

WHAT WE MEAN WHEN WE SAY *It's True*

TIMOTHY GEORGE

Evangelicals are gospel people and Bible people. Indeed, as their critics might put it, they are hot gospelers and Bible thumpers. The gospel they proclaim is news so good they feel compelled to share it: it is the message of salvation by grace alone through faith alone in Jesus Christ alone. And what they declare about Jesus Christ—the gospel—they learn from what God has told the world about himself, using human language, in a collection of ancient documents providentially preserved and revered by Christians everywhere as the Holy Scriptures. As evangelicals celebrate God's love in redemption, so they celebrate God's wisdom in providing a sure source of knowledge about it. The authenticity of the gospel is established by the authority of the Bible.

Evangelicals agree with Martin Luther and John Calvin that the Bible is the standard by which all other religious authorities must be judged. They also believe with John Wesley that the Scriptures are “a most solid and precious system of divine truth, wherein is no defect, no excess. It is the fountain of heavenly wisdom.” In the two centuries since Wesley's death, evangelical theologians have defended the truth-telling character of biblical revelation against both accommodationist theologies and destructively critical methodologies of various types. Carl F. H. Henry's *God, Revelation and Authority* (1976–83) remains unsurpassed as a theological epistemology and epitome of the evangelical case against these skeptical trends.

In recent years, discussion of biblical authority has moved from revelation and inspiration to interpretation. And yet, if the study of the Bible is the soul of theology, as the Second Vatican Council says, and if the first task of the preacher is to

listen for and expect to find the Word of God in the charter documents of the Christian faith, then we cannot sidestep the uniqueness of the Bible as the definitive expression of God's truth, nor can we stop making an issue of asserting it.

Perhaps the most widely attested affirmation of biblical authority among evangelicals over the past generation is the statement found in Article 2 of the Lausanne Covenant (1974):

We affirm the divine inspiration, truthfulness and authority of both Old and New Testament Scriptures in their entirety as the only written Word of God, without error in all that it affirms, and the only infallible rule of faith and practice. We also affirm the power of God's Word to accomplish His purpose of salvation. The message of the Bible is addressed to all mankind. For God's revelation in Christ and in Scripture is unchangeable. Through it the Holy Spirit still speaks today. He illumines the minds of God's people in every culture to preserve its truth freshly through their own eyes and thus discloses to the whole church evermore of the many-colored wisdom of God.

According to this definition, the Bible is a divinely inspired disclosure from God, a revealed message that, in its very givenness, is noninterchangeable (“the only written Word of God”), irreducible (“the only infallible rule of faith and practice”), and universal (“addressed to all”). The Bible is also declared to be totally truthful, “without error in all that it affirms.” For the past hundred years, the common term for total truthfulness has been *inerrancy*. Biblical truthfulness was carefully elucidated in the Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy (1978), followed by the Chicago Statement on Biblical Hermeneutics (1982).

Some evangelical thinkers prefer not to employ the word

inerrancy at all since its proper use requires such careful definition and nuancing. But this is hardly a telling objection since all of our words about the Bible must be just as carefully qualified and defined. The Bible, we say, is inspired, but not in the same way that a Shakespearean sonnet can be said to be inspired. Again, the Bible is infallible, but not in the sense in which Roman Catholics hold *ex cathedra* pronouncements of the pope to be infallible. The Bible is also authoritative, but not in the way that Muslims invest authority in the Qur'an. The care with which the two Chicago statements define inerrancy encourages exegetical honesty in the context of a clear affirmation that biblical assertions are true, and that no view that contradicts such assertions can possibly be right. These statements have gained strong, if not universal, support among evangelicals, and they remain helpful benchmarks for Bible-believing Christians.

HISTORIC AFFIRMATIONS

Recognition of the total trustworthiness of Holy Scripture is not, as many critics allege, a modern notion foisted upon the Bible by latter-day theological fiat. Rather, it is the consensus of ancient Christian writers represented in the East by Gregory of Nyssa ("Whatsoever the divine Scripture says is the voice of the Holy Spirit") and in the West by Augustine (who in his *Confessions* [13.29] has God say, "O man, what my Scripture says, I say"). Moreover, this historic Christian affirmation conforms to the Bible's own witness about itself.

James Barr doubts whether Bible writers wished to teach anything about the nature of Scripture, remarking that "St. Paul was able to write essential theological letters like Galatians and Romans without spending much time on the nature of biblical authority." However, as F. F. Bruce observed, in both of these letters (Rom. 9:17; Gal. 3:8; 3:22) Paul hinges a key argument on a personifying of Scripture, treating it "more or less as an extension of the divine personality." This is a remarkable figure of speech, but Paul's language must be understood this way or it makes no sense at all. How can an inanimate object, a written text, "say" or "foresee" anything? Obviously what Paul meant was "God, as recorded in Scripture, said." He was expressing, and thereby teaching, his conviction that Scripture as such has a compelling validity and normativity precisely because it is God who speaks through it. Clearly Paul meant his readers to bow to his own teaching the same way, as did the other New Testament writers with regard to theirs; so for the church to treat apostolic writings as completing the biblical canon is totally in line with the apostle's own mind. It meshes, too, with the mind of Christ, who sent and equipped the apostles to write authoritatively about himself. We do not worship the Bible itself, but we do submit to Scripture because we submit to Jesus Christ. This is, as John Stott has said, a test of our loyalty to him.

HOW TO INTERPRET?

But now the pressing question is: How am I to interpret the Bible? What are the right principles for understanding the biblical text? While the Bible is the self-revelation of God and therefore carries with it the "scent of truth" in all that it affirms, we should not imagine that a manuscript of it was delivered fresh from heaven to the printing press! No, the Bible was written over a millennium of time in scores of documents by dozens of human authors from various cultural backgrounds, using a wide variety of styles and literary genres. As the author of Hebrews puts it, God spoke "at many times and in various ways" (1:1). Thus we do no honor to Holy Scripture by minimizing the historical particularity of its parts, nor by defending its integrity with respect

to claims that it never makes about itself.

The Bible was inspired in Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek—and everyday Greek, at that. Because the Christian faith can be expressed within all cultures, the meaning of the Holy Scriptures is universally translatable. Today the Bible displays "the many-colored wisdom of God" in many renderings for hundreds of people groups throughout the earth. Yet the very success of modern Bible-translation projects has given fresh urgency to the interpretive task.

Martin Luther set the direction for sound hermeneutics when he declared that "the Holy Spirit is the plainest writer and speaker in heaven and earth and therefore his words cannot have more than one, and that the very simplest sense, which we call the literal, ordinary, natural sense." Interpretation must first aim to recover the original meaning and truth-intention of the biblical text through careful use of what is nowadays called the grammatical-historical method. Among evangelicals, no one speaks more clearly on this than Walter Kaiser, who distinguishes between the normative meaning of the biblical text and its deeper, fuller significance that is brought out through exposition and application.

In the reader-oriented interpretive theories set forth by philosophers of language such as Martin Heidegger, Hans-Georg Gadamer, and Paul Ricoeur, the locus of meaning is the understanding of the interpreter. "Meaning" here signifies not what the document meant as communication from the writer to his envisaged readership, but what it means when there is a "fusing of horizons" (that is, an enlarging communicative impact and rapport) between the biblical writer and the contemporary reader. These thinkers, and those who follow them, use the word *meaning* to signify "significance" in Kaiser's sense.

Evangelicals can gain important insights for the study of the Bible from the sociology of knowledge and contemporary literary analysis, which alerts us to how the presuppositions we bring to the text can decisively shape the result of our study. Dieter Georgi, for example, has shown how both pre-World War I and present-day scholarly efforts to fabricate the "real" Jesus—understood variously as the child of the goddess Sophia, a Galilean social revolutionary, or a wandering Cynic philosopher—all reflect "the evolution of the bourgeois consciousness." The ideological commitment and social location of the revisionist scholars involved distorted their judgment of evidence and so skewed their portrayals of Jesus. While their conclusions are frequently paraded as the "assured results" of objective scrutiny, the claim is unwarranted and invalid.

SELF-CONSCIOUS AND SELF-CRITICAL

But when we say this about eccentric revisionists, we should not imagine that Bible-believing Christians come to the Scriptures with unbiased blank minds, unaffected by their own context and presuppositions. To be faithful biblical interpreters, we must all become both self-conscious and self-critical about our prior commitments, subjecting them both to the searching light of Scripture itself and to the wider witness of the Christian family to which we belong.

Thomas Oden's clarion call for contemporary theology to return to the rich exegetical tradition of ancient Christian orthodoxy is one of the most encouraging developments of our time. It will not suffice merely to have our New Testament in one hand and the latest word from current biblical scholarship (even if it comes from our favorite evangelical press!) in the other. We must also learn to "read alongside" the church fathers, reformers, and theologians of ages past. None of their interpretations is inerrant, and we must subject them all—

along with our own—to the divine touchstone of Holy Scripture itself. Still, the Holy Spirit did not abandon the church with the death of the apostles. As we prayerfully listen for what the Spirit is saying to us today, we will do well to heed what he has been saying to the people of God throughout the history of the church. The massive consensus of thoughtful Christian interpretation of the Word down the ages (and on most matters of importance there is such a thing) is not likely to be wrong.

The role of the community is crucial both in understanding how the Bible came to be recognized as canon and in appropriating its message today. The Enlightenment model of the Bible student as a Lone Ranger, out on his own away from the church as he seeks truth, inevitably leads to distorted, if not heretical, conclusions. A renewed appreciation of the Bible as the book of the church should make us more aware of our need to explore it in and with, rather than without and apart from, the larger Christian fellowship.

Those who seek wisdom in the Bible will not find it as long as they sidestep the Bible's declarations of fact and ignore what Scripture tells us about the world and its history as such. The Scriptures do not present themselves in a cultural-linguistic cocoon or as a self-contained aesthetic object to be studied and admired as one religious book among many. The narrative structure of the Bible itself, from Creation to the world's forthcoming end, makes the imperious claim to be the one true story in the light of which all other stories—and indeed, the reality of the universe itself—must be understood. The post-modern flight from the cognitive content of biblical truth, and the revamping of it as a system of symbols with subjective significance only, is a form of theological suicide that leaves the believer with nothing but a warm-tub feeling to present as “good news” to a lost world.

The reality of Jesus, in particular, cannot be reduced to a language game or a literary construct. The Word did not become “a text” but *sarx*, flesh, something unmistakably, historically concrete. Because this is true, the “story of Jesus,” when canonically understood as including everything from Genesis to Revelation, is dissimilar from all other stories and cannot be explained as anything less than the last word about this world and God's plan for it.

Evangelicals have always insisted that the historicity of biblical events be taken seriously because the soteriological essence of Christianity demands this. As Geerhardus Vos, among others, has argued, if Christianity were a philosophical system aimed at the spiritual enlightenment of humankind, or a code of ethics to be used as an instrument of moral suasion, then it would make little difference whether its founder were born of a virgin, walked on the water, healed the sick, or rose from the dead.

AN OFFENSIVE MESSAGE

But the Christian message declares something altogether different. We confess, in the words of the Creed of Nicaea, that the Lord of eternity, “God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God . . . for our salvation came down . . . and was incarnate . . .” A space-time crucifixion of the incarnate Lord was followed by a space-time resurrection, a space-time outpouring of the Holy Spirit, and a space-time spread of the gospel and the church, which still goes on. Christianity must be seen as a historically continuous fellowship in which all enjoy a salvation that was won for them in Palestine on a certain date nearly two millennia ago. The historical claims of the Christian primary documents must therefore be acknowl-

edged as true, and true not just “for me,” but true for all persons everywhere.

Admittedly, this is an offensive message for a culture that magnifies local consensus above any notion of objective public truth and that prizes pluralism and relativism as the reigning orthodoxy of the day. But we should not imagine that the scandal of biblical particularism is a greater burden for us than it was for Elijah at Mount Carmel, Paul on Mars Hill, or William Carey in Calcutta. Because of who God is and what he has done, we can only say, on the basis of the commission we have received, “If the Lord is God, follow him; but if Baal is God, follow him.”

What is the ultimate alternative to a reverent, if also discerning and even properly critical, engagement with Holy Scripture as the message of divine achievement, promise, and command? It is the kind of intellectual nihilism that reduces the Christian faith to the sum total of our dreams, fantasies, and self-projections, “a God who looks like me,” to quote the title of a recent book. Following the lead of Feuerbach and Nietzsche, Sigmund Freud described this outcome with glaring precision at the beginning of the present century:

Fundamentally, we only find what we need and only see what we want to see. We have no other possibility. Since the criterion for truth—correspondence with the external world—is absent, it is entirely a matter of indifference what opinions we adopt. All of them are equally true and equally false. And no one has the right to accuse anyone else of error.

Contrary to this outcome, evangelicals affirm that the Bible can be trusted to be totally reliable on its own terms: its history is historical and its miracles are miraculous, and its theology is God's own truth. But what is the source of such confidence in the truth-telling character of Holy Scripture? How do we know that the Bible is the Word of God? The Reformers of the sixteenth century faced this question. They could accept nei-

**As we listen for what the Spirit is saying
to us today, we do well to heed what
he has been saying all along throughout
the history of the church.**

ther the magisterial authority of the Church of Rome, which made knowledge of the divinity of the Scriptures depend on ecclesiastical tradition, nor the radical individualism of certain mystics who were so enamored of the Spirit that they saw little need for the written Word. Luther and Calvin pursued a different path. They stressed the coinherence of Word and Spirit—that is, the objectivity of God's revelation in Holy Scripture and the confirming, illuminating witness of the Holy Spirit in the believer.

The Belgic Confession declares that the Scriptures carry within themselves the evidence of their own divinity and authority (article 5). The self-authenticating nature of the Bible is an important principle for Christians to remember both in our witness to unbelievers and in our dialogue with skeptical critics. There is no neutral ground, no independent epistemological platform, on which we can stand and decide

for or against the Bible. Skepticism about it is natural to our hearts, and only as God opens our eyes to discern divinity in Scripture do we ever come to trust it. Our assurance of its veracity comes only as the same Spirit who inspired the prophets and apostles enlightens our minds and confirms the truths that have been revealed in these sacred texts.

There is a kind of evidentialist apologetic that overrates the receptive capacity of fallen human reason and plays down the inner witness of the Holy Spirit. Calvin's words to

“Have we to await a comment from Tübingen or a telegram from Oxford before we can understand the Bible?”

those who demanded “rational proof” that Moses and the prophets were inspired are still relevant today:

The testimony of the Spirit is more excellent than all reason. For as God alone is a fit witness of himself in his Word, so also the Word will not find acceptance in men's heart before it is sealed by the inward testimony of the Spirit. The same Spirit, therefore, who has spoken through the mouths of the prophets must penetrate into our hearts to persuade us that they faithfully proclaimed what had been divinely commanded. (Institutes 1.7.4)

Thus the Holy Spirit, the divine author of Scripture, authenticates the prophetic and apostolic word to our consciences. Through the Spirit's illumination earnest believers find that the Scriptures are marked by what Huldrych Zwingli called “prevenient clarity” or perspicuity. Each day Zwingli began his Bible lectures in Zurich with the following prayer, which became a model for other ministers in the Reformed tradition: “Almighty, eternal, and merciful God, whose Word is a lamp unto our feet and a light unto our path, open and illuminate our minds, that we may purely and perfectly understand thy Word and that our lives may be conformed to what we have rightly understood, that in nothing we may be displeasing to thy majesty, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.”

THE LUCID WORD

The doctrine of the Bible's perspicuity is one of the historic hallmarks of the evangelical understanding of Scripture. Fundamentally it means that, as was shown above, the Bible is not an obscure conundrum or cryptogram that must be decoded by a team of specialists before it can be understood and applied. On the contrary, in all matters that are necessary for salvation, the Bible is so lucid that laypersons as well as theologians, mechanics as well as academics, can sufficiently understand and appropriate its teachings. The acceptance of this principle underlies the widespread use of the so-called inductive method of Bible study and the high regard for the Scriptures from the church's earliest days as the communal treasure of the entire body of believers.

But the perspicuity of Scripture can itself be misunderstood in a number of ways. It does not mean, for example, that there are no difficult passages or “hard sayings” that continue to baffle the best and most spiritually alert students of the Bible. Not everything in Scripture is equally plain or evidently clear to all. Neither should this principle be equated with the “right of private judgment,” where that motto is

used to justify the kind of individualism that reduces biblical meaning to a matter of personal taste.

We should also guard against using the clarity of the Bible as an excuse to undermine rigorous and reverent scholarly work on the text. To be sure, vast numbers of evangelicals can relate to the question asked a hundred years ago by the English Congregationalist pastor Joseph Parker: “Have we to await a comment from Tübingen or a telegram from Oxford before we can understand the Bible?” No doubt there are many tributaries that spill into the reservoir of resentment against technical biblical scholarship. Anti-intellectualism and unreflective piety (substituting emotional fervor for disciplined thought) are two examples. And an even greater problem during the past 150 years has been the gaping chasm that opened in so many centers of learning between the academic study of the Bible on the one hand, and the life and mission of the church on the other. It is hard to overstate the destructive impact of “unbelieving criticism,” that is, scholarship shaped by the ethos and presuppositions of the secular academy.

To scholars of this bent we might well apply Jesus' description of the “experts in the law” of his day: “You have taken away the key of knowledge. You did not go in yourselves, and those who were on their way in, you stopped” (Luke 11:52, NEB). Such scholarship, unhappily, is with us still.

But it would be tragic if evangelicals spent so much time lamenting destructive criticism that they ignored the impressive achievement during the past half-century of Bible-believing scholars who are deeply committed to Jesus Christ and his church and who seek to be faithful ministers of the divine Word. Such men and women of learning and faith stand in worthy succession to the great English biblical scholar J. B. Lightfoot, who once said: “I cannot pretend to be indifferent about the veracity of the records which profess to reveal him whom I believe to be not only the very Truth but the very Life.” The learning of exegetes and theologians such as this can only contribute to the building up of God's people.

A MEANS OF GRACE

Evangelicals today have a rich legacy of cherishing the Bible as the Word of God, defining its authority and defending its veracity against both secular critics outside the church and religious modernists of various types within. Over the past two generations, evangelical Bible scholars have moved beyond a defensive posture to engage the wider world of thought. Their careful research and interaction with current trends in biblical scholarship have made them a vital resource for the church as well as a significant presence in the academic world. At the same time, we must also confess that evangelicals have often worked in isolation from the wider community of faith, the body of Christ extended throughout time as well as space. We have frequently been bound more to the biases of our culture than to the unadulterated Word of God. And we have sometimes used the Bible as a hammer in our fractious conflicts with one another, forgetting, as Francis Schaeffer reminded us, that harshness does not equal holiness, and that we are always to speak the truth in love.

After his appreciative survey of the recent evangelical renaissance in biblical scholarship, Mark Noll wisely urged that Bible-believing Christians “move beyond the external examination of Scripture to an internal appropriation of its message.” Committed as we are to the truth of God's Word, we should never for a moment imagine that the Bible is a mere compendium of neutral, albeit accurate, information about God and his dealings with humankind. The Bible, as

vivified by the Spirit, is a divinely appointed means of grace, a medium of encounter with the living God. John Bunyan had this in mind when he asked, "Have you never a hill Mizar to remember? Have you forgot the close, the milk house, the stable, the barn, and the like, where God did visit your soul? Remember also the Word—the Word, I say, upon which the Lord hath caused you to hope."

The true measure of evangelical identity is that we delight in the Bible as fully as we believe in it. Where this is so, our congregations will be characterized by an atmosphere of hospitality to scriptural truth. Our pulpit work will be marked by faithful expository proclamation. The public reading of the Scriptures will again assume a place of honor in our corporate worship. And our personal devotional life will also be transformed. The standard fare of sound-byte spirituality will be replaced by what the Cistercians called "divine reading" (*lectio divina*), that is, the sustained reading of the Word of God leading to meditation, contemplation, and prayer. In each of these activities we shall approach the Bible, as the late Merrill Tenney put it, in a spirit of eagerness seeking the mind of God, in a spirit of humility listen-

ing to the voice of God, in a spirit of adventure pursuing the will of God, and in a spirit of adoration resting in the presence of God.

Thus, with all persons who love and cherish the Holy Scriptures as God's gift of revelation about himself, with all who recognize and adore Jesus Christ as the center and sum of the Bible, and with all who study the inspired words of Holy Writ seeking the illumination of the Spirit, we shall ever pray in the words of this Advent collect:

Blessed Lord, who hast caused all Holy Scriptures to be written for our learning; Grant that we may in such wise hear them, read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest them, that by patience, and comfort of Thy Holy Word, we may embrace, and ever hold fast the blessed hope of everlasting life, which Thou has given us in our Savior Jesus Christ. **GI**

Timothy George is a senior adviser for CHRISTIANITY TODAY and dean of Beeson Divinity School, Samford University, in Birmingham, Alabama.

Cruising the Electronic Bible

A colleague told me about an elderly woman in his church who was forever comparing him to Jimmy Swaggart. On numerous occasions she asked, "Pastor, why don't you preach like Jimmy Swaggart?" One evening she phoned my colleague with a different question. She was ill and asked, "Pastor, could you please take a little time and come visit me?" He was tempted to respond: "Madam, why don't you call Jimmy Swaggart?"

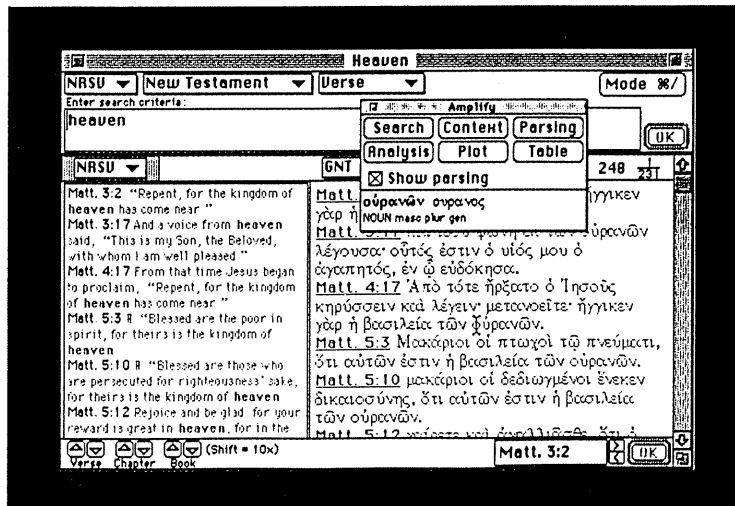
We local pastors often pale in comparison with the oratorical pyrotechnics of our media counterparts. Many of them have the luxury of a research staff to chase down quotes, an administrative staff to manage the minutiae of ministry, and a pastoral staff to address the time-consuming demands of the sick and needy. We small-church pastors fantasize that if only we had the same resources, we too could preach a home-run sermon every week.

Computer technology now offers the hope of leveling the playing field. I recently received *acCORDance*, a software program for biblical studies from the Gramcord Institute. My approach to sermon preparation has been forever revolutionized.

Imagine it—completing an exhaustive word search at the touch of a finger! I started my search with *heaven*. Within seconds, all 490 instances of the word

were up and ready for my perusal. The Options menu permitted me to display *heaven* in one of a dozen different colors—yes, colors—like cyan and magenta. (Okay, that is "Mac" overkill, but still, it's very cool.) What a rush—to see *heaven* in emerald green all over my screen!

In addition to the various English versions of the Bible, I also installed the Greek New Testament module, a lifesaver for the time-pressed exegete.



It enables me to display the English and Greek texts in tandem for instant translating. So, too, if your parsing ability has atrophied, not to worry: the "amplify" feature of the program analyzes every Greek word, at the touch of the cursor, right down to its mood, voice, person, and gender. Or if you prefer to know the statistical incidence

of the search-word as it appears in each book of the Bible, just click the appropriate Tool palette. Or how about a graphic display of that same data? Push a button: been there; done that.

For the rigorous exegete, simply open the *acCORDance* Construct Window, where you can examine all the instances in the Bible where your search-word appears along with other related words, prepositions, or other parts of speech. Admittedly, this feature is a bit more complicated and, alas, it required a glance at the manual. But once mastered, it has been tantamount

to having a dozen graduate students at my command. Talk about leveling the playing field!

While most pastors avoid parading scholarship, still, good preaching is predicated upon good exegesis, and even that won't necessarily make us great preachers. But the Bible software now available will allow us to rightly divide the Word into units, subunits, and "nano-

bytes"—in warp speed. Which will in turn free us to spend more time with our shut-ins and infirm parishioners since, chances are, Jimmy Swaggart isn't going to make it.

By Robert V. Zoba, a pastor in the Chicago area. The Gramcord Institute may be reached at (360) 576-3000.