

A.T.B. McGowan, *The Divine Authenticity of Scripture: Retrieving an Evangelical Inheritance* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2007), 214 pp. ISBN 978-0-8308-2879-1

When North American evangelical Protestants cross cultural barriers, they regularly find that questions treated as definitive at home can be assigned a very different weight abroad. It is especially true in the realm of Christian theology; Christians in other cultures seem far less fascinated with minutiae pertaining to the return of Christ at the end of the age than North American Christians have been. The globetrotting Christian would find the same state of things in comparative attitudes to the Bible. Evangelical Christians everywhere are known to read and reverence the Book, but they do not necessarily use a standard vocabulary to describe its trustworthiness. We, by contrast, have been long accustomed to speak of its “inerrancy”.

The author of the book under review (whom I have long counted a friend) lives and ministers in a culture different than our own. Both in his work as a theologian who has taught within his nation’s public university system, as a member of the Fellowship of European Evangelical Theologians, and as an evangelical minister of the doctrinally-comprehensive Church of Scotland, he has found it helpful to embrace the terminology of an earlier age, “infallibility” as the appropriate vocabulary for describing Scripture’s trustworthiness. All this *might* be explained by the variations between respective cultures and the constraints of the doctrinally-comprehensive settings in which he has ministered and taught.

Yet, in writing this book, A.T.B. McGowan understood himself to be under a kind of obligation. He has written it, substantially, to instruct his friends and acquaintances on *this* side of the Atlantic (where he is well-known as a guest theological lecturer) as well as those evangelical Protestants elsewhere who take ‘cues’ from the American evangelical movement, that we have been seriously mistaken in our readiness to employ the language of “inerrancy” as a means of describing the Bible’s trustworthiness. We ought instead to join in supporting the European evangelical approach to these questions and revert to the language of “infallibilism” and to speak of the Bible’s “authenticity”. He makes this argument across seven chapters before recapitulating the whole in a final wrap-up.

About this argument, several observations can be made and several issues pursued. As to observations, let me note that the real argument of this book fills only half the chapters written (I, II, IV, V). Chapter III, “The Enlightenment and Liberal Theology”, while interesting, is not well integrated into the work as a whole and does not advance beyond what evangelical Protestants, in general, might say. Chapters VI, “Scripture and Confession” and VII “Preaching Scripture” make edifying reading, but do not contribute to the book’s central argument. This brings us to the burden of the book – and the difficulties inherent in its argumentation.

McGowan is not the first modern Reformed theologian to argue, as he does in two initial chapters, “Introduction”, and “Reconstructing the Doctrine” that it has been mistaken for Reformed theology to give pride of place to the question of the credentials of the Bible – as does the Westminster Confession’s first chapter. One could certainly find such an argument set out in James Denney’s *Studies in Theology* (1894). But McGowan’s ground for arguing for a different sequence of theological *loci* than the one Reformed Christians have been long accustomed to seems to this writer to be very unconvincing. He compares the early Christian creeds with Reformed creeds and confessions (commencing with the Geneva Confession of 1536) and faults the latter for giving to Holy Scripture a pride of place uncharacteristic of earlier articles of doctrine. But it does not seem to occur to him that the context of the sixteenth century (in which reform of faith and morals was desperately needed) required the exaltation of the doctrine of Scripture in order for the needed primacy of Scripture to be re-established. In our present context of aggressive religious pluralism, the need for exalting Scripture as the primary means by which true revelation is mediated from the living God, supremely seen in Jesus Christ, leaves our situation somewhat ‘on par’ with the age of Reformation.

In his chapter IV, “Fundamentalism and Inerrancy” McGowan covers ground familiar to any reader who knows volumes such as Mark Noll’s *Between Faith and Criticism* (1986). Here we are reminded of the polemical context in which A.A. Hodge and B.B. Warfield articulated their doctrine of inerrancy in 1881. Fundamental to his argument is the suggestion that this position was “made in America”. McGowan’s U.K. reviewers on both sides of the Scottish border have (correctly in my view) rejected the validity of this argument. It was easily within McGowan’s power both to note that English and Scottish writers on inspiration were continuously contending for a Bible without error well into the nineteenth century and that Hodge and Warfield wrote quite conscious of this continuity of Reformed conviction from well before their time. In pointing this out, I give McGowan full credit for distancing himself from the highly unsatisfactory treatment of these questions provided in the deservedly-critiqued volume of Rogers and McKim, *The Authority and Interpretation of the Bible* (1979). Yet having avoided their excesses, it does not follow that his historical homework has yielded superior results. If it would be granted that confidence in a Bible, kept from error, was a representative evangelical and Reformed viewpoint in nineteenth century Britain, McGowan’s line of argument that inerrancy is an American “excess” becomes fatally compromised.

There is still more reason to be concerned with the author’s chapter V, “Infallibility: an Evangelical Alternative” and the concern has once more to do with the quality of historical investigation underlying the writing. McGowan aims to demonstrate the superiority of the concept of infallibility over inerrancy by appeal to historical figures. He shows the existence of charitable relationships between late nineteenth century orthodox Reformed theologians whose doctrines of Scripture were in fact distinguishable. How good to be reminded that the infallibilist Scot, James Orr, was on such charitable terms with his Princeton opposite number, the inerrantist B.B. Warfield. (The latter, at the invitation of the former as editor, wrote the notable article, “Inspiration” for the first edition of the *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia* of 1915). But beyond this, McGowan’s historical argument becomes mired in uncertainty, for he seeks to show that Warfield was, in actuality, the “odd man out” by reason of the greater affinity between the position on inspiration held by Abraham Kuyper and Herman Bavinck and that of Orr. Resting this judgment on the opinion of Donald Bloesch (138) as well as his own reading of Bavinck’s *Reformed Dogmatics* (E.T.), McGowan seemed insufficiently aware (though he alluded to it in a footnote 60 at page 138) that two articles by Richard B. Gaffin, written in 1982-83 to critique the sloppy research of Rogers and McKim, quite completely undermine the force of his own argument also. Though he has attempted to show that Kuyper and Bavinck stood with Orr *against* Warfield, it was satisfactorily shown by Gaffin’s eighty pages of research that the Dutch theologians more fully approximated the views of Warfield. Now a strong case *might* in fact be made for employing the language of infallibility over against inerrancy; but it is safe to say that McGowan’s historical argument in support of a reversion to this terminology is the opposite of convincing.

To this reviewer’s knowledge, inerrantists within and beyond North America are perfectly willing to accept infallibilists as their comrades-in-arms; we widely acknowledge that in different cultural and ecclesiastical contexts our chosen terminology may well not be opportune. This being so, how are we to understand the efforts of such an infallibilist to convince not only North American inerrantists – but their counterparts within his own culture – to “come in from the cold”? For the time being, we can only say “your argument is weak, but can’t we still be friends?”

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