CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION
CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

This study seeks to understand the historical and contemporary Christian views of Scripture, particularly in regard to the relation of theories of inspiration to the various methods of interpretation which have been and are employed by the Church. Though the question is never directly asked, the whole research has centered about the tacit question, what do we mean when we say that the Bible is the Word of God? The theology of inspiration is not under consideration but only an analysis of the various expressions regarding it. In this sense it is a semantic approach. The study is directed toward the goal of uncovering principles of interpretation which are historically, philosophically and semantically sound, which do justice to the uniqueness of the Bible and which will demonstrate the relevance of the Bible to the needs of today.

The study is justified, in the writer's opinion, for a number of reasons. (1) There are several views of inspiration and consequent variations of emphasis and procedure in interpretive methods extant in the Christian church. This results in a failure to find a common ground for "conversation" on matters that should be of mutual concern. This divergence of opinion long ago raised questions in the writer's mind,
questions which have assumed demanding proportions which made a personal
decision imperative. (2) No published works, to the writer's knowledge,
exist which attempt to resolve the confusion by means of a sympathetic
understanding of the terms and concepts which have been and are used
and around which the differences of opinion revolve. A very great deal
has been written from a theological, and philosophic but always dogmatic
point of view. It seems to be the proper way to attempt unity of spirit,
at least, to uncover and analyze the various pre-suppositions of each
position so that an objective judgment can be made. (3) If the conserva-
tism with which the writer identifies herself does not re-examine its
position, constructively, its enemies will do so destructively with too
great a loss to theological conservatism of intellectual prestige and
spiritual leadership. (4) It is hoped, moreover, that relevant semantic
principles may be suggested which will provide tools for a further
exploration into theological formulations. At least it should be a
"point of departure" toward this worthy goal. (5) To summarize the
main concern it may be said that one desire is paramount in the author's
mind, namely, to work toward a unity of spirit and faith among Christians.

The study, it is hoped, is reasonably objective and unbiased.
Pure objectivity, however, is not only impossible but undesirable. The
author approaches the subject matter as a Christian with all the personal
and moral commitments involved in a living Christian faith and is aware
of the deep assumptions that this commitment brings to the study.
Objectivity, then, will mean a freedom from a priori conclusions, of a creedal and dogmatic nature which would prejudice the study and result in a merely circular argument which defends rather than explores the question.

The fact of the problem is assumed in view of the variety of opinions held by equally qualified Christian scholars. Inspiration is not considered here to be a problem but the relationship between theories of inspiration and the understanding of the Bible as we have it, gives rise to legitimate problems in the field of interpretation. Does the Bible need to be interpreted? If not, why are there so many different understandings of its doctrines? If it does, what are the proper hermeneutical rules and how are they determined? Should the Bible be handled as any other literary work or are there special rules for interpretation which apply uniquely to it? How do we know this? What is interpretation? What are the pre-suppositions involved in the act of interpretation? What are we doing when we interpret? How is interpretation related to revelation? Who interprets revelation? Is it an authorised person, a certain church, a council or synod, or is it the individual reader? If interpretation is to be authoritative, in what is that authority grounded and what is the objective sign of the proper interpreter? What is authoritative, the Word of God or the interpretation? What is the relationship between interpretation and authority? Wherein does the authority of the Bible
consist? Does it, and can it reside in the Book as a book? Is authority intrinsic or vested so far as the Bible is concerned? We believe that all these are proper questions. There are others. Most Christian scholarship recognises the human element in Scripture and the fact of progressive revelation and the Bible's thoroughly "historical" involvement. These things obviously must be reflected in the rules of interpretation. How does it do so, and to what extent? What does historical mean, and how is it related to inspiration, particularly when interpretation is based on this characteristic as a modifying element? The Bible is called supernatural, divine, holy, spiritual. It has human elements in its production and history. It has a physical structure. What is the distinction between all these terms? How do each relate to interpretation? There are also, very urgent and practical problems. What is the Bible for? This is a crucial question, because the answer to it must be one of the major criteria for interpretation. Is it relevant for today? Can it speak to individual and collective needs and if so how can this be realised? Only a handful of scholars are able to read the original Biblical languages with any degree of real understanding. The rest of the world have the Bible in some translation. Some pagan cultures have no verbal equivalent for such words and ideas as "God" and "love." Do those who must read the Bible in imperfect translations have the word of God or not? If they do not, how does God speak to men, any
man, today? If the translation can be considered the word of God what is it that is the vehicle of that word? These "diagnostic" questions lie behind every inquiry of this study.

There are three kinds of questions asked above, practical questions, philosophical and semantic questions. It is impossible to disentangle these aspects completely but it is necessary to distinguish them and in so doing bring to the solution a greater measure of clarity than is often the case. The central question is very simple; what do the terms we use mean to us? But as simple as this may appear on the surface it is actually the source of all the questions which have been posed, and many more. Meaning is more involved than dictionary definitions and philological analysis though it includes these. There is a personal element about the question as it is stated that is vitally important since it makes the difference between the possibility and impossibility of "conversation." If we had asked: what do these terms mean? the discussion would have remained abstract and formal and would not pass beyond the point that justifies this study. The personal approach opens up new areas of thinking and asks for a more thoughtful response than many are accustomed to give. We, as Christians, justify our views of inspiration and interpretation and related terms, on a sense of continuity with the central stream of Christian consciousness running through at least two thousand years of history. We believe we have a right to our assurance. But when
we are pressed for an answer as to what we mean by the terms which we use, if we maintain continuity with the past Christian traditions we are driven to inquire whether our understanding of the terms is the same as that of the other Christian epochs. This is necessary to justify our right to stand in "apostolic succession." We do not take for granted that the meaning has not undergone modification through the centuries. We ask whether or not it has changed.

This study, then, in order to come to a practical answer to the problem of interpretation must explore two apparently unrelated fields, history and the philosophy of meaning. What have Christians of all ages believed about the inspiration of the Bible and how did they relate that belief to interpretation? The answer to these questions will establish a historical perspective against which to evaluate contemporary views. The second emphasis is that of meaning, or an analysis of the expression of the various views and a critical consideration of them in the light of the possibilities and limitations of language. Interpretation as a science of meaning must ask about words and how they are able to bear significance from one mind to another. The philosophy of interpretation is not a dogmatic discipline but is a necessary one as a preliminary preparation to hermeneutics, and particularly to Biblical exegesis.

Of necessity, then, this study cannot result in a dogmatic conclusion, though there has come great personal assurance to the
writer as a result of it. She expects and welcomes criticism and debate. In no other way can finite minds arrive at any measure of certainty so far as our interpretation of God's word is concerned. Criticism and revision is the way to an educated and useful mind. The study is offered much in the spirit of Charles G. Finney, who, in launching his Systematic Theology into troubled theological seas, said,

I do not preserve my views to be published after I am dead, to spare myself the mortification of seeing them severely criticized, and overturned if false; but on the contrary I desire to subject them to the fullest criticism, that whatever is wrong in them may be thoroughly sifted out.¹

The following chapter will further acquaint the reader with the nature of the problem under discussion and the next chapter proceed to examine the major points of view, held through the centuries by the Christian church, regarding inspiration and its methods of Biblical interpretation. This will not be an exhaustive inquiry but an attempt at a fairly representative and accurate one. The significance of the Reformation period requires a more detailed analysis, as does also, the peculiar shifting of emphasis in the post-Reformation epoch. A section will be devoted to the role of Modernism in the history of interpretation as it challenged the Catholic church and then Protestantism and then was caught on the horns of a self-created dilemma.

The resultant reversal to a sort of Orthodoxy which has issued in a new demand for a Biblical theology (in contrast to Old or New Testament theologies), will be traced. All of this prepares us to examine our own views of inspiration and asks that we justify our methods of interpretation in the light of a clear understanding of our position and in terms which are meaningful to us and to others, and in a full awareness of our historical heritage on the matter. But this chapter is more than analytic. It is also a germinal approach to a constructive statement by the writer. This personal aspect is both implicit and explicit. It is implicit in the very choice of subject matter and the criteria of judgment throughout the study. It will be spelled out more fully as a conclusion, in a manner which seems to be justified historically, philosophically and semantically.