts" in 2:22 probably refers to a tendency to fly off the handle, lose one's temper, blow one's stack, have a short fuse. Any such reaction would typify a lack of maturity. It's okay to reprove, rebuke, and exhort, but it has to be done with patience (see 2:24-25a).

Gentleness and patience should prevail. If one's manner is belligerent, his efforts to recover the drifters will fail. He must patiently instruct them, demonstrating righteousness, faith, love, and peace (2:22). Apparently the Ephesian church as a whole failed to fulfil this responsibility in its rescue efforts. About thirty years later, through the apostle John in Revelation, Jesus had nothing to say against the church doctrinally, but He criticized them severely for leaving their first love, love for God and for one another (Rev 2:1-7). Love must temper every rebuke of the drifters.

### **The Contrasting Contemporary Response**

If Scripture expects the same response to its precision as it expected from Timothy, how has contemporary evangelicalism measured up. Unfortunately, not too well. Exegetical and consequent theological slippage—i.e., drifting—is the rule of the day as the twenty-first century begins. If anyone takes a stand against it, he must be ready to accept the flack that will come his way. Often twenty-first-century drifters have spoken against precisionists with such remarks as, "You have cast your net too wide," or "You have painted with too broad a brush." "You are expecting too much precision from the text." In other words, "Your view of truth is too narrow. You are too detailed." Three examples of twenty-first-century drifting will suffice to illustrate the seriousness of the problem.

**Vacillation between precision and imprecision.** Quite interesting is the way that some evangelical writers treat the precision of Scripture. Poythress and Grudem furnish an example. A chapter entitled "Generic 'He'" appears in a work on Bible translations co-authored by the two.<sup>45</sup> At one point they express their viewpoint about gender-neutral translations:

Because generic singular is a convenient and frequent usage in the Bible, gender-neutral translations end up using 'they' and 'you' in a large number of passages where earlier translations had generic singular 'he/his/him.' In still other instances the new

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<sup>45</sup>Vern Poythress and Wayne Grudem, *The Gender-Neutral Bible Controversy: Muting the Masculinity of God's Words* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2000) 111-33.

translations adopt passive rather than active constructions or substitute descriptive nouns for pronouns in order to avoid using “he.” The total number of verses affected numbers in the thousands.

Now let us be clear: The gender-neutral translations still achieve a rough approximation of the meaning of the original when they change the pronouns. But it is an approximation. When we look at finer nuances, shifts from singular to plural and from third person to first or second person result in subtle alterations.<sup>46</sup>

Their insistence on precision in handling the “generic ‘he’” properly is gratifying, because it aligns with the precision that Jesus and Paul exemplified and that Paul sought to instill in Timothy and those under his influence. They rightly note the damage done when a translation settles for an approximation rather than a precise rendering of the text.

Yet elsewhere in the same volume, in a chapter called “The Bible: The Word of God,” a section entitled “The inerrancy of Scripture,” the co-authors write,

**2. The Bible can be inerrant and still include loose or free quotations**

The method by which one person quotes the words of another person is a procedure that in large part varies from culture to culture. While in contemporary American and British culture, we are used to quoting a person’s exact words when we enclose the statement in quotation marks, written Greek at the time of the New Testament had no quotation marks or equivalent kinds of punctuation, and an accurate citation of another person needed to include only a correct representation of the *content* of what the person said (rather like our use of indirect quotations): it was not expected to cite each word exactly. Thus, inerrancy is consistent with loose or free quotations of the Old Testament or of the words of Jesus, for example, so long as the *content* is not false to what was originally stated. The original writer did not ordinarily imply that he was using the exact words of the speaker and only those, nor did the original hearers expect verbatim quotation in such reporting.<sup>47</sup>

Poythress and Grudem reverse their position on precision when it comes to the Gospels’ reporting the words of Jesus, perhaps failing to realize that if the Gospels have only the *general content* of what Jesus said, who can say whether Jesus used a generic “he,” a plural “they,” or a passive voice in instances they cite. For example, they cite the difference in renderings of Matt 16:24:

NIV: Then Jesus said to his disciples, “If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me.

NIVI (New International Version Inclusive Language Edition): “Then Jesus said to his disciples, “*Those* who would come after me must deny *themselves* and take up *their* cross and follow me.”<sup>48</sup>

In the NIVI rendering, they point out the possible meaning of a cross belonging to a whole group of people jointly rather than a single individual. However, if one has

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<sup>46</sup>Ibid., 112.

<sup>47</sup>Ibid., 49 [emphasis in the original].

<sup>48</sup>Ibid., 117 [emphasis in the original].

only the gist of what Jesus said, who is to say whether He used the singular or the plural.

Another instance cited is John 14:23:

NIV: If anyone loves me, he will obey my teaching. My Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him.

NRSV (New Revised Standard Version): *Those* who love me will keep my word, and my Father will love *them*, and we will come to *them*, and make our home with *them*.<sup>49</sup>

Here Poythress and Grudem note the probability that the NRSV means that the Father and the Son make a home with a plurality of people *together*—i.e., with the church corporately—whereas the singular in the original text shows clearly the meaning of making a home with each person. Again, however, if the text has only the general idea of what Jesus said rather than His exact words, who is to say that He did not express the corporate idea.

By relaxing their standard of precision in regard to the words of Jesus, these two have fallen into the pattern of the drifters whom Timothy was instructed to rescue. Their inconsistency is lamentable in that it does serious injustice to the precision that is inevitably a major component of biblical inerrancy.

**All-out support for imprecision.** Approximation rather than precision best describes the way a goodly number of evangelical scholars handle the Gospel accounts of Jesus' life.

Guelich, for example, represents several who refer to the Gospels as "portraits" rather than "snapshots" of Jesus' life.<sup>50</sup> He contrasts a critical approach to the Gospels, which is equated to abstract paintings, with an uncritical approach, which to him is the same as snapshots. For this author, the Gospels were close approximations but not precise representations of the historical Jesus. Hagner and Blomberg follow closely the pattern set by Guelich, where that author sees the Gospels as portraits contrasted with snapshots—i.e., an uncritical approach—and abstract paintings—i.e., a critical approach. They take the Gospels as close approximations but not precise representations of the historical Jesus.<sup>51</sup>

Bock fits the same pattern of consistently labeling the Gospel descriptions of Jesus' words and actions as approximations. He repeatedly refers to their reporting of the "gist" of Jesus words and actions.<sup>52</sup> "Gist" is the substance or essence of a speech, but not the very words spoken. In his category of "gist," Bock includes not only the substance or essence of a speech, but also what the Gospel

<sup>49</sup>Ibid [emphasis in the original].

<sup>50</sup>R. A. Guelich, *The Sermon on the Mount, A Foundation for Understanding* (Waco, Tex.: Word, 1982) 24-25.

<sup>51</sup>D. A. Hagner, "Interpreting the Gospels: The Landscape and the Quest," *JETS* 24/2 (1981):24; Craig L. Blomberg, *The Historical Reliability of the Gospels* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1987) 8-12.

<sup>52</sup>Darrell L. Bock, "The Words of Jesus in the Gospels: Live, Jive, or Memorex?" in *Jesus under Fire*, ed. By Michael J. Wilkins and J. P. Moreland (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995) 78, 86, 88, 94.

writers' later reflections on the significance Jesus' teaching came to mean.<sup>53</sup> This means that the writers consciously changed His words and actions later to accomplish the purposes of their reports. As Stein explains,

[T]hey [namely, the Evangelists] felt free to paraphrase, modify certain terms, and add comments, in order to help their readers understanding the "significance" of what Jesus taught. The Evangelists had no obsession with the *ipsissima verba* [i.e., the very words], for they believed that they had authority to interpret these words for their audience.<sup>54</sup>

Bock even argues for imprecision in the recording of the gist of the events in Jesus life,<sup>55</sup> by which he apparently means that differing details of parallel accounts activities need not be historically harmonized. That is a far cry from the precision that Jesus demonstrated in His use of the OT.

Following in the train of others, Keener advocates the same imprecision when writing,

Because ancient biography normally included some level of historical intention, historical questions are relevant in evaluating the degree to which Matthew was able to achieve the intention his genre implies. This does not require us to demand a narrow precision regarding details, a precision foreign to ancient literature, but to evaluate the *general* fidelity of substance. . . . My most striking discovery while writing this commentary was how often Matthew 're-Judaizes' his sources, probably mostly on the basis of concrete Palestinian, Jewish-Christian oral traditions.<sup>56</sup>

He later adds, "The Gospel writers' contemporaries, such as Josephus, noticeably exercised a degree of both freedom and fidelity in their handling of *biblical* history . . . and one would expect the Gospels to represent the same mixture, albeit not necessarily in the same degree of each."<sup>57</sup> To justify further his case for imprecision in Matthew's Gospel, he notes, "[G]iven Matthew's proximity to Jesus' situation, his guesses are more apt to be correct than ours."<sup>58</sup> If the best Matthew could do was guess about Jesus' situation, one can hardly entertain any thought of historical precision in that Gospel. Keener puts Matthew into a category with other ancient writers: "Of course, students regularly paraphrased sayings of teachers; paraphrase was in fact a standard school exercise in Greco-Roman education . . . , and it was the 'gist' rather than the verbatim precision that ancients valued. . . . Scholars from across the theological spectrum thus acknowledge that Jewish and Christian sources

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<sup>53</sup>Ibid., 77.

<sup>54</sup>Robert H. Stein, *The Synoptic Problem: An Introduction* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1987) 156.

<sup>55</sup>Bock, "Words of Jesus" 85-86.

<sup>56</sup>Craig S. Keener, *A Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999) 2 [emphasis added].

<sup>57</sup>Ibid., 12-13 [emphasis in the original].

<sup>58</sup>Ibid., 13.

alike both preserved and adapted earlier tradition. . . .”<sup>59</sup> Regarding the genealogy in Matthew 1, Keener attributes further imprecision to Matthew: “The best alternative to harmonizing the lists is to suggest that Matthew emphasizes the nature of Jesus’ lineage as royalty rather than trying to formulate a biologically precise list (contrast possibly Luke), to which he did not have access.”<sup>60</sup>

In commenting on the inherent difficulties of genre identification, Green observes,

As interesting and consequential as greater precision in genre identification might be, though in terms of our task of ‘reading the Gospel of Luke,’ this area has become problematized in recent years by the growing recognition that, *from the standpoint of our reading of narrative*, the line separating historical narrative and nonhistorical cannot be sustained. This is not because historical narrative makes no historical claims (or has no historical referent outside of the text), but because the narrative representation of history is always inherently ‘partial’—both in the sense of its selectivity and in the sense of its orientation to a hermeneutical vantage point. Historiography—in terms of temporal and causal relations—inevitably provides more, and less, than ‘what actually happened.’<sup>61</sup>

In his words, “the line separating historical narrative and nonhistorical cannot be sustained,” a blurring that he blames on a lack of precision in genre identification. Genre has only come to be a factor to be reckoned with in evangelical interpretation since the late twentieth century. Among scholars it has as yet to find a consensus definition, particularly in the Gospels. Green acknowledges this fact and admits that sorting out the mixture of historical and nonhistorical in the Gospels and Acts remains an unsolved problem. Narrative claims to precise historicity are unjustified in his eyes. In other words, imprecision is the rule of the day in dealing with the NT historical books.

He speaks of “varying levels of precision the sort of history-writing Luke-Acts most approximates,”<sup>62</sup> which, of course, makes wide allowance for various levels of imprecision in those books.

With his words, “Against the backdrop of the last two centuries of biblical studies, the approach to the Lukan narrative we have sketched may seem ahistorical to some, or at least impoverished with reference to historical concerns,”<sup>63</sup> Green evidences his realization that his case for imprecision in Luke-Acts differs from past historical interests in these works. Yet he continues to press his case that historical accuracy is not that important: “Nevertheless, the veracity of Jesus’ healing ministry is neither for Luke, nor apparently for his contemporaries, the point at issue. . . . Luke’s compulsion is to provide meaning for the events he recounts, not to argue for

<sup>59</sup>Ibid., 29.

<sup>60</sup>Ibid., 75-76.

<sup>61</sup>Joel B Green, *The Gospel of Luke*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997) 2 [emphasis in the original].

<sup>62</sup>Ibid., 2-3.

<sup>63</sup>Ibid., 14-15.

or demonstrate their veracity.”<sup>64</sup>

A recent work by France also imbibes of this spirit of imprecisionism in the Gospels, this time the Gospel of Mark. Regarding the forty days of Jesus’ temptation, France writes, “[Τ]εσσαράκοντα ἡμέρας ([T]essarakonta hēmeras, ‘Forty days’) need be no more than a [*sic*] idiomatic expression for a long but limited period, and is so used elsewhere in the Bible (e.g., Gn. 7:4 etc; Nu. 13:25; 1 Sa. 17:16; Jon. 3:4; Acts 1:3).”<sup>65</sup> Elsewhere he questions historicity: “So when Mark emphasises [*sic*] the wilderness location in 1:2-13, it is not only to signal that this part of the gospel operates on a different level from the story of real-life involvement which will follow, but also that the wilderness is itself a symbol of hope and fulfilment.”<sup>66</sup>

The above examples of recent scholarship that insist on at least a few, and in some cases many, aspects of historical imprecision in the NT historical books demonstrate an utter disregard for the precision of Scripture.

**Imprecision and uncertainty.** Advocates of a modern linguistics approach to Scripture typify an unavoidable by-product of imprecision. That byproduct is uncertainty about the meaning of a text being interpreted. Cotterell and Turner express this uncertainty:

In fact, the criticism goes, the Cartesian or Baconian ideal of ‘objective’ exegesis, an exegesis that is unaffected by the world of the analyst, is unattainable. . . . The original meaning is hidden from us, and we have no way of resurrecting it. . . . All that we can do is to infer the meaning, and that will in some measure be affected by our present understanding of our world. . . . We need fully to recognize that *our* reading of the letter to Philemon (or whatever), however certain we may feel it is what Paul meant, *is actually only a hypothesis—our hypothesis—* about the discourse meaning.<sup>67</sup>

They correctly blame such widespread uncertainty about biblical meaning on what they call an unjustified expectation of “a precision in the use of words”:

It is, perhaps, a danger of exegesis that we tend to demand a precision in the use of words which our everyday experience should tell us is not to be expected, and to find differences in meaning where none is demonstrably intended. A case in point is John 21 and the alternation between two Greek words for ‘love’ in Jesus’ questioning of Peter. It is probable that we are right in seeing significance in the three-fold question in vv. 15-17, less probable, however, that the change in *word* is significant.<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>64</sup>Ibid., 18.

<sup>65</sup>R. T. France. *The Gospel of Mark: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, The New International Greek Testament Commentary, ed. by I. Howard Marshall and Donald A. Hagner (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002) 85 [transliteration added].

<sup>66</sup>Ibid., 58.

<sup>67</sup>P. Cotterell and M. Turner, *Linguistics and Biblical Interpretation* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1989) 59, 68, 70 [emphasis in the original].

<sup>68</sup>Ibid., 159 [emphasis in the original].

Their rationale is that since no human communication is completely unambiguous, the same must be true of God's attempts at communication with humanity through the Bible. Such a rationale vastly underestimates God's ability in conveying His direct revelation to man.

The above three illustrative categories, far from following the pattern of Scripture itself and Scripture's expected response from believers, demonstrate an utter disregard for the precision and hence the reliability of Scripture.

### **Precision and Jesus' Words**

Much attention has centered on the rival perspectives of *ipsissima vox* ("Jesus' exact voice") and *ipsissima verba* ("Jesus' very words"). In discussions of the precision of Scripture, a consideration of the scriptural accounts of the words of Jesus and others is inevitable. Based on merely human estimates, a dogmatic choice between the two possible views is impossible, but by looking at the evidence on each side of the issue, one can with a high degree of probability establish whether Scripture has "the very words of Jesus" or only "the exact voice of Jesus."

**Ipsissima Vox.** One position is that the Gospels have only the "voice" of Jesus—i.e., the essence of what He said, but not His very words. Several reasons support the *ipsissima vox* position.

(1) The strongest support contends that Jesus probably gave most of His teaching in Aramaic, because that was the dominant public language of first-century Israel.<sup>69</sup> The Gospel writers wrote in Greek, meaning that most, if not all, of Jesus' teaching recorded there is a translation, not His very words.

In response to such reasoning, the flat assertion must be that no one in modern times knows with certainty what language Jesus spoke most of the time. That information is not available in modern times, but archeological and other types of studies make a strong case to support His extensive use of Greek.<sup>70</sup> The area where Jesus taught was actually trilingual, with Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek languages sharing equally in usage. In NT times the influence of Hellenism on Israel was profound. The Jewish institution of the Sanhedrin had a Greek name (derived from the Greek noun *συνέδριον*, *synedrion*). Some scholars now hold that Greek was the primary language spoken in Israel by Jesus. They point to such things as "the role of Greek as the *lingua franca* of the Roman Empire, the linguistic and cultural character of lower Galilee during the first century, the linguistic fact that the NT has been transmitted in Greek from its earliest documents, a diversity of epigraphic evidence, significant literary evidence, and several significant contexts

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<sup>69</sup>Bock, "Words of Jesus" 77.

<sup>70</sup>Robert H. Gundry, "The Language Milieu of First-Century Palestine," *JBL* 83 (1964):404-8; Phillip Edgcumbe, "The Languages Spoken by Jesus," in *New Dimensions in New Testament Study*, ed. by Richard N. Longenecker and Merrill C. Tenney (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1974) 125-43.

in the Gospels.”<sup>71</sup>

The exclusive use of the Greek OT in Scripture citations found in the Epistle to the Hebrews, a document either originating from or addressed to Hebrew Christians in Israel, is another indication of Greek’s widespread use in first-century Palestine. The use by Jesus Himself of mostly LXX sources in His quoting of the OT furnishes further evidence to this effect. Andrew and Philip, two of Jesus’ twelve apostles, had Greek names.<sup>72</sup> Their encounter with a certain Greek person in John 12:20-22 is clear indication of their use of Greek. Peter, leader of the Twelve, had Hebrew and Aramaic names (“Simon” and “Cephas”), but he also had a Greek name, Peter. Most probably he spoke Greek in preaching the sermon in Acts 2 and ministering to the household of Cornelius (Acts 10). He also wrote two epistles in Greek. In the Greek text of Matt 16:18, Jesus plays on the difference between two Greek words, πέτρος (*petros*) and πέτρα (*petra*), a distinction that Hebrew or Aramaic is unable to make. Jesus must have used Greek in speaking with the Syrophenician woman who was a Greek (Mark 7:26), the Roman centurion (Matt 8:13), and Pilate (Matthew 27; Mark 15; Luke 23; John 18). Also, Stephen (Acts 7) and James (Acts 15) quote from the Greek OT. Furthermore, Jesus’ extensive use of synonyms in John 21 is additional validation for His use of Greek. He has two words for “love,” two words for “know,” three words for “sheep,” and two words for “feed.”<sup>73</sup> Distinctions between such synonyms is impossible to make in either Hebrew or Aramaic.

Thus, the argument that the Greek Gospels’ quotations are a translation from the Aramaic that Jesus spoke is without merit.

(2) Another reason given to support the *ipsissima vox* position is the supposition that many of Jesus’ statements and sermons are abbreviated accounts of all that He actually said on a given occasion.<sup>74</sup> The Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5–7) has elements that the parallel Sermon on the Plain (Luke 6) does not have, and vice versa. The two probably represent Jesus’ ministry on the same occasion. If so, certain parts are omitted in each account. This means that the Gospels do not contain every word that Jesus spoke.

Such reasoning is not a valid support for the “voice” position, however. The omitted portions could very well have been and probably were parenthetical-type portions of His speech, portions that did not add to, subtract from, or change what He said in the recorded portions of His messages. The Sermon on the Mount as recorded in Matthew, for example, makes very good sense and has an even flow of continuity whose literary worthiness has been recognized through the centuries. The same is true of Luke’s Sermon on the Plain. Both the Sermon on the Mount and

<sup>71</sup>Stanley E. Porter, “Did Jesus Ever Teach in Greek?” *Tyndale Bulletin* 44 (1993):204; cf. F. David Farnell, “The Case for the Independence View of Gospel Origins,” in *Three Views on the Origins of the Synoptic Gospels*, ed. by Robert L. Thomas (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2002) 288-89.

<sup>72</sup>Robert L. Thomas and Stanley N. Gundry, eds., “The Languages Jesus Spoke,” in *The NIV Harmony of the Gospels with Explanations and Essays* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1988) 301-2.

<sup>73</sup>Cf. M. S. Terry, *Biblical Hermeneutics* 200-201.

<sup>74</sup>Bock, “Words of Jesus” 77-78.

the Sermon on the Plain could very well be portions of a much longer discourse that Matthew and Luke under the Spirit's inspiration extracted and preserved word-for-word in writing for the profit of subsequent generations.

(3) A third consideration offered to support the *ipsissima vox* position is the way the NT writers cite the OT. If they felt freedom to vary the wording of the OT in their citations, they must have felt the same freedom in citing the teachings of Jesus.<sup>75</sup> The thrust of the argument is that if they loosely quoted the OT, they must have loosely quoted the words of Jesus also.

Those who follow that line of reasoning, however, seldom if ever take into account that the readers of the NT had access to various versions of the OT. They had opportunity to compare those Gospels with the OT to learn how the NT writers had used the OT. By comparing the NT with the OT, they could tell whether the Gospels had cited a passage word-for-word and given it a literal interpretation, or whether they had cited a passage word-for-word or with word changes in order to apply a non-literal sense of the passage to a new situation. In the latter case, they made an "inspired *sensus plenior* application" of the passage, which they were authorized to do because the NT writers themselves were inspired to write what they wrote and could assign such a fuller meaning.<sup>76</sup>

Those readers could not do the same with Jesus' sayings. In knowing what Jesus actually said, they were strictly limited to what was written in the inspired Gospels. They had no second source to compare. Therefore, to compare how the Gospel writers quoted the sayings of Jesus with how they used the OT is illegitimate. In comparing with the OT, one is comparing familiar words with familiar words. But one cannot compare the use of familiar words with a use of unknown words.

Thus, a reader learns nothing about how the Gospel writers quoted the words of Jesus through considering how they quoted the words of the OT.

(4) Bock says that, by examining the Gospels themselves, one can learn that the Gospel writers gave only the gist of the words and activities of Jesus.<sup>77</sup> Consistently, his reasoning says, they took a summarizing approach to reporting on the teachings and events of Jesus' life, furnishing another evidence that the biblical text itself clearly evidences a distinction between the Lord's words and His voice.

Bock's assertion regarding this aspect of the biblical text is simply not true. It is beyond the scope of this presentation to refute his handling of various passages, but Green has shown clearly that Bock has failed to prove this point.<sup>78</sup> Bock's biased preunderstanding of what he wants to find by way of proof forces him into a distorted handling of the various parallel passages that he cites.

Here, then, is another alleged evidence of *ipsissima vox* that falters for the lack of cohesive reasoning.

<sup>75</sup>Ibid., 78.

<sup>76</sup>For more details on how the NT writers used the OT, see Robert L. Thomas, *Evangelical Hermeneutics: The New Versus the Old* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2002) 141-64, 241-69.

<sup>77</sup>Bock, "Words of Jesus" 78, 84-88.

<sup>78</sup>Donald E. Green, "Evangelicals and *Ipsissima Vox*," *The Master's Seminary Journal* 12/1 (Spring 2001):59-66.

(5) Bock draws a fifth support for the *vox* position as he compares the Gospels with the Greco-Roman tradition and the Jewish culture.<sup>79</sup> From such comparisons he concludes, “[O]ne can see that oral culture of that society did not mean the kind of loose approach to the teaching of divine wisdom that the ‘jive’ approach suggests, even though one cannot guarantee from the cultural practice that such writers would have always quoted material as if on a ‘memorex’ tape.”<sup>80</sup> By “jive” approach, he refers to the conclusions of The Jesus Seminar; by “memorex” approach, he refers to the *ipsissima verba* position. His view is that the degree of accuracy of the Gospels is somewhere between the two extremes.

Green has also shown Bock’s use of Greco-Roman sources to be faulty.<sup>81</sup> Bock favors the Greco-Roman sources rather than Jewish historiography as a pattern for Gospel literature, but after a careful scrutinizing of Greco-Roman and Jewish sources, Green concludes,

The comparison to secular historians for which the *ipsissima vox* proponents so valiantly argue is invalid, poorly conceived, and lacking evidence—and cannot stand against the clear testimony of Josephus on this point. The Gospel writers’ pattern for transmission of the words of Jesus does not lie in ancient Greek historiography, but in the Jewish pattern that paid close attention to the actual words used.<sup>82</sup>

So here again, a supposed support for *ipsissima vox* falls to the ground empty because the best parallels to the Gospels are literature “that paid close attention to the actual words used.”

***Ipsissima Verba.*** Of course, the precision that has been so evident thus far in this present study of Scripture itself strongly favors the *ipsissima verba* position, i.e., that the Gospels contain the actual words spoken by Jesus. If Jesus could insist on the retention of even the smallest letter of the Hebrew OT and even the smallest part of a letter of the Hebrew OT, one should expect that the Holy Spirit would preside over the inspiration of the NT with the same degree of accuracy. If Paul could insist on Timothy’s close attention to details of Scripture, one of those details would be the very words spoken by Jesus.

Bock insists that the “memorex” approach is unrealistic, however:

In the beginning there were no tape recorders. In our twentieth-century high-tech world it is difficult to appreciate how communication took place in the first century. There were no printing presses, no cassette players, no newspapers, no printed page, no faxes, no dozen other devices by which we send and record information today. Two thousand years ago there were only individually produced, handwritten copies either on pieces of parchment or on reed paper known as papyri.<sup>83</sup>

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<sup>79</sup>Bock, “Words of Jesus” 78-81.

<sup>80</sup>Ibid., 81.

<sup>81</sup>Green, “Evangelicals and *Ipsissima Vox*” 51-59.

<sup>82</sup>Ibid., 59.

<sup>83</sup>Bock, “Words of Jesus” 74.

What Bock fails to take into account, however, is the fact that the same God whose providence allowed humans to invent all the electronic marvels of modern times presided over the inspiration of the Scriptures, including the Gospel accounts of Jesus' words and activities. If He has provided for contemporary times a means of preserving factual material precisely, He certainly was capable of guiding human writers of Scripture with the same precise information in communicating His revelation to the human race.

The strongest argument against the *verba* position is that Jesus used Aramaic most of the time, but Jesus' extensive use of the Greek language in His teaching and preaching is a well-founded probability. He did occasionally incorporate transliterated Aramaic and Hebrew into His speech as evidenced in a few instances. The fact that the Gospels at times supply an interpretation for such Aramaic or Hebrew expressions shows such uses to be only occasional, however. Jesus' use of "*Talitha kum!*" in Mark 5:41, along with its translation, "Little girl, I say to you, arise!" evidences His occasional use of Aramaic as does Mark 15:34 and His words Ελωι ελωι λεμα σαβαχθανι; [*Eloi, eloi, lema sabachthani?*] with the translation "My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?" Another non-Greek language appears in the parallel Matt 27:46: Ηλι ηλι λεμα σαβαχθανι; [*Ēli, ēli, lama sabachthani?*] which Matthew translates "My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?" Mark 5:41 and Mark 15:34 evidence Jesus' use of Aramaic, and Matt 27:46 shows that He knew Hebrew as well.<sup>84</sup> In Matt 23:7, 8, Jesus used the Aramaic 'Ραββί (*Rabbi*)<sup>85</sup> instead of its Greek equivalent Διδάσκαλος (*Didaskalos*, "Teacher"). These occasional transliterations in languages other than Greek further support Jesus' customary use of the Greek language in His ministry.

The Gospel writers were also careful to pick up instances when Jesus' disciples and others used Aramaic instead of Greek. They used *Rabbi* and *Rabboni*<sup>86</sup> fifteen times in the Gospels<sup>87</sup> as compared with the corresponding Greek title *Didaskalos*, which the disciples and others used more than thirty-five times. In John 20:16, John is careful to note that Mary "said to Him in Hebrew" in her use of *Rabboni*. This was one of those exceptional cases when someone addressing Christ or speaking about Him did so in Hebrew (or Aramaic) rather than Greek. Note several other instances when the writer John specifically designates a name in Hebrew: John 5:2; 19:13, 17. Here is further evidence from the Gospels themselves that Jesus and His contemporaries ordinarily communicated among themselves in the Greek language. The writers made a point of identifying the exceptional cases that were not in Greek.

<sup>84</sup>Textual variants in all three passages confuse the issue of which language Jesus used, but the evidence is sufficient to show His familiarity with all three languages. The inscription on the cross was in three languages, Hebrew (or Aramaic), Latin, and Greek. The addition of Latin, the language of Rome, does not necessarily mean that Jesus knew Latin in addition to Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek.

<sup>85</sup>Greek transliteration: *Hrabbi*.

<sup>86</sup>Greek transliteration: *Hrabbi*.

<sup>87</sup>Matt 26:25, 49; Mark 9:5; 10:51; 11:21; 14:45; John 1:48, 49; 3:2, 26; 4:31; 6:25; 9:2; 11:8; 20:16.

The major obstacle erected to combat an *ipsissima verba* position has been an assumption that Jesus and His contemporaries communicated with each other exclusively or almost exclusively in Aramaic. If Aramaic had been the principal or exclusive language in Israel at that time, each Gospel writer would in some cases have needed to translate independently from Aramaic to Greek in quoting speakers. Since in such cases the writers often agree with each other, word-for-word, their translations from one language to another would have to have been identical or nearly identical. That could hardly have been the case. A short example illustrates this phenomenon. In a section of the Synoptic Gospels dealing with the ministry of John the Baptist (Matt 3:1-12 = Mark 1:1-8 = Luke 3:1-20), there occur three word groups of John's teaching in which Matthew and Luke agree verbatim on 169 out of the 178 words in the groups. If the two authors had translated from Aramaic independently of each other, their translations could not have matched each other with such precision. Advocates of Markan priority cannot say that they copied from Mark, because Mark does not have those words. If, however, they were independent verbatim reports of John's teaching in Greek, the near-identity of the two series is easily explainable through eyewitness memories enabled by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit.

In His Upper Room Discourse, Jesus promised His disciples an enabling for such verbatim reporting: "[T]he Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in My name, He will teach you all things, and bring to your remembrance all that I said to you" (John 14:26). He provided in advance for the writing of the Gospels as a divine-human undertaking: "When the Helper comes, whom I will send to you from the Father, *that is* the Spirit of truth, who proceeds from the Father, He will bear witness of Me, and you *will* bear witness also, because you have been with Me from the beginning" (John 15:26-27). Of course, the divine side prevailed to overcome any human weaknesses, thereby providing readers of the Gospels with the very words spoken by Jesus while on earth. As He said, "Heaven and earth will pass away, but My words shall not pass away" (Matt 24:35).

In concert with Hodge and Warfield,<sup>88</sup> a few years ago I wrote,

No one has an airtight case for concluding whether they are Jesus' very words or they are only the gist of what Jesus said. For one whose predisposition is toward evangelical HC [i.e., Historical Criticism] and its primary focus on the human element in the inspiration of Scripture, he will incline toward the *ipsissima vox* position. For one whose inclination leads him to place highest premium on the Spirit's part in inspiring Scripture, he will certainly lean toward the *ipsissima verba* view. In some mysterious way known only to God, the natural merged with the supernatural when the Spirit inspired the Gospels. Whatever way that happened, however, the supernatural must have prevailed. Otherwise, the Gospels could not be inerrant. The Bible is more than just a humanly generated book.<sup>89</sup>

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<sup>88</sup>A. A. Hodge and B. B. Warfield, "Inspiration," *Presbyterian Review* 2/6 (April 1881):230-32.

<sup>89</sup>Robert L. Thomas, "Impact of Historical Criticism on Theology and Apologetics," in *The Jesus Crisis: The Inroads of Historical Criticism into Evangelical Scholarship*, ed. by Robert L. Thomas and F. David Farnell (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1998) 373.

All that has transpired since I wrote those words has served to confirm the position expressed there even more.

### **Example of Heroes from the Past**

**A. A. Hodge and B. B. Warfield.** At the end of the nineteenth century, two well-known theologians ably defended the verbal inspiration of Scripture. They were A. A. Hodge and B. B. Warfield:

It is evident, therefore, that it is not clearness of thought which inclines any of the advocates of a real inspiration of the Holy Scriptures to deny that it extends to the words. Whatever discrepancies or other human limitations may attach to the sacred record, *the line* (of inspired or not inspired, of infallible or fallible) *can never rationally be drawn between the thoughts and the words of Scripture.*<sup>90</sup>

Hodge and Warfield insisted on the inspiration of the very words of Scripture in spite of human limitations that may have played a part in producing the Bible. Suggestions that Scripture contains only the *thoughts*, i.e., the *gist*, of what actually happened was to them preposterous. As they so pointedly note, one cannot draw a line between “the thoughts and the words of Scripture,” because once someone changes a word, he has also changed the thought. Hence, a belief in the *verbal* inspiration of Scripture is an endorsement of the *ipsissima verba* position. Only since the inroads of historical criticism of the Synoptic Gospels into evangelicalism have evangelicals begun to differ from Hodge and Warfield.

**C. H. Spurgeon.** Spurgeon’s final annual address to his Pastors’ College in 1891 has been published under the title *The Greatest Fight in the World*. He was at that point engulfed in a theological battle with those of his own association who were attempting to befriend the findings of secular philosophy and science by shaving away certain teachings of Scripture. Here is part of his instructions to his students on that occasion:

But we are told that we ought to give up a part of our old-fashioned theology to save the rest. We are in a carriage travelling [*sic*] over the steppes of Russia. The horses are being driven furiously, but the wolves are close upon us! There they are! Can you not see their eyes of fire? The danger is pressing. What must we do? It is proposed that we throw out a child or two. By the time they have eaten the baby, we shall have a little headway; but should they again overtake us, what then? Why, brave man, *throw out your wife!* “All that a man hath will he give for his life”; give up nearly every truth in the hope of saving one. Throw out inspiration, and let the critics devour it. Throw out election, and all the old Calvinism; here will be a dainty feast for the wolves, and the gentlemen who give us the sage advice will be glad to see the doctrines of grace torn limb from limb. Throw out natural depravity, eternal punishment, and the efficacy of prayer. We have lightened the carriage wonderfully. Now for another drop. *Sacrifice the great sacrifice!* Have done with the atonement! Brethren, this advice is villainous, and murderous: we will escape these wolves with everything, or we will be lost with everything. It shall be “the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth”, or none

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<sup>90</sup>Hodge and Warfield, “Inspiration” 235 [emphasis in the original].

at all. We will never attempt to save half the truth by casting any part of it away. The sage advice which has been given us involved treason to God, and disappointment to ourselves. We will stand by all or none. We will have the whole Bible or no Bible. We are told that if we give up something the adversaries will also give up something; but we care not what they will do, for we are not the least afraid of them. . . . We shall with the sword of the Spirit maintain the whole truth as ours, and shall not accept a part of it as a grant from the enemies of God. . . . God being with us we shall not cease from this glorying, but will hold the whole of revealed truth, even to the end.<sup>91</sup>

Spurgeon was unwilling to surrender even the smallest detail of the Bible to the criticisms of science and philosophy, because he appreciated the precision of Scripture and knew that such precision would triumph in the end.

**J. Gresham Machen.** Other defenders of biblical inspiration in past years have set an example worth following by people of the present generation. J. Gresham Machen was one of those heroes. In the following 1930 excerpt, his example of firmness yet gentleness in defending Scripture against the drifters of his day closely adheres to instructions that Paul gave Timothy in 2 Tim 2:14-26:

The book [i.e., Machen's book on *The Virgin Birth of Christ*] has been criticized by a number of writers (for example, in *The Times Literary Supplement*, London, for April 10, 1930) on the ground that it weakens its case by attempting to prove too much—by attempting to establish a thoroughgoing trustworthiness for the birth narratives in Matthew and Luke, instead of admitting the presence of a “midrashic” element as does G. H. Box.

In reply to this criticism, the author [i.e., Machen] desires to say how very highly he values the work of Canon Box (whose important book on the virgin birth has recently been supplemented, in a very interesting way, by two articles entitled “The Virgin Birth, A Survey of Some Recent Literature,” in *Laudate*, ix, 1931, pp. 77-88, 147-155); and he [i.e., Machen] also desires to say how sharply he distinguishes the view of this scholar, who accepts as historical the central miracle in the birth narratives and rejects details, from the views of those who accept only details and reject the central miracle. The author [i.e., Machen] has taken occasion, moreover, to say (in *British Weekly*, for August 21, 1930), in reply to a very sympathetic review by H. R. Mackintosh (in the same journal, for July 17, 1930), that he does not adopt the apologetic principle of “all or nothing,” and that he rejoices in the large measure of agreement regarding the birth narratives that unites him with scholars like Canon Box and the late Bishop Gore, who reject many things in the Bible that he [i.e., Machen] regards as true. Nevertheless, the author [i.e., Machen] still believes that a thoroughgoing apologetic is the strongest apologetic in the end; and, in particular, he thinks that when the objections to the supernatural have once been overcome, there are removed with them, in a much more far-reaching way than is sometimes supposed, the objections to the birth narratives as a whole.<sup>92</sup>

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<sup>91</sup>C. H. Spurgeon, *The Greatest Fight in the World* (reprint; Pasadena, Texas: Pilgrim Publications, 1990) 33-34.

<sup>92</sup>J. Gresham Machen, “Preface to the Second Edition,” *The Virgin Birth of Christ* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1930) ix-x.

Machen wrote these words at a time when scholars of nonevangelical persuasion were questioning the historicity of the birth narratives in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke. Machen stood his ground against extreme liberalism and also, in a much gentler tone, against a middle-of-the-road position between fundamentalism and liberalism, such as represented by Canon Box in the quotation above. In distinction from both groups, Machen accepted “as historical the central miracle in the birth narratives” and the “details” contained therein. He was accused of “attempting to prove too much” by the “middle-of-the-roaders” who accepted the “gist” of the virgin birth accounts and rejected the details, but he stood his ground.

This hero of the faith set the pattern for conservative evangelicals of the present who have likewise been accused of “attempting to prove too much” from the Gospels. Osborne has criticized *The Jesus Crisis*<sup>93</sup> with the following: “[T]o say that virtually all the sayings in the Gospels are *ipsissima verba* is a dangerous overstatement, for inerrancy itself is at stake. Thomas demands more precision from the Gospel accounts than they can give. Such precision is virtually impossible to demonstrate.”<sup>94</sup> The observation in response to Osborne is that *imprecision* is “virtually impossible to demonstrate,” and the strongest probability is on the side of precision because of the divine role in inspiration.

Regarding the same book, Bock has written, “[S]ome warnings in this book have merit. But it casts its net far too widely.”<sup>95</sup> He adds, “Such a book should carefully describe and distinguish differences in how views are held. It should be careful about how the details of Scripture are treated, details which the Spirit of God did give us with accuracy. These details do not support the book’s claim for a specific kind of historical precision in Scripture.”<sup>96</sup> Earlier he writes, “So a historically based distinction between Jesus’ exact words (*ipsissima verba*, historically accurate direct citations) and His voice (*ipsissima vox*, a historically accurate summary or paraphrase of His utterances) remains necessary in some cases, despite the book’s claim that this distinction is bibliologically dangerous.”<sup>97</sup>

Some middle-of-the-road contemporary reviewers of *The Jesus Crisis* look at the book as “attempting to prove too much,” the same charges as Machen’s adversaries leveled against him. Machen’s adversaries have long since passed from the memories of orthodox Christians, but Machen’s name has etched itself in the annals of orthodoxy for generations to come, because he chose to interpret the text with precision.

**J. I. Packer.** Though not a voice from the distant past, J. I. Packer in 1958 published a work that won wide positive acclamation among evangelicals. In that book he wrote,

<sup>93</sup>Thomas and Famell, eds., *The Jesus Crisis*.

<sup>94</sup>Grant R. Osborne, “Historical Criticism and the Evangelical,” *JETS* 42/2 (June 1999):203.

<sup>95</sup>Darrell L. Bock, Review of *The Jesus Crisis: The Inroads of Historical Criticism into Evangelical Scholarship*, *Bibliotheca Sacra* 157 (April-June 2000):236.

<sup>96</sup>Ibid.

<sup>97</sup>Ibid., 233.

Our point here is simply that the Church must receive all teaching that proves to be biblical, whether on matters of historical or theological fact, as truly part of God's Word.

This shows the importance of insisting, that the inspiration of Scripture is *verbal*. Words signify and safeguard meaning; the wrong word distorts the intended sense. Since God inspired the biblical text in order to communicate His Word, it was necessary for him to ensure that the words written were such as did in fact convey it. We do not stress the verbal character of inspiration from a superstitious regard for the original Hebrew and Greek words . . . ; we do so from a reverent concern for the sense of Scripture. If the words were not wholly God's, then their teaching would not be wholly God's.<sup>98</sup>

As late as the sixth decade of the twentieth century, evangelicals overwhelmingly endorsed the verbal inspiration about which Packer wrote. The only position compatible with that verbal inspiration is that of *ipsissima verba*, but that is a far cry from the evangelicals who today speak only in terms of the Scripture's retaining the *gist* of what Jesus said.

Evangelicals need to retrace their steps of the last fifty years if they are to regain their appreciation for the reliability and precision of the Bible.

### **Scripture in Light of Its Rationalism, Meaningfulness, and Precision**

The inerrancy of the Scriptures places heavy responsibilities on the shoulders of those who interpret them.

- They must interpret them rationally, making allowance for the difference between biblical logic and secular logic. To do otherwise would be to attribute irrationality to the Scripture.
- By aiming for a goal of eliminating all subjective input by the interpreter, they must interpret them objectively in recognition of the Scripture's own meaningfulness. To do otherwise would be to view the Scripture as meaningless.
- They must interpret them precisely, recognizing the overruling activity of the Holy Spirit in guarding them against even the slightest error. To do otherwise would be to attribute imprecision to the Scripture.

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<sup>98</sup>J. I. Packer, 'Fundamentalism' and the Word of God: *Some Evangelical Principles* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1958) 89-90.