CHAPTER  V

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

OF THE HISTORY OF INTERPRETATION
We are now prepared to suggest an answer to the question; what did our Christian forefathers mean by the terms they used in relation to a doctrine of Scripture? In the first place, throughout history the Scriptures have had a place of centrality for the Church. They have been considered authoritative. Throughout the various theories of inspiration and methods of interpretation there has run the deep consciousness that Scripture was the very life of the Church. Interpretation has always been the bond between the sacred documents and its ongoing life. This observation includes the fact that the Bible was always, up until modern times, at least, considered to be uniquely inspired by God. There have been a number of theories of inspiration, but back of them all the profound conviction that Scripture was God's word to men in an absolutely unique sense. This conviction has dominated every method of interpretation. The Palestinian and Alexandrian Jews, Philo, Origen, Augustine, the Schoolmen, Luther, Calvin, the post-Reformation Protestants and Catholics, and most of Christendom down to the present day, including the Liberal, the Neo-Orthodox, Calvinists, Wesleyans, Lutherans, Arminians, Fundamentalists, Conservatives, Evangelicals, Neo-Evangelicals, among others, and a host of unclassifiable theological "mavericks,"
all stand with bowed head and humbled heart before the Word of God. Some of these have attempted to formulate a doctrine of inspiration which would define orthodoxy or which would merely describe the faith which men had in the Word. Others, among most of the groups, preferred to declare a faith in the fact of divine inspiration, but prefer not to become too specific about the manner of inspiration. Relatively few Christians have dogmatized about inspiration, and practically no scholars have done so. Practically all Christian writers have used terms to refer to inspiration which sound to us like some form of mechanical dictation. Language has been extravagant at this point. The Bible was the Word of God in the most literal sense; its doctrines were true and without error and the book was of the highest authority. But when this has been said we are faced with the paradoxical fact that in no case, up until the post-Reformation time was verbal inerrancy associated with the individual words of Scripture (except during the pre-Christian era when the Jews worshipped the very letters of the Law). We make this judgment on the strength of the testimony left us of the actual usage the Fathers made of the Scripture. As we have seen, they felt free to criticize, misquote, alter, eliminate words, verses, books, and to interpret in a way that did violence to any idea of a verbally sacred book. Augustine was unable to become a Christian until he discovered the allegorical method of interpreting the Old
Testament. To him a literal sense was unworthy of God. Neither Luther nor Calvin felt tied to a verbal accuracy but applied personal criteria to the Bible to determine the truthfulness and inspiration of the book. Neither believed that the book of Revelation was inspired. Even the Creeds almost unanimously affirmed the perfection and authority of Scripture to be in its doctrines, and not specifically in its individual words. This is in no way, yet, a judgment as to whether divine authority can be maintained apart from a divinely inerrant text, but is only an observation that, on the basis of historical evidence, the two ideas were not equated through history.

The second observation is in respect of interpretation. On the one hand, interpretation, in relating Scripture to life has been the modernistic emphasis. It has seldom been self-consciously modernistic, but by its very exercise has certainly been so. Even in epochs when inspiration was thought to be the most pure word of God, even to the point of Bibliolatry, where the physical book itself was sacred, interpretation reached its arms about God and man in an effort to bring them together — a real modernistic impulse. But on the other hand, always, possibly without exception, interpretive methods have interposed themselves between God and man. Interpretation has been both a bridge and a barrier. We will venture the dogmatic statement that the Bible, in the Church, with the exception of one short period, that of the Reformation proper, has never spoken
directly to man. Men have never been able to lay their ears against
the Book to listen to its message with the blessing of the Church. If
controlling principles for allegorizing have not intervened, tradition
and dogma have determined the interpretation. When tradition was cast
off, Church Creeds took its place and became dogmatic philosophical
presuppositions. Wolfgang Schweitzer's challenge, "Who is Lord of the
Bible?" strikes a painful sore in the Christian conscience. Harnack
was right when he said that a divine revelation required a divinely
authorized interpreter. Of course, by this he meant that since no
human agency could provide that kind of interpretation we are not to
assume the divine revelation. But the fact remains that, in the history
of the Church, the practical consequence of a "high" theory of inspiration
has always been a sacerdotal interpretation standing between man and the
word. This was true in relation to the Jewish law which demanded the min-
istration of the scribes to apply the precepts of the Law to the daily
life. It is demonstrated again in the decrees of the Council of Trent
which ascribed such absolute perfection to the Scriptures as to demand the
divine interpretation of the Church as Christ's own voice. It should be
noted that this decree is the first example in Christian history of an
affirmation of mechanical perfection of the Bible which in this case
was the Latin Vulgate, notorious for its unreliable textual structure.
Rather than an asset to the Christian conscience it became a liability
because it separated men from the personal contact with the Word.
Significantly enough, this decree followed closely on the basis of the invention of printing which was providing a way for the common man to own and read for himself the sacred book. The few Confessions that specified mechanical perfection of the Bible, also tend to authorize interpretation and to confuse it with the inerrancy of the text. This was especially noticable during the Fundamentalist controversy.

The third observation is in relation to the methods of interpretation against corresponding theories of inspiration. The more supernatural the Bible is considered to be, and the less it is related to human authorship, the more the allegorical methods of interpretation become the acceptable approach to it. And this is logically proper. Communication with such a Book accommodates itself to a sort of gnostic philosophy. The deepest understanding must, of necessity, be mystical and inexpressible. And, we may say, to the extent that the Book is considered supernatural, allegory is proper, if adequately controlled. We cannot ignore the Scriptural warrant for it.

It is commonly understood that basically, the soundest method of interpretation begins with a respect for the grammatical and historical implications of literature. But it is well to note that this method logically demands a reduction in the "height" of the view of inspiration for it reduces the revelation to the categories
of human literature. It raises the question as to whether "special revelation," supernaturally perfect, can be understood in the same manner that natural revelation is received and understood. If the revelation in Scripture can yield its secret to imperfect men by way of the common laws of literary interpretation, alone, it must itself have partaken of the limitations of the natural and human. Grammatical interpretation is consistent with a "higher" view of inspiration than the historical method of interpretation. Grammatical precision shows a greater respect for the literal word of Scripture than the historical sensitivity can possibly show. The Church has scarcely ever been completely devoid of the grammatical exegete. But literary exegesis did not rest on the historical sense. Historical interpretation has undergone changes through the centuries. The Antiochian meaning of historical was a corrective to the non-historical Alexandrian method. It simply meant that the biblical revelation had historical reality rather than losing itself in a shadowy world of symbols.¹

In other words, the literal meaning which all could comprehend was

distinguished from the secret meanings to the initiate, only. Later, historical came to mean, as in the Reformation, that Scripture was originally spoken in a historical situation — that real people had spoken and written in connection with real events. There was some true regard, theoretically at least, especially in Calvin, for the fact of progressive revelation and the accommodation of revelation to the comprehension of the people. Historical interpretation in the nineteenth century came to mean that the Bible was to be read entirely in the light of its contemporary cultural milieu. But, common to all interpretations, beyond the Antiochean conception of historical, is the explicit understanding that the literal word has been environmentally conditioned and that the true meaning of it cannot be determined apart from some measure of vicarious participation in that condition. Wherever this method of interpretation is used, a less rigid view of inspiration than the supernatural perfection of words, is assumed. To unite the idea of verbal inerrancy and an interpretation which respects the historical situation is a logical contradiction and has never been able to maintain itself for long.

The fourth observation arises out of these three. Terms like verbal inspiration, inerrancy and infallibility are not encountered before the Confessional period, as they are now used. Historians in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries use these terms in describing the views of the Fathers back as far as Origen and beyond. But in
reviewing the literature on the history of interpretation two divergent judgments are made which can be confusing to a student. One will say, as Farrar does, of Origen and Clement, "both regarded the Bible as verbally inspired," and another will say, "the Church never held a view of verbal inerrancy." To anticipate the discussion on Semantics in the next chapter, we may say here, that great care must be exercised as we read the works of historians as well as of the original works of the Fathers that our own personal or cultural connotations of the words are not read back into the works of an earlier day. Farrar's judgment as well as that of the other writers, is an interpretation and must be understood to be such. It results in a fallacious understanding to project the associations which make up the meaning of a term, into another context of associations. The term verbal inspiration acquiring a particular flavor of emotional and historical and religious and controversial characteristics, did not mean to Farrar in 1886, all that it means to us, and to project the accumulation of one to two thousand years of usage into New Testament words is obviously to misrepresent and distort the concept we wish to clarify. It is not difficult to come to a fair understanding of the views of the Church regarding inspiration. The study, thus far, in comparing expressed affirmations of inspiration with the handling of Scripture in practice, has uncovered the fact that no one held a theory of verbal inerrancy comparable to the
twentieth century American view as expressed in the Fundamentalist controversy. Of all the Creedal families, only the Catholic and Calvinistic branch spelled out the theory in any germinal way. Even the Westminster Confession is less explicit than the early twentieth century exposition of it. It strongly affirms Biblical authority and completeness and its source in God but not its verbal inerrancy except by implication. Therefore, when terms are used by Origen and Augustine and Calvin, which apart from a historical understanding, sound like the terms we use to describe inspiration, we are in error not to remember the startling freedom with which all these men handled the Word of God. Were they inconsistent? If only one or two had done this, we might say, yes, but when every Father did the same thing we must conclude that we project a false inconsistency upon them by forcing them into the pattern of our logic.

A history of the theories of inspiration illustrates the erroneous judgments that may be made by failing to note the context of the use of the terms used. Did the Church always believe in an inerrant text? A good case can be made for the affirmative answer if no thought is given to meaning. The case receives a setback when it is remembered that in the early Christian centuries it was the very imperfect Greek Septuagint translation which was thought to be verbally inspired. During the Reformation it was the translations which were thought to carry the pure word of God, and which
were the objective authority. When Biblical criticism uncovered the presence of an impure text the Church, in order to retain confidence in the trustworthiness of Scripture was forced to retreat to the abstract idea of an inerrant autograph as the authority for its doctrine. Autographs, as important to inerrancy and authority, had never entered the doctrinal concept of the Church in all its history until the Calvinistic confessions were forced to resort to them in the face of science. It would be untrue to fact, then, to say that the Church has always held to the theory of verbal dictation (in any of its forms), if we impose the extreme Fundamentalistic content of meaning on the terms that have been used in other centuries and conditions. Verbal inspiration meant one thing to Augustine (if he used the term), another to Calvin, and an entirely different thing to the modern church. This in no way reflects on the propriety of the use of the term nor its theological truth, but does suggest that it is not as simple a term to understand as is so often assumed.

A final observation is made. No method of interpretation has been able to do full justice to the spiritual and religious quality of the Bible. Luther and Calvin came the closest to a satisfactory system of exegesis in trying to make Scripture terminate, not in its word but in Christ, the Living Word of God. Such "indefinite," somewhat subjective considerations, the explicit laws of which cannot be pinned down to the point of a regulatory rule, is
the danger and the challenge with which we, in our day, are left. It is a task which only the brave may dare, and only the spiritual exegete may succeed in accomplishing and yet, a task each individual Christian must assume if he would hear the voice of his Lord.

Robert Grant says it nicely,

To our mind the correct understanding of exegesis and its task is that set forth at the Reformation by Luther and more recently by Wilhelm Dilthey. He calls the highest type of interpretation "divination," and argues that it "has always an element of genius, i.e., it reaches a high degree of perfection only through inner affinity and sympathy."

This is not a recession to ancient untenable excesses, but it comes close to an understanding of the intangible wealth of the Bible that the more logical methods completely miss.

The suggestion has been made in this study that the interpretive devices used by Christian thinkers through the centuries have been prompted, consciously or otherwise, by a desire to do justice to the strange spiritual dynamic in Scripture which defies description. The Greek and Roman fathers thought they could do it justice best by allegorising. Even Luther and Calvin whose ideas for interpretation were so high, in practice resorted to other methods in an attempt to do justice to it. It is the conviction of the writer that these methods of interpretation were not to be explained entirely by saying that these men were children of their age — that

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1 Grant, *The Bible in the Church*, p. 4.
we cannot expect as much from them as may be demanded of us. There is a real measure of truth in all of this, but it must not be forgotten that they were not men of childish intellect or shoddy scholarship. The fact remains, as has been pointed out, that the basic doctrinal insights permanently relevant to the Christian church were born and developed in these very centuries. The highest Christological formulas came out of the "fanciful" Alexandrian atmosphere. Soteriological theories informing Christian doctrine today were developed in the "arid" rationalism of the Scholastic period and it may not be untrue to fact to say that the modern period using the better interpretive methods has neither improved on the older doctrines nor has it been significantly more active in developing Biblical doctrines, acceptable to the majority of Christian people. A number of deductions could be made at this point, but only one is important to this study and it will now be expressed as the hypothesis which seems to do justice to that which we know. The concern of the Church has always been to do justice to the spiritual dynamic of Scripture by means of some type of interpretation. No formal method yet devised has been able to capture that dynamic. As men were true to the insights given by a diligent study of the Scriptures, eternal truth has broken through, regardless of what method of interpretation was habitually used by the men concerned. This does not justify inferior hermeneutical practice in any age, nor
does it account for good doctrine on that basis, much less give
this age liberty to be careless in this most important area of
theological work, but it does point up the fact that there is a
"more" to Scripture than any theory of inspiration and method of
interpretation has yet been able to pin down into a rational system.

If the Bible is to be a living force in human life some way will
have to be provided to bridge the very deep gulf between an ancient
book and modern men. In other words, the Bible's authority is at
stake. By what right do we (for we do) press the message of the Bible
on others and accept its authority for ourselves? Grammatical and
historical categories of interpretation, as proper as they are, are
impotent to answer this question or to suggest the way out. Great
preaching has always leaped over the boundaries of formal hermeneutics.
Why has the reading of Scripture always produced a conviction for sin
and pointed to a Redeemer? How is it that a book, its youngest author
at least two thousand years removed from us, prompt the righting of
personal and social wrongs? No other book does this. It is clearly
not a book that imposes any former pattern of culture or government
upon us, though it is couched in the terms of its contemporary situa-
tions. In other words, in what does its authority over us consist?
These observations and questions point up the urgent need for a
philosophy of interpretation which can give an answer and defend it
before the thoughtful mind. Interpretation does stand between inspira-
tion and a contemporarily relevant book either as a barrier or as a
bridge.