

The Authority and Interpretation of the Bible in the Reformed Tradition

"A Summary of the Authority and Interpretation of the Bible: an Historical Approach", Don McKim and Jack Rogers, Harper and Row, 1979.

Introduction

One of the most important and least known facts of American church history is that when Archibald Alexander formed the curriculum of Princeton Seminary in 1812, he chose as the textbook in systematic theology the *Institutio Theologiae Elencticae* of Francis Turretin. Sixty years later, in 1872, Charles Hodge's famous *Systematic Theology* replaced Turretin's Latin tome as the text, but continued Turretin's theological method until 1929. For over 100 years, professors at Princeton vowed to "receive and subscribe" the Westminster Confession of Faith and Catechisms. They thought of themselves as followers of Calvin. But in actuality, they believed and taught a theological method regarding the authority and interpretation of the Bible which rooted in a post-Reformation scholasticism, almost the exact opposite of Calvin's own approach. More importantly, certain features of the central church tradition regarding the authority and interpretation of Scripture which had been retained from the Early Church down through the Reformation were lost in the post-Reformation reaction to the rise of scientific criticism of the Bible.

This peculiar twist of American history — that Turretin, rather than Calvin molded the 19th century Presbyterian understanding of the authority and interpretation of the Bible — has served to distort our view of both the central Christian tradition and especially of its Reformed branch. We need to step back and reflect briefly on the central Christian tradition regarding Scripture and how it was carried on in that theological tradition of the Reformation known as Reformed (Calvinist as opposed to Lutheran or Anabaptist).

A. Common Foundations in the Early Church

Early Christians had to cope with a dual environment. They accepted the Hebrew Scriptures as authoritative for them. But they had to interpret them to teach that Jesus was the Messiah. A naive literalism was rejected while the spiritual meaning was retained. At the same time they had to communicate their faith in a way compatible with the Greek culture in which most Christians lived. That meant using the categories of Greek philosophy.

Christian teachers struggled for balance between these twin forces. They fought against attacks from without and excesses from within caused by literalism and legalism on the one side and spiritualism and sectarianism on the other side. Literalists (Jews, Gnostics, Marcionites) posed the heaviest threat in the Early Church. Accordingly, the dominant Platonic philosophy which stressed a spiritual perspective became an ally. Plato taught that all persons had within them knowledge of the great unchanging ideas or ideals such as truth, beauty and justice. The Apologists like Clement of Alexandria and Origen made use of and to some extent were molded by this philosophical medium. Platonism, modified by Biblical meanings afforded a framework in which theology could be communicated in their culture.

Theologians of the Early Church shared a fund of common concepts which formed the foundation of a Christian acceptance and interpretation of the Bible. Scripture — Old and New Testament alike — was completely authoritative. The Bible was accepted in faith by the working of the Holy Spirit in human hearts. Faith that Scripture was authoritative freed Christians to proceed to a scholarly understanding of it using the tools and techniques available to them. "Faith leads to understanding" was both a theological method and a call to Christian maturity. The theology which resulted was viewed as primarily a practical rather than a theoretical discipline. Its purpose, like that of Scripture, was to instruct people concerning God's salvation and guide them in living the life of faith. The Bible was not to be used as a book of science. Its focus was rather on that saving wholeness which encompassed love of God and love of neighbor as well. Awareness of that goal also yielded principles of interpretation.

The early theologians affirmed God's accommodated style of communication. The incarnation modeled God's willingness to humble himself in seeking to bring persons salvation. Christians

likened God's speaking in Scripture to that of a parent or teacher who condescended to think in the concepts and speak the language of children for their benefit. The notion of accommodation enabled theologians to exegete Scripture in a way that upheld God's worthiness and accepted human limitations.

Interpreters of the Bible shared the common tradition of typology inherited from rabbinic Judaism. Promises in the Old Testament were linked historically to fulfillments in the New. Beyond that, two divergent methods of interpretation developed. The principal one was allegory, flowing from the Platonic center in Alexandria. It sought spiritual meanings to solve the problems posed by literalism. Augustine exemplified this approach and passed it on to the Middle Ages. The lesser known school of interpretation was the grammatical-historical one situated in the more Aristotelian center at Antioch. It reacted against allegorism and sought the natural meaning of the author in its historical context. Chrysostom commended this method by his use of it in preaching. Whereas the Protestant Reformers followed Augustine's theological method, they focused on Chrysostom as their exegetical mentor.

Despite differences in their method of Biblical interpretation, Augustine and Chrysostom exemplified the consensus of the Early Church regarding the Bible. Their common rhetorical training helped them to separate the depth of truth contained in Scripture from its lowly accommodated style. They sought the intention of the author and the meaning of his thought. Error was a matter of deliberate deception from which the Bible was free. Human limitations of thought and speech reflected in the Biblical writings were matters for scholarly study.

Augustine's understanding of the authority of Scripture flowed from his general method, "I believe in order to understand." Scripture was completely authoritative for Augustine. The Holy Spirit had inspired the original writers and illumined present-day readers. For Augustine, the Bible was not a textbook of science, but the Book of Life, written in the language of life. When Felix the Manichean claimed that the Holy Spirit had revealed to Manicheus the orbits of the heavenly bodies, Augustine replied that God desired us to become Christians, not astronomers.¹ The style of God's condescension or accommodation in the Bible was as apparent to Augustine as it had been to Origen and Chrysostom. He wrote: "We can safely follow Scripture, which proceeds at the pace of a

mother stooping to her child, so to speak, so as not to leave us behind in our weakness." ²

Augustine was quite conscious of the human character of the Biblical material. He declared concerning the differences in the evangelists' reports in the four Gospels: "The truth is in no wise violated if the same events are narrated in different ways with different words." ³ A rhetorician like Augustine knew that truth could be conveyed in a great variety of words, even those which technically could not be harmonized. He wrote: "In any man's words the thing which we ought narrowly to regard is only the writer's thought which was meant to be expressed, and to which the words ought to be subservient." ⁴

B. Differences in Method at the Middle Ages

The common foundations on which an understanding of the authority and interpretation of the Bible rested in the Early Church were decisively divided at the Middle Ages. The Augustinian tradition, rooted in Neoplatonism, was carried on down to the 12th century. Its chief exponents were John Scotus Erigena and Anselm of Canterbury. They maintained the theological method expressed in the motto: "I believe in order that I may understand." Even in their work a subtle shift of accent occurred as the emphasis moved from believing to understanding.

In the Early Scholastic period of the 12th century a decisive reversal of theological priorities occurred. Beginning with Peter Abelard, theological method was predicated on Aristotelian logic. The motto of this approach was "I know in order that I may believe." The re-discovery of the metaphysical works of Aristotle stimulated the sweep of rationalism into theology. By the 13th century, Scholasticism entered what is now known as its Classical period. Albertus Magnus attempted to make all of the Aristotelian corpus known by making a theological commentary on it. Thomas Aquinas produced a *Summa Theologiae* which gave comprehensive and systematic expression to Medieval Scholasticism. As Scholasticism developed, philosophy was given priority over theology. Reason was used to prepare people for faith. Authority shifted from the Scriptures received in faith through the work of the Holy Spirit, to proofs for the existence of God developed by rational speculation. Theology was transformed from being a practical discipline expounding the saving message of Scripture and giving guidance in

the Christian life to being a theoretical science. Theology now became the Queen of the Sciences with the right to critique other areas of knowledge from her own theoretical viewpoint. The Early Church concept of accommodation was replaced by the philosophical concept of analogy. Scripture was no longer the focus of research, looked upon as human language and thought forms by which God as our parent had graciously condescended to communicate to his children. God's mind was now understood to be expressed in the orderly processes of nature. By reasoning from God's effects in the world back to a First Cause or by constructing the logical opposite of human qualities and assigning them to God it was assumed that God's existence and something of his attributes could be known. The accent in theology had moved from exegesis of the Biblical text to philosophical speculation. Nonetheless, one benefit was a return to the grammatical-historical interpretation of Scripture which was more scientifically controllable than the allegorical search for spiritual senses.

Franciscan theology continued the Neoplatonic-Augustinian tradition through Medieval Scholasticism in opposition to the Aristotelian innovations of the Dominicans. Duns Scotus and William of Occam denied that the truth of Christianity could be rationally demonstrated. The will, rather than the intellect, was given primacy in human actions. Theology again was understood as a practical, not a theoretical, discipline. Authority was to be found in Scripture and in church, not in the demonstrations of reason.

The most extreme reaction to Scholasticism was expressed in Monastic theology. The monks, led by Bernard of Clairvaux, distrusted all academic approaches to theology and developed the mystical tradition. Bernard's theological method was expressed in the notion: "I believe in order to experience." Monastic theology called for faith alone, and contended that the result of devotional reading of Scripture and prayer should be the experience of union with God. Mysticism skipped the step of studying the human context of the Biblical writings and stressed instead the stimulation of subjective feelings by what was presumed to be the "spiritual" sense of Scripture.

C. The Concentration on Function at the Reformation

Luther and Calvin both returned to the Augustinian Anselmian theological method that faith leads to understanding. They were trained in and used the tools of scholarly study developed by the Christian humanism of the Renaissance.

1. Luther

Luther was an Augustinian monk. He was nurtured in the older neo-Platonic milieu which put faith before reason. Luther declared: "For Isaiah vii makes reason subject to faith, when it says: 'except ye believe, ye shall not have understanding or reason.'" Luther's training in the "new" thought of Occam gave him philosophical rationale to support his orientation. Luther rejected nominalist theology, especially in its emphasis on free will. But he shared its anti-Aristotelian attitude.

The imperfect form of the Bible was no problem to Luther. God had condescended or accommodated himself to human means in communicating his saving message. When Luther said that in Scripture, "there is no falsehood," he was speaking not about technical accuracy, but the ability of the Word to work righteousness in us.⁶

2. Calvin

Calvin was trained in that branch of Renaissance learning which we know as Christian humanism. He began with the study of Latin and the liberal arts. His father directed him first to theology and then to law. A distinctive mark of Christian humanism which Calvin imbibed was an emphasis on the rhetorical tradition. This tradition from Cicero through Augustine emphasized rhetoric (eloquence) over dialectics (logic). The concern was to make the given truth persuasive rather than seek to find God at the end of a series of syllogisms. Theology was not scientia (science) as in the Middle Ages but sapientia (wisdom) taken directly from the pages of Scripture. The laws of Aristotelian logic were not allowed to take precedence over the teachings of Scripture.

Calvin positioned himself squarely in the rhetorical tradition. Plato was the best of the Greek philosophers and the most often cited by Calvin with favor. Calvin called Cicero "the first pillar of Roman philosophy and literature."⁷ Calvin quoted Augustine by far the most among the Church Fathers. Calvin's basic theological method followed Augustine's "faith leads to understanding" pattern.

For Calvin, everyone had an inborn knowledge of God (similar to Plato's innate ideas).⁸ Everyone suppressed this knowledge sinfully. Therefore, no valid "natural theology" could result.⁹

Although mankind was responsible for this sinful suppression of the truth, God gave "another and better help" properly to direct us to God our Creator. This aid was Holy Scripture. Whereas the innate knowledge was blurred and unclear, the revelation in the Bible was sharp and vivid. Scripture thus functioned like "spectacles . . . gathering up the otherwise confused knowledge of God in our minds, (which) having dispersed our dullness, clearly shows us the true God."¹⁰ The knowledge of God to which persons then came based on the Bible was not a theoretical but a practical kind, that which led to reverence, worship and right living.

But how could people know that the Bible was authoritative? Calvin felt that even to ask such a question was to "mock the Holy Spirit."¹¹ Asking, "who can convince us that these writings came from God?" was like asking "whence will we learn to distinguish light from darkness, white from black, sweet from bitter?"¹² The answer for Calvin was self-evident. The Bible was a self-authenticating book.

According to Calvin, the persuasion that God is the author of Scripture was established in us by the internal testimony of the Holy Spirit. Calvin declared: "We ought to seek our conviction in a higher place than human reasons, judgments, or conjectures, that is, in the secret testimony of the Spirit."¹³ Human testimonies to the Bible's authority were not in vain if "as secondary aids to our feebleness, they follow that chief and highest testimony," the Holy Spirit.¹⁴ But, for Calvin, we may not begin with evidences or reasoned arguments. He stated quite explicitly: "But those who wish to prove to unbelievers that Scripture is the Word of God are acting foolishly, for only by faith can this be known."¹⁵

Calvin strove for the Augustinian middle way regarding the authority of Scripture. He rejected the rationalistic Scholasticism on the one side which demanded proofs for the existence of God and the truth of the Bible prior to faith in Christ and Scripture. He rejected with equal firmness the spiritualistic sectarians on the other side who claimed leadings of the Spirit apart from Scripture. The Holy Spirit, for Calvin, "has not the task of inventing new and unheard-of revelations, or of forging a new kind of doctrine, to lead us away from the received doctrine of the gospel, but of sealing our minds with that very doctrine which is commended by the gospel."¹⁶

Neither was the Bible intended to teach us about science ac-

According to Calvin. In Calvin's commentary on Genesis he faced the issue of the relationship of the science of his day and the Bible. Astronomers had proved that Saturn was really a greater light than the moon, spoken of in the Bible as one of the two great lights. Calvin commented: "Moses wrote in popular style things which, without instruction, all ordinary persons, endued with common sense are able to understand; but astronomers investigate with great labor whatever the sagacity of the human mind can comprehend. . . Nor did Moses truly wish to withdraw us from this pursuit. . .but had he spoken in things generally unknown, the uneducated might have pleaded in excuse that such subjects were beyond their capacity." ¹⁷

The goal or object of Scripture for Calvin was to point persons to Jesus Christ in whom is salvation. Calvin commented: "We do not deny that believers embrace and grasp the Word of God in every respect, but we point out the promise of mercy as the proper goal of faith."¹⁸ God's revelation of himself in Christ was the model of his method of communicating with us. Calvin declared that "in Christ God so to speak makes himself little, in order to lower himself to our capacity."¹⁹ This incarnational style of communication was evident in the language used in the Bible. Calvin said that God "lisps" in speaking to us as a nursemaid does in addressing children. "Thus such forms of speaking do not so much express clearly what God is like as accommodate the knowledge of him to our slight capacity."²⁰ Calvin affirmed that the language of the Bible was often crude and unrefined. He noted an inaccuracy in Paul's quotation of Psalm 51:4 in Romans 3:4 and generalized: "We know that, in quoting Scripture the apostles often used freer language than the original, since they were content if what they quoted applied to their subject, and therefore they were not over-careful in their use of words."²¹ Similarly in Calvin's commentary on Hebrews 10:6 he affirmed that the saving purpose of the Biblical message could come through what we would think of as an imperfect form of words: "They (the apostles) were not overscrupulous in quoting words provided that they did not misuse Scripture for their convenience. We must always look at the purpose for which quotations are made. . . but as far as the words are concerned, as in other things which are not relevant to the present purpose, they allow themselves some indulgence."²²

The authority of Scripture, for Calvin, was not found in its style, but its saving content, not in its human forms, but its divine

functions. Preaching by limited human messengers was another evidence of God's accommodation, according to Calvin. The limitations of the preacher's words were no hindrance to communication of the divine content. Preaching of the Word of God was the Word of God for Calvin.

Because Calvin was assured by the Holy Spirit of the authority of Scripture he was free to examine its human forms with the tools of scholarship. Whereas Augustine was Calvin's model for theology, John Chrysostom was Calvin's mentor in exegesis. Calvin preferred the grammatical-historical method as the best way to get at the "natural and obvious," simple sense of Scripture. This did not imply literalism to Calvin. He rejected a narrow literalism (which he called "syllable-snatching") because it resulted in legalism.²³ Calvin desired to examine the circumstances and culture in which any part of the Biblical message was set. He said: "There are many statements in Scripture the meaning of which depends upon their context."²⁴ Calvin always looked beyond the bare words to the intention of the author in interpreting Scripture, even in the Decalogue.

Calvin had two requirements for excellence in exegesis: *brevitas* and *facilitas*. By *brevitas*, Calvin wished to avoid lengthy commentary which would only exhaust the reader. By *facilitas*, he wanted to avoid the discussions of other commentators and come directly to the meaning of the text. Calvin was equally opposed to allegorical spiritualism and rationalistic literalism. He branded allegory "a most disastrous error."²⁵ He also opposed the Aristotelian rationalistic exegesis developing among some of the Reformers, e.g. Melancthon, Bullinger, and Bucer. He feared that Melancthon's method, for example, could lead to an arbitrary choice of topics, not based on the text, but imposed on it.

The most recent scholarly biographer of Calvin, T.H.L. Parker, aptly summarizes Calvin's views on the authority and interpretation of Scripture: "The creatureliness of the Bible is no hindrance to hearing God's Word but rather the completely necessary condition . . . For, according to Calvin's concept of accommodation, God genuinely speaks to man in such a way that he is comprehensible to him."²⁶

3. The Reformed Confessions

During the sixteenth century, as the Reformation became

indigenous in various parts of Europe, local communities, from cities to nations, drew up their own confessions of faith. These statements generally had a three-fold purpose: to show the Biblical character of their doctrinal affirmations; to demonstrate continuity with the ancient creedal forms of unity — the Apostles and Nicene Creeds especially; and, to clarify the distinctive emphases which set this confessional group off from Roman Catholicism and other Protestant groups.

Bullinger, the author of the Second Helvetic Confession, in his *Summa* reflected the spirit of the Reformed statements regarding Scripture: "We know very well that the Scripture is not called the Word of God because of the human voice, the ink and paper, or the printed letters (which all can be comprehended by the flesh), but because the meaning, which speaks through the human voice or is written with pen and ink on paper, is not originally from men, but is God's word, will and meaning."²⁷

D. The Concern for Form in the Post-Reformation Period

1. The Shift in the Second Generation of Reformers

Calvin died in 1564. By that time the Roman Catholic Counter-Reformation had consolidated and focused its strength in rejection of Protestant doctrines at the Council of Trent (1545-1563 A.D.). In response, the second generation of Reformers tried to prove the authority of the Bible, using the same Aristotelian-Thomistic arguments which Roman Catholics had used to prove the authority of the church. The second generation of Reformers by then were also fighting the extreme rationalism of Faustus Socinus and the unitarians. Because Socinus claimed that reason did not lead to traditional Trinitarian doctrines, the second generation Reformers became all the more attached to a "natural theology" and tried to defend their doctrines by reason as well as Scripture.

Melanchthon, the successor of Luther, and Beza, the successor of Calvin, both endeavored to systematize the work of their masters by casting it into an Aristotelian mold. Thus a period of Protestant Scholasticism was launched in the immediate post-Reformation period. This Protestant Scholasticism rejected the Augustinian approach of faith, especially in regard to the Bible and reverted to the Thomistic rationalism of the Reformer's medieval opponents. Two aspects of the central Christian tradition were also weakened.

Theology was turned more toward an abstract, speculative, technical science and away from its practical and moral methodology. Further, and even more far-reaching in its consequences, the concept of accommodation was discarded. Theologians now unashamedly contended that they thought God's thoughts because the human mind was fitted to think in God's ways. Precision had replaced piety as the goal of theology.

On the Reformed side, Theodore Beza took on the mantle of Calvin. During Calvin's lifetime they had complemented one another. Now, in the post-Reformation polemical situation, Beza tended to rigidify and scholasticize many of Calvin's positions. Beza, along with Ursinus, Zanchius, and Peter Martyr Vermigli were transitional figures, who tended to follow Calvin in their pastoral and exegetical work, but who in their more "scientific" and polemical writing moved in the Aristotelian scholastic direction. Those who followed them in the seventeenth century increasingly adopted the scholastic mold.

2. Francis Turretin

Reformed Scholasticism reached its full flowering in the theology of Francis Turretin who held the chair of Theology in Geneva one hundred years after Calvin's death. Turretin chose the theological method of Thomas Aquinas' *Summa* as the pattern for his own theology. In developing his doctrine of Scripture, Turretin quoted 175 authorities but did not mention Calvin.²⁸ Scripture was the formal principle on which Turretin founded a scientific, systematic theology. The authority of Scripture was predicated on the claim that the Bible contained inerrant words. Turretin adduced external and internal arguments to prove that the Biblical writers had not erred in the slightest particular. No trace of Calvin's concept of accommodation was to be found in Turretin's work. Not just the content, but the form of the Bible was asserted to be supernatural. Accordingly, Turretin was intensely concerned over the present state of the Biblical text. He omitted reference to the intrin-
sic witness of the Holy Spirit in developing the authority of Scripture but invoked the Holy Spirit to guarantee an authentic canon and a reliable edition of Scripture. This led Turretin to the extreme of claiming inspiration for the (non-existent) vowel points in the original Hebrew manuscripts. Turretin's style of Reformed Scholasticism was embodied in The Helvetic Consensus Formula in 1675. It declared that textual criticism of the Old Testament would

subject faith in Scripture to "perilous hazard."²⁹

Reformed Scholasticism was a mind-set which in a period of defensive reaction made significant changes in the doctrine of Scripture utilized by Calvin. Reason was given priority over faith. Scripture came to be treated as a compendium of propositions from which logical deductions could be drawn.

E. From Calvinism to Scholasticism in Great Britain

The English Reformation underwent a development quite distinct from that on the continent. The civil war retarded the incursion of the new science and philosophy and thus also slowed the scholastic reaction to them until after the mid-seventeenth century. Puritanism in England also drew on native resources of Augustinian anti-Aristotelianism. This neo-Platonic philosophical orientation was supported in the seventeenth century by the simplified logic of French Protestant philosopher Peter Ramus.

The Westminster Divines, meeting from 1642-1649, carried on the Augustinian middle way in theological method holding that faith leads to understanding. For them the authority of Scripture resided in its central saving message and was affirmed to them by the inner witness of the Holy Spirit. The purpose of the Bible was to join persons to Jesus Christ not to judge matters of science. This central saving message could be known by anyone who read the Bible or heard the gospel preached. Matters of controversy in religion were to be dealt with by scholarship. The historical setting and cultural context of the Biblical message were important in understanding the difficult passages. The grammatical-historical method of exegesis was preferred. The Westminster Divines fought the excesses of Anglo-Catholic rationalists on the one side, and spiritualistic Sectarians on the other. They maintained the Reformation stance that the Word and the Spirit always work together.

John Owen was a transitional figure who illustrated the move toward scholasticism soon after the Westminster Assembly. In reaction to Biblical criticism, he contended that the Hebrew original of the Old Testament had been verbally inspired down to the (non-existent) vowel points. A similar scholasticizing occurred in Scotland through an anonymous commentary on the Westminster Confession of Faith.

After the Restoration of Charles II in 1660, the Royal Society

was founded. It became a means of introducing the new science and philosophy in England. Its members were clergymen and scientists who separated religion and science into separate spheres. Gradually reason was given priority over faith even in religious matters. John Newton stood as the final flowering of this trend, introducing mechanical laws governing the universe, but holding to his belief in God. John Locke applied empirical methods to philosophy hoping to find certain knowledge based on sense experience alone. For him, as well, reason became the judge of what was appropriate in religion. Theologians adopted a mechanistic, mechanical model by which the Bible was to be judged. Scripture's message had to accord with Lockean reason and Scripture's language had to conform to Newtonian notions of perfection. Many followed the lure of the new science into Deism. By the end of the eighteenth century David Hume had followed Locke's lead to the conclusion of skepticism.

Thomas Reid founded a school of Scottish Common Sense philosophy which sought to answer Hume while remaining solely empirical in method. Reid assumed a simple Aristotelian realism and accepted as normative Bacon's naive method of scientific induction. Reid claimed that the mind directly encountered objects in nature. His assurance that this was so was provided by an intuitive judgement of the mind.

Scottish Realism dominated the academic philosophy taught in American colleges during their first half-century. It was brought to Princeton by John Witherspoon in 1768 when he became President of the College of New Jersey. Witherspoon's Scottist Realism laid the foundation for the theories of Biblical interpretation developed in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries at Princeton Seminary.

F. The 19th Century Princeton Theology: Reformed Scholasticism

The two streams which carried Reformed theology to the New World both bore currents of scholasticism. The conservative form of New England Congregationalism carried the tradition of John Owen and its concern for a rational defense of the faith. Scotch-Irish immigration brought another stream strongly influenced by Scottish Realism. They had in common the spirit of the 18th century, that Christianity must be harmonized with scientific reason.

The Presbyterian Church had no center of theological training

until the founding of Princeton Seminary in 1812. Until that time it was customary for young men to study with pastors as their tutors in preparation for ordination examination by the presbytery. One such man was Archibald Alexander, born in 1772 of Scotch-Irish parents. In preparation for ordination he studied Johathan Edwards, John Owen, John Witherspoon's Lectures on Moral Philosophy, and Francis Turretin's Loci in a Latin compendium. In 1812, Alexander was named the first professor at Princeton Seminary and given the task of planning the curriculum. He centered that course of study in the works of Francis Turretin and Scottish Common Sense philosophy. Alexander intended that the Seminary should train men to refute Deism which was passing and resist Biblical criticism, which was rising.

The *Institutio Theologiae Elencticae* of Francis Turretin was the principal textbook in systematic theology at Princeton Seminary for 60 years, from its founding in 1812 until Charles Hodge's *Systematic Theology* replaced it in 1872. Hodge was completely committed to Turretin's system and to the epistemology of Scottish Realism. His *Systematic Theology* therefore made that same post-Reformation Scholastic theology available in English. Succeeding generations of professors at Princeton vowed "to receive and subscribe" the Westminster Confession of Faith and Catechism. But the terms used in the Confession's chapter on Scripture were defined by concepts taken from Turretin's *Institutio*, Reid's Scottish Common Sense philosophy was thought to be a sufficient guide in interpreting the Bible. Thus, a post-Reformation Scholasticism with a Scottish flavor was taught as the theology of Calvin and Westminster for over 100 years until the reorganization of Princeton Seminary in 1929.

The authority of Scripture was to be found in its form of inerrant words according to the 19th century Princeton Theology. There was an increasing rigidification from one theologian to his successor through the years. But in keeping with their roots in Turretin, each of them postulated the inerrancy of the Bible in all things. Archibald Alexander wrote that if the evangelists had fallen into mistakes of minor importance it would be impossible to demonstrate that they wrote anything by inspiration.³⁰ Hodge declared that the inspiration of the Bible extended to not only moral and religious truth but "statements of facts, whether scientific, historical, or geographical."³¹

Hodge showed no trace of the concept of accommodation held

by Origen, Chrysostom, Augustine and Calvin. Buoyed with confidence by Scottish Realism, Hodge asserted: "We are certain, therefore, that our ideas of God, founded on the testimony of His Word, correspond to what He really is, and constitute true knowledge." ³² Statements in the Bible were treated just as objects in nature, and it was assumed that the mind came into direct contact with the thing itself.

By the time of Charles Hodge's son, A.A. Hodge, the sciences were no longer supporting Princeton theories of Biblical inerrancy. A.A. Hodge rested his case on external evidence, but shifted the object of inerrancy to the original (lost) autographs of the Biblical text. When B.B. Warfield succeeded A.A. Hodge he completed the shift in theological method from induction to deduction. Apologetics were now the primary task in a time when the Princeton theories were under increasing attack from within the church. Warfield no longer acknowledged the philosophical and theological sources of the Princeton Theology in Scottish Realism and Turretin. He identified the Princeton position with the Bible itself and claimed that the church had always held to the Princeton particularities.

A.A. Hodge and B.B. Warfield developed the doctrine of the inerrancy of the Bible as a defensive, apologetic tool. As their contribution to a series of articles in *The Presbyterian Review* dealing with Biblical criticism they wrote on "Inspiration" in April, 1881. Hodge stated:

Nevertheless, this historical faith of the church has always been, that all the affirmations of Scripture of all kinds whether of spiritual doctrine or duty, or of physical or historical fact, or of psychological or philosophical principle, are without error, when the ipsissima verba of the original autographs are ascertained and interpreted in their natural and intended sense. ³³

Warfield in his part of the article averred that one proven error would destroy the Bible's claim to inspiration. But, he added that no error could be proved unless it could be shown to be in the original text of the Bible. Since the original manuscripts were all lost, Warfield seemed to have an unassailable apologetic stance.

There was no carefully developed hermeneutic (theory of interpretation) in the writings of the Princeton theologians. They accepted Turretin's theology as the framework into which all theological facts must necessarily fit. Then they proceeded with utter

confidence to investigate the Bible's facts like a Baconian inductive scientist. Scottish Realists assumed that God had made the natural world orderly and constant and therefore error could not arise in the observation of facts. Hodge applied that same naive inductive method to theology. Hodge affirmed that God "gives us in the Bible truths which, properly understood and arranged, constitute the science of theology. As the facts of nature are all related and determined by physical laws, so the facts of the Bible are all related and determined by the nature of God and of his creatures." ³⁴

The Princeton theologians had no interpretive principles by which to distinguish between God's revealed purposes and the cultural context in which human persons applied those Divine purposes. Charles Hodge, for example, failed to distinguish between the Pauline thrust against slavery and its restricted application in Roman society. Hodge, both before and after the Civil War, contended that slave holding was not necessarily a sin and opposed abolitionism. At the same time he abhorred the evils of slavery and urged that those evils be ameliorated. ³⁵

The Princeton theologians denied that there could be any legitimate development of doctrine. They claimed an identity of their views with those of Westminster, Calvin, Augustine and Paul. Neither culture nor context needed to be taken into account in the application of what they took to be universal theological norms. Their pride in an unbending consistency led to Charles Hodge's remark at the celebration of his fiftieth year as professor at Princeton:

Drs. Alexander and Miller were not speculative men. They were not given to new methods or new theories. They were content with the faith once delivered to the saints. I am not afraid to say that a new idea never originated in this Seminary. Their theological method was very simple. The Bible is the word of God. That is to be assumed or proved. If granted; then it follows, that what the Bible says, God says. That ends the matter. ³⁶

Thus the inductive method of treating Biblical statements like objects in nature was compatible with a system of theology like that of Turretin. Orthodoxy was assured. And, it was assumed that the facts of the Bible and the facts of nature could never conflict. When scientists offered views at variance with those of the Princeton theologians, the Princeton men always charged that the

scientists were offering speculative theories and not plain facts properly organized.

Despite the intended uniformity of thought among the Princeton theologians, significant changes were made in successive generations. Archibald Alexander began with religious experience and used reason and evidence to confirm it. Charles Hodge continued to honor religious experience as a valid basis for personal religion. He preferred the internal evidence which the Bible presented to the reader over external evidences of its authority. But in the classroom and in writing Hodge asserted that theology was a science and stressed objective proofs of the Bible's divinity. A. A. Hodge and B. B. Warfield increasingly shunned religious experience as a source of knowledge and claimed complete scientific objectivity for their theology.

G. The Princeton Theology and 20th Century Controversy

It was inevitable that the Princeton Theology would conflict with the rising tide of Biblical criticism in the 19th century. The critics assumed the opposite of the Princeton theologians, namely, that patterns of thinking varied with historical periods and cultures. The ancient and Near Eastern world views and languages of the Bible were being shown to be quite different from that of the 19th century American culture.

The prime antagonist of the Princeton theologians was Professor Charles Augustus Briggs of Union Seminary. Briggs was Professor of Old Testament at Union Seminary in New York. He introduced the views of German higher criticism into the Presbyterian Church. He was also a collector and student of the writings of the Westminster Divines. Briggs openly attacked the Princeton theology for departing from Reformation theology and supplanting the theology of the Westminster Confession with the post-Reformation Scholasticism of Turretin's *Institutio*. Warfield attempted to refute Briggs but did not join the historical argument. Warfield simply assumed that Charles Hodge's *Systematic Theology* was a normative example of "all Reformed Systems."³⁷

Despite the fact that Briggs was historically correct, Warfield's views prevailed in the Presbyterian Church. The majority of ministers and through them members had been trained in the Princeton theology which Warfield defended. In 1891 Briggs was charged with heresy for, among other things, denying the inerrancy of the Bible.

After lengthy litigation, the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in 1893 suspended Briggs from the ministry. Furthermore, it adopted a statement that the original Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments were without error and went on to assert that this view "has always been the belief of the Church."³⁸ Thus, the position of the Hodge-Warfield article of 1881 was erroneously read back into the confessional history of the denomination. Similar heresy trials with similar results took place in other denominations in America and Great Britain during this period.

The General Assembly's decision of 1893 was not unanimously accepted. Tensions over the question of the inerrancy of Scripture marked the next three decades in the Presbyterian Church. In 1910 the General Assembly adopted five points which all ordination candidates had to affirm as "essential and necessary doctrines." The first of these points was the inerrancy of the Bible.³⁹ J. Gresham Machen, a Princeton professor, in 1923 issued a book entitled *Christianity and Liberalism* in which he denied that liberals had the right to be called Christians. By contrast, in 1924, thirteen percent of the ministers of the Presbyterian Church signed the "Auburn Affirmation" which stated that the doctrine of inerrancy "intended to enhance the authority of the Scriptures, in fact, impaired their supreme authority for faith and life."⁴⁰ In 1925, the General Assembly appointed a special theological commission to deal with these sharply contrasting positions. In 1927, the commission issued its report which declared that no one, not even the General Assembly had the constitutional power to issue binding definitions of "essential and necessary doctrines."⁴¹

Presbyterians were spared the full consequences of their lack of confessional guidance by the rise to dominance of Neo-Orthodoxy in the 30s, 40s and 50s. The theology of Karl Barth provided a core of consensus in the Presbyterian Church which guided the teaching, preaching and even church school curriculum of the denomination. Conservatives, who still held to the old Princeton position, rejected Barth as simply another and more dangerous form of liberalism and ignored denominational literature. After a 1958 merger of the Presbyterian Church, U.S.A. with the smaller and more conservative United Presbyterian Church in North America, a move to create a new confessional position was launched. A committee, headed by new Princeton professor Edward A. Dowey, proposed a Book of Confessions, adding some sixteenth century Reformed documents to Westminster, and a new, contemporary confession of faith, named

The Confession of 1967. Conservatives deplored C'67's statement on the Bible. Two organizations of conservatives, one lay (The Presbyterian Lay Committee) and one largely clergy (Presbyterians United for Biblical Confession) — were created and fought the new confessional stance. PUBC took credit for helping to amend C'67 on the Bible with the addition of the phrase "The Word of God written." After Presbyteries approved the confessional revision, Dowey commented:

Now we can look forward. Writing the confession, studying it, and moving through the slow work of adoption were laborious processes. But they made us talk together, even fight together for the first time in decades about what we believe and what we must do. We discovered that the bitterness of the 1920s is practically gone. Fundamentalism is as dead as the merely social gospel. ⁴²

Unfortunately for the denomination, subsequent events failed to confirm Dowey's optimistic assessment. Neither Fundamentalism, nor the social gospel were dead, and in the 60s and 70s both showed renewed vitality. Significant discussion of confessional matters nearly ceased soon after the acceptance of the Confession of 1967. Rarely was the Book of Confessions invoked in denominational literature or public controversy in the church. In the 1960s concern for particular social problems made theology issue-oriented. In the 70s, Liberation theology offered a framework through which social concerns could be dealt with theologically in the Presbyterian Church. Among professional theologians, the Neo-Orthodox consensus was declared dead by the mid-sixties. Process theology with its concern to correlate theology with modern science and human experience began its rise to prominence. Theological seminaries gave consideration to this methodology, and Process thought was used as a resource in discussion of denominational problems.

In the 70s, the United Presbyterian Church was rent by disagreement over social issues and the effects of bureaucratic reorganization. Ironically, the Confession of 1967 was blamed for the restructuring and retreat from social involvement by former denominational bureaucrat John R. Fry in *The Trivialization of the United Presbyterian Church*, published in 1975. Fry contended that the choice of "reconciliation" as the central theme of the Confession of 1967 was the call of timid liberals for peace-at-any-price rather than theological confrontation of issues.⁴³ Fry's thesis was not widely

accepted in the denomination. It was, nevertheless, symptomatic of the lack of a confessional consensus in the UPCUSA. Later events of the seventies evidenced the lack of any working agreement on theological method or Biblical interpretation in the denomination. Controversies over ordination of women and the ordination of homosexuals found church-persons in opposition to one another still holding to positions very similar to those of the Fundamentalist-Modernist controversy of the early decades of the century. Documents prepared in studying ordination of homosexuals identified four methods of Biblical interpretation being used in the church. They corresponded to: A. Old Princeton; B. Barthian; C. Liberation; D. Process methodologies.

In 1978, two different task force reports to the denomination declared that the basic problem in the church was a lack of consensus on theological method and interpretation of the Bible. A Task Force on Theological Reflection reported to the General Assembly Mission Council that no theological consensus existed in the church and that church members felt that the situation "is one of tension and inability to respond to or deal with pressing questions and issues." The report continued, however, that seeking immediately to re-establish a consensus "is both unnecessary and impossible."⁴⁴ A second group, the Committee on Pluralism, formed two years earlier to study the sources of conflict in the church offered its conclusions to the Advisory Council on Discipleship and Worship. The report asserted:

Of all the factors that contribute to divisiveness within our denomination, none is as pervasive or fundamental as the question of how the Scriptures are to be interpreted . . . Widely differing views on the ways of Old and New Testaments are accepted, interpreted, and applied were repeatedly cited to us by lay people, clergy, and theologians as the most prevalent cause of conflict within our denomination today . . . It is our opinion that until our denomination examines this problem, we will continue to be impeded in our mission and ministry, or we will spiral into a destructive schism.⁴⁵

Commissioners to the 1978 General Assembly of the United Presbyterian Church repeatedly expressed concern that there was no identifiable confessional position in the church. The phrase (attributed to President James McCord of Princeton Seminary) "the center of the church has collapsed" was often cited. Delegates desired guidance in the effort to restore a confessional centrist position. The Assembly ultimately adopted the following recommen-

dations:

- C,1. That the General Assembly authorize the Advisory Council on Discipleship and Worship to engage in a study on the diverse ways of understanding biblical authority and interpreting the Scripture, which are now prevalent in our denomination; that components of the study include an exploration of our theological heritage in the Reformed Tradition and an analysis of the confessional standards that guide our interpretation of Scripture, and that a result be recommended guidelines for a positive and not a restrictive use of Scripture in theological controversies.
- C,2: That the Advisory Council on Discipleship and Worship make an interim report. . . to the 192nd General Assembly (1980) and final report with recommendations to the 193rd General Assembly (1981).
- C,3: That the Advisory Council, to accomplish this study, assemble a theologically balanced task force of the most competent church leaders, lay and clergy, who will have the authority to draw upon the expertise of biblical scholars and interpretation of literature from inside and outside the denomination.

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Authority and Interpretation

Footnotes

1. Proceedings with Felix the Manichee, I, 10 cited in A.D.R. Polman, *The Word of God According to St. Augustine*, trans. A. J. Pomerans (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1961), p.59.
2. Quoted in Calvin, *Institutes*, III. xxi. 4.
3. *The Harmony of the Gospels*, II, xii, 28 cited in Augustine Bea, *The Study of the Synoptic Gospels*, ed. Joseph A. Fitzmeyer, (New York: Harper and Row, 1965), p. 55, note 1.
4. *The Harmony of the Gospels*, II, xxviii, 67, in Bea p. 69.
5. "The Papacy at Rome," *Works of Martin Luther*, I, 346f., cited in Hugh T. Kerr, ed. *A Compend of Luther's Theology* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1966), p.4.
6. *Luther's Works*, xxiii, 235 cited in Raymond Larry Shelton, *Martin Luther's Concept of Biblical Interpretation in Historical Perspective* (Ph.D. diss.: Fuller Theological Seminary, 1974), p. 179.
7. *Commentary on Seneca's De Clementia*, Preface, iii, note 5 cited in Ford Lewis Battles "The Sources of Calvin's Seneca Commentary," John Calvin, ed. G. E. Duffield (Appleford: The Sutton Courtenay Press, 1966), p. 49.
8. *Institutes*, I. iii. 1; I. iii. 3; I. vi. 1.
9. *Inst.*, I. iv. 1, 2, 4.
10. *Inst.*, I. vi. 1. Cf. *Inst.*, I. xiv. 1.
11. *Inst.*, I. vii. 1.
12. *Inst.*, I. vii. 2.
13. *Inst.*, I. vii. 4.
14. *Inst.*, I. viii. 13.
15. *Inst.*, I. viii. 13.
16. *Inst.*, I. ix. 1.
17. *Commentary on Genesis 1:16*.
18. *Inst.*, III. ii. 29.
19. *Commentary on I Peter 1:20* cited in Ford Lewis Battles, "God Was Accommodating Himself to Human Capacity," *Interpretation*, XXXI, No. 1 (January, 1977), p. 38.
20. *Inst.*, I. xiii. 1.
21. *Commentary on Romans 3:4*.
22. *Commentary on Hebrews 10:6*.
23. *Inst.*, IV. xvii. 14. Cf. IV. xvii. 23.
24. *Inst.*, IV. xvi. 23. Cf. IV. xv. 18.
25. *Commentary on II Corinthians 3:6*.

26. T.H.L. Parker, *John Calvin: A Biography* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1975), p. 77.
27. Summa, cited in Edward A. Dowey, *A Commentary on the Confession of 1967 and an Introduction to "The Book of Confessions"* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1968), pp. 204-205.
28. Leon McDill Allison, "The Doctrine of Scripture in the Theology of John Calvin and Francis Turretin," (Th.M. thesis: Princeton Theology Seminary, 1958), p. 92.
29. For the text of The Helvetic Consensus Formula see John H. Leith, ed., *Creeds of the Churches: A Reader in Christian Doctrine from the Bible to the Present*, rev. ed. (Richmond: John Knox Press, 1973), pp. 308-323.
30. *Evidences of the Authenticity, Inspiration and Canonical Authority of the Holy Scriptures* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian Board of Publications, 1836), p. 229.
31. *Systematic Theology*, I, 163.
32. ST, I, 134.
33. II, 238.
34. ST, I, 3.
35. Hodge, "The Princeton Review on the State of the Country and of the Church," *Biblical Repertory and Princeton Review*, XXXVIII (1865), 637 cited in William S. Barker, "The Social Views of Charles Hodge (1797-1878): A Study in 19th Century Calvinism and Conservatism," *Presbyterian: Covenant Seminary Review*, Vol. 1 (Spring, 1975), 5. See p. 22 for Baker's evaluation.
36. A. A. Hodge, *The Life of Charles Hodge* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1880), p. 521. A recently (1977) created organization called the International Council on Biblical Inerrancy uses Hodge's exact language as one of its slogans: "What the Bible says, God says," adding the phrase "through human agents and without error." See James Montgomery Boice, "Biblical Inerrancy — The Debate Is Not Over," *Evangelical Newsletter*, Vol. 5 (July 14, 1978), p. 4.
37. Benjamin Breckinridge Warfield, *The Westminster Assembly and Its Work* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1931), p. 213.
38. Cited in Max Gray Rogers, "Charles Augustus Briggs: Heresy at Union," *American Religious Heretics*, ed. George H. Shriver (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1966), p. 138. Cf. Lefferts A. Loetscher, *The Broadening Church* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1954), p. 61.
39. Loetscher, p. 98.
40. Maurice Armstrong, et al, eds., *The Presbyterian Enterprise* (Philadelphia: the Westminster Press, 1956), p. 286.
41. Loetscher, pp. 134-135.
42. "Now We Can Look Forward," *Presbyterian Life* (April 1, 1967), p. 24.
43. John R. Fry, *The Trivialization of the United Presbyterian Church* (New York: Harper and Row, 1975), p. 3.
44. *Blue Book*, 190th General Assembly (1978) of the United Presbyterian Church in the United States of America (New York: Office of the General Assembly, 1978), C-49 and C-50.
45. *Blue Book*, E-10.

46. Minutes of the General Assembly of the United Presbyterian Church in the United States of America, Part I: Journal (New York: Office of the General Assembly, 1978), p. 40.

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