

ΤΩ ΧΡΟΝΟΥ ΚΑΙΡΩ

IN THE NICK OF TIME

Occasional Essays and Other Stuff for Christian Students Presented by the President of
Central Baptist Theological Seminary of Minneapolis

American Christianity needs leaders. American Christianity needs *Christian* leaders. Christian leaders explain the Scriptures, bringing them to bear upon life's urgent questions. Christian leaders exemplify the life of faith, finding their ultimate satisfaction in God alone. They unite intellectual discipline with ordinate affection, turning their entire being toward the love of God. These essays are dedicated to the task of inviting Christian students to become tomorrow's Christian leaders.

—Kevin T. Bauder

"...Be instant in season, out of season; reprove, rebuke, exhort with all longsuffering and doctrine."

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Directions in Evangelicalism, Part 2 Biblical Criticism

Kevin T. Bauder

In the middle of the 1970s, a book by the editor of *Christianity Today* announced that the evangelical world was in the middle of *The Battle for the Bible*. Harold Lindsell made public what most observers already knew, namely, that some professing evangelicals were denying the inerrancy of Scripture. He was particularly concerned because he thought that a denial of inerrancy would necessarily lead to a rejection of other important doctrines. Scholars such as Jack Rodgers and Donald McKim, however, insisted that a strong view of biblical authority could be maintained even if the Bible contained a few errors of fact.

For more than thirty years, evangelicals have been debating whether a person who denies inerrancy should be recognized as an evangelical. In the meanwhile, the dominance of the New Hermeneutic has almost made discussions of inerrancy obsolete. The reason is rather simple: if meaning is person-relative, then truth is person-relative. If truth is person-relative, then error is person-relative. If error is person-relative, then discussions about inerrancy simply do not make sense.

Yet the inerrancy issue will not go away. Recently, it has been brought back because of evangelical biblical scholars who wish to adopt the results of historical and literary criticism. Recent controversy has focused on the writings of Peter Enns, who published *Inspiration and Incarnation* in 2005. The book was an expanded version of an article published the same year in *Reformation and Revival* ("Some Thoughts on Theological Exegesis of the Old Testament: Toward

a Viable Model”). Enns asserts that evangelicals have not responded fairly to the evidence of biblical critics. He insists that evangelicals must be willing to face the evidence rather than playing make-believe. Their failure to do so renders evangelicalism implausible to many thoughtful people. Faced with apparent contradictions between the results of biblical criticism and the historic theological formulations of evangelicalism, Enns argues that evangelicals must drop their suspicion and make proper use of modern criticism. While he does not overtly deny the inerrancy of Scripture, Enns is unable or unwilling to provide a clear explanation of how an inerrant Bible is compatible with the results of biblical criticism. So controversial have Enns’ writings become that he was forced to resign from his teaching post at Westminster Theological Seminary.

The situation today is one in which it is possible for a scholar to affirm biblical inerrancy while, at the same time, insisting that the Bible makes assertions that are not true. How can an inerrant Bible contain errors? Answering that question is the work of Kenton L. Sparks.

Sparks, a professor at Eastern University, has recently published a volume entitled *God’s Word in Human Words*. The value of his work is that it makes explicit what has only been implicit in Enns and others. He openly avers that evangelicals must accept the standard results of higher biblical criticism. He defends (among other points) the documentary hypothesis of the Pentateuch, the multiple authorship of Isaiah, a late date for Daniel (which book, he says, contains pseudo-prophecies), the non-historicity of some events in the biblical narratives, and the late date and non-Pauline authorship of the pastoral epistles. Nevertheless, Sparks insists that he believes in biblical inerrancy.

While Sparks’ conclusions may be controversial, he claims that he is hardly alone in the evangelical world. On pages 169-170, he alleges that Peter Craigie has argued for the multiple authorship of Isaiah (*The Old Testament: Its Background, Growth, and Content*), as have Raymond Dillard and Tremper Longman (*Introduction to the Old Testament*); that John Goldingay finds pseudo-prophecy in Daniel (*Daniel in the Word Biblical Commentary*); that Raymond Dillard affirms that the parts of the narrative in Chronicles are fictional (*2 Chronicles in the Word Biblical Commentary*; also Dillard and Longman *Introduction*); that Leslie Allen believes that Jonah is fictional (*The Books of Joel, Obadiah, Jonah, and Micah in the New International Commentary on the Old Testament*); and that George R. Beasley-Murray insists that the differences between John’s gospel and the synoptics cannot be harmonized historically (*John in the Word Biblical Commentary*). He further suggests that some evangelicals who actually hold critical views are reluctant to express them, in part because they fear a backlash from the boards and administrators of the schools in which they teach. States Sparks, “It is my experience that many evangelical scholars, in their more candid moments, will privately confess that their views are far closer to the critical consensus than their institutions could stomach” (168). Well, well.

Sparks begins his argument with an examination of contemporary hermeneutics (incidentally, this chapter is one of the best short summaries of the field that I have encountered). He objects to both extremes in the hermeneutical controversy, namely, strong foundationalism and

destructive antirealism. His conclusion is that humans are capable of interpreting and knowing, but that their understanding is always situated within a particular perspective and their knowing is always finite, fallen, and therefore fallible. He insists that these factors must be true of the human authors of Scripture no less than for the rest of humanity. Apparently, Sparks believes that Scripture cannot be a truly human production unless it contains errors.

In his next move, Sparks examines the way that Assyriologists understand the texts that they study. Once he has shown the reasonableness of their methods, he applies the same techniques to the text of the Bible. Sparks argues that if the Bible is understood in the same way as other ancient texts, then most of the results of biblical criticism are inescapable. This, too, is an aspect of the Bible's genuine humanity. What is more, according to Sparks the theological and ethical perspectives of the biblical writers are not always consistent or even compatible with one another. He insists that typical evangelical attempts to deal with these phenomena are artificial, selective, and illegitimate.

Sparks is particularly suspicious of attempts to ground inerrancy on the testimony of Jesus to biblical authority. He contends that Jesus was perfectly willing to accommodate His presentation to the worldviews and beliefs of His listeners. What is more, Sparks maintains that, because of Jesus' humanity, His knowledge was limited, perspectival, and fallible. Jesus could and did make mistakes in His own utterances.

Since Sparks believes that Jesus could make mistakes, it comes as no surprise that he believes the Bible can make them. What is more difficult to understand is how Sparks can continue to profess a belief in inerrancy. Much as he talks about inerrancy, it is clear that he finds the Bible riddled with errors, not only of fact, but of faith and morals.

God's Word in Human Words is an important book. It raises important issues. It is likely to set the agenda for the next round in a whole series of controversies.

Is the Bible inerrant? What does that mean? Must one believe in inerrancy in order to be an evangelical? Or to be a Christian? How much difference exists between the more leftward evangelicals of our day and the more moderate liberals of a century past? How much historical criticism can biblical scholars practice before they begin denying biblical authority? What must their assumptions be? These are questions that Sparks forces us to ask again. The answering of those questions promises to be entertaining, if nothing else. ✕

This essay is by [Kevin T. Bauder](#), president of Central Baptist Theological Seminary. Not every one of the professors, students, or alumni of Central Seminary necessarily agrees with every opinion that it expresses.

[Christmas (II)]

George Herbert (1593-1633)

The shepherds sing; and shall I silent be?
 My God, no hymn for thee?
My soul's a shepherd too; a flock it feeds
 Of thoughts, and words, and deeds.
The pasture is thy word: the streams, thy grace
 Enriching all the place.
Shepherd and flock shall sing, and all my powers
 Outsing the daylight hours.
Then we will chide the sun for letting night
 Take up his place and right:
We sing one common Lord; wherefore he should
 Himself the candle hold.
I will go searching, till I find a sun
 Shall stay, till we have done;
A willing shiner, that shall shine as gladly,
 As frost-nipt suns look sadly.
Then we will sing, and shine all our own day,
 And one another pay:
His beams shall cheer my breast, and both so twine,
Till ev'n his beams sing, and my music shine. ✠

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