

# **The Inspiration and Authority of Scripture:**

**J. D. G. Dunn versus B. B. Warfield**

Churchman 97/3 1983

**Roger Nicole**

## **Introduction**

Under the title ‘The Authority of Scripture According to Scripture’, *Churchman* has published, in two instalments a slightly modified and fully footnoted version of a paper presented by Professor James D. G. Dunn at the 1981 Anglican Evangelical Consultation in London.<sup>1</sup> This paper ‘led, it seems, to a mature, creative and irenic debate’<sup>2</sup> by those participating in the consultation. Another paper in this area was presented at the time by Dr R. T. France, and has also appeared on the pages of *Churchman*.<sup>3</sup> Discerning readers will perceive that this latter article, written in a tone very supportive of evangelical convictions, does balance off, so to speak, the rather critical presentation of Professor Dunn, while addressing some of the same problems to which evangelical scholars need to give heed.

Professor Dunn expressly focuses his attack on B. B. Warfield with great propriety—for indeed Warfield is one of the most notable and articulate modern advocates of the doctrine of biblical inspiration and inerrancy—and with great courage, for Warfield seems to possess an uncanny ability by his magnificent scholarship to dwarf those who take the cudgels against him. My interest in, and gratitude to, Warfield<sup>4</sup> naturally leads me to consider with care the objections to his view of Scripture, although I am painfully aware that Warfield’s scholarship may well dwarf his supporters as well as his opponents!

Professor Dunn furthermore gives considerable attention to the International Council on Biblical Inerrancy (ICBI), both in its official statements at the 1978 Chicago Summit,<sup>5</sup> and in the formulations published by several of its members.<sup>6</sup> Being myself a member of the Council, who has not been quoted in this context, I deem it desirable to face this challenge. At the outset I should like to acknowledge the impressive contribution of Professor Dunn, which recently led to his prestigious appointment as the successor to C. K. Barrett in Durham. The clear-cut evangelical character, especially of his earlier works, is readily admitted, even though at this juncture I am constrained to take issue with his positions.

## **I**

### **Dunn’s indictment of ‘the Warfield position’**

Not only does Professor Dunn devote the whole second section of his paper to the presentation of this indictment, but he offers additional critical comments in the other three sections and it appears desirable to consider all this material in some detail. Before I do this, however, I must call attention to the paucity of references to the written work of Warfield. In a paper with 118 footnotes, containing no less than 160 references to various sources, it is surprising, to say the least, that I find only seven references to Warfield’s works<sup>7</sup> and no attempt to provide a comprehensive survey of Warfield’s total contribution in this area. Surely an exegete should not need to be reminded of the importance of reference to primary sources, and yet when Professor Dunn expounds ‘the weakness of the Warfield position’ he seldom quotes Warfield, and shows an astonishing disregard of a number of Warfield’s writings which, if properly recognized, would have greatly attenuated or even cancelled out

the validity of his strictures. By way of contrast, Professor Dunn quotes a sub-evangelical writer like P. J. Achtemeier no less than nine times, and refers to his own work fifteen times!

To be sure, he also refers frequently to the International Council on Biblical Inerrancy and to writers who are associated with this council. These are subsumed under the general designation of 'the Warfield position'. Probably no one would take offence at being thus associated with the great Princeton scholar, and it may be viewed as a tribute to the learning and orthodoxy of ICBI that the name of Warfield should be chosen as representative of its stand. But this nomenclature also involves the subtle intimation that the position under consideration was inaugurated by B. B. Warfield and did not have appropriate representation at an earlier date. A cursive, scurrilous and inaccurate<sup>8</sup> reference to the seventeenth-century scholastics is probably not sufficient to overcome this impression, and it is only fair to point out that, in the minds of millions of evangelicals, what Professor Dunn dubs 'the Warfield position' is also the position of the Old Testament toward the Torah, the position of orthodox Judaism of all times toward the whole Old Testament, the position of the New Testament toward the Old, the position of the quasi-unanimity of the early church toward canonical Scripture, the position of St Augustine, the position of Anselm, the position of Thomas Aquinas, the position of Luther toward what he owned to be canonical Scripture, the position of Calvin,<sup>9</sup> the position of Archbishop Cranmer, the position of Whitaker, the position of Bishop Jewel,<sup>10</sup> the position of 'judicious' Richard Hooker, the position of John Owen, the position of Turretin, the position of S. Rutherford, the position of Wesley, the position of L. Gaussen, the position of C. Hodge, the position of C. H. Spurgeon, not to speak of countless others who could well be named here. Probably many who hold to inerrancy do not even know that Warfield existed and some would associate this name with a contemporary American football player, or the hapless first husband of the Duchess of Windsor rather than with the Princeton theologian.<sup>11</sup> B. B. Warfield himself would be the first to insist that his view was not a personal idiosyncrasy but was derived from Scripture and representative of the dominant line of thought in the Christian church.<sup>12</sup>

Professor Dunn's first line of attack relates to the claim that the only fully evangelical view of the Bible is that which affirms inerrancy (ICBI, E. J. Young, J. I. Packer, and others). He is at pains to show that this is not the case by appealing to James Orr and James Denney in earlier generations, and Fuller Seminary (with the supporting voices of D. Hubbard, Jack Rogers, Bernard Ramm, Clark Pinnock) and S. T. Davis within the last decade. At this point, it seems to me, it must be readily granted that there are people who cling to the name 'evangelical' and who are not holding to the inerrancy of Scripture. The ICBI has not constituted itself as a self-appointed body that would confer or deny the use of the term 'evangelical' to individuals or groups. It is a group of evangelical persons who desire to bear witness to the inerrancy of autographic Scripture and to warn about the dangers of compromising this stance. It will be readily granted, I believe, that James Denney did not hold to this perspective, even though he wrote some excellent pages on the doctrine of the atonement, particularly in the beginning of his career. The case of James Orr is rather different, however, for he wrote extensively in support of the reliability and historicity of Scripture, and as editor-in-chief invited Warfield to contribute the articles on 'Inspiration' and 'Revelation' for the *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia (ISBE)*. It is true that in his little volume *Revelation and Inspiration* he expresses reservations about the position of inerrantists, as quoted by Professor Dunn. Yet we should not forget that in the same context he also said:

...it remains the fact that the Bible, impartially interpreted and judged, is free from demonstrable errors in its statements, and harmonious in its teachings, to a degree that of itself creates an irresistible impression of a supernatural factor in its origin.<sup>13</sup>

A passage like this certainly mitigates the impact of the quotation adduced by Dunn.

Professor Dunn's second (and major) line of attack consists in attempting to show that inerrancy is not in fact a tenable option. He has given us a summary of his criticisms at the close of his second section:

If I had to sum up my criticism of the Warfield position it would be that it is exegetically improbable, hermeneutically defective, theologically dangerous, and educationally disastrous.<sup>14</sup>

I plan to consider these four points *seriatim*.

### **1) Alleged exegetical improbability**

Professor Dunn focuses his attention on four specific passages 'which contain the strongest teaching about Scripture'<sup>16</sup> and which he calls 'the four corner pillars of the inerrancy stronghold.'<sup>16</sup> He acknowledges that there is 'other biblical material' which is used to reinforce a 'stand on the inerrancy line',<sup>17</sup> but this is scarcely saying enough either for Warfield himself or for other well-informed inerrantists. The argument is cumulative and based on scores, yea hundreds, of passages, and the four Scriptures that Dunn singles out, while very important indeed, represent only the tip of an iceberg. How could someone fairly think that he has dealt sufficiently with Warfield who does not even allude to his articles, 'The Oracles of God',<sup>18</sup> "'Scripture'", "The Scriptures" in the New Testament',<sup>19</sup> 'Professor Henry Preserved Smith on Inspiration',<sup>20</sup> 'The Inspiration of the Bible',<sup>21</sup> 'The Real Problem of Inspiration',<sup>22</sup> not to speak about his contribution to the study of Calvin's and the Westminster Assembly's doctrine of Scripture?<sup>23</sup> In his very brief article on 'Inspiration' for J. Davis's *Bible Dictionary*, Warfield listed no less than sixty different Bible references, even though the article occupies only two pages of print!<sup>24</sup> An even larger figure would emerge if a count were taken in his article 'Inspiration' for *ISBE*,<sup>25</sup> which embodies his mature conclusions when he was past sixty years old. Only one casual reference to this article appears in Professor Dunn's paper. Another of Warfield's major contributions, the article "'It says": "Scripture says": "God says";' receives notice by Dunn in another context.<sup>26</sup> There he owns that these three formulae are equivalent in the New Testament, but refuses to follow Warfield in drawing an inference of inerrancy from that fact.

#### *a) 2 Timothy 3:16*

This is the first pillar passage which Professor Dunn examines. He grants that the word *theopneustos* can well be translated 'God-breathed' (Warfield, NIV), but insists that this divine inspiration relates only to the matters named in the context, that is salvation and sanctification.<sup>27</sup> This, however, appears as a very questionable restriction of the import of the passage. The author (Paul) asserts here that God is the author of Scripture, and from that thesis derives the truth that Scripture is useful in the areas which are of special concern to God's servants. Two observations are needed at this point.

i) To acknowledge God as the primary author, of necessity involves a confession of the truthfulness of the product. Can anyone imagine Paul saying, 'This is what God says, but there is a mistake in it; I am going to provide you with a correction!?' A. A. Hodge and Warfield were right when they argued that the principle of divine authorship implies by

absolute logical necessity the corollary of inerrancy.<sup>28</sup> It is true, of course, that 2 Timothy 3:15-17 does not provide an express direct statement as to the errorlessness of Scripture—in so far as mere exegesis of the passage will not yield this doctrine—but to concede that there is an error in the autographic text is to run a collision course with what this passage expressly asserts, to wit, that Scripture is God-breathed. When God speaks, it is arrogance to imagine that any scholar may interrupt to place a *sic* in square brackets in what He says!

ii) Professor Dunn claims that 2 Timothy 3:16 limits the divine authority to the areas in which the usefulness of Scripture is here propounded, to wit, faith and life. But this is in no way apparent from the text, for no restriction whatever is enunciated, as would be the case if words like ‘only’, ‘in so far as’, or the like, had been inserted. If I say that *Whitaker’s Almanack*<sup>29</sup> is very carefully compiled and useful for securing data on British national parks, the bishops of the Church of England, the area and population of Commonwealth nations, and the principal London clubs, this in no way suggests that is *Whitaker’s Almanack* unreliable on data concerning British peerage, life assurance, or statistics of foreign countries. On the contrary, the predicate ‘very carefully compiled’ embraces all subjects on which the Almanack provides data, and my listing of certain areas of usefulness in no way involves the restrictive judgement that this is all the book is good for. The construction of 2 Timothy 3:16 is precisely of the same nature, and it is wholly arbitrary to restrict the divine authorship and authority, to the spheres of usefulness particularly noted. Obviously Paul had in view the fitness of God’s servants, rather than the training of architects, farmers or cooks, but the limitation has to be imported into the text by *eisegesis* (of an unjustifiable nature); it cannot be derived from it by *exegesis*!

#### b) 2 Peter 1:20-21

Here Professor Dunn again emphasizes that the text does not speak of inerrancy, and that the possible vagaries in interpretation further dilute the assurance that we have actually elicited the divine content of any text.

Here again I must note that the emphasis of the text is upon the divine initiative and the divine content in prophetic Scripture (‘speak from God’, ‘borne along by the Holy Spirit’). The proper recognition of this divine factor leads to a confession of inerrancy. It is by a tendentious stress on alleged implications of the human factor in inspiration that error is deemed possible. This stress is not to be found in the text.

As to the problem of a correct interpretation, all will surely acknowledge its existence, and it will occupy our attention below. But Peter’s emphasis was upon the clarity of Scripture (‘a light shining in a dark place’), not upon its obscurity or the uncertainty of its interpretation, on which Professor Dunn focuses. This again is *eisegesis*!

#### c) John 10:35, ‘The Scripture cannot be broken’

Professor Dunn concedes that this sentence is ‘open to a strong interpretation’ and agrees with Dr Leon Morris that it means that ‘Scripture cannot be emptied of its force’.<sup>30</sup> He then chides Morris for adding ‘by being shown to be erroneous’, Warfield for stating that ‘I said, you are gods’ is a casual clause, and indirectly John, or Jesus, or both of them, for developing an argument ‘in good rabbinic style’, but presumably without permanent logical validity, and perhaps built on a faulty understanding on the text of Psalm 82:6 in its original setting.<sup>31</sup>

I concede that Warfield’s formulation was infelicitous. Since the Scripture is God’s Word, it does not, strictly speaking, contain ‘casual clauses’, although Warfield was concerned to

show that Jesus' appeal was not to an Old Testament passage obviously emblazoned with the stamp of divine origin—as, for example, one of the ten commandments or a major prophecy of Isaiah might be—but to just one clause in a minor psalm not even written by David! Warfield's conclusion is surely justified that indefectible authority 'belongs to Scripture through and through, down to its minutest particular.'<sup>32</sup>

On the other hand, the claim that Morris develops 'his own corollary rather than that of Jesus or John'<sup>32</sup> can hardly be sustained. Surely, if the Scripture were 'shown to be erroneous', it would 'be emptied of its force.' Perhaps Dr Morris has not given us an exhaustive list of all the factors that could possibly bear this emptying effect, but the one instance that he adduces is clearly and manifestly in line.

Perhaps more ominous is the suggestion that Jesus, or John, or both, improperly understood the original passage and built an argument without permanent validity. If this were granted, the authority of the New Testament Scripture, and perhaps of Jesus himself, would be jeopardized in a matter of faith, to wit, the bearing of an Old Testament passage on the subject of the deity of Christ. This, as I see it, would be a catastrophic concession, which would undermine the whole evangelical position and fly in the face of the doctrine of authority held by the church universal. Professor Dunn's hesitation as to the person to whom the statement should be ascribed, John or Jesus, when the gospel record states plainly that it was Jesus who said it and localizes the *situs* in Solomon's colonnade (v.22), is also disappointing. From his cautious reaction to Bultmann's thesis at an earlier point, one could have hoped that he would be more decisive here.<sup>34</sup>

#### *d) Matthew 5:18*

Here Professor Dunn avers that if Jesus ascribes eternal validity to the law, a great difficulty develops with the setting aside by the early church of many features of the Old Testament legislation. If the time limit is his own advent ('until all is accomplished'), eternal authority is not affirmed, and, *a fortiori*, neither is inerrancy.

But these are not the only alternatives. One can very well, for instance, posit the eternal validity of Old Testament Scripture, and recognize that the actual coming of Christ so embodies the truths presented in the old covenant's foreshadowings that it renders these rudimentary forms superfluous, not so much by way of discountenancing but by way of fulfilment. When the living person is present, photographs become unnecessary, although they do embody perennial characteristics of the subject. Here the question is not whether the law is or is not without error, and therefore binding, but rather whether the Scripture has a divine origin which is the guaranty of its perennial validity, and, by the same token, of its perfect truthfulness or errorlessness. It is this latter point that Warfield and others affirm, and it fits very acceptably the meaning of *luō* (abolish) and *pléroō* (fulfil), as well as the immediate and remote context.

Thus the so-called pillar passages, while not constituting even the major part of the evidence for inerrancy, surely comport very well with it, and provide corroboration of it by probable exegesis. It is the attempt to empty them of their force in this direction that must be rated 'improbable' or *eisegesis*.

## **2) Alleged hermeneutical<sup>35</sup> deficiency**

Professor Dunn chides the supporters of inerrancy for having ‘not paid sufficient heed to the question of the biblical author’s *intention*’<sup>36</sup> and for failing to recognize sufficiently the problems caused by the necessity of *interpretation*.<sup>37</sup>

*a) Intention*

Professor Dunn owns that holders of ‘the Warfield position’ do indeed recognize the factor of the human writer’s intention, especially as a means to explain phenomena in Scripture which might appear to clash ‘with an unqualified assertion of inerrancy’,<sup>38</sup> but they overlook this factor at three important points: i) the shaping of dogmatic presuppositions which then control their exegesis; ii) the historicity of utterances recorded in the narrative, specifically John’s gospel; iii) the issue of pseudonymity.

*i) Dogmatic presuppositions.* Professor Dunn charges that proponents of inerrancy approach the text of Scripture, and notably the pillar passages discussed above, with a preconceived notion of what inspiration must be, and that they superimpose this notion upon the texts rather than derive their understanding of inspiration exegetically from the text. This very serious charge, I have attempted to show, is not supported with reference to the pillar passages, and it is, on the face of it, not very plausible. Charles Hodge and B. B. Warfield were exegetes before they turned their major attention to dogmatics. A similar remark would apply to many other inerrantists. Of course the question remains as to the primary data, on the basis of which a biblical doctrine of inspiration should be constructed: Are they express statements about the Scripture or are they the phenomena that the Scripture exhibits? I would like to suggest here that both are relevant, and that the appropriate method consists in starting with the former and then proceeding to refinements by virtue of the latter. This is the way in which the biblical position on any subject is best ascertained.<sup>39</sup>

Meanwhile, a comment is in order with respect to the charge of dogmatic presuppositions that is so often levelled against orthodoxy. Let those who would press it not imagine that they function without presuppositions. It must be immediately apparent that they have a prejudice against presuppositions of any sort; they have a systematic aversion to systems, a dogmatic revulsion against dogma! Thus they do not function in full consistency with their own premises: they have a system in which they make a virtue of chaos; they are trenchantly dogmatic presuppositions that is so often levelled against orthodoxy, what makes full sense only as a part of a set, or even an organism. I would not suggest here that Professor Dunn deserves to be charged in these terms, but he makes remarks that appear to veer dangerously in this direction.<sup>40</sup>

*ii) Historicity or recorded utterances.* Professor Dunn raises the question of whether it may not have been God’s intention that ‘sayings of the exalted Christ through an inspired prophet or interpreter should be given a place in the tradition of Jesus’ teachings and accorded the same authority.’<sup>41</sup> This would apply particularly to the fourth gospel, and its record of extended discourses by Jesus. This is not the place to carry a lengthy discussion of a very complex issue, but it should surely be noted that if the gospel writers did not mean to report conversations, statements and discourses of Jesus in the days of his flesh, they certainly confused the church from the very start, for we have no trace in the early Christian literature of any doubt in this respect. John Lightfoot, who was immensely versed in rabbinic literature and wrote the *Horae Hebraicae et Talmudicae*, perhaps the most extensive study of this type until Strack-Billerbeck was published, appears never to have suggested in print that there may be midrashic elements in John’s gospel! Even Schleiermacher, surely no prime example of bias in favour of inerrancy, held that the fourth gospel gave the best historical picture of

Jesus. And John seems to take special pains to give specific detail of time and place.<sup>42</sup> Thus I may be forgiven if I cling to the face-value validity of the gospel statements and, for the present at least, am strongly disinclined to view any statement ascribed to a certain person in a historical context to be anything but a fair and adequate representation of what that person actually said at that point of time. Professor Dunn disappoints here, for his article of 1978 (mentioned above) had led me to expect a much less adventurous stance than I find here.<sup>43</sup>

*iii) Pseudonymity is generally denounced by inerrantists.* They insist that the biblical writings in which a claim of authorship is present should be viewed as authentic products of that person. Professor Dunn raises a question as to how such a claim would be viewed at the time of the writing: if there is not a genuine affirmation of authorship but merely a literary device accepted at that time and not fraught with fraudulent intent, we should not raise an adamant objection. That is perhaps true, but the evidence is not set forth that pseudonymity was so viewed among the ancients and that this comment is applicable to cases like the pastorals or 2 Peter. To deny the authenticity of biblical books seems to have been a pastime of negative critics. It is not really surprising if evangelical scholars are wary of it!<sup>44</sup>

*iv) Dangers implicit in the search for intentionality.* This may be an appropriate place to pause and comment about some hazards to which the course recommended by Professor Dunn may be exposed. Surely it is ominous that he should show himself ready to flirt with such concepts as pseudonymity, unhistorical midrashim and the like, which have been at various times since 1750 among the standard tools of negative critics. This melancholy road has been mapped for us in the very stimulating work of Hans W. Frei, *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative: A Study in Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century Hermeneutics*.<sup>45</sup> This title speaks for itself.

In a note, Dunn states that he is aware of the ‘fallacy of intentionality’, as discussed for instance in the work of E. D. Hirsch, yet he holds that, ‘uncovering the author’s *intended meaning* is the primary goal of New Testament exegesis [*sic*].’<sup>46</sup> I would not here challenge that often our understanding of statements is furthered by a knowledge of the author’s or speaker’s intention, but it is precisely the statement, particularly in a written text, which is to be the vehicle for communicating this intention! To suspend the process of hermeneutics upon intentionality, may throw us into a vicious circle and open the door wide to a kind of psychological second-guessing as replacing a sober analysis of the text. With reference to inspired Scripture, the intention of God, the primary author, would also have to be taken into consideration as well as that of the human writer. Professor Dunn does indeed introduce this factor,<sup>47</sup> but more in terms of asking what kind of book God may have intended us to have in the Bible, rather than how a knowledge of God’s intentions helps us to understand particular passages. The kind of book God wanted the Bible to be is the kind of book he declares it to be in verses like the pillar passages and many others not specifically studied in the article; to wit, God-breathed, his word, of indefectible authority, clothed with God’s own truthfulness. This excludes some of the eventualities which Dunn would like us to consider as possibilities: like a book burdened by human scientific or historical blunders, or again a book with unharmonizable accounts of the same event, or again a book where the exalted Christ’s teachings through inspired prophets are presented as part and parcel of his earthly ministry. This range of intention appears in conflict with the truthfulness of God, and it will do no good to speculate in this direction.

Professor Dunn chides dogmatists for superimposing their presuppositions upon the text rather than proceeding by *exegesis*. But it must be plainly apparent that his forays into God’s

intentionality are not the result of exegesis! By what exegesis can one pass from ‘He said this while teaching in the synagogue in Capernaum’ (John 6:59) to ‘This is a teaching which originated after the ascension of Christ’?

*b) Interpretation*

Professor Dunn calls attention to the fact that Scripture, like any other written text, needs to be interpreted, that is brought home to the reader in terms of his/her ‘language, thought-forms, and idioms.’<sup>48</sup> Translation from the Hebrew, Aramaic or Greek original into modern languages is already a part of this process, which involves many steps aimed at manifesting the relevancy of the Bible for any time or place. This task, however, is not carried out under the aegis of infallibility, but is fraught with the frailties and inadequacies of human activity. Hence it is always subject to challenge for cause. Since, therefore, a fallible factor is introduced into our perception of the meaning of Scripture, Professor Dunn would ask, What is the value of positing (or confessing) an inerrant text at the start? To cry “inerrancy” on all that the Bible touches, when we have to live with such uncertainty, is to promote a kind of double-think which cannot be healthy.<sup>49</sup>

One may well ask, What is the value of having a very strong cable in an aerial tramway, if the connectors between the cabin and the cable are subject to breaking? The answer, of course, is that the connectors can conveniently be inspected and checked whenever desirable, but if the cable itself is not safe, the whole project is foolhardy. The doctrine of the perspicuity of Scripture, so wonderfully reemphasized at the time of the Reformation, and so clearly in line with the concept that God gave us the Scriptures to provide light (Psa. 19:8; 119:105, 130; 2 Peter 1:19), not to promote darkness, affords a strong foundation for believing that a Christian, eager to know the will of God, will not get snarled up in hermeneutical knots but will be able to discern what is essential for faith and life. This is a truth that Professor Dunn also confesses, but which he circumscribes very sharply, limiting clarity to the central core of the message.<sup>50</sup> Yet beside the central core, there are innumerable data, some of them quite peripheral, which are very clearly enunciated in the Bible: for instance, that Emmaus is about seven miles from Jerusalem (Luke 24:13). Some passages are obscure (2 Peter 3:16) and some are open to a variety of interpretations, but in the main the Bible is clear and provides good and reliable guidance to all of God’s children.<sup>51</sup>

Of course it is of paramount importance to distinguish clearly between what Scripture expressly says, and what we interpret it to mean. As sinners we are always inclined to deny or question the validity of God’s Word (Gen. 3:1) and to confer on our own words and thoughts the infallibility and authority that belong to God alone. This temptation must be firmly resisted, particularly by those who hold strongly to the inerrancy of Scripture, lest God’s authority be diluted by being confused with human pronouncements of any kind.

Professor Dunn’s judgement is that the idea of inerrancy is really not firmly grounded in Scripture, but fits more naturally into the category of a particular interpretation of Scripture, and one which is accepted, he thinks, by only a minority of Christians. He is therefore ready to repudiate it on the basis of his own interpretation of the scriptural view of biblical authority. This is surely a legitimate way to approach the matter, if his exegetical premises be granted. It must be clear to those who read this article thus far, that I am in no way persuaded by his exegesis, which appears to me fatally flawed by a failure to consider all relevant passages and by a refusal to draw properly the necessary implications of the four passages he does treat in his essay. The fact of the fallible nature of our interpretations by no means implies that we are unable to reject certain interpretations which impress us as manifestly

faulty. Professor Dunn does it to inerrancy, and wise inerrantists in turn will do it to Professor Dunn's construction. Interpretation cuts both ways!

### **3) Alleged theological dangers**

Professor Dunn warns that 'the Warfield position' exposes its supporters to theological dangers that he would like us to avoid. Here I would not be concerned to deny the reality of perils. In theology, so much is a matter of proper balance that the discipline may more aptly be compared to a climb on a ridge rather than a walk on a plain! If one holds to the unity of the Godhead, there is a danger of slipping into modalism or subordinationism; if one wishes to press the threefold personhood, tritheism and an abandonment of monotheism threaten. If one asserts strongly the sovereignty of God, some people will imagine that this involves a denial of the freedom of rational creatures; and if human and angelic freedom are confessed, some will see this as an encroachment upon the sovereign action of God. To stress the deity of the incarnate Christ may lead to Docetism, Apollinarianism or Monophysitism of one type or another, but to stress his humanity beyond proper bounds leads to Ebionitism, Arianism, or at least to Kenoticism, all of which do not sufficiently recognize the true deity of Christ. Justification by faith may be abused to the point of antinomianism (Rom. 6:1,15) and an undiscerning emphasis on good works to a denial of the gracious character of the gospel—yes, to salvation by works (in spite of Rom. 3:20).

So what is new in saying that inerrancy is dangerous? As with so many doctrines in Scripture, the doctrine of inspiration must involve a certain tension between a divine and a human factor, neither of which may be compromised or reduced to the other. Inerrancy is simply the form which the unadulterated affirmation of the divine is bound to take. The denial of inerrancy of necessity is viewed by inerrantists as both compromising and adulterating this divine factor in ways required neither by the reality of human authorship nor by the actual phenomena of Scripture.

Specifically, Professor Dunn mentions Pharisaic legalism and bibliolatry as the dangers to which inerrancy exposes its supporters.

The great problem with the Pharisees was not their doctrine of Scripture, with which our Lord appears to have been in hearty agreement (John 5:39; Matt. 23:3,23; etc.), but their disregard of certain portions of Scripture,<sup>52</sup> their judgemental attitude toward others,<sup>53</sup> their pride and spiritual blindness manifested in that they thought to have fulfilled in perfection the divine requirements,<sup>54</sup> their tendency to insist on their own network of oppressive regulations, presumably designed to implement God's law, while keeping some large loopholes that enabled them to escape inconvenience,<sup>55</sup> their insistence on the binding authority of their tradition even when it was in conflict with the express statements of Scripture,<sup>56</sup> their desire to be admired for their piety, when they had little true love for God himself,<sup>57</sup> and their arrogant desire to control the lives of others to the point of shutting their eyes to the manifest divine mission of Jesus, the prophets and the apostles.<sup>58</sup>

Now, who can say that he/she is immune to these tendencies? We all have the roots of these defects within us. This is the subtle power of the parable of the Pharisee and the tax-collector (Luke 18:9-14), that at the moment we identify with the tax-collector and point to some one else as a Pharisee, we have joined the company of the latter in self-righteousness! I would therefore not deny that Pharisaical attitudes are a threat to inerrantists. This, however, is not due to their high doctrine of Scripture but to the common sinfulness of the heart which, alas, they share with all other human beings, including those who do not believe in inerrancy.<sup>59</sup>

The second theological danger of inerrancy that Dunn mentions is that it leads to *bibliolatry*. Asserting the Bible's indefectible authority is attributing to it 'an authority proper only to God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit',<sup>60</sup> he avers. But how shall we distinguish between the authority of God and the authority of what he says? And if what Scripture says, God says,<sup>61</sup> how can we claim to accept the authority of God, while rejecting that of Scripture? The really improper attitude in the worship of God is not an unqualified acceptance of his Word, but rather the presumption to assert that what God says may be fraught with error.

Dunn draws an analogy between the tendency to Mariolatry in Roman Catholicism and the evangelical affirmation of inerrancy. But evangelicals do not *worship* the Bible. Some unwise people may treat it as a fetish, for instance, when soldiers carry steel-plated New Testaments in the hope of being protected from bullets, or when people open the Bible at random in order to find God's message for them at a particular moment; but this is not characteristic of well-trained evangelicals and in any case does not amount to worship. In all honesty I have to say that in all my life I have never encountered any person who was actually worshipping the Bible! The accusation of bibliolatry is an utterly worthless and groundless charge, not worthy of a competent Christian scholar. Will Professor Dunn raise it against Calvin because he wrote:

...we owe to the Scripture the same reverence as we owe to God, since it has its only source in Him and has nothing of human origin mixed with it...?<sup>62</sup>

In this same context Dunn adds:

We cannot argue for a precise analogy between the divine and human in Christ (effecting sinlessness) and the divine and human in Scripture (effecting inerrancy) without making the Bible worthy of the same honour as Christ—and that is bibliolatry.<sup>63</sup>

Now if Professor Dunn had only read his sources more carefully, he could have avoided making such a reckless charge, for Warfield in his great *ISBE* article on 'Inspiration' was very careful to articulate the difference, as well as the analogy, between Christ and the Scripture. He wrote: 'There is no hypostatic union between the Divine and the human in Scripture.'<sup>64</sup> Professor Packer, in his classic book *'Fundamentalism' and the Word of God*, also delineated with great care the limits of the analogy.<sup>65</sup> The great Dutch theologian, Herman Bavinck, also makes use of this analogy,<sup>66</sup> and who would be so bold and foolish as to accuse him of idolatry? Now, if these authorities seem too Reformed for Professor Dunn, it may be that he will find it more impressive that the Second Vatican Council used the analogy in the beautiful climax of the third chapter of the Apostolic Constitution on Revelation:

For the words of God, expressed in human language, have been made like human discourse, just as of old the Word of the eternal Father, when he took to himself the weak flesh of humanity, became like other men.<sup>67</sup>

#### **4) Alleged educational disaster**

In Professor Dunn's final stricture against 'the Warfield position', he variously calls it '*pastorally disastrous*' in the text,<sup>68</sup> and 'educationally disastrous' in his summary.<sup>69</sup> What he has in view is that the insistence on biblical inerrancy puts in jeopardy the faith of students, who in the presence of apparent discrepancies in the Bible, are tempted to abandon Christianity altogether. The 'everything or nothing' policy, he concludes, is responsible for the shipwreck in the faith of people who could have been safeguarded if only they had been

exposed to a more mature approach to authority, which had enabled them to distinguish between peripheral matters, in which the Bible may err, and essential issues of faith and life, in which it may be trusted. Professor Dunn rejects the ‘slippery slope’ analogy, according to which minor departures from biblical authority tend to snowball into wholesale discard of it, and he assesses the position of those who stay at ‘the top of the slope’ as that of spiritual immaturity, where one is racked by fears: fear of discovering an error somewhere in the Bible, fear of possible conflicting archaeological discoveries, fear of open discussion, fear of searching questions.<sup>70</sup>

As I see it, none of these things is true with reference to properly informed inerrantists. I don’t know who may be the inerrantists from whom Professor Dunn gathers his representation, although his almost cavalier reference to Professor Packer as ‘Jim Packer’<sup>71</sup> leads me to think that he is reasonably well acquainted with this eminent living Anglican theologian. Personally I have been privileged to know well, or even intimately, scores of learned inerrantists from all continents except Antarctica, and I am at a loss to recognize the picture. These are not people racked by fear of discovering a fatal mistake in the Bible, any more than Christians in general are scared that somehow it might surface that Jesus committed a sin at one point or another. If an inerrantist were committed to the view that the authority of Scripture were dependent upon his/her personal ability to resolve all difficulties, there might well be room for uneasiness and fear; but this is emphatically not the case, and informed inerrantists are perfectly willing to keep in abeyance certain problems to which they have no present solution, confident that God, who inspired the Scriptures, would also vindicate their truthfulness in his own time. This is clearly and specifically articulated by Warfield<sup>72</sup> and Packer,<sup>73</sup> and it is a pity that Professor Dunn—by apparently missing this point—permitted himself this wholesale misrepresentation.

Students well-taught in the *real* doctrine of inerrancy, rather than the strawman with which Professors Barr, Achtemeier and Dunn appear to enjoy fencing, would not permit their faith to totter at the appearance of a difficulty, for they would know well how to distinguish between a present difficulty and a *proven error*. Meanwhile, if some professors of exegesis were to show a more pastoral concern for them, rather than to manifest a kind of pernicious pleasure in pointing out problems in Scripture, it is possible that they might not so easily be shaken in their faith.

The record for ministerial education of schools that have abandoned a high doctrine of Scripture is clear, and I would characterize it as ‘disastrous’. The record of schools where inerrancy was taught, and is taught, seems by contrast to be quite enviable. Would Professor Dunn characterize Princeton Theological Seminary from 1812 to 1929 as a disaster area, because inerrancy was taught there? Let the reader judge.

This concludes my comments on Professor Dunn’s objections to the Warfield position. In another instalment, I purpose to deal with the learned professor’s alternative programme, and with his performance in terms of it.

*(to be continued)*

**ROGER NICOLE** is Professor of Systematic Theology at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary, Wenham, Mass., USA.

Endnotes:

- 1) J. D. G. Dunn, 'The Authority of Scripture According to Scripture', *Churchman*, 96, 1982, pp. 104-22 and 201-25.
- 2) Peter Williams in reply to a critical letter, *Churchman*, 96, 1982, p.198.
- 3) 'Evangelical Disagreements About the Bible', *Churchman*, 96, 1982, pp.226-40.
- 4) cf. J. Meeter and R. Nicole, *A Bibliography of B. B. Warfield*, (Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing House, Philadelphia 1974); R. Nicole, 'The Inspiration of Scripture: B. B. Warfield and Dr Dewey M. Beegle', *The Gordon Review*, 8, 1965, pp.93-109.
- 5) Dunn, op. cit., notes 12, 20, 31, 39.
- 6) Dunn, op. cit., notes 12, 13, 14, 16, 25, 26, 30, 34, 49, 51, 55, 56, 58, 60, 70, 81, 83, 115.
- 7) Dunn, op. cit., notes 5 (with reference to two different pieces), 17, 24, 30, 64, 65.
- 8) Dunn, op. cit., pp.104, 105. Here Prof. Dunn relies unduly on the jaundiced judgement of F. W. Farrar, who resorts to invective in his *History of Interpretation* (Macmillan, London 1886) and advances the view that the Arminian, Cartesian and Salmurian movements in the seventeenth century were a welcome relief from the vagaries of Orthodoxy! In saying that the writers of the *Formula Consensus* of 1675 'found it necessary to maintain that the pointing of the Massoretic text of the Old Testament belonged to the original autographs', Prof. Dunn is simply wrong, for the *Formula* carefully articulates that it is 'either the vowel points themselves, or at least the power of the points' which are inspired, thus carefully avoiding settling the historical issue between Buxdorf and Cappel. In extenuation, one can observe that Prof. Dunn is only one in a long list of scholars who have given expression to this criticism of the *Formula Consensus*, thus creating the impression that they were more eager to stigmatize reprehensible scholastics than to check carefully their sources. In this whole area one cannot afford to overlook the splendid work of Robert Preus, *The Inspiration of Scripture: A Study of The Theology of the Seventeenth Century Lutheran Dogmaticians* (Oliver and Boyd, Edinburgh 1955). This work amply demonstrates the spurious character of many of the hackneyed formulae commonly used to condemn Protestant scholasticism. One could venture the view that the criticism in question is in inverse ratio to one's direct acquaintance with the sources!
- 9) I am aware that certain scholars have represented Calvin otherwise, but I have yet to see a single text of Calvin where he expresses a doubt concerning the truthfulness and divine authority of a single authentic autographic text of Scripture. What F. W. Farrar (op. cit., p.349) advanced under this caption is so far from being adequate evidence as to be ridiculous.
- 10) See Philip E. Hughes (sometime editor of *Churchman*), *The Theology of the English Reformers* (Eerdmans, Grand Rapids 1965), pp.11-44.
- 11) L. Gausson's *Théopneustie*, published eleven years before Warfield was born, had fully convinced me of the biblical foundation for, and propriety of, inerrancy before I even knew that Warfield existed. One may well surmise with what enthusiasm I discovered his writings in 1938 when I came to study in the USA.
- 12) cf., e.g., B. B. Warfield, 'The Inspiration of the Bible', *Bibliotheca Sacra*, 51, 1894, pp.614-40 and reprinted under the title 'The Church Doctrine of Inspiration' in *The Inspiration and Authority of the Bible* (Marshall Morgan & Scott, London 1951), pp.105-28. Here Warfield writes 'This church doctrine of inspiration differs from the theories that would fair supplant it,

in that it is not the invention nor the property of an individual, but the settled faith of the universal church of God...' (p.106). See also *Inspiration and Authority*, pp.173, 420-2, and J. Meeter, ed., *Selected Shorter Writings of B. B. Warfield*, 2 vols (Presbyterian & Reformed Publishing House, Nutley, NJ 1970), II, pp.617-19.

- 13) James Orr, *Revelation and Inspiration* (Duckworth, London 1910). p.216.
- 14) Dunn, op. cit., p.118.
- 15) ibid., p.107.
- 16) ibid., p.110.
- 17) ibid., loc. cit.
- 18) Warfield, *Inspiration and Authority*, pp. 351-407.
- 19) B. B. Warfield, *Revelation and Inspiration* (OUP, New York 1927, reprinted by Baker Book House, Grand Rapids 1981), pp.115-65.
- 20) *Presbyterian and Reformed Review*, 5, 1894, pp.600-53. Reprinted as a separate pamphlet under the title *Limited Inspiration* (Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing House, Philadelphia 1961).
- 21) *Bibliotheca Sacra*, 51, pp. 614-40. See n. 12 above.
- 22) Warfield, *Inspiration and Authority*, pp. 169-226.
- 23) B. B. Warfield, 'Calvin's Doctrine of the Knowledge of God', *Calvin and Augustine* (Presbyterian & Reformed Publishing House, Philadelphia 1956), pp.29-130; 'The Westminster Doctrine of Holy Scripture' and 'The Doctrine of Inspiration of the Westminster Divines', *The Westminster Assembly and its Work* (OUP, New York 1931), pp. 155-257 and 261-333.
- 24) Reprinted in Meeter, *Selected Shorter Writings of B. B. Warfield*, 1, pp.31-3.
- 25) Reprinted in *Inspiration and Authority*, pp. 131-66.
- 26) Dunn, op. cit., p.202 and notes 64, 65 on p.222.
- 27) ibid., p. 108.
- 28) A. A. Hodge and B. B. Warfield, ed. R. Nichole, *Inspiration* (Baker Book House, Grand Rapids 1979), p.26; Warfield, *Inspiration and Authority*, p. 150.
- 29) The mention of *Whitaker's Almanack* is designed to relate to British readers. In the USA, I should have drawn my illustration from *The World Almanac and Book of Facts*.
- 30) Dunn, op. cit., p. 109.
- 31) cf. ibid., p.119, n.21.
- 32) Warfield, *Inspiration and Authority*, p.140, quoted by Dunn, op. cit., p.109.
- 33) Dunn, loc. cit.

- 34) cf. J. D. G. Dunn, 'Prophetic "I"-sayings and the Jesus Tradition', *New Testament Studies*, 24, 1977/78, pp. 175-98.
- 35) There is some question as to where the discussion of exegesis stops and that of hermeneutics starts. For some, Prof. Dunn probably included, exegesis relates to the meaning of a text in its original time and place, while hermeneutics relates to the study of the meaning and application of the same text now. For others, myself included, hermeneutics is understood in the traditional sense of 'science of interpretation', a discipline in which an endeavour is made to set up rules for ascertaining the meaning of any text, while exegesis is concerned with the application of the principles of hermeneutics to particular texts. For the sake of the present study, as I see it, the particular category under which Prof. Dunn's remarks are considered is not of special importance.
- 36) Dunn, 'The Authority of Scripture', p. 110.
- 37) *ibid.*, p.113.
- 38) *ibid.*, pp.110, 111.
- 39) For more ample details on this topic, I may refer the reader to my essay 'Induction and Deduction with Reference to Inspiration' in R. C. Sproul, ed., *Soli Deo Gloria* (Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing House, Nutley, NJ 1976), pp.95-102.
- 40) cf. notably in J. D. G. Dunn, *Unity and Diversity in the New Testament* (SCM Press, London 1975).
- 41) Dunn, 'The Authority of Scripture', p.111.
- 42) John 1:28, 29, 35, 39, 43; 2:1, 11, 12, 13, 23; 3:22; 4:3-6, 43, 45, 46, 54; 5:1, 2, 14; 6:1, 4, 10, 16, 17, 24, 25, 59; 7:1, 10, 14, 28, 27; 8:59; 9:6, 13, 40; 10:22, 40; 11:5, 17, 38, 54; 12:1, 9, 20, 35, 36; 13:1, 2, 30, 31; 17:1; 18:1, 13, 28; 19:9, 13, 17, 31, 40, 41; 20:1, 3, 19, 26; 21:1.
- 43) cf. n.33 above.
- 44) My colleague Dr David Wells very appropriately called my attention to the excellent work of Prof. Donald Guthrie with respect to alleged pseudonymity in the canonical Scripture: 'Epistolary Pseudepigraphy', *New Testament Introduction* (IVP, London 1970'), pp.671-84; 'The Development of the Canonical Pseudepigrapha in New Testament Criticism', *Vox Evangelica*, 1, 1962, and reprinted in *The Authorship and Integrity of the New Testament* (SPCK, London 1965), pp.14-39.
- 45) Yale University Press, Yale 1974.
- 46) Dunn, 'The Authority of Scripture', p.120, n.29. It seems strange to restrict this to New Testament study, as if it did not apply to Old Testament exegesis, or for that matter to the study of any text!
- 47) *ibid.*, p.111
- 48) *ibid.*, p.113.
- 49) *ibid.*, p. 114.
- 50) *ibid.*, loc. cit.

- 51) Prof. Dunn's attack on the Reformed emphasis on the sermon in Christian worship (ibid., p.115) stems perhaps from his exaggerated stress on the quandaries of interpretation. If you don't know what the Bible means, what is there to expound? Yet if the Book is so obscure, its meaning should the more be elucidated by those who are well trained in exegesis.

The somewhat barbed question, 'Does Jim Packer worship in accordance with 1 Cor. 14:26?' (ibid., p.121, n.49), can easily be answered. If Prof. Dunn is prepared to show that this passage contains a mandate for the Christian worship of all times, I am sure that Prof. Packer will be most eager to comply. I have not cleared this matter with my friend Prof. Packer, but I believe that I know him and his stance well enough to say this!

- 52) Matt. 12:3, 5, 7; 23:23, 24; Mark 2:25,26; Luke 6:3,4; 11:42; John 5:47; 7:19. This note and the six subsequent ones will list some passages where the word Pharisee is not specifically mentioned, but which stigmatize the same defects.
- 53) Matt. 9:11; 11:18,19; Luke 7:39; 15:2; 18:11; John 7:24.
- 54) Matt. 3:8, 10; 21:31,32; Luke 3:8,9; 18:11,12,14; John 3:10; 8:33; 9:41; 12:40; 15:24; Phil. 3:5.
- 55) Matt. 12:2; 16:11,12; 19:3-8; 23:3,4,13; Mark 2:24-26; 10:2-5; John 5:10.
- 56) Matt. 15:2-6; Mark 7:1-5, 9-13; Luke 11:38; John 9:16.
- 57) Matt. 6:5,16; 7:15; 9:14; 15:7,8; 23:5-12, 16-22, 25-28; Mark 2:18; 7:6,7; Luke 5:33; 7:45-47; 11:43; 14:7; 16:15; John 5:44; 7:19; 12:43.
- 58) Matt. 9:34; 10:25; 12:6,14,24ff.; 38ff.; 21:15,33-45; 22:15-17,35; 23:15,29-36; Mark 3:6,22; 12:1-12; Luke 7:30; 11:15; 19:39; John 5:16, 37, 38, 43, 47; 7:1,13,19,20,32, 47; 8:40,44,59; 9:22,29,34; 10:20,31,39; 11:47-53,57; 12:10,11,19,42; 15:18, 20,23-25; 16:2,3; Acts 4:17; 7:51,52; 12:3.
- 59) One is greatly surprised to see such a well-trained exegete as Prof. Dunn using 2 Cor. 3:6 as expressing a contrast between an attachment to the very letter of Scripture and an emancipation from the text, which Paul would represent as a life-giving spirit ('The Authority of Scripture', pp.117, 118). One might have looked for this kind of misuse of the text in the works of Auguste Sabatier (*The Religions of Authority and the Religion of the Spirit* [Williams & Norgate, London 1904]) and other assorted devotees of liberal thought. Surely the context makes it clear that Paul's contrast relates to the old and the new covenant, and has absolutely nothing to do with a literal or non-literal acceptance of the authority of Scripture. Jesus and Paul themselves emphasize sometimes single letters in the Old Testament text (Matt. 5:18; Gal. 3:16). How one could wish that scholars would pay heed to the warning of Alfred Plummer: '...we must not be misled by the common contrast in English between "letter" and "spirit", which means the contrast between the literal sense and the spiritual or inward sense of one and the same document or authority' (International Critical Commentary, *2 Corinthians* [T. & T. Clark, Edinburgh 1915], p.87)!
- 60) Dunn, 'The Authority of Scripture', p. 117.
- 61) Prof. Dunn concedes this on pp. 108,202, although in other parts of his article he is concerned to introduce reservations.
- 62) John Calvin, *The Second Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Corinthians and the Epistles to Timothy, Titus and Philemon* (Eerdmans, Grand Rapids 1964), p.330.

- 63) Dunn, 'The Authority of Scripture', p.117. In his footnote 59 on p.122, Prof. Dunn quotes a section of Adolf Saphir's *Christ and the Scriptures* (Marshall Morgan & Scott, London n.d.), where Saphir castigates as bibliolatry a position in which Scripture is arbitrarily isolated from the incarnate Word and from the inspiring Spirit. Perhaps Prof. Dunn may have overlooked that Saphir, if I mistake not, an advocate of inerrancy, had written earlier 'As far as this objection [the charge of bibliolatry] is urged by those who do not fully and clearly acknowledge the Divine authority and inspiration of Scripture, it is easily refuted' (p.151). Saphir also repeatedly draws attention to a parallel between Christ and the written Word (op. cit., pp.1,6, 69-76, and *The Divine Unity of Scripture* [Hodder and Stoughton, London 1906<sup>6</sup>], pp. 1-3, 18-20).
- 64) Warfield, *Inspiration and Authority*, p. 162.
- 65) J. I. Packer, '*Fundamentalism*' and the Word of God (IVP, London 1958). pp.82-4.
- 66) Herman Bavinck, *Gereformeerde Dogmatick* (Kok, Kampen 1918<sup>3</sup>), I, p.460.
- 67) Walter Abbott, ed., *The Documents of Vatican II* (Guild Press, New York 1966), p.121.
- 68) Dunn, 'The Authority of Scripture', p.117.
- 69) *ibid.*, p.118.
- 70) *ibid.*, loc. cit.
- 71) *ibid.*, p.121, n.49.
- 72) Warfield, *Inspiration and Authority*, pp.127, 128, 215-16, 219-26, 325, 439. 'If we cannot harmonize without straining, let us leave unharmonized', p.219.
- 73) Packer, op. cit., pp.105, 109. D. Harold Lindsell in *The Battle for the Bible* did indeed follow J. M. Cheney in suggesting that Peter denied our Lord six times rather than just three times and that this provides the basis for a harmonious correlation of all four gospels. Very few if any scholars that I know are willing to accept this as a plausible explanation. Prof. Dunn may have the right to adduce this case as an example of an excess that arose in the context of biblical inerrancy (n.57, p.122). He ought not to leave the impression that this kind of development is inevitable among upholders of that doctrine.