

## **SOLA SCRIPTURA, INERRANTIST FUNDAMENTALISM, AND THE WESLEYAN QUADRILATERAL: IS "NO CREED BUT THE BIBLE" A WORKABLE SOLUTION?**

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### *Introduction*

American Bible-believing Protestants have given firm support to the finality of biblical authority in doctrinal formation. This scripturally oriented heritage certainly has its source in the issues which erupted out of the sixteenth-century Reformation's resort to and emphasis upon the *sola Scriptura* principle. The issue which this article addresses is whether conservative Protestants can, in all honesty, continue to give assent to this venerable principle.<sup>1</sup>

While other traditions will be mentioned, the focus of this essay will be on the way Wesleyans have sought to come to terms with the practical problems raised by *sola Scriptura*. This will be addressed through a clarification of the way their use of the so-called Quadrilateral can be instructive for other traditions which take scriptural authority seriously.

Before we address some historic trends which have rendered *sola Scriptura* problematic and seek to clarify the implications of the Quadrilateral methodology, a brief sketch of the way *sola Scriptura* has evolved in the American Protestant Bible-believing tradition is in order.

### *A North American Historical Sketch*

Much of the practical interaction with Scripture is still under the shadow of the yeasty individualism of the early nineteenth century. In that time *sola Scriptura* evolved into such radical slogans as "No creed but

<sup>1</sup>Probably the best review of the historical and hermeneutical vagaries which surrounded the Reformation appropriation of *sola Scriptura* is given by Alister McGrath, *Reformation Thought* (New York: Basil Blackwell, 1988), 95-116; and idem, *The Intellectual Origins of the European Reformation* (New York: Basil Blackwell, 1987), 140-174.

the Bible" and "Everyone one's own interpreter."<sup>2</sup> Such radical slogans took on different, though still intensely polemical overtones during the Fundamentalist revolt of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Not only was biblical authority emphasized, but it was accentuated through the strenuous proclamation of biblical inerrancy.

There were differences between the early-nineteenth-century emphasis on radical Scriptural authority (expressed in "No creed but the Bible") and the "biblicism" of the Fundamentalist revolt which arose later in the century. While the earlier movement was a "republican," Jeffersonian-inspired revolt against real or perceived priestly and creedal authority, the Fundamentalist revolt was a reaction to the downgrading of biblical authority by critical liberalism. Despite their different motivations, both were rather rationalistic efforts to uphold biblical authority and had a similar polemical spirit. Both were also quite preoccupied with the formal, as opposed to the material, authority of Scripture.

Scarcely a conservative Protestant denomination, church, or movement was not "leavened" by Fundamentalism's almost reflexive turn to biblical authority in the face of the real and perceived challenges of modernistic liberalism.<sup>3</sup>

The flirtations of the Wesleyan/Holiness Movement with Fundamentalism brought about a rather problematic "shotgun wedding" with Fundamentalism's more Reformed and restorationist version of biblical inspiration and authority. During this period the Holiness Movement unwittingly moved away from its more distinctly Wesleyan heritage. This classic heritage was more deeply indebted to seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Anglican approaches to the role of the Bible in doctrinal formation than it was to Reformed, scholastic models.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>2</sup>For the background of the rise of such slogans, see Nathan Hatch, "The Christian Movement and the Demand for a Theology of the People," *Journal of American History* 67 (1980): 545-567; Nathan Hatch, "*Sola Scriptura* and *Novus Ordo Seclorum*," and George Marsden, "Everyone One's Own Interpreter in Mid-Nineteenth-Century America," in *The Bible in America*, ed. Nathan Hatch and Mark Noll (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1982), 59-100.

<sup>3</sup>The term "leavened" is Paul M. Bassett's. He has perceptively and carefully documented the Holiness Movement's relationship to Fundamentalism in "The Fundamentalist Leavening of the Holiness Movement, 1914-1940: The Church of the Nazarene, A Case Study," *Wesleyan Theological Journal* 13 (Spring 1978): 65-91; and idem, "The Theological Identity of the North American Holiness Movement: Its Understanding of the Nature and Role of the Bible," in *The Variety of American Evangelicalism*, ed. Donald W. Dayton and Robert K. Johnston (Knoxville: Univ. of Tennessee Press, 1991), 72-108.

<sup>4</sup>Dayton and Johnston, 76-82. I am indebted to William J. Abraham for the rather pungent term "shotgun wedding"; see his "Response: The Perils of a Wesleyan Systematic Theologian," *Wesleyan Theological Journal* 17 (Spring 1982): 27. Abraham offers other

At first glance, this brief historical sketch would seem to exalt *sola Scriptura*. This history, however, has actually uncovered some troubling trends which seem to have had the effect of calling into question the practical usefulness of the *sola Scriptura* principle. This is especially true when it comes to the effects generated by Fundamentalism's emphasis on inerrancy.

### *Nettlesome Trends*

The issue of biblical authority implicit in "sola scriptura" has been rendered quite problematic in practical theological formation by at least two vexing historical trends.

#### *The Formative "Prophetic" Figures*

The first trend involves the widespread phenomenon of religious traditions having historic and contemporary figures who have exercised powerful, formative influences over their interpretation of Scripture. Lutherans, Wesleyans, and Seventh-day Adventists (to name just three) have all stoutly proclaimed their allegiance to *sola Scriptura* while having to acknowledge that Luther, Wesley, and Ellen White have been powerfully shaping interpretative forces in their respective traditions. Furthermore, numerous Fundamentalist groups could be cited who loudly profess their allegiance to biblical authority and yet have their own formative teachers, preachers, and de facto "prophets."<sup>5</sup>

In view of such a persistent, widespread historical trend, it is certainly pertinent to ask: Can self-proclaimed adherents to the finality of biblical authority lay a credible claim to *sola Scriptura* and still be mentored by such compelling figures as a Luther and a Wesley?

#### *The Wesleyan Dilemma*

As this article addresses the practical viability of a professedly Wesleyan theological methodology, it seems appropriate to inquire how Wesleyans have tried to resolve the dilemma raised by claiming *sola Scriptura* principles while acknowledging Wesley's formative interpretive influence.

A classic example of this dilemma was played out in the Wesleyan

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colorful imagery when he speaks of the phenomenon of "patching elements of Wesley's thinking into the loin-cloth of some alien theological system, such as fundamentalism or dispensationalism" (24).

<sup>5</sup>The best treatment of the issue of how *sola Scriptura* traditions can relate to the authority of postcanonical "prophetic" figures is Ronald Graybill's "Ellen White's Role in Doctrine Formation," *Ministry*, October 1981, 7-11.

Theological Society<sup>6</sup> in the early 1980s in a revealing exchange between Ray Dunning and William Abraham. In his response to Dunning's suggestions on doing "theology in a Wesleyan Mode," Abraham pointedly raised the issue: if the interpreter self-consciously brings such distinctive Wesleyan themes as "salvation and sanctification by grace through faith, prevenient grace and Christology" to the study of Scripture, is he/she not thus vulnerable to the charges of any opponent that Wesleyans have cooked "the hermeneutical books in advance"?<sup>7</sup>

Can conservative Wesleyans (and others) have it both ways? Can they continue to claim Scripture as ultimate, sole authority, and yet be mentored by their key formative figures?

### *The Bewildering Doctrinal Pluralism*

The second historical trend which makes the practical application of *sola Scriptura* questionable is the bewildering array of doctrinal options that have arisen among groups that strenuously profess fidelity to the Bible as their sole authority.

As has often been pointed out, so-called "high" views of inspiration and biblical authority (usually associated with such terms as "biblical inerrancy" and "The Bible and the Bible alone") have not been able to generate the expected unity in either theological or practical matters. Every person and movement which claims high biblical authority should prudently ponder Clark Pinnock's sobering observation:

Conservative Protestants . . . naively assume that if one secures the first level of [biblical] authority [an "infallible" Bible], the rest will take care of itself. How naive an assumption this is shows up in the theological pluralism of those who adopt the stance: Baptist, dispensationalist, Calvinist, Lutheran, Wesleyan, Pentecostal, Adventist, Jehovah's Witness, and so forth. It is astonishing how little attention conservative Protestants give to issues of pluralism in their own interpretation and to the problems of control this suggests.<sup>8</sup>

Such painful "pluralism" includes issues as varied as soteriological emphases, prophetic interpretation, Christology, and the role of women in ministry (to mention only a few of the most prominent). Yet all have

<sup>6</sup>The Wesleyan Theological Society is a Commission of the Christian Holiness Association (formerly the National Campmeeting Association for the Promotion of Holiness), whose membership is mainly composed of scholars from Holiness denominations, conservative United Methodists, and a sprinkling of Pentecostals, Adventists, and others with a scholarly interest in Wesley and his tradition.

<sup>7</sup>H. Ray Dunning, "Systematic Theology in a Wesleyan Mode," *Wesleyan Theological Journal* 17 (Spring 1982): 15-22; Abraham, 26.

<sup>8</sup>Clark H. Pinnock, *Tracking the Maze* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1990), 43.

a high view of biblical authority and many are professing "inerrantists" (or at least unwittingly demonstrate "inerrantist" presuppositions in their approach to biblical interpretation).<sup>9</sup>

Geoffrey Bromiley rhetorically sums up the painful pluralism: "The Bible is infallible and authoritative. But if there are different possibilities of interpretation, where is one to find that which is infallible and absolute?"<sup>10</sup>

The issue needs to be honestly confronted: are Bible-believing Protestants still in need of the "*Sola Scriptura*" and "No creed but the Bible" placards if they are to maintain a credible posture and practice in their resort to a high view of biblical authority?

### *A Quadrilateral Alternative*

It seems that one of the best ways to begin the exodus out of this embarrassing, pluralistic impasse is the judicious application of the methodology inherent in the so-called Quadrilateral—especially as it was practically modeled by Wesley.<sup>11</sup>

#### *The Quadrilateral: A Description*

The Wesleyan Quadrilateral is a fourfold complex of authorities which has been most aptly described by the members of the Seventh Oxford Institute of Methodist Theological Studies which convened at Keble College, Oxford in the summer of 1982:

Our interest in Wesley's authority . . . is less in the man himself than in the complex of authorities by which he chose so willingly to be guided. This complex has been identified as the so-called "Wesleyan

<sup>9</sup>Robert K. Johnston has perceptively laid out this dilemma in *Evangelicals at an Impasse: Biblical Authority in Practice* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1979), 1-76.

<sup>10</sup>Geoffrey Bromiley, "The Inspiration and Authority of the Scripture," *Eternity*, August 1971, 12-20.

<sup>11</sup>The term Quadrilateral was coined in the Wesleyan tradition by Albert C. Outler. The best treatment, however, of the development of Wesley's theological methodology and the way the use and meaning of this term has evolved in recent Wesleyan studies has been given by Donald A. D. Thorsen, *The Wesleyan Quadrilateral: Scripture, Tradition, Reason & Experience as a Model of Evangelical Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990). Other recent treatments are given by Randy Maddox, *Responsible Grace: John Wesley's Practical Theology* (Nashville: Kingswood, 1994), 36-47; and Thomas C. Oden, *John Wesley's Scriptural Christianity: A Plain Exposition of His Teaching on Christian Doctrine* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 55-99. For further background on how the Quadrilateral has fared in the American Holiness tradition, see Leon O. Hynson, "The Wesleyan Quadrilateral in the American Holiness Tradition," *Wesleyan Theological Journal* 20 (Spring 1985): 19-33. For a somewhat positive critique of Thorsen from a non-Wesleyan perspective, see Donald G. Bloesch, *Theology of Word and Spirit* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1992), 208-211.

Quadrilateral" (which may or may not be a wholly apt metaphor, since one of its sides [Holy Scripture] is much more than equal to the other three). What the Quadrilateral means to point to, in its first instance, is the primacy and sufficiency of Holy Scripture. . . . The Scriptures are, in this view, the primal font of Christian truth. But since they must be interpreted in every succeeding age and in each new cultural context, there is also a need for the positive aid of *tradition*, understood as the collective wisdom of the Christian community in all centuries and all communions. Such interpretations, however, must also be guided by *reason*. Wesley expressly excludes interpretations that lead either to logical absurdities or to indictments of God's goodness. This is a demand for clarity and cogency in all Christian formulations. None of this, however, will suffice until all are given life and power by "the inner witness of the Spirit that we are the children of God." This is the Christian *experience* that turns sound doctrine into living faith.<sup>12</sup>

The implications of this methodological style offer a more satisfactory approach to doctrinal formation than does the authoritarian traditionalism of the Catholic communions (and the unwitting traditionalism in much of conservative Protestantism) or the rationalistic "biblicism" so prevalent in the individualistic (often Fundamentalistic) American scene.<sup>13</sup>

### *The Quadrilateral Implication: "Prima Scriptura"*

The major implication of the Wesleyan Quadrilateral would be *prima scriptura*. I would urge that such slogans as *sola Scriptura* and especially "No creed but the Bible" be laid aside and that a renewal of theological discourse be sought within the *prima scriptura* framework.<sup>14</sup> Such a term

<sup>12</sup>M. Douglass Meeks, ed., *The Future of the Methodist Theological Traditions* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1985), 56-57. While the term Quadrilateral and its suggested methodology have in recent years received wide acclaim in the Wesleyan tradition, they have been contested by at least two Wesleyan scholars: Ted A. Campbell, "The 'Wesleyan Quadrilateral': The Story of a Modern Methodist Myth," *Doctrine and Theology in the United Methodist Church*, ed. Thomas A. Langford (Nashville: Kingswood, 1991), 155-159; and Scott J. Jones, *John Wesley's Conception and Use of Scripture* (Nashville: Kingswood, 1995), 62-65. It must be pointed out, however, that the criticisms of Campbell and Jones do not affect the general way that the term is employed in this article. Their criticisms are aimed at those who claim the Quadrilateral in Wesley's name, but (1) lower the primacy of Scripture in Wesley's own theological development, and (2) misunderstand the way Wesley understood and used "tradition." It seems that they want to adjust the basic methodology inherent in the Quadrilateral, not do away with it.

<sup>13</sup>By "biblicism" I mean a view of Scripture which conceives it in almost Islamic terms—some sort of freestanding norm to which we can resort in almost push-button appeals when we get into theological debate.

<sup>14</sup>As to the background for my use of the term *prima scriptura*, I am consciously indebted to the introductory comments of Albert Outler in his classic introductory

certainly reflects the conservative Protestant concern for the *normative* finality of biblical authority, but it realistically acknowledges that other factors (such as tradition, reason, and experience) play powerfully *formative* roles in interpretative and doctrinal development. As has already been suggested, the other options essentially come down to the numerous varieties of sterile "traditionalism" or naive "biblicism."<sup>15</sup>

In practical terms, how does the *prima scriptura* theme inherent in the Wesleyan Quadrilateral point the way to a more productive theological dialogue and consensus?

### *The Prima Scriptura Implications*

**1. The First Implication: Honest Self-Criticism.** The Quadrilateral enables the biblical interpreter to be more honest and self-critical about what is actually going on in theological development. Thorsen's judicious suggestions merit careful consideration:

Evangelicals need to conceptualize their theological method in a way that explicitly recognizes the interplay between various sources of religious authority that it uses. The Wesleyan Quadrilateral provides one attempt to produce greater self-consciousness and thus greater criticalness and appreciation for the complexity of doing theology.<sup>16</sup>

Persons working in this Wesleyan mode are better prepared to be candidly realistic about their experiences, but they also know that no love relationship arises out of some "virgin-born" conditions. Their existential response to divine love certainly needs the constant corrective witness of Scripture; but such an experience is quick to acknowledge that it also profits from the testimony of older, experienced lovers (tradition) and the observations and insights of cool, logical counselors (reason). But the key point that thinkers who work in this mode want to make is that the rationalists simply cannot deny the need for and the essential validity of experience which supplies powerful grist to the theological mill.

When we refer to rationalists, we are speaking of the mind-set which makes the perceptive and logical abilities of the human mind the be-all and end-all of religious knowledge. Certainly Wesley acknowledged the perceptive abilities of the mind to discover important spiritual and moral truth, the importance of logic, and the mind's ability to see important

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anthology of Wesley's writings, *John Wesley* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1964), 28.

<sup>15</sup>The terms *normative* and *formative* are certainly not original with either me or Ronald Graybill, but I must confess my own "formative" debt to Graybill for this nomenclature and the essential conceptual weight that he has them bear; cf. Graybill, "Ellen White's Role in Doctrine Formation."

<sup>16</sup>Thorsen, 232.

relationships between the givens of knowledge. But for him such knowledge also needed special revelation and the illuminating guidance of the Spirit. It is one thing to be logical and rational, quite another to be rationalistic.<sup>17</sup>

Much of the rationalist appeal comes from its vaunted claims to objectivity. But in the area of ethics, philosophy, and spiritual truth, Wesleyans perceive that claims to scientific objectivity are simply the imaginary specters of Enlightenment spirits that never really existed in the first place.

The crux of this issue needs to be clearly exposed: the honest self-appraisal of Wesleyan methodology can better recognize that while Scripture remains the primary and ultimate place of objective appeal, it does not play an exclusive, solo role. A more realistic metaphor for the role of Scripture, rather than a Pavarotti solo recital might be a lead singer who carries tenors in his section of the choir. Whatever solos he might sing usually arise out of an essentially choral piece.

The choral metaphor alerts us to another consideration closely related to the honest self-criticism of the Wesleyan *prima Scriptura* model of doing theology: it is inherently more oriented to the "priesthood of believers" style of theological formation. Tradition, reason, and experience inherently point to the more participatory (as opposed to the purely passive) nature of the theological performance.

The very nature of this choral style of interpretation and doctrinal development requires some no-nonsense, self-conscious clarity about what is transpiring: it is not merely some rhapsodic "happening" where Bible interpreters gather to let their theological hair down in mindless testimonies about their personal experiences. Sing and share they must, but this kind of interpretation also includes invited veterans of previous quests for Bible truth; there are singer saints and composers of the past and contemporary critics and composers present to mentor and role-model with their testimony about the meaning of Scripture.

When this Wesleyan choir forms itself into a "class meeting," along with its past and present masters, it need not apologize for either its style or status. The "class" humbly and honestly confesses its need for every class member and invited master. The prima donnas of the choir and the invited masters are not there to pontificate, but to work in complementary fashion. Each participant recognizes that without the Spirit's constant work in truly "evangelical" experience their theological hymnody will quickly become sterile and take on the notes of a death-

<sup>17</sup>For a perceptive discussion of Wesley's attitude toward and use of reason, see Jones, 65-80, 160-169.

dirge—not the hopeful hymnody inspired by the gospel.<sup>18</sup>

Many fundamentalist inerrantists may be getting a bit nervous at this juncture, protesting that they “just go by the Bible and the Bible alone.” But would not a bit of frank self-assessment reveal an interesting, but often elusive reality?

Fundamentalists and many Evangelicals, while claiming to follow the Bible and the Bible alone, often tend to be quite rationalistic. Here the arid rationalism of Carl F. H. Henry’s ponderous six-volume *God, Revelation and Authority* comes to mind. If such thinkers could own up to it, they would honestly admit they often seem to love Greek philosophy more than self-evidential revelation.<sup>19</sup> Furthermore, such ardent biblicists might also admit that they are more deeply indebted to tradition than they realize. Granted, their traditions might not be as hoary as the Anglican’s or the Lutheran’s, but they are, nonetheless, powerfully formative.

Fundamentalists might not even be aware of Protestant scholasticism’s genetic history from Turretin, to Old Princeton, to Moody, to militant Fundamentalism. They must, however, at the very least dimly recognize their indebtedness to a powerful pastor, evangelist, Sunday School teacher, camp-meeting exhorter, footnotes in the *Scotfield Reference Bible*, or a Bible conference speaker (to name but a few) for many of their biblical interpretations and doctrinal views.

One does not have to travel far to meet Fundamentalists in the revivalistic tradition (belonging to churches with such names as “The Bible Church” and “The Bible Baptist Church”) who can wax eloquent about the night they “got saved.” They usually remember the moment of conviction, the struggle, the walk to the front of the church, the sense of release that came from surrender, and the beginnings of a growing attachment to the Bible as the oracles of God. But they are also routinely attached to the minister that they “got saved under”—and they often view this person as an authority in biblical interpretation.

Another irony in the biblicist phenomenon is that Fundamentalism, child of Greek-inspired rationalism though it is, can also manifest a powerfully passive mindlessness typified by the bumper-sticker slogan—“The Bible says it, I believe it, that settles it.” Such biblicist passivity is all too prevalent.

These instances are not mentioned to belittle, but to simply point out that all Christians are using tradition, reason, and experience as vigorous

<sup>18</sup>For those unfamiliar with early Methodist history, the “class meeting” was an important “cell group” which developed into a key vehicle for study, prayer, pastoral nurture, and mutual admonition.

<sup>19</sup>Carl F. H. Henry, *God, Revelation and Authority* (Waco, TX: Word, 1976-1983).

*formative* components in their conceptual development. The Wesleyan Quadrilateral (and its *prima Scriptura* implications) is simply more consistent in being honest about the whole process. No Bible-believer is strictly *sola Scriptura* in any arena of theological discourse—and this includes the most stridently fundamentalistic persons in the most conservative traditions of independent, Bible-oriented American churches.

Again, along with the great classic Christian tradition, it is appropriate to continue to give Scripture its *prime* place of authority in theological methodology. But a greater level of honesty is called for: Scripture never functions in a solo role. It must always be witnessed to by the Spirit in the setting of earnest individual and collective experience. And such collective experience is always open to the critical reflections of sanctified reason.

Only a healthy recognition of all these dynamic, *formative* factors in the theological mix can begin to forestall much of the stifling, unwitting traditionalism or rationalistic biblicism which has been so prevalent in a great deal of individualistic American Protestantism.

**2. Focus on the Message, Not the Medium.** The Wesleyan methodology allows a greater focus on the message of Scripture. Perhaps the time has come to concentrate the theological spotlight on the *message* of the Bible rather than on the Bible as *medium*. This difference has been particularly evident in the recent Fundamentalist “battle for the Bible.”

Some of the most trying and confusing theological thickets which theologians have explored involve the issues of revelation and inspiration. Isn't it more realistic to confess that Scripture is God's inspired revelation to lost humanity and yet acknowledge a reluctant, but healthy agnosticism regarding the exact nature of its workings and how infallible or inerrant it is?<sup>20</sup>

Preoccupations with inerrancy are inherently rationalistic and defy the ability of the mind to get at the reality demanded to make such a judgment. To put it another way: can there really be any absolutely scientific solution which would satisfy the critics? How can any believer claim that the Bible is inerrant in all matters of science and history? What discoveries of science and historiography can yield such inerrant results? How can the Bible be the final norm when its fitness as ultimate authority is measured by the rationalistic standards of Enlightenment scientism?

<sup>20</sup>Clark Pinnock has shared his personal challenges in dealing with the subject of revelation and inspiration. Referring to the struggles involved in the writing of *The Scripture Principle* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1984) Pinnock confesses: “I will admit that I have not found this an easy book to write. Indeed I have written and rewritten it several times. I agree with James Orr, who said: ‘There is perhaps no subject at the present moment more difficult to write upon, and above all to write upon wisely, than this of revelation and inspiration’” (viii).

This puts rationalism in the driver's seat. Fundamentalism ends up fighting enlightenment liberalism on its own grounds of *prima* rationalism in the name of defending *sola Scriptura*.

Furthermore, what would scholars have if they could find such a scientifically, inerrant result? Would it not be a "cheap" genre of truth when compared with the "costly" truths that the Bible really wants to confront humanity with? Since when did scientific and historical inerrancy ever move a soul to acknowledge personal sinfulness, the unmerited love of God, and the Lordship of Jesus?

Is it not more productive to confess that the "voices" which Christians really want to be heard speaking through Scripture address the sobering truths and poignant appeals of the "trustworthy," Triune Lover/Redeemer—not the objective, cold findings reported in the *Scientific American*? Is it not better to say that the "truth-telling" message of Scripture has a compelling Witness uniquely its own? What other literature can speak with such power to the spiritual, moral, and social needs of a deeply disillusioned and alienated humanity?

Are there errors in Scripture of a textual, scientific, and historical nature? It is quite evident that there are errors of a textual nature. All claims that the "autographs" are inerrant miss two important points: (1) We do not have the "autographs," so we have to deal with what we have—copies that present us with variant (errant!) readings; (2) How would we be able to identify an "autograph" if we had one? Are there any handwriting experts who could positively identify Paul's signature on Romans? Furthermore, what canons of "inerrancy" could certify an "autograph" to be perfectly without error?

What about alleged errors of a scientific and historical nature? Prudent caution is needed by anyone who positively asserts that there are errors of a scientific and historical nature. But any mind that is so narrow that it will stumble over such "blemishes" would just as easily stagger over the plainest revealed truths of Scripture.<sup>21</sup>

Again, historical trends need to be faced: Even conservative Wesleysans have often succumbed to the heady seductions and false

<sup>21</sup>The thought in the last sentence comes from Ellen G. White: "Some look to us gravely and say, 'Don't you think there might have been some mistake in the copyist or in the translators?' This is all probable, and the mind that is so narrow that it will hesitate and stumble over this possibility or probability would be just as ready to stumble over the mysteries of the Inspired Word, because their feeble minds cannot see through the purposes of God. Yes, they would just as easily stumble over plain facts that the common mind will accept, and discern the Divine, and to which God's utterance is plain and beautiful, full of marrow and fatness. All the mistakes will not cause trouble to one soul, or cause any feet to stumble, that would not manufacture difficulties from the plainest revealed truth" (Manuscript 16, 1888, *Selected Messages*, bk. 1 [Washington: Review and Herald, 1958], 16).

securities proffered by their Fundamentalist partners in the debate over biblical authority. But it is now becoming more apparent that such inerrancy strategies have missed the main point of Scripture: its *message*, not its *medium*.

Conservative biblical scholars have more basic and ultimately satisfying theological issues to ponder. In the more existentially oriented approach of the Wesleyan Quadrilateral, the Bible is given greater freedom to be a powerful witness to the truths that give it redemptive sufficiency, not mere scientific or historic accuracy. Therefore, I would suggest that Christian apologetics should be preoccupied with the "trustworthy" witness that speaks of a God who is deeply intent on getting out a redemptive message about the Person of the loving Bridegroom. God is not so intent on winning scientific or historical debates, but on gaining loving allegiance. And such allegiance can only be won through "redemptive" appeals to the heart, not threats of overweening authority.

It is rather ironic that one of the key texts which authoritarian fundamentalists resort to in seeking support for their view of biblical authority (2 Tim 3: 15, 16) speaks not in terms of authority but of profitability—Scripture's ability "to make wise unto salvation." Without any apology, those who would work in the Wesleyan-Quadrilateral style should continue to witness to scriptural authority as anchored in its sufficiency for salvation.

For the Wesleyan-Quadrilateral style of theology, authority is inherent in the message. Let the message be heard and the medium will have its legitimate authority (and primacy). Scripture did not fall out of heaven with a note attached to it saying: "I am to be the final court of authoritative resort in doctrinal and ethical formation." The reality is that it has providentially come down through the history of God's redemptive dealings to speak to each generation with a compelling message—the gospel of powerful redemption! Exposure to this message lends the Bible its confessional authority.

**3. Biblical Authority and Christian Witness.** The classic Wesleyan approach to biblical authority is more amenable to witness, winsome apologetics, mission, and unity. What is the relationship between witness and theology? Only as the church is revived to witness is it truly able to differentiate between the *adiaphora* and the essentials of the faith. Wesleyans sense that the witnessing apologetics which are born of a deep experience with the redemptive message of Scripture are more productive for dynamic theological growth and unity than internecine, polemical battles over the form and authority of Scripture.

The practical effects of such a theological style should be readily apparent: The Wesleyan inclusion of personal and collective experience suggests that a sharing mode of witness is more engagingly effectual than technical argumentation about inerrancy. It is much easier to share the redemptive witness of Scripture than it is to master the often intricate and torturous arguments involved in "inerrantist" apologetics. Not only are such arguments perceived as elusive, they also give a great sense of inadequacy to the average layperson who is often left with the impression that he/she must master Josh McDowell or Norman Geisler before being fit to witness.

**4. The *Material Principle* Shapes the *Formal*.** The character of God found in the message of Scripture greatly informs the character of his revelatory methods. The Wesleyan-Quadrilateral model of theological formation suggests a humble and respectful listening to what the Word says. And the crux of what Wesleyans claim to have heard from the Word in this more winsome and cooperative setting is that the service that God desires arises out of an allegiance borne of freely given love, not the forced acknowledgment of his inerrancy, power, and authority. The Bible is heard not so much as creedal authority, but as redemptive appeal.

Certainly Wesleyans want to acknowledge that the God who speaks through the Bible is the Sovereign Judge; but one senses that he can only achieve redemptive success if he carries the day through poignant appeal. The whole authoritarian move, so inherent in the "No Creed but the Bible" slogan and fundamentalistic inerrancy claims, resonates better with the Augustinian/Calvinist view of God than it does with the Arminian-Wesleyan vision.

It could be that Wesleyans have "cooked" their "hermeneutical books" before they have settled the issue, but they are compelled to confess that their involvement with listening to Scripture has allowed its *material* principle to be powerfully formative of their *formal* principle of authority. In other words, the Wesleyan understanding of God has not only affected their soteriology and missiology, but it has also seeped into their views of biblical inspiration, authority, and theological methodology. The cadences of God's voice heard in the Scripture have more profoundly shaped such a theology than have Aristotle and his Enlightenment progeny.

#### *Pinnock's Pilgrimage*

Prophets have often felt like lonely voices crying in the wilderness, wondering if anybody is heeding their message. For the Wesleyan prophets of Quadrilateral methodology, there are indications that their witness is being heeded by a number of contemporary evangelical

theologians. The most compelling and forthcoming figure is Clark Pinnock, whose theological pilgrimage has provided a striking exemplification of the Wesleyan/Arminian theological ethos and method.

Referring to the "docetic" and polemically driven views on "Biblical authority and inerrancy set forth" in his earlier work *Biblical Revelation*,<sup>22</sup> Pinnock admits that they were

an expression of the theology of . . . Old Princeton.

I had picked that view up as important from J. I. Packer and the Westminster faculty during the fifties and it was further encouraged by the influence of Francis A. Schaeffer on me . . . .

First, according to this mentality, it is thought to be epistemologically crucial to be able to prove that there is a perfect Bible which can serve as a theological axiom or first principle for a rational system of theology. To deliver a high enough degree of rational certainty, a Bible is required which would be principally untouched by any historical or human factors. This is central to an apologetically driven theology of this sort. Second, such a Bible was thought to be possible on the basis of the predestinarian framework of high Calvinism. Since God is thought to decree and control everything, he can also be thought of as controlling and determining the text of the Bible through the supernatural inspiration of it . . . . And, given a Bible so totally controlled by God's sovereignty, one might deduce that it would partake of the attribute of divine truth itself and be perfectly inerrant in every respect. Third, such a view is by nature a militant one, since so much is thought to be at stake. If Christianity itself depends on this theory, it is not easy to be tolerant of other views of the matter even though they are called evangelical. I thought that my early view was the only sound position a Christian could take and that there was no other.<sup>23</sup>

Furthermore, it should be noted that with Pinnock's shift away from rationalistic views of inspiration and authority, he developed a much more experiential style of theological method. He testifies to

a fresh appreciation of the work of the Spirit in my life [which] caused me to question the hard rationalism of my former scholastic view . . . . I began to see that one cannot establish the credentials of a perfect Book apart from the truth of the message it enshrines and cannot establish the truth of that Gospel without the witness of the Spirit of God to it. This

<sup>22</sup>*Biblical Revelation: The Foundation of Christian Theology* (Chicago: Moody, 1971; reprinted, Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1985).

<sup>23</sup>Clark H. Pinnock, "Foreword," in Ray C. W. Roennfeldt, *Clark H. Pinnock on Biblical Authority: An Evolving Position* (Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews Univ. Press, 1993), xviii, xix. Roennfeldt has offered a thorough and insightful study of Pinnock, who acknowledges that Roennfeldt has helped him to more clearly understand his own development (xxiii). For a very similar pilgrimage (though couched in more Reformed, less explicitly Wesleyan terms than Pinnock's testimony), see Jack B. Rogers' *Confessions of a Conservative Evangelical* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1974), especially chaps. 8, 10, 11.

caused the epistemological premise of the scholastic paradigm to fade.<sup>24</sup>

Pinnock goes on to recognize that not only was his rationalistic paradigm of Scriptural authority alien to the tenor of biblical revelation, but that there was a "deeper realization" permeating his theology:

During the seventies it was my impression that all I was doing was adjusting an old paradigm to make it work better. Now I see that something more fundamental than that may have been going on. The key thing to remember is that during the same period in which I was questioning the Warfieldian paradigm in these ways, I was also moving away from its larger framework of Calvinism itself to more dynamic ways of thinking theologically. I was being drawn to a new orientation which sees God as love, away from the view of God as authoritarian and austere judge. I was giving up the view according to which God is thought to relate primarily to us as all-determining monarch and law-giver and shifting to the paradigm in which God relates to us primarily as parent, lover and covenant partner.<sup>25</sup>

From a Wesleyan perspective, Clark Pinnock's paradigm shifts come as no surprise and exhibit how an appropriation of Arminian principles affects methodology. Pinnock, however, has not only made an Arminian shift in his conscious paradigms about the nature of God and Scripture, he has also taken the seemingly inevitable step: he is specifically advocating the Wesleyan Quadrilateral as the best model of theological methodology.<sup>26</sup>

### Conclusion

Wesleyans and other conservative evangelicals will certainly continue in the Protestant tradition classically expressed by *sola Scriptura*. But the arrogance engendered by the heady individualism of the American experience and their Quadrilateral mentoring by Wesley suggest that *prima Scriptura* could provide a framework that is in some ways more fruitful for theological formation.

Over against the individualistic (and ultimately fundamentalistic) "biblicism" implicit in "The Bible our only creed" sloganeering, *prima Scriptura* provides a dynamic setting for a more genuine implementation of another much neglected, basic Protestant principle: the priesthood of all believers. Scriptural mentoring in this framework is reluctant to feature isolated solo acts: the choir of evangelical experience, tradition, and sanctified reason (conceived as *formatively* confirming and interpretative)

<sup>24</sup>Roennfeldt, xx.

<sup>25</sup>Ibid., xx, xxi.

<sup>26</sup>Pinnock, *Tracking the Maze*, 71, 170-181.

inherently points to a collective, congregational exposure to and interaction with Scripture (the ultimate *norming* agency).

In such a collective setting, no believer (or group) can own the Scripture in any authoritarian way: it is not that believers possess the Scripture, but that through the illuminating witness of the Spirit they are possessed by its message and the God who sends it. Here is a venue which is much more open to dynamic interaction and growth in understanding. The alternative has all too often been highly individualistic persons with a very autocratic sense of their exclusivist strangle hold on truth.

For those who might be getting nervous that anyone who works in this theological mode is about to fall into the cauldron of relativism, I would urge that a careful hearing be given to Paul Bassett's words of reassurance:

The fact that tradition, experience and reason are sources of theological authority and reflection in dynamic conjunction with Scripture necessarily keeps religious thinking open to the creativity of the Spirit and it implies that the Spirit is not limited to the here and now. But this does not open the door to relativism. The creative Spirit is the same Spirit who enlivens and gives witness to the truth of Scripture. And it is the specific task of Scripture, within the quadrilateral, to serve as the foundation for "norming" the other norms, by the inspiration of the Spirit.<sup>27</sup>

<sup>27</sup>Paul Bassett, "The Holiness Movement and the Protestant Principle," *Wesleyan Theological Journal* 18 (Spring 1983): 21.