

Statement, 1979 Annual Conference

Biblical Inspiration and Authority

Inasmuch as some members of our constituency are raising concerns about the Brethren view of the inspiration and authority of the Bible, and because our denomination has been known for its affirmation, "We have no creed but the New Testament," we recommend that a committee of five be appointed to prepare a paper on the historical Pietist-Anabaptist and Brethren understandings of the Bible's inspiration and authority and report to the 1978 Annual Conference.

Furthermore, the committee should present representative positions held by the Brethren today on the nature of the Bible as our authority in matters of faith and practice. Whatever consensus the committee is able to achieve on a Brethren position today should be stated in the paper. Finally, the committee should give some guidance on how we can hold each other in love and fellowship when there exists a diversity of attitudes among us on the matter of the Biblical inspiration and authority. Special emphasis in this section of the paper should be given to publications and the official papers of Annual Conference and the General Board. The committee will consist of three persons appointed by the General Board, one person named by the Brethren Revival Fellowship, and one person named by the Bethany seminary faculty.

Action of 1977 Annual Conference: This item was presented from Standing Committee by Dean Miller. *The proposal was approved.*

1978 Report of the Committee

The committee has met twice since receiving the assignment proposed by the 1977 Annual Conference. These meetings have enabled us to clarify the scope of our assignment, to determine the kinds of research necessary, and to begin to carry out specific tasks related to that research. In addition to work with biblical and historical resources, we are securing exploration of the issues in a hearing at the 1978 Annual Conference in Indianapolis.

The committee has not yet completed its assignment and requests more time to do so. We envision presenting the paper requested from us at the 1979 Annual Conference.

1979 Report of the Committee

1. The Witness of the Bible Itself

How shall we speak in a biblical way about the inspiration and authority of the Bible? Very often the questions we raise are foreign to the Bible. The biblical writers display little interest in particular theories of inspiration and authority. They are far more interested in our living response to the word God makes clear through prophets and apostles.

And yet the Bible *does* speak to the issues before us. Not only in isolated texts, but in currents and undercurrents of its larger message, the Bible supplies a helpful framework for thinking about inspiration and authority.

(1) *God speaks!* The picture of God speaking the word is central to the Bible. Far from being a silent God remote from the affairs of life, God continually speaks to us of mercy and judgment. Thus it is that scripture is replete with references to "the word of the Lord," "the word of God," and related expressions.

Sometimes the word God speaks is viewed as the powerful source of events in history, a decree which accomplishes what God intends it to accomplish (Isaiah 55:11). Sometimes it is the interpretation of events which God supplies so that we can know what is going on (Amos 3:7). And sometimes it is a penetrating "two-edged sword" which lays bare where we ourselves are in relation to God (Hebrews 4:12-13). In these and other ways, God is a self-expressive God.

(2) *God speaks to us to create a covenant with us.* Of all the concepts which shed light on the purpose of God's word, none is more instructive than the concept of covenant. The Bible does not present God as one who utters timeless truths to satisfy the speculative interests of theologians. Rather, God speaks in order to draw us into a covenant of steadfast love.

At the very beginning of God's relationship with Israel, God invites Israel to enter into a covenant and commissions Moses to set forth the "words" which make up that covenant (Exodus 19:5-6, 24:7, 34:27-38). When this covenant fails to achieve its full intent, God announces plans to write a new covenant in the very hearts of the people (Jeremiah 31:32-34). Whether through stone tablets, books, or "living letters" (2 Corinthians 3:1-6), God speaks to us as our covenant partner.

(3) *God's Spirit equips us to speak God's word to one another.* The voices through which God speaks are human voices. Though we are inclined to set "divine" and "human" in opposition to each other, the biblical writers do not. They rejoice rather in the fact that the Spirit enables us to share God's word in the community of believers.

So it is that we hear of a day when everyone will dream dreams, see visions, and prophesy, when the Spirit will equip all God's people to speak (Joel 2:28-29, Acts 2:17-18). So it is that we hear of the community of believers as a place where the Spirit enables persons to understand the gifts bestowed by God and impart this in words to others (1 Corinthians 2:10-16, John 16:12-15).

Within this larger conversation in the Spirit, God calls forth some to speak for God with special authority. So we hear of prophets who were moved by the Holy Spirit to speak from God (1 Peter 2:10-12, 2 Peter 1:21, Jeremiah 1:9, Ezekiel 2:1-2, 3:4-11). We hear of particular individuals anointed by the Spirit to proclaim God's good news (Isaiah 61:1). We hear of apostolic witnesses called to testify to God's deeds in Christ (Luke 1:2, Acts 1:8, 21-22). Through the words that these persons speak, God's own word is made known to God's people.

(4) *Words spoken for God in the past have a continuing life among God's people.* God's word does not have an expiration date. When the Spirit moves someone to speak God's word, the word declared becomes part of the memory of the people. Whether orally or in writing, words from the past are preserved for the future, and become a basis for new declarations of God's word.

So it is that Jeremiah appeals to the Mosaic covenant in his prophetic ministry in Jerusalem (Jeremiah 11:1-8). So it is that the story of the exodus through the wilderness gives rise to a hope in a new exodus for a people in exile (Isaiah 41:17-20, 42:16-21). So it is that the early church drew on the promises of the prophets to discern the meaning of Jesus' life (Acts 8:30-35).

(5) *Different ways of speaking for God may be necessary in different generations.* Neither the people of God nor the flow of history in which they live stands still. For this reason the word of God can never be a static word. What was a very appropriate word at one point might not be the appropriate word at another point. Those who speak for God in the biblical account do not hesitate to find fresh ways to address those needs which are urgent.

Jeremiah, for example, rejects the false hopes of those who used Isaiah's promise of Jerusalem's security as a basis for moral complacency (cf. Isaiah 31:4-5, Jeremiah 7:1-15). Jesus challenges the finality of certain parts

of the law of Moses (Mark 10:1-12, Matthew 5:21-48), even as he asserts his intent to fulfill the law rather than destroy it (Matthew 5:17-20). And James takes issue with those who misused Paul's language about justification by faith alone (James 2:14-26). In these and other ways, the Bible attests the growing character of its witness.

(6) *Scripture sets forth God's word with power and authority.* Because those who speak for God in the biblical account were guided by the Holy Spirit, all scripture is attested as "inspired of God" or "God-breathed" (2 Timothy 3:16). The Bible is thus not only a great work of literature, but a canon of faith and life for the community of believers.

So it is that the psalmist can extol the words of the law as a lamp to our feet and a light to our path (Psalm 119:105). So it is that scripture can be acclaimed as "profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness" (2 Timothy 3:16). So it is that Paul can call the apostolic message the word of God, and not merely a human word (1 Thessalonians 2:13). So it is that Jesus affirms in the Fourth Gospel that "scripture cannot be broken" (John 10:35).

(7) *Jesus Christ expresses God's word in a complete and decisive way.* The New Testament writers declare with one voice that Jesus Christ reveals the full meaning of God's covenant with us. Though we are constantly discovering new ways to speak God's word, God's self-disclosure in Jesus now sets the ground rules for this language.

In many and varied ways the New Testament affirms this centrality of Jesus: He is called the mediator of a new and final covenant (Hebrews 9:15). He is the one, Paul says, in whom all the promises of God find their Yes (2 Corinthians 1:20), in whose face we behold the light of the knowledge of God's glory (2 Corinthians 4:6). In him the eternal word became flesh and dwelt among us (John 1:14). He reflects or images the power and purposes of God (Hebrews 1:1-3, Colossians 1:15). His words are a rock foundation for the church's life (Matthew 7:24-27). And his example of servanthood is the final model for our lives (Philippians 2:5-11). For all these reasons, all who would speak God's word now must speak in the light of God's word in and through Jesus.

(8) *God calls us to become a faithful community of the word.* God counts on us to be responsible partners in keeping the covenant alive and healthy. Though the biblical writers never call us to believe in scripture for its own sake, they summon the church in various ways to live out of the message which the scriptures proclaim.

Jesus himself supplies the model for the faithful church here. Jesus values and respects the Old Testament as a resource for his teaching ministry (Matthew 21:33-46; Mark 12:18-37; Luke 1 1:29-32). He defines his own mission in terms of a scriptural hope in a day of salvation for the afflicted and oppressed (Luke 4:18-19). He criticizes those who have set aside the clear witness of scripture in the interest of human traditions (Mark 7:1-13). And he appeals to scripture in various ways to bring his hearers to understanding and decision (Matthew 11:20-24; Mark 2:23-28; 10:2-9).

So too we are to guard and follow the truth that has been entrusted to us by the Holy Spirit (2 Timothy 1:13-14). We are to give first importance to the message which was of first importance to the early church (1 Corinthians 15:1-5). We are to guard against twisting God's word with our private misinterpretations (2 Peter 1:20). We are to allow scripture to serve its intended purpose of leading others to life in Christ (John 5:39-40). We are to handle the word of God with integrity and openness rather than play games with it (2 Corinthians 4:1-2). And we are to declare anew the wonderful deeds of the God who called us out of darkness into light (1 Peter 2:9).

A Further Concern of Some Members:

One of the most convincing aspects of the Bible's message concerning itself is found in the testimony of Jesus. The Sadducees (Matthew 22:24-32) tried to trap Jesus and referred to Deuteronomy 25:5.

Jesus answered by quoting Exodus 3:6, and said that what Moses wrote was "spoken to you by God" (Matthew 22:31). In fact, Jesus' view of scripture was so high that in two instances (Matthew 22:43-45 and John 10:34-35), his whole argument rested upon a single word in the Old Testament. Jesus viewed the Old Testament scriptures as verbally inspired and entirely trustworthy.

Furthermore, Jesus spoke of the creation of Adam and Eve (Matthew 19:4), the flood that destroyed the world in Noah's time (Luke 17:27), the miracles performed by Elijah (Luke 4:25), the whale that swallowed Jonah (Matthew 12:40), the life of David (Matthew 12:3), the glory of Solomon (Matthew 6:29), the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah (Luke 17:28-30), the provision of manna from heaven in the wilderness (John 6:31), etc. And in all this record of Jesus' words there is not even the slightest intimation at any time, that the scriptures may be inaccurate at any point.

Also, Jesus pre-authenticated the New Testament. In John 16:12, Jesus expressly declared that he was leaving "many things" unrevealed; in John 16:13, Jesus promised that this revelation would be completed after the Spirit came; in John 17:20, Jesus expected that this new revelation would be recorded for future generations. It is true that the apostles might forget what Jesus had said, but Jesus assured them that they would not be left to their own fallible memories, but that the Holy Spirit would bring to mind all that he had said to them (John 14:26). One cannot understand Christ's attitude toward the scriptures, apart from believing that it was his conviction that they were without error. And when we discover what Jesus thought about the scriptures, that is what we are to think about them.

II. The Church's Understanding Throughout History

Historians agree generally that the Spirit-filled birth, dynamic growth, and struggles of the early church were soon accompanied by a movement toward more structure, order and authority. They point to the development of a more official ministry, the formulation of creeds, and the process of choosing the canon. The canon, which literally means a ruler by which to keep things straight, refers to the collection of books which were eventually approved by the church to be a part of the scriptures. The struggle over the canon took place in the second century as Christians on the one hand opposed the desire of some to repudiate the Old Testament, while on the other hand they rejected the tendency of others to deny the uniqueness of a new covenant or testament. By the year AD 200 the church had an authoritative collection of New Testament books, in the main like our own. The collection represented a desire to be inclusive of different views and groups of Christians while excluding the worst errors.

Though the canon was not closed for another two centuries, from the beginning of the third century on the major debates in the church did not focus on opinions about the Bible. None of the creedal struggles of the great ecumenical councils involved a debate about the scriptures. The early creeds do not include the Bible as an article of faith. Many of our contemporary questions about inerrancy and literalism do not represent the concerns of those who lived before the age of science and reason. It may be for this reason that the early church fathers can be quoted to support arguments both for biblical infallibility and against biblical literalism. Roman Catholics and Protestants alike have been able to find support in Augustine and other early thinkers for their views on the nature of biblical authority.

Brethren views and use of the Bible did not emerge in a vacuum. The Bible had already been the focus in defining authority in various traditions of the church. The following options provided the primary context for the attitudes of the early Brethren.

Eastern Orthodoxy

The Eastern Church has a high view of the authority of the Bible, venerating it in worship as a verbal icon of

Christ. In every church it has a place of honor; the faithful kiss it and prostrate themselves before it. As a book of the people and the church, however, the Bible must never be something set up over the church. The apostolic tradition of the church is not only older than the New Testament, but its source. Holy scripture is the special written form of the apostolic tradition. The creeds and major decisions of the seven great ecumenical councils are highly regarded forms of the same tradition. Though in many ways the mystical East focuses on worship by seeing rather than hearing, the Bible is featured and read as an integral part of the liturgy. Personal interpretations, however, cannot be trusted. They must be placed under the guidance of the church. When received into the church, a convert promises: "I will accept and understand Holy Scripture in accordance with the interpretation which was and is held by the Holy Orthodox Catholic Church of the East, our Mother."

Roman Catholicism

One can find no stronger affirmations of scriptural infallibility than those in the documents of Roman Catholicism. This is true in spite of the fact that Roman Catholics do not rely on the sole authority of the Bible, and include within their Bible the writings of the Apocrypha which most Protestants do not view as authoritative. The difference with Protestantism lies not as much in questions dealing with authority as with those dealing with the *source* of that authority. Protestants generally hold the authority to be a part of the nature of the Bible itself. Like the Eastern Church, Roman Catholicism has held that the authority is derived from the church. Since the scriptures originated in the church, the church remains the guardian and infallible interpreter of the Bible. Increasingly, however, Roman Catholics are pointing to the unity of the living word (tradition) with the written word (the Bible). This has been a part of the genuine biblical revival, found in both biblical circles and popular usage, which has been prevalent among Roman Catholics since Vatican II.

Luther

In the heat of battle the father of the Protestant Reformation formulated the slogan, *sola Scriptura*. Scripture alone, rather than popes and councils, was declared to be the source of truth and normative for life and doctrine. Nothing was to be allowed which contradicted scripture. With Calvin, Luther held to the close association of word and Spirit. It is the Spirit which validates, brings alive, and unifies our interpretation of the written word. The biblical writers were so inspired as to become the tongue, the pipe, or the channel of the Holy Spirit. Nevertheless, Luther did not maintain complete identity between scripture and the "Word" of God. For Luther "the Word was Christ." "The Word" comes alive through the spoken word in preaching, the written word in the Bible, and the visible word in the sacraments. He referred to the Bible as the manger in which Christ was laid. It was this distinction which allowed Luther to make many critical judgments. He wondered whether Moses had written all the Pentateuch, believed the book of Kings to be more reliable than Chronicles, preferred the Fourth Gospel to others, and questioned the value of the epistle of James and the book of Revelation.

Calvin (Reformed)

Calvin gave the Bible a clearer and more authoritative status than Luther. According to Calvin, the scriptures ought to have with believers the same complete authority as though they were able to hear the voice of God from his own mouth. This emphasis, along with Calvin's stress on the moral law of the Old Testament and its continuity with the New, placed the Bible at the center of Protestant life. Calvin's doctrine of the internal testimony of the Holy Spirit defined the role of the Spirit almost exclusively as an aid in confirming the word in the heart and mind of the believer. Though many have found in Calvin the origin of fundamentalist stances in reference to the Bible, others point to passages in which Calvin accented human authorship and defined revelation as something not to be identified completely with the Bible. In suggesting that biblical authors give a testimony to revelation rather than revelation itself, Calvin approached Luther's position of maintaining that authority of scriptures lies outside themselves, in Christ.

Anabaptism

The radical contemporaries of Luther and Calvin represented a wide diversity of beliefs. One major group, often labeled evangelical Anabaptists (rebaptizers), the spiritual forerunners of contemporary Mennonites, were cohesive enough to present their views more clearly. They certainly desired to be people of the book. It is true that they were often charged with exalting the Spirit at the expense of the written word, but the fact that they were often attacked as literalists substantiates their reliance on the Bible. The earliest confessions of faith reveal that they took for granted the inspiration and authority of the Bible. They possessed an amazing knowledge of scripture. In a personal letter one sixteenth-century Anabaptist shared the hope of being able to learn one hundred chapters of the New Testament by heart. Representative of their attitude is this statement by Menno Simons:

The whole scriptures, both Old and New Testament, were written for our instruction, admonition, and correction... they are the true scepter and rule by which the congregation must be governed. All doctrine and practice must be measured by this infallible rule.

Because of the Anabaptist identity of the early Brethren, it will be helpful to list some of the ingredients in the Anabaptist attitude toward the scriptures.

(1) The Bible is best understood as the community of faith gathers around the word. The locus of infallibility shifts from the text itself and the technically qualified theological expert to the committed and listening congregation. The unique authority of the revelation of God in Christ which is found in the Bible becomes apparent in the covenant relationships of the responding community.

(2) There is an insistence on the presence of the Spirit, the inner word. This did not mean that the Spirit was claimed as a source of new revelation but that the outer word, the scriptures, must be tested and appropriated in life. Biblical knowledge apart from the loving obedience of the community of faith is idolatrous. The focus on the Spirit also signaled that the congregation must not be bound by tradition, creeds, or government authority in any fresh examination of the scriptures.

(3) Without denying its authority, it was held that the Old Testament was not to be regarded as the final standard for Christian obedience. Nevertheless, this did not mean that the relationship of the New Testament to the Old was one of rejection, but rather one of fulfillment. The relation was like that of the groundwork of a building to the building itself. This ability to differentiate between the two covenants supported the two most distinctive ethical emphases of the Anabaptists, nonswearing and the refusal to participate in warfare and bloodshed, both of which had been permitted in the Old Testament. The comparison between the Testaments also undermined the Protestant focus on the continuity between Jewish circumcision and infant baptism.

Protestant Orthodoxy

In the century following the outburst of the Reformation, there developed a rigid orthodoxy which is sometimes called by that name and sometimes labeled as Protestant Scholasticism. In the battle of words which accompanied the battle of swords, scripture itself tended to be regarded as an external authority legalistically conceived. The distinction between scripture and the word of God, and between scripture and doctrine, became blurred. Rather than relying on justification by faith, Aristotle and reason came back in vogue. Christianity became increasingly intellectualized. In reference to the Bible inspiration meant verbal infallibility. J. A. Quenstedt in 1715 stated the position without equivocation:

The holy canonical scriptures in their original text are the infallible truth and free from every error, that is to say, in the sacred canonical scriptures there is no lie, no deceit, no error, even the slightest, either in content or words, but every single word which is handed down in scriptures is most true, whether it

pertains to doctrine, ethics, history, chronology, typography or names....

In spite of such exaltation of scripture, when reason dominated, creeds came to define scripture rather than the other way around.

Pietism

It was partly in reaction against strong exponents of scholastic orthodoxy that the Pietist reformation emerged in the last decades of the seventeenth century and the first decades of the next. Avowing to remain within the Protestant tradition with its insistence on biblical authority, Philipp Spener and August Francke, leaders of churchly Pietism, nevertheless felt that the Bible would best come alive if freed from dogmatic formulations. They desired to shift the focus from finding in the Bible what had been formulated in the creeds to one of testing the creeds by the Bible. They pleaded that biblical truths be presented with tolerance, love, and persuasion instead of the use of texts to attack others in bitter controversies. They advocated the reading and use of the Bible by all the people, encouraging small group meetings and the devotional use of the scriptures. Both leaders felt that biblical study should take precedence over theology in theological training. Through their own example, the importance of utilizing the original biblical languages was stressed. Consistent with their plea that Luther's reformation of doctrine be translated into a reformation of life. Pietism shifted the focus from the Bible as an end in itself to being a means for repentance, mutual edification, and a life of holiness. In terms of method, greater freedom was exercised in terms of investigating the meaning of texts. Similar to the Anabaptists, Pietists regarded the New Testament as the fulfillment of the Old. And Christ was seen to be the sum and substance of all scripture.

The more separatist and radical wing of Pietism was the one which constituted the immediate environment of the early Brethren. This movement has been designated as Radical Pietism. In reference to scripture, it is characterized by a more spiritualist view which looks to immediate direct inspiration more than to written words. Inner baptism is regarded to be more important than external practices. Jacob Boehme, one of the seminal Radical Pietist thinkers, was purported to have taught: "The entire Bible lies within me." Louis Gruber, Inspirationalist leader and neighbor at Schwarzenau, espoused a direct call from God made manifest in signs, miracles, and specially inspired prophets.

The Brethren

Most of the first Brethren had been nurtured in the Reformed tradition. Breaking with it, they then imbibed both an emphasis on Bible study and an enthusiastic doctrine of the Spirit in Radical Pietist circles. Their study of the scriptures led them to again change their identity by consciously adopting the discipleship and gathered church views of Anabaptism. One cannot read the writings of Alexander Mack without noting his strong dependence on the scriptures. Repeatedly he introduces his arguments with sentences like this one: "Note well; I will explain this to you from the holy scriptures." Central to the historic Brethren approach to the Bible are the following emphases or characteristics:

(1) The Inward and Outward Word

Awakened through the strong inner convictions of the Radical Pietists, the first eight began to search the scriptures together. It became obvious that they could only take seriously such passages as Matthew 18 through a visible church. To their inner experience they now realized the necessity of adding outward obedience. They did not wish to dispense with the emphasis on the Holy Spirit. Rather they wanted to combine this with a focus on the outward word. In the context of Mack's discussion of the inward and outward word, we find one of the best early summary statements about the scriptures: "This law which is inwardly written by the Spirit of God is completely identical with that which is outwardly written in the New Testament." Though not rejecting special revelations of the Spirit as would have been the case with the major Reformers, Mack did affirm that such inner witness must be tested with what is found in scripture. At its best the heritage from Mack attempts to guide a course between shackling legalism on the one hand and formless

inspirationalism on the other.

(2) Shift from I to the We

In addition to the shift to the outward word, a second major shift in authority can be seen in the dialogue of the early Brethren with Radical Pietism. This is the shift from Hochmann's "I" to the "we" of the Brethren. Ernest Christopher Hochmann, an outstanding radical Pietist preacher and teacher, had been a friend and spiritual guide to Mack and the early Brethren. In writing about the first baptisms the early Brethren shifted to the more biblical plural pronouns. In fact their entire approach represented the Anabaptist way of biblical interpretation, that of the community gathering around the scriptures. Thus, any new revelation or light has to be tested not only by the outward word but with brothers and sisters.

(3) The Mind of Christ

Mack's admonition of "look alone to Jesus your Redeemer and Saviour" parallels the christological approach of Spener and Francke as well as the focus on the teaching and example of Jesus so central to the Anabaptists. For Brethren the inward word came to be translated by the "mind of Christ" (I Cor. 2:16; Phil. 2:5). Brethren have emphasized that the Old Testament must be interpreted in the light of the New and the New by the mind of Christ. Before it was named as such, Brethren knew a Christ-centered hermeneutic (style of biblical interpretation).

(4) No Creed but the New Testament

Since the Brethren have been even more reluctant to adopt statements of faith than the Mennonites, their noncreedal stance no doubt represents an inheritance from Pietism. Reacting to the belligerent spirit of their day, they advocated patience and understanding in dealing with differing interpretations. Mack, Jr. indicates that should he come on elders who did not share his understanding about the order of footwashing, he "would participate quite simply in love and peace and would nevertheless explain it to them according to the scriptures. I would wait in love and have patience with them until they too gained this insight...." Such openness to new light in seeking the mind of Christ, however, does not represent an openness without any rootage in authority. Rather, it is an openness in the context of seeking new light as it breaks forth from the word. Historically, for the Brethren, it has not been "we have no creed," but rather "we have no creed but the New Testament."

(5) The New Prefigured in the Old

The Brethren followed both Anabaptism and Pietism in believing that the New Testament represents the fulfillment of the Old in the context of continuity. Mack quoted profusely from the Old Testament. He stated, for example, that baptism is prefigured in many stories from the Old Testament such as the exodus event. There is a unity between circumcision and baptism. There is no penalty in either case if a child dies before the eighth day. But in the New Testament the eighth day is figuratively interpreted as the day of maturity. Such interpretation involves interpreting the Old in the light of the New without denying the authority of the Old and the unity of the scriptures. The Brethren have regarded themselves as a New Testament church, but like the early church, this has not meant a repudiation of the Old Testament.

(6) Rule of Faith and Practice

The Brethren adopted an oft-repeated phrase from the Anabaptists which illuminates their biblical stance. Mack, Jr., in commenting on the changing practices in reference to footwashing, concluded: "Indeed, we do not intend to rest upon the old practice but the word of the Lord alone is to be our rule and guideline." In the few times one finds the word infallible in early Anabaptist thought, the word is associated with faith and life. For Anabaptism and the early Brethren, the Bible is the rule or infallible authority for faith and life. The priority is in giving willing and cheerful obedience to the plain, simple commands of Christ Jesus. In this way, Mack hoped that the entire New Testament is written into the hearts of the reader by the finger of God until the entire life of the reader becomes a living letter of God in which one can read all of the commandments of Jesus Christ. It is not nearly enough to consider the New Testament as a book which does contain truths although they do not concern us very much, or do not commit us to the carrying out of Christ's

commandments.

(7) Tradition

Though Brethren have identified often with Protestant views of the Bible, like others they have found it impossible to escape an emphasis on tradition. Such is the case of Mack, Jr. in writing later about the first baptisms:

They found in trustworthy histories that the early Christians during the first and second centuries were planted into the death by crucifixion of Jesus Christ, according to the commandment of Christ, through trine immersion in the water bath of holy baptism. They therefore diligently searched the New Testament, and found that everything agreed with this perfectly.

In this reference to the historical research of Gottfried Arnold, Mack revealed what was to become basic to the Brethren attitude toward tradition: the traditions of the church are to be judged by the example of the early Christian.

Later Brethren, in dealing with issues such as the kind of food to use for the Love Feast and the kind of worship center to have in the meeting houses, found that it was impossible to eliminate some consideration of tradition. For the most part, however, they have shared the sentiment of the yearly meeting minute of 1857:

Would it not be better in deciding upon all subjects brought before our annual meeting, to refer first to the Word of God, instead of first referring to the old minutes? Answer: We think it always safest to refer first to the Word of God.

III. Brethren Views Regarding the Bible in Recent Times

Brethren at the Beginning of Our Own Century

The strong consensus of the early Brethren held firm for the most part through the divisions of the 1880s. An excellent summary is given by Henry Kurtz in *The Brethren Encyclopedia* (1867) on page iv: "The fundamental principles of the Brethren... was to take the pure word of God, and that alone, as the infallible rule of the faith and practice." It was only after the scientific and industrial revolutions from Europe had their strong impact on American soil that the Brethren began to participate in the debate about the Bible which was beginning in American Protestantism. This focus on the nature of the Bible accompanied the beginning of Bible Conferences, Bible Schools, and the fundamentalist movement which emerged during the last years of the nineteenth century and the early years of the next. From an examination of various articles and statements in the *Gospel Messenger* of those years, it is possible to find Brethren with leanings toward both sides of this debate. The extremes, however, one does not find. This probably explains the maintenance of a greater sense of unity on this question than has been true in some denominations.

As early as 1895 one can discern openness to the methods of historical criticism. Articles appear in the first two decades of the twentieth century which openly deny the plenary and verbal nature of inspiration and in typical Brethren fashion shift the focus to the fruit the Bible produces instead of the claims it makes.

On the other hand there are voices which share strongly the concern that the authority of the Bible may be weakened by German rationalism and higher criticism. H. C. Early in his bicentennial address held that "when God speaks it is final, and there is no appeal, that he speaks with full understanding as well as authority, and that the only safe ground is to accept the word of God in all good faith, and obey it." It was in the 1920s that some of the strongest statements supporting biblical inerrancy appear in the *Gospel Messenger*.

From Then Till Now

Various sources help us to trace the development of Brethren thinking in recent decades. David Wieand

describes his father, one of the founders of Bethany Bible School, as believing the fundamentals but not a fundamentalist. He viewed the scriptures conservatively but not literalistically. A common affirmation in the early days at Bethany was to emphasize the absolute trustworthiness of the Bible. Edward Frantz wrote editorials during the thirties and forties which resembled Wieand's stance in certain ways. He felt that "the Christian faith does not rest on any so-called inerrancy of its documents but rather on the well established certainty of its essential facts" (1943). Under the guidance of Frantz, the *Gospel Messenger* seemed to be open to both moderate and very conservative statements.

In the nineteen-fifties there was some debate about the proposed Revised Standard Version. For the most part the official publication seemed to be preparing the church for its acceptance and especially its use. In the Fifties and sixties one can find some very critical statements about the Bible in some curriculum materials. For the most part, however, the orientation remains moderate. One finds no extreme liberalism or conservatism. The major emphasis of many articles is to encourage the readers to study the Bible and incorporate its teachings. One can find an article by Billy Graham (1954) as well as many articles which focus on the ethical teachings, progressive revelation, and the belief that the Bible does not point to itself but to Jesus Christ.

Along with the acceptance of the Bible's authority in matters of faith and practice, Brethren thinking over the last one hundred years has consistently maintained the emphasis summed up in a *Gospel Messenger* editorial in 1919: "Straightforward preaching of scriptural truth, reenforced by a lot of Christian living, is the best defense of the Bible that has ever been devised.... Practice will do more than proof to protect it from discredit."

Surveying Brethren Today

One part of the task assigned to this committee by the 1977 Annual Conference was to "present representative positions held by Brethren today on the nature of the Bible as our authority in matters of faith and practice." The committee used three methods to gain information about views among Brethren. First, a survey form was mailed to seventy-five Brethren diverse in age, geography, theological viewpoint, asking them to describe their own position on the authority and inspiration of the Bible. They were also requested to list the positions of Brethren they knew. Fifty-one responses were received.

Second, Brethren attending the 1978 Annual Conference in Indianapolis were invited to complete a questionnaire designed to give the committee additional information about current Brethren beliefs regarding the Bible. Eight hundred and forty-five responded to that invitation, six hundred and one laity, two hundred and forty-four pastors (five hundred and twenty-two delegates, three hundred and twenty-three non-delegates.)

Finally, a Tuesday evening insight session at the Indianapolis conference provided an opportunity to secure from working groups at the hearing affirmations and consensus statements regarding authority and inspiration.

None of these methods pretended to obtain a scientific sampling; none was intended to take a poll to determine the percentage of Brethren who take differing positions. There was no effort to be comprehensive. Rather our task, as we saw it, was to gather information about the range of Brethren thought and underline any areas of agreement that emerged.

Our samples suggest Brethren generally affirm the inspiration of the Bible and the primacy of its authority for faith and practice. Brethren differ on the nature of the inspiration, the equality of authority within the Bible, and the exclusiveness of the Bible's authority in relation to the authority of the church, other inspired writing, and contemporary leading of the Spirit.

Some Representative Positions

The survey provides a rich tapestry of a wide range of Brethren views regarding scripture. An attempt to

summarize these does not imply that all Brethren positions are included in the five described, or that every Brethren could identify with one of them. Most Brethren would probably wish to pick and choose from several. Each person would define the varying positions in a somewhat different way. These clusters suggest representative positions that surfaced most often in survey responses.

First, there are Brethren who believe the Bible is the divinely inspired word of God, completely without error in the King James Version. God controlled the writing so that each word and phrase should be interpreted literally and followed exactly. The Bible's authority is absolute and it is not open to challenge from any source.

A second group's position is similar to the one above but with a more Anabaptist, traditional Brethren point of view. The Bible is without error in the original autographs and any conflicts within the text are only *seeming* discrepancies due to our own lack of understanding. The King James Version is not the only English translation considered reliable. Scripture passages are studied in light of their context, the laws of grammar, and the form of biblical writing they represent. The total Bible is uniquely inspired and has the highest authority for life.

A third group of Brethren point to Christ as the only perfect Word of God. The Old Testament is judged by the New Testament, the whole Bible by the witness of Jesus Christ, our supreme authority. Jesus' teachings are the basic guide for faith and practice, the canon within the canon. The Bible was created by interaction between God and people and is a mixture of human frailty and the perfect wisdom of God. It points beyond itself to God.

Another group of Brethren emphasize the Bible's roots in the faith community—written by the faith community, for the faith community. It is salvation history, the record of God's action. The focus of inspiration is the people. "The Bible is the touchstone to measure our experience against the record of God's interaction with his people. The authority is in the words and spirit, checked by Christian community today, a continuing channel for God's revelation." Themes and principles are emphasized in presenting its message for our day.

Finally there are Brethren who hold the Bible has great value when understood as a "human concept of God," open to error. It is inspired, but other writings are inspired in the same way. The authority it has depends on its relevance for life today and will vary from one book to another as a result of the differing insights of individual writers.

Beyond the conscious affirmations Brethren make about the Bible and its role as authority, many respondents to the survey suggest practice often does not follow stated conviction. Instead Brethren take their authority either from a set of ideals that may be biblically rooted and confirmed by tradition and the community of the church today, or they accept the authority of secular society, living by the values shared by the majority.

A Diversity of Convictions and Concerns

The diversity among Brethren is further documented by the conference questionnaire and hearing. There is evidence that many Brethren insist the Bible is "without error in all its statements." Many others are equally convinced of the falseness of that assertion. Respondents agree that the word of God is revealed in the Bible, although they disagree about whether the Bible is, contains, or witnesses to the word of God.

Brethren affirm the value of the continued existence of diversity in our communion, emphasizing unity and love rather than judgment and rejection. Brethren, as surveyed, are not ready to condemn current Brethren preaching, biblical literacy, or biblical commitment. Most suggest our differences center in interpretation rather than the authority given to the Bible.

There is strong feeling against the formulation of an official Brethren statement of basic biblical doctrine or a

requirement that ministers be screened by their willingness to sign such a statement.

Brethren generally are not willing to give the authority for biblical interpretation to the community of believers rather than individuals on their own. They do not, however, take a purely individualistic approach to problem texts. Most say they refer to commentaries or discuss these passages with a Sunday school class or other small group. Only a fourth report they rely entirely on the insights the Spirit reveals to them in prayer.

Although there is a concern about use of a critical method that seeks to exclude the supernatural from scripture, a sizable majority of the Brethren surveyed believe the historical or critical method of Bible study enables improved understanding.

Brethren still place their greatest emphasis on the teachings of Jesus. Most agree that "no creed but the New Testament" says what needs to be said about biblical authority for the Brethren, although many suggest the phrase must be defined more sharply to be helpful.

Hardly any of the respondents to our questionnaire wish to say the Bible's authority is the same as that of other books rooted in centuries of experience. Rather they tie the authority to the Bible's witness to Jesus and its role as the basic statement of faith for the church.

Almost all those who expressed their views at conference agree that the Bible is the result of the work of the Holy Spirit with people, rejecting a focus on the creativity and imagination of its human writers. There is much concern among Brethren to call attention to God's initiative, underlining the importance of the Bible as a revelation of God's work in the world with men and women. Further, the necessity for continued openness to God in understanding the Bible's witness and being able to live its message was frequently mentioned.

The questionnaire indicates Brethren see the Bible as "our story," a gift that provides a tool to understand and live by the faith, a window through which life is to be viewed.

Finally, Brethren express overwhelming support for making increased biblical awareness one of the top five priorities of the church in the next five years, affirming the importance of knowing the content of the Bible as a basis for life directed by its teaching.

IV. Affirmations for Brethren Today

The data summarized thus far makes clear that we as Brethren are a church deeply rooted in scripture. It is not enough, however, merely to recount the story of our biblical heritage. We must go on to raise the question: What can we say together about the Bible as guidelines for our approach to scripture today? The statements which follow invite us to affirm with one another certain shared convictions about the Bible—and to acknowledge those areas where we are not yet fully agreed. Linked together in this way, these double statements remind us both of the rich unity we already can celebrate, and of the unity toward which we still need to strive.

(1) We affirm the inspiration of the Bible, acknowledging with mind and heart that the Bible is a book of the Spirit. Both the biblical writers and those whose witness contributed to their message were empowered and guided by the Holy Spirit. Because of this presence of God enabling and equipping the biblical writers, we hear God's own word addressing us through the words of scripture.

We are not yet agreed on whether inspiration is a finished or continuing process. Some of us believe that God's Spirit inspires new prophetic witness in the community of believers in every age, in

continuity with the biblical witness. Others of us believe that the work of the Spirit in guiding the biblical writers was unique and now completed, and that the present role of the Spirit is entirely one of illumining what the Bible says.

(2) We affirm that the Bible is first and foremost an account of God's quest to find us, not merely our human quest to find God. From beginning to end scripture attests God's own decisive action to become known through word and deed. And scripture itself is a central part of this divine self-revelation.

We are not yet fully agreed on the way the divine and the human are related in the origin of the Bible. Some of us would sharply distinguish between revelation and normal human processes of discovery and reflection. Others of us would see a close relationship between the two.

(3) We affirm that the Bible, rightly interpreted, 'is a fully trustworthy guide for our lives. In this sense we reaffirm our historic understanding of scripture as an infallible rule of faith and practice. With these and other expressions we honor and acknowledge the unique authority of the Bible for the church.

We are not yet agreed on whether "trustworthy" means "inerrant." Some of us believe that the Bible's witness to its own authority implies that the statements of scripture are without error of any kind, whether factual, historical, or doctrinal. Others of us believe that such a claim is both contrary to the intent of the biblical writers and a denial of the true humanness of scripture.

(4) We affirm the need to interpret scripture in the light of scripture. When we fail to discern how a particular text relates to the rest of the Bible, we are likely to distort its meaning or press its significance in an unbiblical way. We agree that we need to weigh scripture against scripture rather than appeal to favorite texts while ignoring others.

We are not yet agreed on what this means for a number of particular issues facing the church. For example: How do we put together the proclamation that God's kingdom has already begun to dawn with apocalyptic predictions of increasing evil in the world? How do we put together the variety of New Testament texts which deal with the relationships of women and men? Etc.

(5) We affirm that all scripture must be interpreted in the light of God's self-revelation in Jesus Christ. While God speaks to us through all parts of the Bible, we must read the Old Testament in the light of the New, and the New in terms of its witness to God's gift of life in Jesus Christ. It is Jesus Christ who is truly the Word of God made flesh and through whom we perceive scripture as one unified account of redemption.

We are not yet agreed on the scope of the diversity we find in the Bible. Some of us believe that all biblical statements are historically conditioned, and that new understandings sometimes correct or supersede older ones. Others of us believe that there are no fundamental differences in outlook between the Old Testament and the New, or between particular biblical writers.

(6) We affirm the need for a careful, disciplined approach to the study of the Bible. This calls for the use of the best texts and translations available to us. It also calls for sensitivity to the literary and historical

context of passages we wish to study. Undergirding all such study must be an openness to the same Spirit who inspired the biblical message.

We are not yet agreed on the relative value of the historical-critical method as a tool to assist us in Bible study. Some of us view it as extremely helpful in reconstructing the origin and significance of biblical texts, thus enabling us to enter into the biblical message more completely. Others of us view this method as questionable in its assumptions, dubious in value, and tending to exclude the supernatural from scripture.

(7) We affirm the central importance of the gathered community of believers in the interpretation of the Bible. Together with our forebears, we are convinced that all individual insights into scripture need to be tested in and by the community. When it is functioning properly, the church will be a place where the gifts and insights of all will contribute to a more complete understanding of God's word.

We are not yet agreed on how binding the scriptural counsel of the community should be. Some of us believe that the church's voice should be binding, both within the local congregation and in Annual Conference. Others of us believe that the consensus of the church should be advisory rather than binding, and that anything more would violate our heritage of "no creed but the New Testament."

(8) We affirm that a faithful response to the biblical message involves both believing and doing. It is the doers of the word who will be justified in God's sight, and not those who give only lip service to its claims. At the same time, obedience with our lives does not come about apart from a joyful, trusting acceptance of the biblical message and its authority for our lives.

V. Holding One Another in Love and Fellowship

How can we hold one another in love and fellowship when there exists a diversity of attitudes among us about the way in which scripture was given and its interpretation?

The way is found in the nature of God's creation, through the example and teachings of Jesus, through the examples of our early Brethren, through acknowledging our human limitations in understanding, and through being open to the leading of the Spirit who draws all members of Christ's church together.

In spite of an essential unity, diversity is God's pattern in creation. God's delight in variety is expressed in countless ways (Psa. 104). To those who walk in the Spirit, varieties of gifts are given (I Cor. 12:4). Conformity is humanity's pattern. It is the way of the world to try to force individuals into a uniform mold. Jesus denounced the Pharisees for doing this. The Pharisees showed their authority over the people by trying to enforce the minutia of every law without themselves lifting a finger to help (Matt. 23:4). Paul warned the Christians in Rome: "Don't let the world around you squeeze you into its own mould..." (Rom. 12:2, J. B. Phillips). There have been times in our history when the Brethren have fallen into the error of insistence on rigid conformity, when we as church members either agreed or we were disfellowshipped.

Individuality requires freedom. Respect for freedom is seen in our traditional Brethren belief in "no force in religion," and so we avoid patterns of enforcement which violate the freedom of individuals and local groups. In fact, there needs to be an appreciation for diversity and a spirit among us of humility and openness to learn from one another. We need to acknowledge that the perceptions and understandings of all of us are limited

and change with our own experiences, "...for our knowledge is imperfect... we see in a mirror dimly..." (I Cor. 13:9, 12). None of us has captured the kingdom!

However, Christian freedom does not imply an unchecked individualism. Our Anabaptist heritage teaches that no one enters the kingdom apart from one's brothers and sisters. It is within the community of believers and for their upbuilding that the Spirit is given, and those who walk in the Spirit are called on to work toward "...being in full accord and of one mind... (and are instructed) ...to have this mind among yourselves, which you have in Christ Jesus..." (Phil. 2:2, 5).

Jesus revealed in his life and teachings the way to freedom and at the same time life in community—the way to "unity in diversity." In the Upper Room his disciples were given a specific instruction: "A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another; even as I have loved you, that you also love one another. By this all will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another" (John 13:34-35). Love for one another is not optional for Christians; and in the cross we see just how far Christian love goes.

It is the love experienced when Christ is at the center of one's life, that draws us into unity. We do not create unity or fellowship. They are gifts. When our lives are Christ-centered, we can disagree without being bitter or divisive. It is a mark of the working of the Holy Spirit that we can hold one another in love and fellowship even though there is diversity among us.

Christian love requires:

- that we acknowledge the integrity and worth of those brothers and sisters with whom we cannot totally agree.
- that we make every effort to understand one another by keeping lines of communication open, by listening to, hearing, and responding to our sisters/brothers.
- that we be willing to test our perceptions and understandings with the gathered church.
- that we be open to the counsel of our brothers and sisters.
- that we behave in ways that build up the church.
- that we be obedient to Jesus Christ.
- that we not attempt to gloss over our differences, but that we face them honestly and work at resolving them "with patience, forbearing one another in love, eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace" (Eph. 4:2-3).
- that we hold before us the goal of "being in full accord and of one mind" (Phil. 2:2).

There have been times in our history when the Brethren have simply agreed that at that point in their life together, they could not agree. Their faith surely was that as they maintained their unity in the Spirit, agreement would eventually be given. For instance, in 1883 a query came to Annual Meeting asking that one form of feet washing be established and that the churches be uniform in having the supper either off or on the table at the time of feet washing. Answer: "We desire very much to see a uniform practice in the church. But we see no way of accomplishing that object at the present time in the practices referred to in the query" (Revised Minutes 1778-1885, p. 174).

In referring to those brethren who differed in their understanding of the Scripture, especially regarding the feet washing service. Mack, Jr. encourages them to consider different views "in love and with a calm spirit." He writes, "...dear brethren, let us watch and be careful, and above all preserve love, for thus one preserves light. The spirit of truth testifies in I John 2:10: 'He who loves his brother abides in the light, and in him there is no cause for stumbling.' The good God, who is the pure impartial love, can and will supply gradually where insight is lacking here or there."

VI. Recommendations

In our diversity we are not yet fully agreed on all that it means for Brethren to respond faithfully to the message of the Bible in our day. We are agreed, however, on the need for a continuing dialogue with and about scripture that we might experience biblical renewal in our midst. To that end we make the following recommendations to and for the church:

- (1) We recommend to the General Board that increased biblical awareness be a top priority for Board program over the next five years, with serious Bible study as a basic ingredient in our pursuit of the Goals for the Eighties.
- (2) We recommend to the Parish Ministries Commission that a study guide be prepared to enable congregations to use this statement as a resource for church school classes and other small group settings. This study guide could include the statement itself, additional materials gathered by the committee, suggestions for group study, and recommendations of additional resources for further study.
- (3) We recommend to both the Parish Ministries Commission and to the districts that Bible study events be designed and carried out which allow for in-depth sharing of diverse approaches to biblical texts, at both the district and congregational level.
- (4) We recommend to all concerned that there be a more complete representation of persons holding different viewpoints on the Bible's inspiration and authority at all levels of the church's life, including the General Board, national and district staff, seminary faculty, writers for church publications, and Annual Conference committees.
- (5) We recommend to one another as members of the church that we commit ourselves afresh as individuals to searching the scriptures, with sensitivity to the message of both the Old and New Testaments, opening ourselves to the new light which may yet break forth from God's word.

Wanda W. Button, Convener
Dale W. Brown
Joan Deeter
Rick Gardner
Harold S. Martin

APPENDIX

Definition of Terms

AUTHORITY: As applied to the Bible, authority denotes the ability or right of scripture to serve as the norm or criterion for issues of faith and practice in the church.

CRITICISM: A term covering a wide range of literary and historical methods of analyzing a text. The so-called *historical-critical method* applied to the Bible approaches the Bible with the same tools of research one uses with other historical documents. These "tools" induce *source criticism* (sometimes called literary criticism, which is actually a much broader field of inquiry than just distinguishing sources); *form or tradition criticism*, which involves determining the forms or units in which the biblical materials circulated before being incorporated in written documents and the setting in the life of the people out of which these units of material came; and *redaction criticism*, an attempt to define the way in which the biblical writers edited or redacted the material they received to speak to the needs of the church in their own day. Sometimes the phrase *higher criticism* is used to identify this discipline, to distinguish it from the prior discipline of determining the correct form of the original text of scripture, called *lower criticism*.

ILLUMINATION: Insight into the meaning of the biblical text provided by the Holy Spirit, an "enlightening" of both mind and heart.

INERRANCY: The claim that each and every statement of the original text of scripture is without error of any kind—whether factual, historical, doctrinal, or moral.

INFALLIBILITY: Sometimes used synonymously with inerrancy, but more often with a concern for the Bible's authority for matters of faith and practice. In the latter usage, it implies the reliability of the Bible as a norm for doctrinal and moral decisions.

INSPIRATION: The activity of God's Spirit which enables God's word to be heard and set forth in human words. Though the term "inspired" (or God-breathed) occurs only once in the New Testament, the concept is assumed throughout. In this larger context, we may speak of an inspired community, within which the Spirit equips some to be inspired witnesses, the end product of whose witness is an inspired canon of scripture (2 Timothy 3:14-17). Various terms are used to describe either the process or result of the Spirit's activity in relation to scripture. *Verbal inspiration* suggests that the Spirit guided the very choice of words. *Plenary inspiration* suggests that the whole of scripture derives from the moving of the Spirit. Neither phrase implies the actual dictation of the words of scripture to the writers, though a few persons have championed that view too.

INTERPRETATION: The process of re-entering the world of meaning of the biblical writers--and finding ways to bridge the gap between that world and our own, so that we too can understand and respond. Though some would argue that the Spirit interprets scripture for us apart from any disciplined human effort, most persons would affirm that some such disciplined effort is the channel through which the Spirit can work most readily.

REVELATION: The self-disclosing activity of God, whereby God becomes known to us. For the biblical writers, God is revealed in a general way in the created order, but even more so in special acts in history which manifest God's word and power; The phrase *progressive revelation* is sometimes used to describe the gradually unfolding character of this revelation as attested in scripture, sometimes (but not necessarily) implying that the new partially supersedes the old.

TRUTH/TRUSTWORTHINESS: One of the most difficult sets of terms in our talk about the Bible. Truth may be variously defined as correspondence with certain objective data, as internal consistency or coherence, as dealing with the real as opposed to the unreal or illusory, or as fidelity to a particular purpose. The particular definition(s) of truth we have in mind will determine what we mean when we speak of the Bible as trustworthy. As defined in this paper, the trustworthiness of the Bible means *at least* that the Bible sets forth faithfully the message which God wants us to hear, and that it faithfully leads us to right relationships with God and one another. Whether it means more than this (for example, factual inerrancy) remains a subject of continuing discussion.

Action of 1979 Annual Conference: The report was presented by Wanda W. Button, with members of the committee present. *The report was adopted.*

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