

THE NATURE OF TRUTH: POSTMODERN OR PROPOSITIONAL?

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Ernest R. Sandeen laid a foundation for a contemporary concept of truth that was unique among evangelicals with a high view of Scripture. He proposed that the concept of inerrancy based on a literal method of interpretation was late in coming during the Christian era, having its beginning among the Princeton theologians of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. He ruled out their doctrines related to inspiration because they were based on rational thinking which he taught was absent from earlier Christian thought. Subsequent evaluations of Sandeen's work have disproved his assumption that those doctrines were absent from Christianity prior to the Princeton era. Yet well-known Christian writers have since built on Sandeen's foundation that excludes rationality and precision from an interpretation of Scripture. The Sandeenists criticize the Princetonians for overreacting in their response to modernism, for their use of literal principles of interpretation, for defining propositional truth derived from the Bible, and for excluding the Holy Spirit's help in interpretation. All such criticisms have proven to be without foundation. The Princetonians were not without fault, but their utilization of common sense in biblical interpretation was their strong virtue. Unfortunately, even the Journal of the inerrantist Evangelical Theological Society has promoted some of the same errors as Sandeen. The divine element in inspiration is a guarantee of the rationality and precision of Scripture, because God, the ultimate author of Scripture, is quite rational and precise, as proven by Scripture itself.

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Several words related to an evangelical quest for truth have gained a negative connotation. Among them are the two words "rationality" and "precision."

Since I used both words in a positive way in a recent article,¹ I was compelled to search for the source of this negativity. My probing took me into the clash between a group I will call the Sandeenists on one side and the defenders of the nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Princeton theologians on the other. In the former case, truth is ill-defined, in step with the postmodern tempo of today; in the latter, the truth is propositional and stable.

**Foundation for a Contemporary Concept Laid by
by Ernest R. Sandeen**

Ernest R. Sandeen Himself

The campaign endorsed by a number of evangelicals bears a remarkable similarity to one initiated by E. R. Sandeen three or four decades ago. Why such a battle continues to arise is a deep mystery, because the foundations laid for discrediting the so-called Scottish Common Sense Realism—i.e., rationalism—of the Princeton movement have themselves been so thoroughly discredited. The work of Sandeen on fundamentalism² has received much attention, both from those who buy into his theory partially or totally and from those who have shown the grievous shortcomings of his theory. Sandeen contended, “Most twentieth-century Fundamentalists and many twentieth-century historians have mistakenly assumed that Protestantism possessed a strong, fully integrated theology of biblical authority which was attacked by advocates of the higher criticism. As we shall see, no such theology existed before 1850.”³ He developed a theory that the millenarian—more commonly known today as dispensational premillenarian—literal method of interpretation of Scripture was essentially the same as that introduced into evangelicalism through the Princeton doctrine of the Scriptures, and concluded, “Both Princeton and the millenarians had staked their entire conception of Christianity upon a particular view of the Bible based ultimately upon eighteenth-century [i.e., Enlightenment] standards of rationality.”⁴

In the process of developing his theory, Sandeen raised three objections to conclusions of the Princeton theologians: their doctrine of verbal inspiration, their doctrine of biblical inerrancy, and their view that inspiration applied only to the

¹Robert L. Thomas, “The Rationality, Meaningfulness, and Precision of Scripture,” *The Master's Seminary Journal* 15/2 (Fall 2004):175-207.

²Ernest R. Sandeen, *The Roots of Fundamentalism: British and American Millenarianism 1800–1930* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1970).

³*Ibid.*, 106.

⁴*Ibid.*, 131. According to Sandeen, Charles Hodge and Princeton Seminary “produced a wooden, mechanical discipline as well as a rigorously logical one” that did not allow the witness of the Spirit to play an important role in biblical interpretation (*ibid.*, 118).

original autographs.⁵

That such doctrines based on rational thought did not exist until the late nineteenth century has been soundly refuted a number of times since Sandeen published his work in 1970. Woodbridge and Balmer have shown that Sandeen's version of the history of biblical authority in the Reformed tradition is misconstrued, that his portrait of the doctrine of biblical authority at nineteenth-century Princeton Theological Seminary is misleading, and that his separation of the Princetonians' teachings about the infallibility of the original autographs from the wider context of American and European evangelical thought is erroneous.⁶ Contrary to Sandeen's theory, William Whitaker in a 1588 publication and William Ames in 1624, 1627, and 1629 publications defended a Reformed position of biblical inerrancy.⁷ Nineteenth-century Princetonians did not play a major role in formulating the doctrine of inerrancy in the original autographs, and they did not neglect the role of the Holy Spirit as Sandeen contended. Rather, non-Presbyterian scholars are the ones who exerted major influence in this area.

Furthermore, Princetonians such as Charles Hodge did recognize the role of the Holy Spirit in attesting the authority of Scripture.⁸ Princeton's position on the inerrancy of the original autographs was not innovative as Sandeen contended, but rather reflected a wider context of Reformed thought and the position of other Christian communions from Augustine to Calvin to Whitaker to Ames.⁹ On the basis of so much misinformation in Sandeen's work, Woodbridge and Balmer call for a thorough revision of Sandeen's work because of the way it has misled so many people.¹⁰

Ronald F. Satta follows a different path in demonstrating fallacies of the theory defended by Sandeen, the theory which included the proposal that the evangelical community in America truly possessed no well-defined doctrine of bibliology—including inerrancy—until the later stages of the nineteenth century.¹¹ He responds to the three major complaints of Sandeen against Charles Hodge and B. B. Warfield, the first of which pertains to verbal inspiration. Sandeen held the doctrinal teaching that the very words were inspired was nascent, but Satta shows conclusively

⁵Ibid., 123-30.

⁶John D. Woodbridge and Randall H. Balmer, "The Princetonians and Biblical Authority: An Assessment of the Ernest Sandeen Proposal," in *Scripture and Truth*, ed. D. A. Carson and John D. Woodbridge (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1983) 254.

⁷Ibid., 254-58.

⁸Ibid., 258-71.

⁹Ibid., 271-76.

¹⁰Ibid., 277-79.

¹¹Ronald F. Satta, "Fundamentalism and Inerrancy: A Response to the Sandeen Challenge," *Evangelical Journal* 21/2 (Fall 2003):66-80.

that the doctrine was ancient, extending all the way back to the early fathers.¹² Next, Satta responds to Sandeen's contention that later Princeton scholars altered the emphasis of Charles Hodge's theology when they taught that the inspiration of the Bible depended on inerrancy.¹³ Here he shows that, contrary to Sandeen, Hodge used the terms "infallible" and "inerrant" interchangeably, meaning that Hodge's successors merely continued the teaching of their mentor.¹⁴ Sandeen's third alleged innovation by Princeton Seminary was to focus on the non-extant original autographs so that no one could ever prove the existence of an error in Scripture.¹⁵ Satta responds to this aspect of Sandeen's accusation with five observations: (1) this theory confuses preservation of the text with its inspiration; (2) Hodge and Warfield would not have appealed to this phenomenon if it was really new; (3) this focus on the autograph was vital to their defense of Scripture; (4) if this was a calculated "dodge" by Princetonians, it would not leave the Bible impregnable to attack; (5) inspiration of the autograph was not new to Reformed theology.¹⁶

Sandeen concludes the section of his discussion on this subject with an interesting statement: "Both conservatives and liberals worked at the theological task, but the Princeton professors' insistence that they were doing nothing new, while creating a unique apologetic which flew in the face of the standards they were claiming to protect, cannot be judged as a historically honest or laudable program."¹⁷ Here is a classic example of the pot calling the kettle black. If anyone has distorted historical data and cannot be judged as "historically honest or laudable," it is Sandeen. That is why it is inexplicable that so many contemporary evangelicals for support of their hermeneutical escapades are looking to Sandeen's theory about the invention of rationalism through installing Scottish Common Sense Realism at Princeton Seminary in the middle-to-late 1800s.

Examples of Sandeen's Influence: the Sandeenists

J. B. Rogers and D. K. McKim. Despite his "at best" careless or "at worst" dishonest handling of historical data, Ernest R. Sandeen has become a hero to a number of well-known writers. J. B. Rogers and D. K. McKim refer to his work frequently in their discussions of the authority and interpretation of the Bible. Like Sandeen, they trace a doctrine of the scientific inerrancy of the Bible to Princeton, specifically to John Witherspoon who became president of the College of New

¹²Ibid., 67-70; cf. Sandeen, *Roots of Fundamentalism* 123-25.

¹³Cf. Sandeen, *Roots of Fundamentalism* 125-27.

¹⁴Satta, "Fundamentalism and Inerrancy" 70-75.

¹⁵Sandeen, *Roots of Fundamentalism* 127-30.

¹⁶Satta, "Fundamentalism and Inerrancy" 75-77.

¹⁷Sandeen, *Roots of Fundamentalism* 130.

Jersey—an earlier name for Princeton College.¹⁸ Witherspoon began a conservative tradition that was very influential in America, they say, and commended “Scottish common sense philosophy as rationally more acceptable” than rationalistic deism.¹⁹ “Witherspoon had unbounded confidence in human reason,” they write.²⁰ He held that reason and Scripture were always in harmony with the principles of Scottish realism.²¹ Witherspoon’s influence continued when Princeton Seminary was founded.²²

Rogers and McKim parrot much of the same perspective as Sandeen when dealing with Charles Hodge.²³ They portray Hodge as constantly changing his position on matters of inspiration because of opposing scientific theories that arose, theories such as Darwinism. Their concurrence with Sandeen’s approach surfaces when they cite his works regarding Archibald Alexander’s emphasis on the importance of reason in combating deism.²⁴ They also cite him extensively, stating that Hodge was wrong when claiming that Princeton theology offered nothing new regarding the doctrine of inspiration that had not been held since the beginning of Christianity.²⁵ They cite Sandeen again in criticism of Warfield’s definition of his inductive approach.²⁶ Either intentionally or unintentionally, Rogers and McKim have used the work of a discredited historian as—at least in part—foundational for their own position, thereby discrediting themselves also.

G. M. Marsden. G. M. Marsden has relied heavily on Sandeen’s work in his attempt to define fundamentalism.²⁷ Basically, he approves of Sandeen’s historical analysis of late nineteenth-century developments regarding the inspiration of the Bible.²⁸ Marsden cites Sandeen frequently, portraying his work in a positive light almost exclusively, though sometimes differing with him on lesser points. He

¹⁸Jack B. Rogers and Donald K. McKim, *The Authority and Interpretation of the Bible: An Historical Approach* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1979) 244.

¹⁹*Ibid.*, 245.

²⁰*Ibid.*

²¹*Ibid.*, 246.

²²*Ibid.*, 245.

²³*Ibid.*, 285-89.

²⁴*Ibid.*, 311-12 nn. 38, 39.

²⁵*Ibid.*, 314-15 n. 89.

²⁶*Ibid.*, 375-67 n. 221.

²⁷George M. Marsden, *Fundamentalism and American Culture: The Shaping of Twentieth Century Evangelicalism: 1870-1925* (New York: Oxford University, 1980).

²⁸E.g., “Sandeen’s thesis has much to recommend it and his impressive study remains valuable. He is certainly correct in supposing that millenarianism and Princeton theology are two of the important keys for understanding fundamentalism” (*ibid.*, 5).

concurs with him in allowing the strong influence of common-sense philosophy on views of inspiration at Princeton and regarding the role of the reaction against deism, Darwinism, and other outgrowths of the Enlightenment as the causes of those views.²⁹ Never, however, does he directly point out Sandeen's radical misuse of historical data.

James Barr. Another who fell victim to the influence of Sandeen is James Barr. Sandeen's influence on Barr is reflected in Barr's statement, "Sandeen argues, to me convincingly, that the fundamentalist leadership came from exactly the same social groups as the liberal leadership came from."³⁰ This is one of Barr's repeated references to Sandeen's work. Regarding the doctrinal stream of fundamentalism, Barr writes,

It is a reasonable comment, therefore, to say that the fundamentalist conception of truth is dominated by a materialistic view, derived from a scientific age. This stress on the accuracy of the Bible in its *material-physical* reporting separates modern fundamentalism entirely from the older theology, such as the theology of Luther and Calvin, which it ill-informedly claims as its own forebear. It is possible to argue further that the chief doctrinal stream accepted in fundamentalism, the Princeton theology of the Hodges and Warfield, took its method expressly from the analogy of natural science, and that natural science as seen in a traditional Newtonian mould.³¹

He adds,

They [i.e., conservative evangelicals] have no right to shrug off Ramm unless they are prepared to alter the doctrines of scripture and principles of interpretation upon which Ramm's reasoning is based and which he is logically following out. Conservative evangelicals have to face the fact: by the doctrines of inerrancy and methods of interpretation upon which they insist, they are bound if they are honest to come up against exactly these questions.³²

Regarding fundamentalism's view of Scripture, Barr opines, "[T]he fundamentalist position has not been a non-philosophical or anti-philosophical one, but one built upon a strong and clear philosophical position, in which a very powerful, indeed a practically unlimited, role was accorded to reason in the vital matter of biblical interpretation."³³

²⁹Ibid., 16-18.

³⁰James Barr, *Fundamentalism* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1978) 91.

³¹Ibid. 93.

³²Ibid., 97.

³³Ibid., 274-75.

Mark Noll. Another follower of Sandeen is Mark Noll. Noll writes, “Critics of Scottish Common Sense Philosophy regularly condemn its advocates for being naive, for—that is—failing to recognize how thoroughly all human perceptions, even those of Scripture, are colored by local cultural circumstances.”³⁴ Noll apparently concurs with Sandeen’s criticism. He adds, “[T]he Princetonians, as much as they sometimes appeared to deny it, were in fact children of their time, participating in the grand intellectual movements of their day.”³⁵ Regarding the rift between fundamentalism and the Princeton theology, Noll’s opinion is,

Fundamentalists believed in the Bible, Modernists in reason, but the Princeton theologians had believed in both. . . . In sum, as American Protestants entered the 1930s and Fundamentalists and Modernists went their separate ways, the institutions of the Princeton Theology had ceased to exist and its convictions had been scattered to the winds.³⁶

In noting the effect of culture on the Princeton theologians, Noll contends, “If a modern evaluator must render a negative judgment of those innovations, the judgment must fall as much upon that culture as a whole as on the Princetonians by themselves.”³⁷ Noll’s respect for Sandeen is reflected in these words: “In this modern controversy over the Princeton conception of the Bible, Sandeen, Rogers, and McKim have successfully made the point that a conception of Scripture which was thoroughly at home in the intellectual world of the nineteenth century may not answer every legitimate question in the second half of the twentieth.”³⁸

Alister McGrath. Alister McGrath numbers among those who have bought into Sandeen’s bogus theory.³⁹ McGrath confuses secular logic with biblical logic.⁴⁰ He also writes, “There is a tendency within evangelicalism to treat Scripture as simply a sourcebook of Christian doctrines, and to overlook, suppress or deny its narrative character,”⁴¹ as he speaks disparagingly of deriving propositional truth from Scripture. He adds, “There is a tendency to regard spirituality in terms of understanding the biblical text—that is, to reading it, making sense of its words and ideas, and understanding its historical background and its meaning for today. The emphasis

³⁴Mark A Noll, ed., *The Princeton Theology 1812–1921* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2001) 32.

³⁵Ibid., 34.

³⁶Ibid., 38.

³⁷Ibid., 39.

³⁸Ibid., 43.

³⁹Alister McGrath, *A Passion for Truth: The Intellectual Coherence of Evangelicalism* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1996) 168-70.

⁴⁰Ibid., 171.

⁴¹Ibid., 173.

continues to be on reason.”⁴²

Again, he takes a negative view of the rationality of Scripture as he says, “We need to purge rationalism from within evangelicalism.”⁴³ Regarding apologetics McGrath writes,

On the basis of the highly questionable assumption that ‘everyone agrees [on, *sic*] what is reasonable,’ the rational credentials of the Christian faith are set forth. This approach, however, has shown itself to be deeply flawed in two respects. First, it assumes that the appeal of Christianity is purely rational; second, it rests upon a network of universalizing assumptions which fail to relate to the strongly particularizing environments in which the gospel must be proclaimed at the global level.⁴⁴

Regarding evangelism he notes, “It is a travesty of the biblical idea of ‘truth’ to equate it with the Enlightenment notions of conceptual or propositional correspondence, or the derived view of evangelism as the proclamation of the propositional correctness of christian doctrine.”⁴⁵

Donald Bloesch. Though his index shows no citations of Sandeen, Donald Bloesch is in tune with the temperament of the Sandeenists in downplaying rationalism: “Scripture is authoritative by virtue of its relation to the living Word, not by virtue of its truthfulness as such. This is because its truth is only understood in relation to Christ by the work of the Holy Spirit, not because of any rationalistic hermeneutic.”⁴⁶

Bloesch speaks disparagingly of “the capacity of reason to judge the truth of revelation.”⁴⁷ He continues,

The knowledge of faith is not an empirical objectifying knowledge but a knowledge in which we are lifted above reason and sense into communion with the living God. . . . Historical research can show the historical probability of certain events happening, but it can give only approximate, not final, certainty. The ground of certainty is not what reason can show or prove but what faith grasps and knows as the human subject acted upon by the Holy Spirit in conjunction with the reading or hearing of the biblical word.⁴⁸

⁴²Ibid., 174.

⁴³Ibid., 175.

⁴⁴Ibid., 176.

⁴⁵Ibid., 177.

⁴⁶Donald G. Bloesch, *Essentials of Evangelical Theology, Volume Two: Life, Ministry, and Hope* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1979) 275.

⁴⁷Ibid., 268.

⁴⁸Ibid., 268-69.

He continues, “In seeking understanding, faith must be on guard against making its cardinal doctrines too clear and distinct (à la Descartes), since this serves to undercut or deny the mystery in revelation.”⁴⁹ Among the “heresies on the right,” he includes dispensationalism and hyperfundamentalism, with the explanation, “Even the doctrine of *sola Scriptura*, understood in the Reformation sense, exists in tension with the current evangelical stress on personal religious experience as well as the fundamentalist appeal to arguments from reason and science in support of total biblical reliability.”⁵⁰

Bloesch is opposed to basing the authority of Scripture on the inerrancy of the writing and then supporting inerrancy with canons of scientific rationality.⁵¹ He denies that the Bible is fallible or untrustworthy, but wants to limit the Bible’s infallibility to matters of faith and practice.⁵²

John M. Hitchen.⁵³ A recent piece by John M. Hitchen started my search for the beginning of this evangelical disdain for “rationality” and “precision.” In his discussion of “What It Means to Be an Evangelical Today,” Hitchen takes his cue from John Stott’s three evangelical priorities: “the revealing initiative of God the Father, the redeeming work of God the Son, and the transforming ministry of God the Holy Spirit.”⁵⁴ In commenting on “The Authority of God in and through the Scriptures—The Revealing Initiative of God the Father,” Hitchen remarks, “Proper attention to the role of the Holy Spirit in illuminating the Scriptures for the believer will move us beyond wooden, rationalistic approaches to inspiration and revelation.”⁵⁵ He cites approvingly the statement of Donald Bloesch that disparages revelation of right-wing, scholastic orthodoxy as “frozen into a propositional formula.”⁵⁶ Hitchen continues,

By recapturing the relevance of interpreted narrative for our identity and authority as the people of God, and by allowing the Scriptures themselves to take the place of the discredited assumptions of the Enlightenment worldview as our basis for what is credible

⁴⁹Ibid.

⁵⁰Ibid., 276.

⁵¹Ibid., 270.

⁵²Ibid.

⁵³John M. Hitchen, former Principal of Christian Leaders Training College of Papua New Guinea and National Principal of Bible College of New Zealand, is currently Lecturer in Mission at BCNZ and at Pathways College of Bible and Mission, Auckland, New Zealand.

⁵⁴John M. Hitchen, “What It Means to be an Evangelical Today, Part Two—An Antipodean Perspective,” *EQ* 76/2 (2004):101, citing John R. W. Stott, *Evangelical Truth: A Personal Plea for Unity* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1999) 25-30.

⁵⁵Hitchen, “What It Means” 102.

⁵⁶Ibid., 103, citing Donald Bloesch, *Essential of Evangelical Theology, Vol. Two* 273-75.

and real in the world—i.e., as our plausibility structure—we can offer an alternative set of interpretive keys for this otherwise meaningless contemporary society.⁵⁷

He speaks of “moving beyond a concept of truth that assumes that I can define truth once for all in unchangeable propositions, such that anyone who disagrees with my definition must, ipso facto, be in error.”⁵⁸ Hitchen’s underlying message is that we take advantage of postmodernity’s openness to an evangelical alternative by freeing ourselves from “the abrasive, defensive dogmatism” that has characterized the evangelical movement of the past.⁵⁹

As I read these words, I could not help thinking of the widespread revolt among contemporary evangelical scholars against static biblical inerrancy and its necessary counterpart, grammatical-historical hermeneutics. Phrases such as moving “beyond wooden, rationalistic approaches to inspiration and revelation,” “frozen in propositional formula,” “recapturing the relevance of interpreted narrative,” “discredited assumptions of the Enlightenment worldview,” and “moving beyond a concept of truth that assumes that I can define truth once for all in unchangeable propositions” recall the all-out war currently being waged against alleged Princetonian teachings that purportedly arose in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, teachings such as a rational approach to Scripture through following “scientific” principles of interpretation and a clear-cut stand on biblical inerrancy such as is currently professed by those who subscribe annually to the doctrinal basis of the Evangelical Theological Society.

Response to the Sandeenists

Sandeen and His followers seem to raise at least four issues regarding developments at Princeton at the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century. (1) One is the alleged overreaction of Princeton scholars in response to modernism that was arising in various forms at the time. They paint the picture of a group who went to an unneeded extreme in order to refute abuses of biblical teaching through an undue attention to science rather than Scripture. Their preunderstanding of correct doctrine caused them to turn to the philosophy of Descartes and Cartesianism, which exalted human reason.⁶⁰ That led them into a

⁵⁷Ibid., 103.

⁵⁸Ibid., 104.

⁵⁹Ibid., 104-5.

⁶⁰Rogers and McKim, *Authority and Interpretation* 167-69, 235. Rogers and McKim give the following as the purpose of their book: “It is the burden of this book to document the fact that rationalism and mysticism are not the only available alternatives. Our hypothesis is that the peculiar twists of American history have served to distort our view of both the central Christian tradition and especially of its Reformed branch. . . . Not rational proofs, but the Holy Spirit persuaded people of the Bible’s authority. . . . To erect a standard of modern, technical precision in language as the hallmark of biblical authority was totally foreign to the foundation shared by the early church” (ibid., xxi-xxii). McGrath

faulty understanding of Scripture.

What the Sandeenists fail to recognize is that all or at least almost all advancement in orthodox doctrine throughout the centuries of Christianity have been in response to heresy. In that setting, to codify the doctrine of inspiration more specifically was completely in line with church history. The Princetonians sought to correct errors imposed by the Enlightenment. Such is a credit to the Princetonians rather than a fault.

(2) Sandeen and company were also critical of principles of literal interpretation, characterizing it by such expressions as “a wooden mechanical discipline.”⁶¹ What else could the “scientific principles of interpretation” and the “literal” interpretation that Sandeen refers to⁶² be but grammatical-historical hermeneutics espoused by the Princeton scholars? Sandeen felt that such principles were too restrictive to allow for mysteries of the leading of the Holy Spirit in biblical interpretation. In keeping with the postmodern spirit of not limiting interpretation of a single passage to one meaning, Sandeen felt such as the principle of single meaning to be an innovation of late-nineteenth century scholarship and not the traditional Christian view.

His view was eventually deemed to be inconsistent with biblical inerrancy as attested in the findings of the Council on Biblical Inerrancy in 1978, which vouched for grammatical-historical principles as inseparable from inerrancy.⁶³ That evaluation befits Sandeen’s intentions, one of which was to disprove the biblical inerrancy espoused by the millenarians and the Princeton scholars.

(3) In arguing against principles of grammatical-historical hermeneutics, Sandeenists rejected the principle of single meaning along the same lines they rejected modernism and embraced postmodernism. In that spirit, Hitchen writes,

Proper attention to the role of the Holy Spirit in illuminating the Scriptures for the believer will move us beyond wooden, rationalistic approaches to inspiration and revelation. . . . This means moving beyond a concept of truth that assumes that I can define truth once for all in unchangeable propositions, such that anyone who disagrees with my definition must, ipso facto, be in error. . . . Postmodernity gives us as much right

says, “The primary feature of the movement [i.e., the Enlightenment] may be seen as its assertion of the omniscience of human reason” (*A Passion for Truth* 163). For him, that feature constitutes a link with evangelicalism.

⁶¹Sandeen, *Roots of Fundamentalism* 118.

⁶²Ibid., 117-18.

⁶³Article VIII, “Articles of Affirmation and Denials, The Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy,” International Council on Biblical Inerrancy (Chicago, 1978); cf. also Article XV, “Articles of Affirmation and Denials, The Chicago Statement on Biblical Hermeneutics,” International Council on Biblical Inerrancy (Chicago, 1982). See also Article XVI of the former statement which reads, “We affirm that the doctrine of inerrancy has been integral to the Church’s faith throughout its history. We deny that inerrancy is a doctrine invented by scholastic Protestantism, or is a reactionary position postulated in response to negative higher criticism.”

as anyone openly to present Gospel alternatives for national, societal, family and personal living.⁶⁴

To embrace postmodernism is to dismiss all possibilities of defining propositional truth from Scripture, because truth cannot be limited to what is defined by grammatical-historical principles. Sandeenists never acknowledge that the illuminating work of the Spirit is discernible only in light of what the Scriptures teach when rightly interpreted in light of rational principles.

The impossibility of obtaining propositional truth is associated with the claim that the “common sense” position is an outgrowth of the Enlightenment worldview. Such a claim flows from an assumption that both modernism—stemming from the Enlightenment—and fundamentalism build on the principle of being able to define truth once for all in unchangeable propositions,⁶⁵ the difference between both of these and postmodernism is that postmodernism disallows that propositional stance. That comparison of modernism and fundamentalism is, of course, ridiculous. In contrast to fundamentalism, modernism’s proposition built upon a very loose doctrine of biblical inspiration, which allowed all sorts of opportunities to question the integrity of the text. Fundamentalism on the other hand held a high view of Scripture that required a literal interpretation of the text. One can hardly say with a straight face that the “common sense” approach is an outgrowth of an Enlightenment worldview.

Since Sandeen’s approach leads inevitably to a more subjective approach to interpretation rather than a grammatical-historical one, it encourages a looser view of narrative portions of Scripture. Hitchen expresses it this way:

The return to understanding Scripture as narrative offers a way to bring a fresh presentation of an evangelical understanding of Scripture as God revealing himself authoritatively while avoiding charges of absolutism and lack of respect for the historical particularity both of the text and of our human contexts. . . . By recapturing the relevance of interpreted narrative for our identity and authority as the people of God, and by allowing the Scriptures themselves to take the place of the discredited assumptions of the Enlightenment worldview as our basis for what is credible and real in the world—i.e., as our plausibility structure—we can offer an alternative set of interpretive keys for this otherwise meaningless contemporary society.⁶⁶

This premise allows contemporary Christians to read their own situations into the text at will, with no restrictions placed on the text’s meaning by authorial—human and divine—intention. What humans deem as the illuminating work of the Spirit is often merely a human inclination, unless it coincides with criteria yielded by interpretation

⁶⁴Hitchen, “What It Means” 102, 104-5.

⁶⁵Ibid., 104.

⁶⁶Ibid., 103.

of Scripture according to rational principles.

(4) A fourth issue raised by Sandeenism relates to how the Holy Spirit is involved in the interpretation of Scripture. How can a person know whether he is being led to a certain conclusion by a spirit of error rather than by the Holy Spirit? He can know only through what the Bible teaches. He can know what the Bible teaches only through rational principles of hermeneutics. As has been exemplified all too often, a person can make the Bible say whatever he wants it to say by erecting his own set of interpretive principles. What makes a set of principles wrong? Their irrationality.

The objection comes often that rationality to the Western mind will not coincide with rationality in other parts of the world. If one honors that type of evasion, so many different definitions of rationality would emerge that the Bible would conflict with itself. The Bible itself builds on its own definition of rationality, and that is the rationality that has prevailed in countries where Christianity and the Bible have had a prolonged impact on culture. The Bible is not an irrational book and must be interpreted according to rational principles. God is a rational being. The Holy Spirit who inspired biblical writers is rational, and His work must be treated in a rational light.⁶⁷

The Princeton Theologians

The heavy focus in this debate on the Princeton theologians warrants a closer look at the weaknesses and the strengths of these men.

Their Weaknesses

Sandeenists have faulted the Princeton theologians for concessions they made to the Enlightenment. One of these concessions was their attempt to integrate the Bible with the findings of secular science such as Darwinism. In this the Sandeenists furnish a valid criticism.

For example, Noll characterizes B. B. Warfield as a theistic evolutionist:⁶⁸

⁶⁷For another view on rationality in biblical interpretation see Hitchen, "What It Means to Be an Evangelical Today—An Antipodean Perspective, Part One—Mapping Our Movement," *EQ* 76/1 (2004):47-64. Hitchen writes, "Donald Bloesch suggested, and others like Alister McGrath have taken up his concern, that we need 'to call into question the bent towards rationalism in current evangelicalism', listing Carl Henry, John Warwick Montgomery, Norman Geisler and Francis Schaeffer as successors to the rationalistic tendencies within the 'Protestant scholastic orthodoxy of the Princeton School', championed in earlier generations by the Hodges and Benjamin Warfield. From another quarter, Lesslie Newbigin also critiques fundamentalism and evangelicalism's understanding of scripture. He sees the claims to have an absolute certainty of truth expressed in inerrant propositions as an unconscious surrender to the rationalistic 'plausibility structures' of the Enlightenment paradigm" (ibid., 54-55; cf. McGrath, *Passion for Truth* 170).

⁶⁸Noll, *Princeton Theology* 45.

In the course of his [i.e., Warfield's] wide scientific reading, he brought to a conclusion A. A. Hodge's earlier efforts to make peace between the Princeton Theology and modern science. Eventually Warfield took special pains to transcend the antithesis which Charles Hodge had perceived between creation and evolution. He wrote in 1911, "'evolution' cannot act as a substitute for creation, but at best can supply only a theory of the method of the divine providence." Evolution, that is, was one of the possible "interpretations" for the "facts" of nature which did not violate the "facts" of Scripture.⁶⁹

Barr majors in this line of criticism of the Princetonians: "It is possible to argue further that the chief doctrinal stream accepted in fundamentalism, the Princeton theology of Hodges and Warfield, took its method expressly from the analogy of natural science, and that natural science as seen in a traditional Newtonian mould."⁷⁰ He later adds,

Hodge [i.e., Charles Hodge] did not think there was any ultimate conflict between religion and science. Theologians should learn the lesson of the Copernican revolution, and know that it is unwise to array themselves needlessly against the teachings of science. One should let science take its course, assured 'that the Scriptures will accommodate themselves to all well-authenticated scientific facts in time to come, as they have in time past'. The wording, that the scriptures would 'accommodate themselves', is worth noting.⁷¹

The Sandeenists were right in this criticism of the Princetonians. As I have earlier expressed, evangelical Christians have no justification for integrating the Bible with findings of such secular disciplines as science.⁷² In that kind of endeavor, the Bible is always the loser. Science cannot be used to correct grammatical-historical principles of interpretation.

Their Strengths

Where critics of the Princeton theologians stray from the truth, however, lies in their insistence that biblical inerrancy is limited to matters of faith and practice. They claim that the Princetonians in their emphasis on common sense relied upon integrating their system with Scottish Common Sense Realism. Charles Hodge and others of that school, however, maintained that a reliance on common sense in interpreting Scripture was not something they had invented.⁷³ In citing Hodge's

⁶⁹Ibid., 289.

⁷⁰Barr, *Fundamentalism* 93.

⁷¹Ibid., 273.

⁷²See Robert L. Thomas, *Evangelical Hermeneutics: The New Versus the Old* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2002), especially the chapter on "General Revelation and Biblical Hermeneutics" 113-40.

⁷³In celebrating his fiftieth year as professor at Princeton, Charles Hodge stated, "I am not afraid to say that a new idea never originated in this Seminary" (A. A. Hodge, *Life of Charles Hodge, D.D. LL.D.*, cited by Rogers and McKim, *Authority and Interpretation* 276).

disclaimer, Sandeenists such as Rogers and McKim attribute a reliance on common sense to the Princetonian reliance on the Cartesian “Common Sense” philosophy.⁷⁴ Their charge against Hodge is unfounded, however.

As far back as the second century A.D., the church father Irenaeus used common sense to defend the truthfulness of Luke’s reporting with the words, “It follows then, as of course, that these men must either receive the rest of his narrative, or else reject these parts also. For no person of *common sense* can permit them to receive some things recounted by Luke as being truth, and to set others aside, as if he had not known the truth.”⁷⁵ Irenaeus, of course, came long before a Cartesian approach to reason existed. The fact is that Hodge himself rejected a purely Cartesian approach to rationality when he cited Rom 1:21-23 to show that human reason and conscience are inadequate guides in relation to the things of God.⁷⁶ Descartes would never have endorsed such a position as that. surveys the entire Christian era before Princeton to show that Christians used common sense to defend the inerrancy of Scripture.⁷⁷

Along with their assertions as to the reasonableness of Scripture, the Princeton theologians insisted on the precision of Scripture. Otherwise, they could not have advocated verbal inspiration of the same. An article antedating the Princetonians read as follows:

[T]he scriptures were designed to be translated into different languages, this made it more necessary that they should be written, at first, with *peculiar accuracy and precision*. Men always write with exactness when they expect their writings will be translated into various languages. And upon this ground, we may reasonably suppose, that the Divine Spirit dictated every thought and word to the sacred penmen, to prevent, as much as possible, errors and mistakes from finally creeping into their writings by the translation of them into other languages.⁷⁸

The Princetonians upheld the same view of the original writings of the Bible, recognizing that later copying of the autographs would introduce errors into those copies.

In their minds, the rationality and precision of Scripture were necessary companions. They did not need to incorporate Enlightenment philosophical tenets into their understanding of the Bible, because the Bible itself dictates the need for Spirit-guided reason in order to understand the precise meaning of the words

⁷⁴Rogers and McKim, *Authority and Interpretation* 245-46.

⁷⁵Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 3. 14. 3-4, cited by John D. Woodbridge, *Biblical Authority: A Critique of the Rogers/McKim Proposal* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1982) 32 (emphasis added).

⁷⁶Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology* 1:363-64.

⁷⁷Woodbridge, *Biblical Authority* 13-118.

⁷⁸“On Inspiration,” *Connecticut Evangelical Magazine* (December 1803):234, cited by Woodbridge, *Biblical Authority* 127 (emphasis added).

originally penned.

The Truth about Rationality and Precision

The central issue for the Sandeenists has been the inerrancy of Scripture, which of necessity is the counterpart of biblical rationality and precision. That raises a serious question: Why have some evangelicals who profess to be inerrantists been so ready to fall in line with the Sandeenists in questioning the rationality and precision of the Bible?

What the Truth Is Not

Rationalism and precision go hand-in-hand with the inerrancy of Scripture. Sacrifice rationalistic and precise understanding of the Bible, and you have opted for an errantist understanding of the Bible. Yet, surprisingly, the lead article in a recent journal of the inerrantist Evangelical Theological Society raises some of the same issues as do the Sandeenists.⁷⁹ In the article, Joel Green reflects a disdain for a number of the same objects as the critics of the Princeton theology. Four examples of this similarity will suffice.

Green shows the same proclivity to emphasize the narrative portions of Scripture and how these should shape the lives of Christians when he writes, “[T]he bulk of Scripture comes to us in the form of narratives, rather than with a preoccupation with the rational essence of the faith, its dogmatic essentials, so characteristic of theology in the modern period,”⁸⁰ and “[T]he notion of ‘inhabiting the world of biblical narrative’ is important when it claims that ‘the story that *most decisively shapes* our lives must be the biblical story.’”⁸¹ That perspective strongly resembles what Hitchen has written about “recapturing the relevance of interpreted narrative for our identity and authority as the people of God.”⁸² Instead of adopting the proposition of biblical inerrancy, this approach to narrative highlights the practical effect of Scripture on the lives of Christians.

Green also shows the same disdain for rationalistic approaches to revelation. His words cited just above speak against “a preoccupation with the rational essence of the faith, its dogmatic essentials.” That perspective strongly resembles that of Sandeen who charged that Charles Hodge and Princeton Seminary “produced a wooden, mechanical discipline as well as a rigorously logical one” that did not allow the witness of the Spirit to play an important role in biblical interpretation.⁸³ For

⁷⁹Joel B. Green, “Practicing the Gospel in a Post-Critical World: The Promise of Theological Exegesis,” *JETS* 47/3 (September 2004):387-97.

⁸⁰*Ibid.*, 392.

⁸¹*Ibid.*, 393 (emphasis in the original).

⁸²Hitchen, “What It Means, Part Two” 103.

⁸³*Ibid.*, 102, 104-5.

Green, this disdain for a rational approach to Scripture includes a ruling out of traditional quests for objectivity in interpretation.⁸⁴

Like the Sandeenists, Green also reflects a disdain for deriving propositional truth from Scripture: “This means that the primary agenda of theological study of Scripture would not be the construction of systematic theology, in the restricted sense of organizing and restating the central propositions of the biblical witnesses.”⁸⁵ Such is a position very much like that of Hitchen when he speaks of “moving beyond a concept of truth that assumes that I can define truth once for all in unchangeable propositions.”⁸⁶

Green also moves away from supporting the precision of narrative portions of Scripture when he writes about the inadequacy of “foundationalism”:

In the environment that developed, in order for data to be “hard,” it needed to be historical; that is, secure foundations for theological discourse were historically defined. How much historical data would be required was a matter of debate, but, for example, historical Jesus studies have been energized in the twentieth century through attempts . . . to demonstrate that the church’s faith rests securely and squarely on the strong pillars of what Jesus actually did and said.

This sort of foundationalism, formed deep in the superheated core of historical positivism, has suffered from the tectonic movements in the philosophy of history.⁸⁷

This view of interpreted narrative as distinguished from factual narrative is quite similar to Hitchen’s description of “recapturing the relevance of interpreted narrative for our identity and authority as the people of God, and . . . allowing the Scriptures themselves to take the place of the discredited assumptions of the Enlightenment worldview as our basis for what is credible and real in the world.”⁸⁸ Such a view of narrative shows a total disrespect for the precision of Scriptural accounts.⁸⁹

What the Truth Is

Given its rightful place of priority, the divine element in the inspiration of Scripture guarantees both its rationality and its precision, because the God of the Bible is both rational and precise.

⁸⁴Green writes, “I recognize that, in mapping this path, I have vacated biblical studies of the sorts of claims to scientific, neutral analysis that have been its bread and butter” (“Practicing the Gospel” 391).

⁸⁵Ibid., 395.

⁸⁶Hitchen, “What It Means, Part Two” 102, 104-5.

⁸⁷Green, “Practicing the Gospel” 390.

⁸⁸Cf. quote cited by n. 66 above.

⁸⁹For other illustrations of evangelical abuse of Scripture’s precision, see Thomas, “Rationality, Maningfulness, and Precision” 192-97; Robert L. Thomas and F. David Farnell, eds., *The Jesus Crisis* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1998) 17-27, 356-68. Evangelicals are all too ready to allow that the Gospels contain only approximations of what Jesus said and did.

Some of my earlier words about the rationality of God and of Scripture clarify the difference between secular logic and biblical 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.⁹⁰

The logic of Scripture is ultimate reality because of the divine element that prevailed over the human element in its inspiration.

Part of my earlier discussion of biblical precision is also relevant to the denial thereof by the Sandeenists.

- 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

⁹⁰Thomas, "Rationality, Meaningfulness, and Precision" 176. For a more detailed explanation of the Bible's rationality and additional examples of evangelical violations thereof, see the broader context of that article.

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.
- 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.⁹¹

Without question, the Bible itself insists on the ultimate in precision for its contents, because its Author is a God of precision.

Therefore, the truth about truth is that it is both rational and precise, therefore propositional, not postmodern. The myth that those conclusions resulted from the Princetonians adoption of Enlightenment thinking is merely a smoke screen for those whose inclination is to veer away from the inerrancy of Scripture. That so many evangelicals who profess to be inerrantists are buying into Sandeenist principles is sad. Principles that are inconsistent with biblical inerrancy have no place on an inerrantist agenda.

⁹¹Ibid., 185-86. For a more detailed discussion of biblical precision, see 184-207 of that article.