

Growth Institute: Scripture & Authority in the Modern Era, AD 1700-2000

Historical Overview

Enlightenment and Romanticism

They valued human feelings and emotions over rational autonomy and emphasized the subjective elements of religion over objective truth claims.

The Historical-Critical Method

The historical-critical method focused more on the historical circumstances that ostensibly gave rise to the biblical text rather than the content of the text itself.

Documentary Hypothesis: Proponents of this view rejected the primary Mosaic authorship and unified message of the Pentateuch, arguing instead that the canonical biblical material represented four different sources that were edited and combined over a period of about three centuries.

Fundamentalist-Modernist Controversies

In their view of Scripture, most fundamentalists argued that every word of the original manuscripts was inspired by God (verbal-plenary inspiration) and that Scripture, when rightly interpreted, was fully trust-worthy, even in matters of history and science (biblical inerrancy).

Schleiermacher, in his view of Scripture, argued that reflection on the human experience of dependence on God, rather than appeal to God's revelation in Scripture, was the heart of theological inquiry.

Neo-orthodoxy

The influential biblical scholar Rudolf Bultmann (1884-1976) argued for the "demythologization" of the Bible in favor of a focus on an ethical gospel compatible with modern assumptions.

The most famous of the neo-orthodox theologians was Karl Barth (1886-1968), arguably the most influential theologian of the twentieth century. Unlike modernists, the neo-orthodox movement sought to synthesize elements of classical orthodoxy with modern critical scholarship.

Postwar Evangelicalism

In the years following World War I, conservative Protestants in American (and to a lesser extent the British Isles) divided into two trajectories, each identified with one of these labels. Those who continued to call themselves "fundamentalists" continued to affirm verbal-plenary inspiration and biblical inerrancy.

Some evangelical theologians adopted a dynamic view of inspiration, wherein God inspired biblical themes but not necessarily the words of Scripture themselves.

A growing number of evangelicals also rejected biblical inerrancy, preferring the term infallibility, which they applied more narrowly to salvation, morality, and ministry rather than historical and scientific matters.

Biblical Interpretation

Based on their belief in verbal-plenary inspiration and biblical inerrancy, most conservative Protestants championed the grammatical-historical method—which focused on detailed study of the biblical text to the historical-critical method preferred by modernists and later liberals.

Case Studies

1. The Princeton Tradition

The Princeton tradition was commitment to verbal-plenary inspiration and inerrancy.

2. Karl Barth and Barthianism

Barth affirmed the divine inspiration of Scripture and offered robust theological reflections on the biblical text.

Barth affirmed that Scripture is not itself a revelation but is a written witness to the revelation: Jesus Christ.

Barth rejected the idea that the Bible should be considered the Word of God, he did believe Scripture becomes God's Word when the Holy Spirit reveals God to its readers and hearers through human witnesses, including the biblical authors and preachers.

3. The Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy

Fuller Theological Seminary, long the flagship evangelical seminary, revised its statement of faith in 1970 to remove the claim that Scripture is "free from error in the whole and in the part."

The Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy reaffirmed the classical evangelical commitment to verbal-plenary inspiration and biblical inerrancy.

4. The Southern Baptist Inerrancy Controversy

By the late 1970s, the denomination was divided between "conservatives" (who were in the majority) and "progressives" (who dominated the convention's leadership).

The Proceedings of the Conference on Biblical Inerrancy, 1987.

By the early 1990s, the SBC was firmly controlled by conservatives, who revised the Baptist Faith and Message a third time in 2000.

For the Church

Scripture offers a trustworthy word.

The battle for the Bible is perennial.