

UNITAS, LIBERTAS, CARITAS: A REPLY TO DR VAN KUIKEN

T.A. Noble

Nazarene Theological Seminary

The question of the authority of the Bible continues to be a crucial issue for the church today. Last month *Didache* published a very thoughtful critique by Dr Jerome Van Kuiken of the report brought to the last Nazarene General Assembly by a committee charged with the task of assessing a proposal to the previous General Assembly of 2009. The proposal was that Article IV in the Articles of Faith should be amended so that instead of affirming our belief that the Scriptures were given ‘by inspiration of God, inerrantly revealing the will of God concerning us in all things necessary to our salvation’, we should affirm that the Scriptures are ‘inerrant throughout.’ The committee recommended that we should stay with the wording first drafted, it is believed, by Dr H. Orton Wiley at the General Assembly of 1928. Dr Van Kuiken’s concern is that the committee were wrong in stating in their report that the strict inerrancy view is derived from the Calvinist tradition and was contrary to Wesleyan theology. He pointed out that the Wesleyan Church and the Churches of Christ in Christian Union affirmed the full inerrancy of Scripture and therefore it appeared that, at the same time that the Church of the Nazarene had been engaged in considering a five-way union including those denominations, this report of their Scripture committee had censured at least two prospective partners of holding a view which was ‘untrue to the Wesleyan tradition, incompatible with Wesleyan theology, and unwarranted by the Scriptures themselves.’

As a member of that Nazarene committee on Article IV, let me first make it clear that the report was agreed by the whole committee and that I have no official position which allows me to speak on their behalf now. So my response to Dr Van Kuiken is a purely personal one. Since that is so, however, perhaps I may be permitted to use the first person singular more than I would allow my students to do in a formal academic paper. That then allows me to begin by expressing my personal pleasure that my former doctoral student should challenge the committee so robustly. He is absolutely correct that from the perspective of the Wesleyan Church and the CCCU, it must appear that we Nazarenes are speaking out of two sides of our denominational mouth and to be distinctly lacking in charity when our committee dismisses the position of strict inerrancy as contrary to Wesleyan theology. His historical point is well made that one can provide quotations from John Wesley himself in which he appears to embrace an inerrantist position.¹ He also points out correctly that this was the view explicitly developed by a number of nineteenth-century

¹ Wesley was writing of course before the rise of biblical criticism in the nineteenth century. He does accept, for example, that there are mistakes in the genealogies (see his *Explanatory Notes on the New Testament*), but generally he does adopt the pre-critical view. See Scott J. Jones, *John Wesley’s Conception and Use of Scripture* (Kingswood, 1995) and Donald A. Bullen, *A Man of One Book?* (Paternoster, 2007).

Methodist theologians. The Scripture committee may indeed have been guilty here of overstating their case and leaving themselves open to correction.

Further, I would be prepared to accept that since the committee was concentrating on an *internal* debate within the denomination, I for one was not sufficiently aware of the significance of our report for relations with our sister denominations and I would deeply regret anything that would drive the Wesleyan denominations apart. I would love to see a merger, and I would be more than pleased to welcome the evangelical half of the United Methodist Church to join us too! That would take unimaginable vision and statesmanship, and perhaps it would need decades of close co-operation before attempting such a difficult exercise, but I for one would be delighted.

In addition to the plea for charity, Dr Van Kuiken's critique makes other cogent logical and historical points about the meaning and history of the term 'inerrancy'. However, I believe that this whole rather narrow debate has to be put in wider context. We need not only strict logic and accurate fact, but perspective and vision. Narrow scholastic rationalism can magnify minor differences into major disputes. Logic and fact undoubtedly have their place (although we may debate what we mean by a 'fact'), but we need to place this essentially North American dispute over this one word, 'inerrant', into global theological perspective. And we need to understand that (as Wittgenstein taught us), it is not merely the dictionary definition of a word which we need to note, but its *function* in the theological language game.

A Quick Sketch of the Wider Picture

One of the cardinal issues for the Christian church in the modern era has been the authority of Scripture and it will help to sketch the wider context, though in inevitably broad and simplified terms. Since the Enlightenment, the Reformation principle of *sola scriptura* has been jettisoned by a large part of Protestant Christianity broadly referred to by the misnomer 'liberal'. In Wesley's life-time, it was deism, emerging in the Enlightenment era of Newton and Locke, which jettisoned, or at least marginalized, all that was specific to Christian faith – the Incarnation, the atonement and the doctrine of sin, the Trinity – to embrace another gospel. This was the gospel of all reasonable 'men' (I use the word intentionally), who thought they had proved by reason the existence of the God who created the universe and was the guarantor of morality. As deism began to lose influence and slide into atheism, Schleiermacher, known as the 'father of modern theology,' proposed a new apologetic. His starting point for theology was in the religious awareness of all humanity, the 'feeling' (*Gefühl*) of God-consciousness innate to each. It was through the influence of Jesus' absolute God-consciousness, mediated to us through the fellowship of his church, that we could cultivate our own piety. True 'religious' significance therefore attached to the God-conscious life of Jesus rather than to his incarnation, death and resurrection. This sparked the 'quest for the historical Jesus' (although Strauss dismissed Schleiermacher's dependence on the Gospel of John) and the historical-critical method came to challenge not only the accuracy of the Bible, but the validity of its interpretation by Christian

Theology. The Bible had to be interpreted historically ‘like any other book’. Another variant of the ‘liberal’ tradition followed Hegel in seeing the Christian faith as a popular representation of Hegelian metaphysics. Further challenge to biblical authority also appeared to come from developments in modern science, particularly Darwin’s theory of evolution and the developing sciences of biology and geology. By the end of the nineteenth century, Adolf von Harnack, a prominent representative of so-called ‘liberal’ theology, ended up in the frank denial of the central credal affirmations of the Christian faith – the Incarnation, the Atonement and the Trinity. Further, historical study had so discredited the gospels that we no longer thought we had access to the ‘God-consciousness’ of Jesus. But Ritschlian theology saw Jesus as a social reformer, and Harnack in particular presented the core of his message as the kingdom of God, understood as a movement of social reform, the fatherhood of God (meaning that we could each be ‘sons’ of God in the same way that Jesus was), and the infinite worth of the human soul. For the so-called ‘liberal’ tradition therefore, final authority in matters of belief and ethics did not lie with God’s revelation in Scripture. It lay either with human *reason* (either in deist or Hegelian form), or with human religious *experience* or ‘feeling’, that deep inner piety and God-consciousness which Jesus could help us to cultivate.

We do not need to trace the twentieth century developments in detail. But we may note the reaction of theologians like Barth, Brunner and Bonhoeffer to ‘liberal’ theology and their return to the Bible and to credal, Nicene theology, recast and re-interpreted. A new form of so-called ‘liberalism’ can be traced through major figures such as Bultmann and Tillich, characterized by existentialism and exaggerated historical scepticism. At the same time, away from the rarefied atmosphere of academic theology, in the largely Anglo-Saxon evangelical tradition, tracing its roots from the Reformation through the eighteenth-century evangelical awakening of Edwards, Wesley and Whitefield, and through the nineteenth-century revivalism of Finney and Moody, there was a popular move to defend the Bible. By the 1920s this produced the grass-roots movement we know as ‘fundamentalism’. That word has widened in its meaning, and it suits the heirs of so-called ‘liberal’ theology to call everyone who abides by credal, Nicene Theology and the *sola scriptura* of the Reformation a ‘fundamentalist’. As someone has said, it has become a very convenient theological swearword! So let me define my use of it carefully. I use it to refer to the grass-roots movement that developed particularly in the United States (with some echoes in the United Kingdom) which had three particular characteristic emphases. First, it held to the inerrancy of Scripture; secondly it embraced what we now call ‘creationism’,² and thirdly, it

² It is presumably unnecessary to differentiate ‘creationism’, the modern claim to a supposedly ‘scientific’ alternative to the theory of evolution, from the church’s ancient doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo*, enunciated clearly first by Theophilus of Antioch and Irenaeus of Lyons in the second century. That doctrine is built into the church development of Trinitarian doctrine and is a necessary and indispensable part of orthodox Christian belief.

tended towards a form of premillennialism, if not outright dispensationalism with its belief in the supposed ‘rapture’ of the saints.

We need to be clear here that while all fundamentalists hold to the inerrancy of Scripture, not all who hold to the inerrancy of Scripture are fundamentalists. That is why it brings important clarity to the debate to include ‘creationism’ and dispensationalism within a useful definition of fundamentalism. It was the debate over evolution which sparked the emergence of fundamentalism in the 1920s, but it was belief in the ‘inerrancy’ of Scripture which led to the conclusion among sincere Bible-believing Christians that they had to oppose ‘Darwinism’. In fact however, although some Methodist theologians embraced inerrancy,³ it was the Calvinist tradition of old Princeton, the Hodges and B.B. Warfield, who were the prominent defenders of the total ‘inerrancy’ of Scripture. But Warfield was not a fundamentalist. Along with many evangelical theologians and scientists of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, he accepted evolution.⁴ Similarly, we are not to denounce as ‘fundamentalists’ those denominations and major evangelical seminaries in the U.S. today who require professors to subscribe to the ‘inerrancy’ of Scripture. But the problem was (and *is*) that the notion of the inerrancy of Scripture is the foundation of fundamentalism.

It is highly ironic of course that the fundamentalists either ignored or were ignorant of the acceptance of the theory of evolution by the leading evangelical theologians and scientists of the day, whether Presbyterian, Methodist or whatever.⁵ Instead the fundamentalists naively swallowed the propaganda of T.H. Huxley and Herbert Spencer that modern science was always in conflict with theology. But our problem today (and the problem which the Nazarene scripture committee believed they were facing) is that the *function* or use of the word ‘inerrancy’ today is to provide a platform for fundamentalism, that is to say, for a naive, literalistic interpretation of Scripture leading to ‘creationism’ and dispensationalism.⁶

The Major Divisions in the Christian Church

It is entirely understandable that faced by the dominance of various forms of so-called ‘liberalism’ in the divinity schools, evangelical Christians in the tradition of the Reformation and of the evangelical revival of Edwards and Wesley should emphasize the authority of Scripture. They rightly saw that the really deep and major divisions in the Christian church were determined by where the final authority lay in determining Christian doctrine. For the so-called ‘liberal’ tradition, adapting Christian theology to Enlightenment modernity, final authority lay

³ Dr Van Kuiken rightly lists Watson, Wakefield, Binney and Steele.

⁴ See David N. Livingstone, *Darwin’s Forgotten Defenders* (Eerdmans and Scottish Academic Press, 1987)

⁵ See T.A. Noble, ‘Darwin and Theology,’ *Didache*, 15:1

⁶ See Al Truesdale (ed), *Square Peg: Why Wesleyans Aren’t Fundamentalists* (Beacon Hill, 2012)

with either the *reason* or the religious *experience* of the individual. Many ‘liberals’ did accept core Christian beliefs such as Incarnation, Atonement, Trinity and Creation, but many did not. And on other doctrines, final judgment for example, so-called ‘liberal’ opinion rejected any such doctrine, affirming universalism. So ‘liberal’ theology tended to reject doctrines which credal Christianity had long based on Scripture. The other option was a form of ‘catholic’ Christianity (Roman, Eastern Orthodox or Anglo-catholic) which claimed to work with a combination of Bible and *tradition*. In fact this meant the supremacy of *tradition*, and so doctrines developed which had little or no biblical basis – purgatory, indulgences, the immaculate conception of the Virgin Mary, and so on. *Scripture*, the *reason* or *experience* of the individual, or *tradition*: ascribing final authority to those determines the major divisions in Christian theology. Compared with those, disputes over such matters as baptism, predestination, or church government, were minor.

Of course the evangelical tradition stemming from the Reformation gave a role to *tradition*, *reason* and *experience*. Albert Outler wrongly thought that what he called the ‘Wesleyan Quadrilateral’ was peculiarly Wesleyan, but in fact it was the hermeneutic of Luther and Calvin and the whole Reformation evangelical tradition.⁷ So-called ‘liberal’ theology in fact departs from the Protestant or evangelical faith. But evangelical theology of all traditions works with what Randy Maddox called ‘a unilateral *rule* of Scripture within a trilateral *hermeneutic* of reason, tradition, and experience.’⁸ I would further argue (although space does not permit this here) that this is the hermeneutical method of the Christian Fathers. Certainly, the positive role of tradition is one which many Wesleyan evangelicals are increasingly coming to understand. I would argue that the original Gospel of the apostolic tradition which gave rise to the New Testament was in substance the *rule of faith* which came to be formulated in the creeds and so is the Church’s hermeneutic for the interpretation of Old Testament and New. But in the end of the day, while the credal form of the *euangelion* is the hermeneutic for interpreting all the Scriptures, it is the Scriptures which the Fathers and Reformers interpreted in order to arrive at their doctrine.

Turning to Specifics

It is only with that wider theological perspective that we can begin to estimate whether this narrower debate over ‘inerrancy’ is significant. Given those three major divisions in the Christian

⁷ For the documentation of this, see T.A. Noble, ‘Scripture and Experience,’ *A Pathway into the Holy Scriptures*, ed. Satterthwaite and Wright (Eerdmans, 1994), 277-295. That volume, marking the fiftieth anniversary of the Tyndale Fellowship for Biblical and Theological Research, also includes significant papers by Carl Trueman, Craig Blomberg, Anthony Thiselton, Kevin Vanhoozer, Howard Marshall, Gerald Bray, David F. Wright, and Anthony N.S. Lane, thus illustrating that both sides in this intra-evangelical debate are able to co-operate.

⁸ See Maddox, *Responsible Grace* (Kingswood, 1994), 46. The epistemological critique of William Abraham has to be taken on board of course.

church, the dispute over ‘inerrancy’ is minor indeed. Both sides in that debate are within the evangelical tradition and wish to uphold the primacy of Holy Scripture and it is therefore tragic that they should be divided by this word. The question is whether this particular word is essential to the case we all want to make.

(1) The Meaning of ‘Inerrancy’

The first aspect is the *meaning* of the word ‘inerrancy’, and Dr Van Kuiken argues that as we Wesleyans use the word ‘perfection’ but carefully define it differently from standard contemporary usage, so we are to use the word ‘inerrant’ while carefully defining it to mean something different from what it means in common usage. But the obvious response to that is that there is a world of difference here. The word ‘perfection’ is a biblical word: the word ‘inerrancy’ is not. We are bound therefore to explain the true meaning of *teleios* and *teleiōsis*: we are not bound by Scripture to use the word ‘inerrant’. There may be better words to say what we need to say.

It is true that to arrive at the best usage we should pay heed to the most sophisticated defence of the word, and that is indeed the Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy.⁹ Much that is in that document, indeed most of it, will be affirmed by all evangelicals, but the problem is the underlying philosophy of language which comes in Article V: ‘We deny that human language is so limited by our creatureliness that it is rendered inadequate as a vehicle for divine revelation.’ There the authors take the side of Eunomius against the Cappadocians, and of Nestorius against Cyril, and assert a Pelagian-like doctrine of the natural ability of creaturely human language to refer to God. This is quite contrary to the apophatic emphasis of Patristic doctrine. It is a curious assertion indeed, particularly from the Calvinists who form the main body of those asserting inerrancy! Here the transcendence and sovereignty and mystery of God are compromised by asserting that our finite human languages and categories are capable in themselves of revealing the infinite and eternal God. This is the root of the rationalist Aristotelian scholasticism which infects the whole theological method. According to the Gospel however (the Gospel, no less!) human beings are only able to know God *sola gratia*, and human language is consequently only able to be an instrument in conveying that knowledge of God (not merely abstract but direct knowledge of acquaintance) *sola gratia*. There is therefore, as Charles Wesley teaches us, a double inspiration:

Come, Holy Ghost, our hearts inspire,
Let us thine influence prove,
Source of the old prophetic fire,
Fountain of life and love.

⁹ Among other publications, the Chicago Statement may be found as an appendix in Norman L. Geisler, *Inerrancy* (Zondervan, 1979) 493-502.

Come, Holy Ghost (for moved by thee
The prophets wrote and spoke);
Unlock the truth, thyself the key,
Unseal the sacred book.¹⁰

Not only do we speak of the plenary inspiration of Scripture (and we do!), but according to the true evangelical tradition, we must also speak of the ‘inspiration’ of the Holy Spirit in our hearts before the inspired words on the page are the vehicle by which the Spirit admits us to *know* the God who is beyond human powers of knowledge:

God through himself we then shall know,
If thou within us shine;
And sound, with all thy saints below,
The depths of love divine.

The Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy is in fact a self-defeating document. By the time it has ruled out all the ways in which we are *not* to say that the Bible is inerrant, it has disqualified the very term it seeks to defend. This is why the Nazarene committee were correct in stating that the word ‘inerrancy’ is not a useful word since it is impossible to define what constitutes an error: it is an absolutist word applied to something which is necessarily a matter of degree of accuracy. The problem is precisely as Dr Van Kuiken has said, that despite its best advocates, ‘It sounds absolutist, hyper-literalistic, and unrealistic.’

(2) The History of ‘Inerrancy’

Secondly, what about the history of the word? Dr Van Kuiken argues that, even if the word has been mainly defended by Calvinists, that does not invalidate it any more than the use of the word ‘Trinity’ commits us to being Roman Catholics or Eastern Orthodox. The fallacy there of course is the notion that it was the *Roman* church or Eastern orthodoxy which formulated the doctrine of the Trinity, and that the Protestant or Evangelical Reformers started new churches! There is only one holy, catholic, and apostolic Church, and it is that church, the Church catholic, which settled the doctrine of the Trinity at the ecumenical councils. Part of that one Church was reformed at the Reformation and part of it was not. John Wesley was a fully committed participant of study of the Fathers by members of the Church of England in order to assert that they – and *not* the Roman church – were the true heirs of *catholic* Christianity.

As far as the word ‘inerrancy’ is concerned, it is true that adopting it does not commit Wesleyans to be Calvinists, but it is more at home in rationalistic, scholastic Calvinism than it is in the Wesleyan tradition. It is not in the Thirty-Nine Articles of the Church of England to which Wesley subscribed on his ordination, and it was not in the Twenty-Five Articles of American

¹⁰ *A Collection of Hymns for the People Called Methodists*, no. 85 (*The Works of John Wesley*, Vol. 7, OUP and Abingdon, 1983), 185

Methodism.¹¹ It was Richard Watson who introduced that rationalism into the Wesleyan tradition, and it is quite a different method from Wesley's Christ-centred, Gospel-centred theological thinking. At the same time of course, it is worth noting that, as Andrew McGowan has shown, the insistence on inerrancy is not true of Scottish or Dutch Calvinism represented by James Orr or Herman Bavinck. It is peculiarly typical of one strain of American Calvinism, represented by the Hodges and Warfield, a tradition embodied today in Westminster Theological Seminary in Philadelphia.¹² The word is at home therefore in this rationalistic, scholasticism developed in post-Reformation Protestant 'orthodoxy'.

Dr Van Kuiken gives the game away when he quotes John D. Woodbridge as showing that 'while the term "inerrancy" is new, the concept was embraced throughout church history.'¹³ The point is that it is the use of the *term* which we are debating! If the term is not an ancient one, why introduce it now in the modern era? The reason it was introduced of course is that some in the evangelical or Protestant tradition were shaped by the Aristotelian scholastic method. Protestant 'orthodoxy', both Lutheran and Calvinist, retreated back into that medieval method (Luther would have been appalled!) in its debates with Counter-Reformation Roman Catholicism. From Beza onwards it therefore operated in the mode of deductive logic thus requiring a literalistic reading of an inerrant text in order to secure the kind of Cartesian certainty which rationalism sought in the late sixteenth and the seventeenth century. We see that already in the logical system the Calvinists constructed at the Synod of Dort. It was precisely that rationalistic deductive Aristotelianism, so characteristic of the seventeenth century, which failed miserably to rise to the challenge of the Enlightenment, so that the Christian faith lost its dominance in Western culture for the first time in a thousand years.

And even if the *concept* of inerrancy is found throughout ancient centuries (as Woodbridge argues), that does not commit us to it, any more that we are committed today to a pre-Copernican cosmology or the notion that no sin after baptism could be forgiven, or the notion of the so-called apostolic succession of monarchical bishops. These are all ancient and venerable beliefs held throughout the Christian church in former centuries, but we are not committed to them today. Wesley himself belonged to that pre-critical era, but once the historical-critical method had raised significant question, it can be seen that it is not an essential part of the insistence which the Christian church has always had in practice, and in principle too since the Reformation – the 'formal' principle of the *sola scriptura*, that doctrine has to be based on Scripture..

That brings us then to the reason why some evangelical Christians have thought it necessary to introduce this neologism, 'inerrancy.' Historically it is part of the reaction to the rise of scepticism from the early modern period onwards and especially to the rise of the historical critical method. The rise of critical history applied to the Bible, particularly in Germany in the

¹¹ See the Methodist Articles of Religion, AD 1784, in Philip Schaff, *The Creeds of Christendom*, Vol. 3 (Baker, 1983), 807-813. See also Ted A. Campbell, *Wesleyan Beliefs* (Kingswood, 2010), 40-42.

¹² A.T.B. McGowan, *The Divine Spiration of Scripture* (Apollos, 2007)

¹³ John D. Woodbridge, *Biblical Authority: A Critique of the Rogers/McKim Proposal* (Zondervan, 1982)

nineteenth century, understandably produced a reaction in all kinds of ‘conservatives’ (a very Victorian word!), including, as Dr Van Kuiken notes, the arch-conservatives in the Roman Catholic Church. All of that is perfectly understandable. Of course Christian people, committed to God and his Word, committed to Christ and his Gospel, reacted. Scholarly Christians today too often despise those sincere fundamentalists of the 1920s. But we have to face the fact that they over-reacted out of a sincere desire to defend the truth. And the insistence on the necessity of holding to the ‘inerrancy’ of Scripture is similarly a most unwise over-reaction.

(3) Practice

Insisting on this unbiblical term, ‘inerrancy’ is also unwise because, in the era of historical criticism, it positively invites sceptics to divert attention to, yes, unimportant details.

‘Was it Abiathar or Abimelech who was High Priest when David ate the showbread? Were there two angels at the tomb, or was there only one? Were there several women at the tomb on Easter morning or was there only one? Did Judas hang himself or did he die some other way? There are innumerable debates on points which have no bearing on the truth of the gospel and which are a waste of time. Because we are dealing with ancient literature, we frequently do not have enough information to determine whether an apparent contradiction is truly a contradiction or not. To assert complete inerrancy therefore is to be diverted into petty and unprofitable arguments like those at Ephesus who debated ‘myths and genealogies which promote vain speculations’ and had ‘wandered away into vain discussion’ (I Tim. 1: 4-6).¹⁴

It is also unwise because it gives support to those sincere but seriously misguided Christians who resort to fundamentalism and creationism, and have done enormous damage to the church of Christ, particularly in the USA, by telling intelligent young people that they have to deny everything that modern science tells us about the universe in order to be true to their faith.

It is also unwise in that it is generally part of an approach that the authority of the Bible is prior to the truth of the Gospel. That is not a psychological question of which a particular believer comes to accept first: it is a question of theological priority. Luther did not come to assert the *sola fide* because he first accepted the *sola scriptura*: he only explicitly affirmed the *sola scriptura*, the ‘formal’ principle of the Reformation, when he discovered that the Pope would not accept *sola fide*. The early confessions of the Reformation therefore begin by affirming faith in the Triune God, and only later in the Scriptures. In later confessions, such as the Westminster Confession, scholastic method has taken over, and the article in Scripture comes first, before the confession of faith in God. Of course the Bible was given by ‘plenary inspiration’ long before we came personally to confess faith in Christ, but the confession of its authority comes as an implication of our faith in Christ and not because we can present a rationalistic argument for its authority which will first persuade the sceptic.

Finally, it is true that the insistence on the use of the term ‘inerrancy’ does not commit one to be a fundamentalist, creationist, or dispensationalist. But it is no ‘straw man’ to say that it is the

¹⁴ From the original report of the Report of the Scripture Study Committee to the Twenty-Eighth General Assembly, Church of the Nazarene.

notion of the ‘inerrancy’ of Scripture understood in this literalistic, scholastic way, which has been fundamental to those distortions of biblical faith and theology.

Caritas

But, as the old couplet has it, ‘A man convinced against his will is of the same opinion still.’ The real goal here is not to win arguments, but to win friends. So I come back to where I began. Is it still possible to think of Wesleyan denominations at least co-operating in a brotherly or sisterly way without being fully agreed on this particular issue? I sincerely hope and believe that it is. But here I must be perfectly frank. It was the insistence on the term ‘inerrancy’, advocated by Harold Lindsell in *The Battle for the Bible* in 1976, which produced (at least in the United States) the most damaging division among evangelical Christians. I was a divinity student at the time, but I’m thankful that in the smaller world of British evangelicalism, that issue was not allowed to break the fellowship. Both views are represented within the Tyndale Fellowship, the main cross-denominational fellowship for biblical scholars and theologians under the auspices of UCCF (InterVarsity).¹⁵ Sadly in the US, as I understand it, this issue led to blood-letting and the exclusion of many excellent evangelical scholars from seminaries and colleges.

The point is, however, that there cannot be unity if this shibboleth is allowed to divide us. Dr Van Kuiken wrongly attributes to the committee report the attitude that inerrantists will be allowed in the big tent ‘as long as [they] accept that [they’re] wrong and don’t truly belong.’ If that was the impression given, I deeply regret it, but ever since Harold Lindsell’s deeply divisive book and the storm it raised, this issue has been attended by too much bad attitude. The logic of the situation is however (and yes, there is a role for logic!), that as long as inerrantists insist that inerrancy is a necessary part of Christian doctrine, there cannot be unity. Only if that is *not* a required belief in an article of faith, and each is at liberty to use this word or not, can there be unity. It is the presence of that word which is exclusive and divisive, not its absence. Without it, each may be in unity but take his or her own view. There can only be greater unity then among the Wesleyan denominations if there is no insistence that that word is an essential part of the Christian faith. Without that word, there can be full co-operation and fellowship among those who are really in fundamental agreement, and (who knows?) in the fullness of God’s time, actual unity.

Why anyway, is so much attention being focussed on this word? What reason can there be for asserting inerrancy unless it is a commitment to fundamentalism, creationism and possibly dispensationalism? If that is not the underlying agenda, should the earlier part of the Nazarene committee report not be the focus of attention? There the committee affirmed in ringing terms that we believe in the plenary, divine inspiration of Scripture, that it inerrantly reveals the will of God in all things concerning our salvation and that no doctrine can be part of our theology if it is not based in Scripture. The use of the adverb ‘inerrantly’ attached to the verb ‘reveals’ instead of the adjective ‘inerrant’ applied to the text of Scripture is quite different of course. It does not require that we engage in the impossible task of defining an ‘error’: it states instead that, as God reveals himself to us through the Scriptures he has inspired, we will not be misled. That is what is sometimes called the ‘infallibility’ of Scripture – *not* meaning ‘inerrancy’, nor implying it, but simply declaring that when it comes to a conflict between Scripture and our human notions, we

¹⁵ See note 5.

are committed to be guided by our best interpretation of Scripture. What else do we need to say? That is all that is affirmed in the confessions of the Reformation – the ‘sufficiency’ of Holy Scripture. It is all that is affirmed in the Twenty-five Articles Wesley gave to the American Methodists,¹⁶ and it is all we need to affirm today in order to stay true to the Gospel and live in obedience to the Word of God.

Can all in the Wesleyan tradition not see the wider strategic picture and understand that we need to put aside this divisive word and unite in our strong belief in the sufficiency of Holy Scripture? The Nazarene Article of Faith strongly commits us to the inspiration of Scripture and its final authority in matters of doctrine and ethics. Surely all in the Wesleyan tradition can unite around that for the sake of the Gospel and the mission of the church.

¹⁶ Of course, Wesley only gave them twenty-four!