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Dr. Homrighausen and the Bible

IN February, 1921, the Rev. Professor B. B. Warfield of Princeton Theological Seminary ceased his labors and passed from this earthly scene into the presence of his Lord. He left behind him a legacy of articles on the inspiration of the Bible which, since his death, have been collected into one volume under the title *Revelation and Inspiration*. This volume is an exposition and defense of what he himself calls the "well-defined church-doctrine of inspiration," and expresses the historic position of the seminary that he served with such distinction for some 33 years. It enunciates and establishes, in a way excelled by no other work that has ever been produced on the subject, the Reformed Christian conception of the inspiration of the Bible. The position championed by Dr. Warfield is, in a word, that of "plenary inspiration," a position that carries with it as corollary the doctrine of Biblical inerrancy. To the establishment and defense of this doctrine as the only true and tenable one Dr. Warfield brought his characteristic depth of devotion and massive scholarship.

Under the copyright date of 1936 Dr. E. G. Homrighausen has written a book under the title *Christianity in America*. Since the publication of this book Dr. Homrighausen has been appointed professor in Princeton Theological Seminary. In the aforementioned volume he says, "Few intelligent Protestants can still hold to the idea that the Bible is an infallible book; that it contains no linguistic errors, no historical discrepancies, no antiquated scientific assumptions, not even bad ethical standards. Historical investigation and literary criticism have taken the magic out of the Bible and have

made it a composite human book, written by many hands in different ages. The existence of thousands of variations of texts makes it impossible to hold the doctrine of a book verbally infallible. Some might still claim for the 'original copies' of the Bible an infallible character, but this view only begs the question and makes such Christian apologetics more ridiculous in the eyes of sincere men" (p. 121). There can be no doubt, then, but that Dr. Homrighausen in 1936 rejected the universal church-doctrine of plenary or verbal inspiration.

In an article, "The Bible Today," printed in *The Presbyterian* of March 24th, 1938, Dr. Homrighausen says, "Statements made by me personally, and by others of like mind, a few years ago, have been misunderstood, and had we to express ourselves again in writing, we would exercise greater caution in the choice of words, not for the sake of diplomacy, but because we have grown in grace and knowledge." We might inquire if Dr. Homrighausen has abandoned his position of two years ago with reference to the Bible.

In this same article of a month ago there are several statements which might appear to indicate reversal of position. Presumably not a few will thus interpret them. He says, for example, "No man dare say that only certain parts of the Bible constitute the Word of God. The Bible is a totality. Besides, such arbitrary human selection is sheer arrogance, and ends in making man a determiner of what is God's Word and what is not. Jesus Christ is the determiner of God's Word." Again he says, "This makes us think of *all* writings of the Bible not as coming from individual writers, but as being in-

spired by the Holy Spirit. In this sense the Bible is the Word of God."

From the somewhat naïve judgment that this is intended to assert the historic church-doctrine of plenary inspiration, we believe, Dr. Homrighausen would turn with something of indignation. Furthermore, we believe it can be shown from this very article that, though it may very well be that he would not now state his position as sharply as he did in 1936, yet his position is basically the same.

In the very paragraph that follows our last quotation he proceeds, "With this view of the Bible, it can be seen that there is no hesitancy whatever in applying the methods of Biblical criticism to the human side of the Bible. That the vessel in which the Word is held is necessary to the Word content is granted, although we should be very careful not to limit God by a human vessel. The vessel may be defaced, it may be somewhat marred, its nature better understood through reverent study, but that is no indication that it is useless, or 'full of mistakes.' It, nevertheless, is the vessel of the Word, and because of its testimony, it is a unique sacred vessel. We hold with Jowett that the Bible would still remain unlike any other book, even after the canons of criticism had been applied to it that might be applied to any other book."

In this quotation Dr. Homrighausen has given us anew the concept of inspiration that really underlies his less elusive statements of two years ago. For what has he done? He has distinguished between the word or text of Scripture and the Word of God. The Scriptures, he maintains, are not the Word of God—they are the vessel of the Word. And the vessel may be defaced and somewhat marred. His concept of Scripture, then, does not imply that all that Scripture says is true.

He does indeed say that "Bible history must be real and substantially accurate history, especially where that history is closely related to the theme of revelation," and that the "Holy Spirit guided holy men who recorded these events so that in substance they truthfully witness to God's active Word." But it is only too apparent that the distinctions and reservations made imply that historical inaccuracies and errors, as well as errors with respect to facts that come within

the province of natural science, are not inconsistent with his view of inspiration. There need be no mistake. For Dr. Homrighausen the Scriptures or the words of Scripture are not the Word of God. They are the human vessel that brings or witnesses to us the Word of God.

In order to elucidate in more detail the radical difference between Dr. Homrighausen's view and that of plenary inspiration we may quote and analyze the following statement from his recent article: "Bible history is revelation history, that is, everything recorded in the Bible is related to, and issues out of, God's revelation of Himself in the events described [italics ours]. As such the Bible is a totality, with one single theme. It seeks to witness to 'God's Story,' or the 'Story of God's Action in History.'" In conjunction with this we may quote from his book, *Christianity in America* (p. 131). "It is perfectly evident," he says, "that this revelation of God actually took place in human history. The Bible is only a series of human records seeking to tell what God did in the lives of men and women who took Him at His Word and lived in obedience to His sovereign leading. The Word of God is greater than the words of the Bible, for it is primarily an act of God, an event of God in human flesh."

Now it is true that the Bible contains the record or story of God's action in history. It is true also that those acts, in particular redemptive acts, were antecedent to the written record of them, except, of course, insofar as predictive prophecy in many cases is prior to the events. It is true furthermore that the record is a divinely inspired record so wrought by the Holy Spirit through the instrumentality of men that it is a living word.

But—and here the fatal divergence from the Biblical doctrine of inspiration appears in Dr. Homrighausen—the Bible is much more than a living record of divine action and revelation. It is more than even a living reproduction and interpretation of the revelation of God in history. It is itself, as a written fact, *revelation*. In other words, it is not simply a history of revelation, indeed not simply revelation history. It is, as *written word*, in itself a divine product. It is itself revelation fact. It is God

speaking to us men and, because so, it is as a written product, in all its extent and detail, of divine origin and character and therefore divinely authoritative. Holy men of God *wrote* as they were moved by the Holy Spirit. All Scripture is God-breathed. And for that reason it is itself, no less than the movements of God in history that it records, normative and determinative.

The Scripture is not simply a record of God's action; it is also *itself* God's action speaking to us with absoluteness and finality. And this is why we bow in humble reverence before it. We bow in adoration not only before the antecedent revelation it records. We bow in adoration before its every word. And this is why we dare not come to it with the canons of criticism that apply to every merely human product. The assumption upon which we approach every human work is that, however excellent and admirable, there is always some imperfection and flaw. The assumption upon which we approach the work of God is that it is like Himself perfect and infallible. If the Bible is the Word of God it is also true that the Word of God is the Bible. It is, as Dr. Warfield would say, the product of the creative breath of God.

In the words of Dr. Warfield to whom we paid tribute in the opening paragraph, "God and the Scriptures are brought into such conjunction as to show that in point of directness of authority no distinction was made between them"¹ and again, "What this church-doctrine is, it is scarcely necessary minutely to describe. It will suffice to remind ourselves that it looks upon the Bible as an oracular book,—as the Word of God in such a sense that whatever it says God says,—not a book, then, in which one may, by searching, find some word of God, but a book which may be frankly appealed to at any point with the assurance that whatever it may be found to say, that is the Word of God."² The difference between Dr. Warfield's position and that of Dr. Homrighausen is just the difference between the Bible-doctrine and Church-doctrine on the one hand and modern theorising on the other.

—JOHN MURRAY

¹ *Revelation and Inspiration*, p. 283.

² *Ibid.*, p. 52.