

Wesleyan Founders and Scripture: John Wesley, Adam Clarke and Richard Watson

By

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Defining the Boundaries of Evangelicalism

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In the late 1970's while reading *Christianity Today* as a student at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, I was startled by a letter to the editor from Timothy Smith, a Nazarene who was a noted church history professor at Johns Hopkins at that time. Smith asserted that Wesleyans had no part in the evangelical heritage, which, according to him, is predominantly Calvinistic. He then listed several evangelical doctrines that Wesleyans do not affirm, the most important of which was biblical inerrancy. As a lifelong Wesleyan myself who had just participated in the historic Chicago International Summit on Biblical Inerrancy, I was surprised. Thus began several years of research on whether inerrancy was a "Wesleyan" doctrine or not.

To my surprise, I found that Smith was not alone among contemporary Wesleyan scholars in denying that biblical inerrancy is compatible with Wesleyan-Arminian theology. Concomitant with this assertion is the denial that Wesleyans are evangelicals. It is claimed that inerrancy is a Calvinistic doctrine and is incompatible with Wesleyan-Arminianism. Larry Shelton in a *Wesleyan Theological Journal* article entitled, "John Wesley's Approach to Scripture in Historical Perspective" sets forth the typical argument of Wesleyans who deny that a high view of Scripture is consistent with Wesleyanism. Shelton advises that Wesley's

statements about Scripture must be interpreted from within the context of eighteenth-century thought, and efforts to super-impose on various proof-texts the framework of twentieth-century fundamentalist epistemology must not be considered legitimate explanations of his positions on the Bible....Although he [Wesley] sometimes speaks in ways which may resemble Fundamentalism, his total context of thought is broader and more inclusive....Furthermore, the canons of biblical authority and interpretation of a rationalistic Fundamentalism had their roots in post-Reformation Protestant scholasticism, which Wesley does not seem to have known, and nineteenth century Princeton theology, which Wesley did not survive to encounter.¹

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Shelton goes on to assert that “it is anachronistic historically to project a nineteenth-century epistemology upon an eighteenth-century evangelist whose hermeneutics were strongly influenced by Patristic and Reformation sources.”² He closes his re-interpretation of Wesley’s position of Scripture by declaring, “it is crucial that we employ methods of historical study which allow previous historical eras to speak without having twentieth-century presuppositions read back into them.”³

Thus does Shelton and other Wesleyan scholars seek to re-define the numerous clear and unequivocal statements by Wesley and the other early leaders of the Wesleyan movement affirming the inspiration and inerrancy of Scripture.⁴ This makes Shelton’s solemn warnings about misinterpreting Wesley through a twentieth-century epistemology all the more preposterous. He practices exactly what he warns others against. He re-reads Wesley’s affirmations of inspiration, infallibility and inerrancy of Scripture through his own modern epistemology and lower view of Scripture.

As we seek to define the boundaries of evangelicalism, it is important to understand the commitment of historic Wesleyanism to biblical inerrancy and other core doctrines of evangelicalism. In spite of the denial of biblical inerrancy on the part of many modern Wesleyan scholars, there was consistent unwavering affirmation of inerrancy and a high view of Scripture among the early leaders of the Wesleyan movement. John and Charles Wesley both stoutly defended a high view of Scripture. Richard Watson, the first systematic theologian of Wesleyanism, Adam Clarke, the renowned Wesleyan commentator, and all the other leading scholars of early Wesleyanism affirmed biblical inerrancy. This paper will document the positions of John Wesley, Richard Watson and Adam Clarke.

John Wesley

The Inspiration of Scripture

The founder of Methodism was, by his own admission, *homo unius libri*, a man of one book. The well-known passage in which Wesley makes this declaration provides a poignant window into the heart and mind of this great man who had the highest regard for Scripture and who earnestly sought to hear God speak through His inspired Word.

To candid, reasonable men, I am not afraid to lay open what have been the inmost thoughts of my heart. I have thought, I am a creature of a day, passing through life as an arrow through the air. I am a spirit come from God, and returning to God: Just hovering over the great gulf; till, a few moments hence, I am no more seen; I drop into an unchangeable eternity! I want to know one thing, — the way to heaven; how to land safe on that happy shore. God himself has condescended to teach the way: For this very end he came from

¹ Larry Shelton, “John Wesley’s Approach to Scripture in Historical Perspective,” *Wesleyan Theological Journal*, Vol. 16, No. 1 (Spring 1981), 36.

² Shelton 38.

³ Shelton 43.

⁴ Paul Bassett in “The Fundamentalist Leavening of the Holiness Movement: 1914-1940” in *Wesleyan Theological Journal* (Spring 1978) No. 13, states, “One of the lesser known differences between Wesleyanism and Calvinism in the last century, buried in the tussle over free-will, is that of hermeneutic principle. And this, in turn, is intimately linked, both as cause and effect, to divergent doctrines of inspiration and authority.” 67.

heaven. He hath written it down in a book. O give me that book! At any price, give me the book of God! I have it: Here is knowledge enough for me. Let me be *homo unius libri*. Here then I am, far from the busy ways of men. I sit down alone: Only God is here. In his presence I open, I read his book; for this end, to find the way to heaven. Is there a doubt concerning the meaning of what I read? Does anything appear dark or intricate? I lift up my heart to the Father of Lights: — “Lord, is it not thy word, ‘If any man lack wisdom, let him ask of God?’ Thou ‘givest liberally, and upbraidest not.’ Thou hast said; ‘If any be willing to do thy will, he shall know.’ I am willing to do, let me know, thy will.” I then search after and consider parallel passages of Scripture, “comparing spiritual things with spiritual.” I meditate thereon with all the attention and earnestness of which my mind is capable. If any doubt still remains, I consult those who are experienced in the things of God; and then the writings whereby, being dead, they yet speak. And what I thus learn, that I teach.⁵

At the beginning of a sermon on 1 Cor. 13:1-3 he declared that since we know God is the source of all Scripture, we know the Word therefore to be “true and right concerning all things.”⁶ Wesley frequently affirmed his belief that “all Scripture is given by inspiration of God” and that “We believe the written word of God to be the only and sufficient rule both of Christian faith and practice....”⁷ He referred to Scripture as the “oracles of God.”⁸ He frequently appealed to 2 Tim 3:16 which affirms God’s authorship and inspiration of scripture. In commenting on 1 Cor 2:13, he points out that Scripture consists of “*words taught by the Holy Spirit*—Such are all the words of Scripture. How high a regard ought we then to retain for them!”⁹ In commenting on Gal 3:8, he declares, “So great is the excellency and fullness of the Scriptures, that all the things which can ever be controverted, are therein both foreseen and determined....”¹⁰

In his sermon on “Christian Perfection” he notes that many people object to using the words “perfect” and “perfection.” But Wesley protests,

But are they not found in the oracles of God? If so, by what authority can any Messenger of God lay them aside, even though all men should be offended?...Whatsoever God hath spoken, that will we speak, whether men will hear, or whether they will forbear....We may not, therefore, lay these expressions aside, seeing they are the words of God and not of man. But we may and ought to explain the meaning of them; that those who are sincere of heart may not err to the right hand or left, from the mark of the prize of their high calling.¹¹

⁵ John Wesley, *The Letters of the Rev. John Wesley*, A.M., 8 vols., ed. John Telford (London: Epworth, 1931), 4:299.

⁶ John Wesley, *The Works of John Wesley*, 14 vols. (London: Wesleyan Conference Office, 1872; rep. Ed. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1978), 8:45-46. All citations from Wesley’s *Works* are from the Zondervan reprint unless noted otherwise.

⁷ John Wesley, *The Works of John Wesley*, 14 vols. (London: Wesleyan Conference Office, 1872; rep. Ed. Kansas City: Beacon Hill Press, 1978) 8:340. *The Character of a Methodist* (1742)

⁸ Wesley *Works*, 14:252.

⁹ John Wesley, *Explanatory Notes Upon the New Testament*, (San Francisco: Carlton & Lanahan; reprint Salem, Ohio: Schmull Publishers), 412. 1 Corinthians 2:13

¹⁰ Wesley *Explanatory Notes* 478. Gal 3:8

¹¹ Wesley *Works* (Beacon Hill) 6:1. Sermon, “Christian Perfection.”

Wesley set forth a brief and simple apologetic for the divine inspiration of the Bible. He proposed that there are but five possible sources of the Scriptures: “good men or angels, bad men or devils, or...God.” He then systematically eliminated all the other choices except God. His conclusion is that “the Bible must be given by divine inspiration.”¹² To be sure, men were involved in the transmission of God’s Word. Wesley refers to the writers of the Bible as “men divinely inspired.”¹³ But still God is the Source and the ultimate Author of the Book. It was He who moved upon the “holy men of God.” (2 Pet 1:21) He even spoke of these writers of prophecy as being “purely passive” as they were “carried” by the Spirit, as expressed in 2 Peter 1:19.¹⁴ He believed that some portions of scripture were “dictated” by the Spirit.¹⁵

In his sermon on “The Means of Grace,” Wesley asserts that Scripture is “the great means God has ordained for conveying his manifold grace to man” and reasoned directly from the scriptural declaration that “All Scripture is given by inspiration of God” to believe “consequently, all Scripture is infallibly true....”¹⁶ It is clear as one scholar has said, “Wesley was one with the Reformers in the tendency to substitute an infallible Book for an infallible Church.”¹⁷

Wesley stoutly affirmed his belief in the divine inspiration of the Scriptures in a series of letters to a “John Smith.”

I am as fully assured today as I am of the shining of the sun that the Scriptures are of God. I cannot possibly deny or doubt it now; yet I may doubt of it to-morrow; as I have heretofore a thousand times, and that after the fullest assurance preceding. Now, if this be “a demonstration that my former assurance was a mere fancy,” then farewell to all revelation at once.¹⁸

Wesley comments on this same matter again in a later letter (July 1747) to Mr. Smith. “The facts, whether asserted or denied, are still invariable...I am fully convinced to-day that the Scriptures are of God as that the sun shines. And this conviction (as every good gift) cometh from the Father of lights. Yet I may doubt of it to-morrow. I may throw away the

¹² Wesley *Works*, 11:484.

¹³ Wesley *Works* 10:90.

¹⁴ Wesley *Explanatory Notes* 623. 2 Pet 1:19

¹⁵ Wesley *Explanatory Notes* 268. John 19:24 In commenting on Rev 2:1 Wesley asserts that “Christ dictated to him every word.” 657

¹⁶ Wesley *Works* (Beacon Hill) 5:193. Sermon, The Means of Grace. In another discussion Wesley once made the statement that he did not like the word “infallible.” He was replying to a letter from Mr. Smith when he said, “‘Infallible testimony’ was your word, not mine: I never use it; I do not like it.” (*Letters* 2:59) However this discussion was not about the infallibility of the Bible. The case Wesley was attempting to prove was that it is possible for a person to believe he is a Christian, to feel that he is, to think he has the witness of the Spirit—and yet not be truly in Christ. In what sense is the witness of the Spirit to the individual concerning his salvation infallible? Wesley replied that in no sense at all is it infallible. It is too easy for finite fallible human beings to think they have the witness when in actuality they do not. But this in no sense impinges upon the infallibility of the Scriptures for Wesley.

¹⁷ Frank Baker, “John Wesley’s Churchmanship,” *London Quarterly and Holborn Review*, October 1960, 270, quoted by A. Skevington Wood, *The Burning Heart—John Wesley, Evangelist* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1967) 215.

¹⁸ Wesley, *Letters*, 2:92.

good gift of God.”¹⁹ One of the major issues facing Wesley was the doctrine of the witness of the Spirit. He taught that one could know that he was a child of God through the inward witness of the Holy Spirit. To this Mr. Smith countered that some people who had claimed to have had such a witness, later doubted or denied any such witness. Thus, Smith claimed, any certainty or this so-called “knowledge” was destroyed. Wesley rebutted this argument by pointing out that just because today a person really knows and cannot doubt or deny that he is a Christian by the witness of the Spirit does not mean he may not doubt that fact tomorrow. But the fact that he begins to doubt the fact later on, does not destroy the fact that he did know before. Expressed another way, it is possible for the Spirit to cease to bear witness to the person’s salvation, which would be the case if the person fell from grace.²⁰ To bring his point home with more force, Wesley laid aside all his arguments from Origen, Chrysostom, and others, and made the statement above concerning the Scriptures. In essence he was saying, “Just because tomorrow I can doubt the Scriptures as being from God, does not change the fact of the matter, viz., that they are from God.” Being the transparent man that he was, Wesley admitted to having doubted the Bible. Most honest scholars have had questions concerning the divine origin of the Scripture arise in the process of their study and investigation of the Bible. But their questions do not change the truth of the inspiration of Scripture. His point is that one can doubt anything regardless of how certain he has been of it previously. Yet that does not change the truth of the matter.

In a letter to the editor of *Lloyd’s Evening Post* Wesley protested concerning remarks which had been made on a new edition of the Koran. He rejected objections which had been made to the Mosaic creation account and to God’s preference of the Jews. He responded to the suggestion that the devil could have invented the sacrificial system, to the argument that prophecy negates free will, and to the claim that “only the words of Christ Himself are the *pure, original* Scriptures.” He went on to proclaim, “I cannot but repeat the observation, wherein experience confirms me more and more, that they who disbelieve the Bible will believe anything. They may believe Voltaire! They may believe the Shastah! They may believe a man can put himself into a quart bottle.”²¹

Inerrancy of Scripture

Not only did Wesley consistently affirm the plenary inspiration of Scripture, but his own clear statements confirm his belief in the full verbal inspiration and trustworthiness or inerrancy of Scriptures. In 1776 Wesley commented in his *Journal* on Jenyn’s tract *Internal Evidence of the Christian Religion* by saying though it was an admirable piece, it was hard to tell whether Mr. Jenyn was a Christian, a deist, or an atheist. “If he is a Christian, he betrays his own cause by averring that “all Scripture is not given by inspiration of God, but the writers of it were sometimes left to themselves, and consequently made some mistakes.” Nay, if there be any mistakes in the Bible, there may as well be a thousand. If there be one falsehood in that book, it did not come from the God of truth.”²²

¹⁹ Wesley, *Letters*, 2:103.

²⁰ Wesley, *Letters*, 2:89.

²¹ Wesley, *Letters*, 6:120-23.

²² John Wesley, *The Journal of the Rev. John Wesley*, A.M., 8 vols., ed. Nehemiah Curnock (London:Epworth Press, 1909; rep. Ed. 1938), 6:117.

Thus, Wesley in unequivocal terms denies any other position concerning Holy Scripture but that of inerrancy. In all his writings Wesley never once gave the slightest indication of a dichotomy between the inerrancy of scripture on “spiritual matters of faith and practice” and the errancy of historical and other “non-spiritual” matters. Rather, in the Preface to his *Explanatory Notes Upon the New Testament* Wesley sets forth his unequivocal understanding of Scripture as the inspired Word of God.

Concerning the Scriptures in general, it may be observed, the word of the living God, which directed the first patriarchs also, was in the time of *Moses*, committed to writing. To this were added, in several succeeding generations, the inspired writings of the other prophets. Afterward, what the Son of God preached, and the Holy Ghost spake by the apostles, the apostles and evangelists wrote.—This is what we now style the *Holy Scripture*: this is that *word of God which remaineth for ever*: of which, though *heaven and earth pass away, one jot or tittle shall not pass away*. The Scripture therefore of the *Old and New Testament*, is a most solid and precious system of Divine truth. Every part thereof is worthy of God; and all together are one entire body, wherein is no defect, no excess. It is the fountain of heavenly wisdom, which they who are able to taste, prefer to all writings of men, however wise, or learned, or holy.

An exact knowledge of the truth was accompanied in the inspired writers with an exactly regular series of arguments, a precise expression of their meaning, and a genuine vigour of suitable affections....

In the language of the sacred writings, we may observe the utmost depth, together with the utmost ease. All the elegancies of human composes sink into nothing before: God speaks not as man, but as God. His thoughts are very deep: and thence his words are of inexhaustible virtue. And the language of his messengers also is exact in the highest degree: for the words which were given them accurately answered the impression made upon their minds: and hence *Luther* says, “Divinity is nothing but the grammar of the language of the Holy Ghost.” To understand this thoroughly, we should observe the *emphasis* which lies on every word; the holy *affections* expressed thereby, and the *tempers* shown by every writer.²³

Thus, Wesley provides a classic description of the evangelical doctrine of verbal plenary inspiration—an inspiration by God which covers every word and thought and yet allows for the individual styles of the inspired writers. Wesley’s declaration that there is “no defect, no excess” in Scripture, that “an exact knowledge of the truth was accompanied in the inspired writers with..., a precise expression of their meaning...” and that “the language of his [God’s] messengers also is exact in the highest degree....” can hardly be re-interpreted to mean anything less than an undiluted affirmation of the inspiration and inerrancy of the Bible.

However Wesley’s view is by no means a naïve, non-critical position, blind to difficulties. In his remarks on Matthew 1:1 in his *Explanatory Notes Upon the New Testament*, concerning possible problems in the genealogy of Jesus, Wesley affirms that the genealogies are inerrant in all they affirm, in spite of potential problems in the records.

²³ Wesley, *Explanatory Notes*, 5-6.

If there were any difficulties in this genealogy, or that given by St. Luke, which could not easily be removed, they would rather affect the Jewish tables than the credit of the evangelists; for they act only as historians, setting down these genealogies as they stood in those public and allowed records. Therefore they were to take them as they found them. Nor was it needful they should correct the mistakes, if there were any. For these accounts sufficiently answer the end for which they are recited. They unquestionably prove the grand point in view, that Jesus was of the family from which the promised Seed was to come. And they had more weight with the Jews for this purpose than if alterations had been made by inspiration itself. For such alterations would have occasioned endless disputes between them and the disciples of our Lord.²⁴

Wesley was simply affirming what most modern adherents of inerrancy would say, viz., that the Bible is inerrant in what it affirms as factual, to the degree of precision intended.²⁵ It should be noted that he did not say there were definitely mistakes in the genealogy. Rather, he merely recognized the possibility of mistakes—not on the part of the inspired authors, but in the Jewish records. He did not feel that his critical knowledge at that time warranted a definite statement either way concerning genealogical problems. Wesley affirmed that Matthew and Luke were inspired as they reported the traditional genealogical tables of the Jews which may have been in error. Thus, Wesley, while recognizing problems and gaps in our understanding, affirmed the inspiration and inerrancy of the Scriptures. As he stated, “‘All Scripture is given by inspiration of God,’ consequently, all Scripture is infallibly true.”²⁶

A leading biographer of Wesley, A. Skevington Wood points out that

it is not to be assumed that he was altogether unconscious of the issues later raised in more acute form by the development of Higher Criticism....An omnivorous reader like Wesley could hardly have been unaware of these preliminary rumblings. The storm was not to break until the next century, but the Bible was already under attack. Wesley's convictions were not held in an atmosphere of undisturbed calm. His belief in the reliability of Scripture was tested by the rationalistic climate of his age.²⁷

On August 8, 1773 Wesley writes in his journal that he had reviewed a volume of theological *Dissertations* challenging the doctrine of eternal punishment. His response gives evidence of both his orthodoxy and his awareness of the critics of Scripture.

²⁴ Wesley, *Explanatory Notes Upon the New Testament*, 10.

²⁵ Paul Feinberg asserts in “The Meaning of Inerrancy” that “Inerrancy does not demand the infallibility or inerrancy of the noninspired sources used by biblical writers.” Norman L. Geisler, ed., *Inerrancy* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1979) 302. Feinberg also uses the phrase “true in everything they affirm” in referring to Scripture, 294. The Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy in Article XIII also denies that inerrancy is negated “by Biblical phenomena such as a lack of modern technical precision, irregularities of grammar or spelling, observational descriptions of nature, the reporting of falsehoods, the use of hyperbole and round numbers, the topical arrangement of material, variant selections of material in parallel accounts, or the use of free citations.”

²⁶ Wesley, *Works*, 5:193.

²⁷ Wood 217-218.

It would be excusable, if these menders of the Bible would offer their hypotheses modestly. But one cannot excuse them when they not only obtrude their novel scheme with the utmost confidence, but even ridicule that scriptural one which always was, and is now, held by men of the greatest learning and piety in the world. Hereby they promote the cause of infidelity more effectually than either Hume or Voltaire.²⁸

Use of Scripture

Wesley's use and view of the Bible in his ministry illustrates and supports his high view of Scripture. He constantly referred to and exhorted his people to be "Bible-Christians."²⁹ Deriders of the Holy Club called them "Bible-bigots" and "Bible-moths" who "fed upon the Bible, as moths do upon cloth."³⁰ In fact he went so far as to repeatedly warn against using frivolous modern terms, but rather to use Bible terminology so far as is possible. He called himself a "bigot" to the Bible and Bible language.³¹ He was fond of referring to himself similarly in connection with the Bible. "My ground is the Bible. Yea, I am a Bible bigot. I follow it in all things, both great and small."³²

Biographer Wood said, "To borrow another arresting phrase from [P. T.] Forsyth, the effective preacher 'must speak from within the silent sanctuary of Scripture.' That was always Wesley's way. Those who heard him sensed immediately that here was a man who had been with God and who now came to them with His message. Only preaching of that supernatural caliber could have produced the results which Wesley saw."³³

He preached that "all who desire the grace of God are to wait for it in searching the Scriptures." Thus hearing, reading, and meditating upon the Scriptures serve as a means of grace.³⁴ Yet he condemned in strong terms the fanaticism that led some to claim that Christians should read *only* the Bible. He declared that anyone who does that, must, to be consistent, do away with all sermons as well.³⁵

The preaching of Christian perfection raised disputes with other schools of theology. Inevitably the charge arose that Wesley's doctrine of entire sanctification was unscriptural. In his reply to such accusations he indicated his solid position that the Bible is to be our sole rule of faith and practice. "I therein build on no authority, ancient or modern, but the Scripture. If this supports any doctrine, it will stand; if not, the sooner it falls the better. Neither the doctrine in question nor any other is anything to me, unless it be the doctrine of Christ and His Apostles...I search for truth, plain Bible truth...."³⁶

²⁸ Wesley *Works* (Beacon Hill) 3:504 August 8, 1773 journal.

²⁹ Wesley, *Works*, 5:54, 137; 6:30, 100; 7:74, 331; 8:349.

³⁰ Richard Green, *John Wesley, Evangelist* (London: The Religious Tract Society, 1905), pp. 76-77.

³¹ Wesley, *Letters*, 5:313.

³² Wesley *Works, Journals* (Beacon Hill Press 1978 reprint), 3:251. June 5, 1766 journal

³³ Wood 211-212.

³⁴ Wesley, *Works*, 5:192-93.

³⁵ Wesley, *Letters*, 4:91, 93; 6:130.

³⁶ Wesley, *Letters*, 3:157-58.

In another letter the founder of Methodism affirmed that “The Scriptures are a complete rule of faith and practice; and they are clear in all necessary points.”³⁷ He especially emphasized the supremacy of the Scriptures in response to the mystics who promulgated the doctrine that the private guidance of the Spirit was more important than the rule of the Bible.³⁸ He was concerned that his followers not be taken up with fanatical legalism but rather instructed them to “enjoin nothing that the Bible does not clearly enjoin. Forbid nothing that it does not clearly forbid.”³⁹

Wesley’s hermeneutic was direct and uncomplicated. “The general rule of interpreting Scripture is this: the literal sense of every text is to be taken, if it be not contrary to some other texts: but in that case the obscure text is to be interpreted by those which speak more plainly.”⁴⁰ He quoted Clement of Alexandria to support his assertion that “the Scripture is the best expounder of itself.”⁴¹ He freely admitted that not all Christians agree on the interpretation of many passages, but pointed out that this is certainly not proof that they are not true Christians. Tongue-in-cheek, he asserts that it is a proof only that we should “no more expect living men to be infallible, than to be omniscient.”⁴²

One of the strongest indications of the value Wesley placed on the Bible comes in the training and demands he made on the Methodist preachers. The founder of Methodism declared that one cannot be a “good Divine” without being a “good textuary.” A minister of the Word ought to “know the literal meaning of every word, verse, and chapter...” He also demanded that his preachers have knowledge of the original languages of the Bible.⁴³

It is evident that John Wesley, the founder of Methodism and the fountainhead of the movement which bears his name held a high view of Scripture. Wood asserts that “What Spurgeon once said of Bunyan is equally true of Wesley: his very blood is bibline.”⁴⁴ While recognizing that our understanding of it is fallible and our interpretations may differ, he held unequivocally that the Bible comes to us by the inspiration of God and is consequently infallible and inerrant. This doctrinal position was demonstrated in practical terms in his many sermons, letters, and exhortations.

Adam Clarke

Inspiration of Scripture

Adam Clarke (1760-1832), the first commentator of early Methodism, held a high view of Scripture. His Bible commentary, which was his greatest work, published between 1810 and 1825, evinces a high regard and deep devotion for the Word. Clarke frequently affirmed his belief in the plenary inspiration and infallibility of Scripture. In his creed which he adopted early in his Christian life and maintained throughout his career he stated his position:

³⁷ Wesley, *Letters*, 2:325. Cf. *Works*, 10:90.

³⁸ Wesley, *Letters*, 2:117.

³⁹ Wesley, *Letters*, 8:192. Cf. *Works*, 5:136.

⁴⁰ Wesley, *Letters*, 3:129; 5:328.

⁴¹ Wesley, *Letters*, 10:94.

⁴² John Wesley, *Wesley’s Standard Sermons*, ed. Edward H. Sugden, 2 vols. (London: Epworth, 1951), 2:154.

⁴³ Wesley, *Works*, 10:482-83, 490-91.

⁴⁴ Wood 218.

“The Sacred Scriptures or Holy Books...contain a full revelation of the will of God, in reference to man; and are alone sufficient for every thing relative to the *faith* and *practice* of a Christian, and were given by the inspiration of God.”⁴⁵ It would never have occurred to Clarke to make the bifurcation so common among modern-day Wesleyans between “faith and practice” and historical truth and factual reliability of the Bible. To read such assumptions back into Clarke is to commit a serious error of interpreting him in the light of modern debates and arguments, which Shelton warned inerrantists about.

In a sermon on Romans 15:4 he declared, “We must ever consider these Scriptures as coming from God, as divinely inspired, and as containing his infallible truth.”⁴⁶ His article “General Account of the Sacred Writings” affirms his acceptance of the sixty-six book canon and states that the Bible is “the only complete directory of the faith and practice of men.”⁴⁷

In his commentary Clarke presents two principles demonstrating the divine inspiration of the Bible. First, Scripture teaches the inspiration of the Holy Spirit concerning itself. The fact that the Gospels and Acts were written several years after the events compels us to believe that Jesus’ promise, of the instruction of the apostles by the Holy Spirit in recalling His words (John 14:26), was indeed fulfilled in a very real way. Also Scripture addresses itself variously as the Word of God, the commandment of God, the wisdom of God, the testimony of God, the gospel of God, the gospel of Christ, and the mystery of His will. The second principle was that the apostles themselves were assured of the inspiration and assistance of the Holy Spirit of Truth as is indicated in several passages, e.g., Zech 1:6; 1 Pet 1:12; 2 Pet 1:1; 1 Cor 2:10, 12, 13.⁴⁸

Clarke denied the mechanical dictation theory, as do most inerrantists. Even though he taught that “the words contained in it [scripture] were inspired by the Holy Spirit into the minds of faithful men...”,⁴⁹ he insisted that his doctrine of inspiration was not a system of mechanical dictation, but was contrary to such a theory. In cases in which the writers already had knowledge about the subject matter, the only inspiration required was that which “will assure us of the truth of what they wrote, whether by inspiration of *suggestion*, or *direction* only; but not for such an inspiration as implies that even their *words* were dictated, or their phrases suggested to them by the Holy Ghost...Although this might be done in some cases, as in 1 Cor. 2:13.” The inspiration of the Holy Spirit kept them from “error in their reasonings” and from making invalid doctrinal inferences from the Old Testament which would be contrary “to the true intent and meaning of them.” Mechanical dictation is refuted by: (1) the fact that the writers were “hagiographers, who are supposed to be left to the use of their own words;” (2) the variety in style and solecisms; and (3) the author’s own words in Scriptures which indicate a clear freedom of human expression, as in cases in which uncertainty, doubt, or ignorance are evinced (e.g., Rom 15:24, 28; 1 Cor 1:16; 16:5; 2 Cor 1:15-17; etc.).⁵⁰

⁴⁵ J.B.B. Clarke, ed., *An Account of the Infancy, Religious and Literary Life of Adam Clarke*, 3 vols. (London: T.S. Clarke, 1833), 1:172.

⁴⁶ Adam Clarke, *Miscellaneous Works*, 13 vols. (London: T. Tegg, 1839-45), 6:420.

⁴⁷ Clarke, *Works*, 12:80, 83, 122.

⁴⁸ Adam Clarke, *A Commentary and Critical Notes*, 6 vols. (New York: Abingdon, n.d.), 5:11-12.

⁴⁹ Clarke, *Works*, 12:132.

⁵⁰ Clarke, *Commentary*, 5:9-10

However, in his comments on 2 Pet. 1:20, 21, Clarke indicates that the Scripture writers were sometimes "...carried away, out of themselves and of the whole region, as it were, of human knowledge and conjecture, by the Holy Ghost, who, without their knowing anything of the matter, dictated to them what to speak, and what to write, and so far above their knowledge were the words of prophecy, that they did not even know the *intent* of those words...."⁵¹ Thus a greater degree of inspiration was necessary when the authors were to write about things they had little or no natural knowledge concerning, than when they were writing about things with which they were quite familiar.

Inerrancy of Scripture

Clarke unequivocally affirmed the full trustworthiness or inerrancy of Scripture. In his article on "The Principles of the Christian Religion," he stated, "The Bible...is a revelation from God himself, and declares his will relative to the salvation of men...men may err, but the Scriptures cannot; for it is the *Word of God* himself, who can neither mistake, deceive, nor be deceived."⁵² He frequently and approvingly quoted the saying concerning Scriptures that they have "God for their *Author*, salvation for their end, and truth, without mixture of error, for their matter."⁵³ In his *Commentary* he categorically stated that "The apostles were assisted and preserved from error by the Spirit of God; and therefore were enabled to deliver to us an unerring rule of faith." The Holy Spirit did not permit them "to err in the delivery of what was thus indited in his name or which they had written as *apostles* of God the Father, and our Lord Jesus Christ."⁵⁴

Clarke took inerrancy of Scripture as meaning that it is without error in all it affirms as fact, and not inerrant in what it does not affirm. For instance, the chronological sequence of recorded events may not be necessarily reflected in historical accounts, such as in the Gospels, unless the sequence is specifically affirmed. Furthermore, in the recording of conversations it is not necessary to have "the very words" but the "true *intent* and *meaning*" of the exact words. However, he believed that John 14:20 does promise exactness in the recording of Jesus' exact words.⁵⁵

Clarke stoutly defended the canonicity and textual purity of the Scriptures. The canon as we have it is complete and authentic. The Scriptures have been transmitted to us "without addition, defalcation, or willful corruption of any kind." He refers to 2 Tim. 3:16-17 in support of this. In Clarke's opinion, the textual variants are not significant enough to lead to any doctrinal error or obscurity or confusion in moral practice. "All is safe and sound,--all pure and holy, it is...the unadulterated gospel of Jesus Christ..." With regard to particular textual variants, such as 1 John 5:7, he honestly admits that he did not believe that was yet fully settled. He did believe however, that the Joshua 21:35-36 problem is solved by 1 Chron. 6:78-79.⁵⁶

⁵¹ Clarke, *Commentary*, 6:883.

⁵² Clarke, *Works*, 12:132.

⁵³ Clarke, *Works*, 11:406.

⁵⁴ Clarke, *Commentary*, 5:9, 11.

⁵⁵ Clarke, *Commentary*, 5:10.

⁵⁶ Clarke, *Works*, 6:388, 415.

Use of Scripture

Clarke believed in the eternal applicability of God's Word. In his practical suggestions on how to read the Bible he advised Christians to read it as the very word of God Himself because God "considers it as much his word now as he did when he first spoke it."⁵⁷

Richard Watson

Inspiration and Inerrancy of Scripture

Richard Watson (1781-1833), the first systematic theologian of early Wesleyanism, propounded a doctrine of Scripture which was identical in every major respect to that of John Wesley and Adam Clarke. Interestingly enough, in his classic *Theological Institutes*, Watson developed no systematic doctrine of Scripture and inspiration. He treated revelation extensively but only in an apologetical manner and not a doctrinal manner. However, in his *Conversations for the Young*, Watson develops a fuller treatment of inspiration. He defines inspiration as meaning, "The sacred writers composed their works under so plenary and immediate an influence of the Holy Spirit, that God may be said to speak by them to man, and not merely that they spoke to men in the name of God, and by his authority."⁵⁸

From this foundation Watson developed several principles concerning inspiration of Scripture in this "Conversation." First, the Bible is trustworthy and without error. The doctrine that God spoke via Scriptures to men and not merely that the authors of Scripture spoke by God's authority "secures the Scriptures from all error both as to the subjects spoken and the manner of expressing them." Watson drew no qualifying lines and made no equivocation on the subject. Later in this same "Conversation" he affirms that the Holy Spirit exerted sufficient influence upon the whole of Holy Writ that as it was being written by human authors "it became truth without mixture of error."⁵⁹ For Watson, phrases such as "The Holy Ghost by the mouth of David spake," "Well spake the Holy Ghost by Esaias the Prophet," and verses as 2 Pet 1:21 affirm the inerrancy of the words in the Word of God. Watson points out that the term "scriptures" is used in the Bible as applicable not only to the Old Testament writings but also to New Testament material and treats the books written under divine inspiration as a special class of writings and as a collective whole.⁶⁰

Secondly, the apostles claim inspiration not only with regard to their general topics but also with regard to their very words. Such inspiration was provided for by the Lord when He promised the Spirit would "guide them into all truth" and that when they were called upon to testify, the very words would be given them. Paul also claimed verbal inspiration in 1 Cor 2:13. Thus, the inspired writers were indeed "the penmen of the Holy Ghost."⁶¹

Thirdly, the differences in style and individual traits can be accounted for by the fact that while the Holy Spirit guided the men by suggestion or even occasionally overruling the

⁵⁷ Clarke, *Works*, 11:416.

⁵⁸ Richard Watson, *The Works of the Rev. Richard Watson*, 12 vols. (London: John Mason, 1834-37), 6:11.

⁵⁹ Watson, *Works*, 6:11, 14.

⁶⁰ Watson, *Works*, 6:12.

⁶¹ Watson, *Works*, 6:12.

selection of certain words, most of the time, God permitted the men to write with their own styles and unique personalities. “The verbiage, style, and manner of each was not so much displaced, as elevated, enriched, and employed by the Holy Spirit...” There is as well an evident “previous fitness” of each of the writers for their particular subject areas.⁶² Thus Paul’s abilities fitted him to write on doctrine and practice while Luke was better equipped to write on history.

Fourthly, we may assume that there were varying degrees of the influence of the Holy Spirit upon the writers as they wrote. Certainly the recording of commonly known historical events did not require a high degree of inspiration or a miracle of memory. Their plenary inspiration consisted in this:

that they were kept from all lapses of memory, or inadequate conceptions, even on these subjects; and on all others the degree of communication and influence, both as to doctrine, facts, and the terms in which they were to be recorded for the edification of the church, was proportioned to the necessity of the case, but so that the whole was authenticated or dictated by the Holy Spirit with so full an influence, that it became truth without mixture of error, expressed in such terms as he himself ruled or suggested.⁶³

Finally, Watson argues in his *Conversations* that since Christ declares that the Old Testament is divinely inspired, “the same arguments which prove the Messiahship of Christ, and the inspiration of the Apostles, prove, consequently, the truth, the uncorruptness, and the authority of all the books of the Old Testament...”⁶⁴ Also in his sermon “The Oracles of God” he declares that since the Scriptures are from God, their truth and wisdom are as “demonstrable” as the wisdom and holiness of God Himself.⁶⁵

Besides these five principles from the *Conversations*, the only direct reference to the inerrancy of the Word in the *Theological Institutes* affirms a high view of scripture. Watson’s comment comes in a discussion concerning objections to the Mosaic account of creation. It was claimed that the Bible is not accurate enough to be judged by scientific standards; it was not written as a science textbook. Watson responds, “If Moses professes by divine inspiration to give an account of the manner in which the world was framed, he must describe the facts as they occurred; and if he has assigned a date to its creation out of nothing, that date, if given by an infallible authority, cannot be contradicted by true *philosophy*.”⁶⁶

While Watson couches his points about the creation in hypothetical or rhetorical terms, his assumptions are significant. We see from this account that he believed (1) that the Bible writers “must describe the facts as they occurred”; (2) that the information contained in the Word was given by “an infallible authority”; and (3) therefore, such facts could not be contradicted. The Bible must be factually correct in all matters about which it speaks. Thus, it

⁶² Watson, *Works*, 6:13.

⁶³ Watson, *Works*, 6:14.

⁶⁴ Watson, *Works*, 6:81.

⁶⁵ Watson, *Works*, 4:47.

⁶⁶ Richard Watson, *Theological Institutes*, J. M’Clintock, ed., 2 vols., 26th ed. (New York: Carlton and Lanahan, n.d.), 1:248.

is inerrant in science and history, as well as in matters of faith, to the degree of precision intended.

Watson defended the substantive textual purity of the manuscripts not only in his lengthy treatment in the *Institutes* of this subject, but also in his *Conversations*. He pointed out that the textual variants do not affect the credibility or integrity of the text and that the Bible is the most “critically correct” and “satisfactorily perfect” of any ancient work.⁶⁷

Use of Scripture

In various sermons and articles Watson stated several practical principles concerning the Scripture. As “the expression of the mind of God” and “a perfect revelation of the truth,” Scripture is accompanied and used by the Holy Spirit in a powerful manner in the hearts of men.⁶⁸ The salvation of the world is to be gained by “the ministry of the Word.”⁶⁹ Scripture helps make the messages of conscience and natural revelation more understandable.⁷⁰ “The only standard of the doctrine” is Scripture.⁷¹ “Every course of conduct” can be universally and easily judged by the rule furnished by Scripture.⁷² The Scriptures are the source of all true moral knowledge and influence.⁷³ The Christian’s response to Scriptural revelation is to be found in full submission to its authority.”⁷⁴

Conclusion

We have seen that the three giants of early Wesleyanism unanimously and unequivocally affirmed their belief in the divine inspiration and infallibility of the Scriptures.⁷⁵ Mechanical dictation is rejected by all, though Wesley does not deal with this particular view as systematically as Clarke and Watson. There is a strong emphasis among all three on the practical role and functions of the Word both in the community of believers and in their individual lives. But most of all, all three are clear in their affirmation of the inspiration and inerrancy of Scripture.

Wesley proclaimed, “If there be any mistakes in the Bible, there may as well be a thousand. If there be one falsehood in that book, it did not come from God.”⁷⁶

Clarke declared that “men may err, but the Scriptures cannot; for it is the Word of God himself, who can neither mistake, deceive, nor be deceived.”⁷⁷ “The apostles were assisted

⁶⁷ Watson *Works*, 6:173.

⁶⁸ Watson *Works*, 4:82-83.

⁶⁹ Watson *Works*, 2:9-10.

⁷⁰ Watson *Works*, 1:464.

⁷¹ Watson *Works*, 12:199.

⁷² Watson *Works*, 4:464.

⁷³ Watson *Works*, 4:60-61.

⁷⁴ Watson *Works*, 4:400.

⁷⁵ A study of the views of inspiration and inerrancy held by early Wesleyan theologians in America can be found in Daryl McCarthy, “Inerrancy in American Wesleyanism,” in John D. Hannah, ed., *Inerrancy and the Church* (Chicago: Moody, 1984) 279-321.

⁷⁶ Wesley *Journal* 6:117.

⁷⁷ Clarke *Works*, 12:132.

and preserved from error by the Spirit of God.”⁷⁸ Hence, Scripture is “truth, without mixture of error.”⁷⁹

Watson defended the doctrine that God’s authority “secures the Scriptures from all error both as to the subject spoken and the manner of expressing them” and spoke of the Bible as being “truth without mixture of error.”⁸⁰

It is appropriate that we conclude our study of the early Wesleyan views of Scripture by meditating on a portion of one of the worshipful poems the Wesleys penned concerning, “The Word of God.”

The Word of God by all confess’d,
Of truth the’ indubitable test,
My perfect rule I own;
The Word which doth His mind reveal
To those who would perform His will,
And worship Him alone.⁸¹

⁷⁸ Clarke *Commentary*, 5:9, 11.

⁷⁹ Clarke *Works*, 11:406.

⁸⁰ Watson *Works*, 6:11, 14.

⁸¹ Wesley, John and Charles. *The Poetical Works of John and Charles Wesley*, G. Osborn, compiler, 13 vols. (London: Wesleyan Methodist Conference Office, 1868), 13:258-59.

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