

What, if anything, is to be said for claims concerning inspiration and inerrancy?

If anything at all is to be said for such claims, they must be interpretable as related ways of *formulating* the claim for unique authority, rather than as related ways of *explaining* the unique authority for which a claim is made. By “the claim for unique authority,” I mean the kind of claim advanced by the classical Protestant principle, *sola scriptura*, according to which the authority of the canon of scripture is unique because it is the sole primary authority for Christian faith and witness. As such, scripture is understood to be immediately authorized by God through Jesus Christ. But claims concerning the inspiration and the inerrancy of scripture can be interpreted as related ways of formulating this very understanding, given assumptions according to which inspiration and inerrancy are the ground and the consequence respectively of the immediate authorization by God whence unique authority derives.

Even if this interpretation of such claims can be defended, however, there is as little to be said for traditional claims concerning the inspiration and inerrancy of scripture as there is for the classical Protestant scriptural principle with its claim for scripture’s unique authority. On the contrary, there is as much to be said against these claims as there is against the scriptural principle itself. Specifically, there are two things to be said which together make these claims as untenable as the principle they serve to formulate.

In the first place, the traditional assumption in making the claims even as in asserting the principle is that any self-understanding or life-praxis that may validly claim scriptural authorization may by that fact alone be judged to be authentic or true and right. In other words, the claims, like the principle, are themselves assumed to be valid. But as much as this assumption might be reasonably thought to be of a piece with Christian faith and witness, the question remains whether or not they are valid for anyone not already committed to exist and thus to believe and act as a Christian. In short, claims that scripture is or has a unique authority or, alternatively, that it is inspired and inerrant are exactly

that—*claims*, whose own validity or truth must first of all be validated before scriptural authorization can in any way settle the question of the authenticity of faith or of the credibility of witness, as distinct from the question of the appropriateness of some faith or witness to what Christians acknowledge as their sole primal authorizing source.

In the second place, historical-critical study has now made it impossible to claim that scripture as such is immediately authorized by God through Jesus Christ in the way in which it would have to be in order to have the unique authority traditionally claimed for it. Not only has such study shown that the canon did not achieve anything like its present form until—at the very earliest—the second half of the second century, but source, form, and redaction criticism of the several New Testament writings themselves has also demonstrated that the author of every one of them depends upon sources of authority, oral if not written, earlier than itself, so that none of them could have been immediately, but only mediately, authorized by God through Jesus Christ. As for the Old Testament writings, any claim that any of them is a conscious prophecy of the coming of Jesus as the Christ, which is integral to the traditional claim that they are immediately authorized by God through Christ, is now generally dismissed as an utterly groundless historical anachronism. But since claims concerning the inspiration and inerrancy of scripture are simply related ways of formulating the claim for its immediate authorization and thus its unique authority, they have now been disclosed to be as untenable as the principle on which they depend.

Is nothing more to be said, then, for claims concerning inspiration and inerrancy? This would certainly be the case if they were nothing more than alternative ways of formulating the classical claim for the unique authority of scripture or if there were no other formulation of the Christian witness, oral or written, that, unlike scripture, could be validly claimed to be the sole primary authority for Christian faith and witness. On the other hand, if there is any such other formulation of the Christian witness that could be validly claimed to be or to have the unique authority traditionally claimed for scripture, something more

certainly could be said for claims concerning inspiration and inerrancy, since they are specified to scripture only because of the unique authority traditionally claimed for it. By the same token, they could be validly specified to any other formulation of the Christian witness that could be validly claimed to be the sole primary Christian authority.

Of course, the other point made above would still hold that, as simply related ways of formulating a claim for unique authority that itself remains to be validated, they could never settle but only raise the question of the authenticity of Christian faith or of the credibility of Christian witness. But provided this necessary limit of any putative authority were acknowledged, claims concerning its inspiration and inerrancy could very well be made by way of claiming its unique authority for answering the other question of the appropriateness of any faith or witness that claims to be Christian.

To say that such claims *could* be made, however, is not to say that they *should* be made. On the contrary, considering how they have traditionally been interpreted, not as related ways of formulating the claim for unique authority but as related ways of explaining the unique authority for which a claim is made, one might well have reservations about making them lest they be understood—really *misunderstood*—in this traditional way.

But as well-founded as such reservations no doubt are, there is no more, even if no less, reason to hesitate in making claims for inspiration and inerrancy than in making any other comparable claims—whether about the virgin birth and sinlessness of Jesus Christ or about the immaculate conception and assumption of the Blessed Virgin. All such claims are simply more or less adequate ways of formulating the constitutive Christian confession to the decisive significance of Jesus for human existence, and there is something to be said for any of them, provided only that it is so understood and interpreted.