

I Background and Issue(s)

Jack Rogers' and Donald McKim's *The Authority and Interpretation of the Bible*,¹ *Eternity* magazine's Book of the Year for 1980, became something of a focal point for discussion of the doctrine of Scripture when it appeared, especially among evangelicals in this country. A basic conclusion of the authors is that the prevailing view of Scripture in contemporary evangelicalism, a conception rooted in the views of the old Princeton theologians, especially B. B. Warfield (1851–1921), and marked by a predominating concern with inerrancy, is a regrettable deviation from the classic church doctrine, especially the position of the Reformers, and so an unfortunate and unnecessary barrier to unity and progress among evangelicals.²

Understandably this and other, related conclusions of the authors provoked a wide range of reaction. Perhaps most searching was the lengthy review of John Woodbridge.³ This critique ought to be read carefully by all concerned. In my

¹ Subtitled *A Historical Approach* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1979) hereafter, *Authority*.

² See, e.g., the tone set in the preface and introduction.

³ *Trinity Journal* NS 1 (1980) 165–236. An extensive and useful summary of this review is provided by M. L. Branson in *TSF Bulletin* 4/4 (March 1981) 6–12. See also, among other reviews, W. S. Barker, *Presbyterion* 6 (1980) 96–107; W. R. Godfrey, *Christianity Today* 25/9 (May 8, 1981) 59ff, and D. F. Wells, *Westminster Theological Journal* 43 (1980–81) 152–55.

judgment, it has demonstrated notable flaws in the historical methodology of the authors, and deserves serious consideration.⁴

Not considered in Woodbridge's otherwise thorough coverage, neither in his review article nor his book, is the authors' discussion of the Dutch theologians in the Reformed tradition, Abraham Kuyper (1837–1920) and Herman Bavinck (1854–1921). Stated briefly, their view is that Kuyper and Bavinck were in reaction against Reformed scholasticism, culminating in the old Princeton theology, and anticipated recent efforts at recovering the Reformed tradition that include the work of Karl Barth and G. C. Berkouwer as well as the United Presbyterian (now the PCUSA) Confession of 1967. In what follows here I propose to test this viewpoint, primarily by setting out what Kuyper and Bavinck themselves have to say on Scripture.⁵ I hope to do this in something of the same spirit of openness to correction and further discussion the authors themselves have expressed in their preface.

An exhaustive or comprehensive survey of the rather extensive writings of both Kuyper and Bavinck on the doctrine of Scripture, while in itself highly desirable, is not practicable here or necessary for our purposes. Instead, the authors' treatment, along with two earlier, underlying articles by Rogers,⁶ suggests a number of controlling questions that serve to focus our examination and at the same time to evaluate their treatment.

⁴ McKim responded to Woodbridge in *TSF Bulletin* 4/5 (April 1981) 6–9. In my opinion, he parries but does not really answer Woodbridge's probing criticisms. Subsequently, Woodbridge's excellent work was expanded into a book, *Biblical Authority: A Critique of the Rogers/McKim Proposal* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1982).

⁵ A brief, yet helpful overview of essential aspects of their views is provided by A. A. Hoekema, "Kuyper, Bavinck, and Infallibility," *Reformed Journal* 11/5 (May 1961) 20–22.

⁶ "The Church Doctrine of Biblical Authority," in *Biblical Authority* (ed. J. Rogers; Waco: Word Books, 1977) 15–46, esp. 41–46; "A Third Alternative," in *Scripture, Tradition, and Interpretation* (ed. W. W. Gasque and W. S. LaSor; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978) 70–91.

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According to the authors, Kuyper and Bavinck, in reacting against post-Reformation scholasticism,⁷ had a view of Scripture that is “functional” rather than “philosophical.”⁸ Their concern was with the activity of the Holy Spirit, not evidences and rational demonstration, in convincing people of the inspiration and authority of Scripture.⁹ This functional approach further involved an “organic” view of inspiration, in contrast to the mechanical view of scholasticism.¹⁰ The primary concern of this organic conception is with the (saving) content of Scripture rather than its (verbal) form.¹¹ It distinguishes between center and periphery in Scripture,¹² that is, between the divine message (saving function) and the human forms in which it is accommodated.¹³ Because the former is what is at stake in Scripture, Kuyper and Bavinck did not fear criticism of the latter. They were open to critical evaluation of the periphery, the human, culturally conditioned form of the Bible.¹⁴ The authors do not make clear whether they think Kuyper and Bavinck believed there were actual errors in Scripture, but certainly suggest that the intent to deceive was the only conception of error of concern to them.¹⁵

⁷ *Authority*, 389.

⁸ *Authority*, 389, 391; “Third Alternative,” 74, 83–84.

⁹ *Authority*, 389f, 399; “Church Doctrine,” 43; “Third Alternative,” 74–75, 77–78.

¹⁰ *Authority*, 391–92, 399; “Third Alternative,” 78.

¹¹ E.g., “... the saving content, not the supernatural form of Scripture” (*Authority*, 399).

¹² *Authority*, 391; “Third Alternative,” 78–79, 83.

¹³ *Authority*, 390–91, 393 (“Scripture has a central message and a lot of surrounding material.... The central saving message of Scripture.... The supporting material of Scripture....”); “Third Alternative,” 78, 83.

¹⁴ *Authority*, 392–93; “Church Doctrine,” 42; “Third Alternative,” 76, 78.

¹⁵ *Authority*, 393: “Scripture fulfilled God’s intention to reveal saving truth. No human mistakes could frustrate that divine motivation. It was not meaningful, therefore, to equate human inaccuracy with error in the biblical sense of intent to deceive”; “Third Alternative,” 83; cf. “Church Doctrine,” 46.

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The following set of questions, then, is prompted by the discussion of Rogers and McKim:

(1) How, in general, did Kuyper and Bavinck view themselves in relation to post-Reformation Reformed orthodoxy, and how did they see the latter in relation to the Reformation itself?

(2) How did they view the activity of the Holy Spirit, in particular, the internal testimony of the Spirit, in relation to the recognition of Scripture and its authority?

(3) How did they view the relationship between form and content in Scripture?

(4) Closely related to (3), how did they view the analogy between incarnation and inscripturation? What significance did they attach to the fact that divine and human factors conjoin both in the person of Christ and in Scripture?

(5) How did they view biblical criticism? What on the whole was their attitude toward the mainstream of biblical scholarship in their day?

(6) How did they view the *notion* of biblical inerrancy? This is not to ask whether they used the terms “inerrancy” or “inerrant” in relation to Scripture (apparently they did not, certainly not with any detectable frequency). Nor is it to ask whether they believed the Bible makes pronouncements with modern scientific exactness.¹⁶ Rather, the precise

¹⁶ No end of confusion in current discussions has been created, especially by the opponents of biblical inerrancy, by equating it with notions of scientific precision and technical accuracy. Rogers and McKim, for instance, are guilty of this (e.g., *Authority*, xx, xxi, 457, 459; “Church Doctrine,” 44–46; “Third Alternative,” 75–76, 80–81). In a paper given at a conference on biblical interpretation held at the Institute of Christian Studies in Toronto in June 1981, Rogers acknowledged that he had previously misunderstood the position of many contemporary biblical inerrantists in this respect (see the editorials of K. Kantzer, *Christianity Today* 25/15 [Sept 4, 1981] 16–19 and G. Marsden, *Reformed Journal* 31/9 [September 1981] 2–3). The issue that still remains unresolved, however, is the inerrancy position of the old Princeton theologians. As I try to make clear below, scientific, technical precision has not been the notion of

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question is whether or not they held to a view of biblical infallibility that at the same time allows for either the actual presence or the possibility of errors in Scripture. Did they believe there were errors in Scripture? Did they think there was any sense in which the category of error could be properly or meaningfully applied to the Bible?

The discussion that follows will not attempt to give a separate answer, in turn, to each of these questions for both men. Instead, taken together, especially question (6), which raises the issue of inerrancy, the questions may be seen as constituting a network of interests, an angle of approach from which the Rogers-McKim interpretation can be measured, and Kuyper and Bavinck related to contemporary discussions on Scripture. At the same time, I hope to avoid the inherent danger, on an approach thus qualified, of misrepresenting them or distorting their views as a whole.

biblical inerrancy advocated by at least the best of the Reformed tradition, *including* Warfield.