

COMMUNICATION TO KENNETH KANTZER
IN RE EVANGELICAL USE OF REDACTION CRITICISM

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I have nothing against Osborne personally, and would really have preferred to use a more appalling example of what he is doing -- such as the enclosed paper by Robert Gundry of Westmont (which Gundry sent to me prior to its forthcoming presentation at the Far-West Regional Chapter of ETS on April 6). Since Gundry's paper is not yet officially published, I could not use it as a basis of my analysis and criticism. But, as you will certainly discover by reading it, he is doing exactly the same thing as Osborne, and is justifying it in exactly the same way, namely, by continuing to assert inerrancy while evacuating all meaning from the expression through the critical method that he employs. If Osborne does not give you pause, Gundry certainly should; and if you can distinguish the methods of the one from methods of the other, I shall be much surprised.

But now to particulars.

(1) You write: "You failed to distinguish between those who seek to avail themselves of certain aspects of redaction criticism and yet safeguard the full inerrancy of Scripture (e.g., Grant Osborne) and those who do so without such unequivocal and careful commitment to inerrancy." But there is simply no way to employ critical techniques and "yet carefully safeguard the full inerrancy of Scripture." All that Osborne (or Gundry) does is to assert fideistically that the final product of the redaction process is inerrant regardless of what his form critical technique has come up with. Inerrancy becomes a totally plastic concept at the mercy of the critical hermeneutic. (See the final chapter of my Faith Founded on Fact for an analysis of what this does to the very concept of inerrancy; in brief, it renders it technically meaningless.) The evangelical committed to the inerrancy of Scripture must do just the reverse of what Osborne and Gundry do: he must allow the overall biblical concept of truth (truth as correspondence -- see the paragraph from Robert Preus's essay attached) to give him his concept of inerrancy; that concept of inerrancy will create the hermeneutic limits for his handling of particular scriptural problems. Hermeneutics is not an open area for the evangelical committed to inerrancy (See my Crisis in Lutheran Theology, Volume I, especially pp. 100-105). Evangelicals are still naive enough to think that, by getting Seminary faculty to subscribe to the word inerrancy, they cover the problem. But just as the word "inspiration" hermeneutically lost its original meaning, so the term "infallibility" has pretty well gone down the drain (cf. Hans Küng and company) and we are now seeing "inerrancy" losing its meaningfulness. Even the International Council on Biblical Inerrancy is only dimly aware of the necessity for hermeneutic commitments in order for inerrancy commitments to be meaningful. (Enclosed is a copy of the Melodyland Doctrinal Statement; you will note the Hermeneutic Section, included as an essential insurance policy against reassessments of the meaning of inerrancy which in fact destroy it.)

(2) I do not hold that "the recognition of influences upon the biblical record from the interests and concerns of the early church [is] illegitimate." But I do hold that such influence cannot, consistent with an inerrant view of Scripture, modify the substantive factual character of biblical assertions. For example, the early church's interests and concerns may indeed have influenced the writer's

selection of what to include among all the things Jesus said and did -- but this does not mean that their Sitz im Leben could result in the introduction of untruth into their narrative, such as attributing to Jesus what he did not in fact say or stating that events of his career occurred on day X or in place Y when in fact they didn't. Osborne and Gundry simply fudge the factual question by confusing selection with inaccuracy.

(3) It is precisely here that your own discussion of the ipsissima verba becomes confused. For example, the Aramaic problem is totally irrelevant. By ipsissima verba is meant an accurate record of what Jesus in fact said. There is a world of difference between the straw man you seem to attribute to me (Jesus quoted in the very language he spoke) and Osborne's position that what the Gospel writers attribute to Jesus he did not in fact say.

Take Osborne's example of the Great Commission. He declares that "it seems most likely that at some point the tradition or Matthew expanded an original monodic formula." Jesus, in other words, did not make a Trinitarian statement; the early church or Matthew expanded Jesus' monodic statement to become a Trinitarian statement; nonetheless, since God is a Trinity, the Holy Spirit was at work bringing about an inerrant result anyway! Now surely it ought to be obvious that the exegetical issue is not whether Trinitarian theology is inerrantly true but whether the biblical writers can be trusted when they affirm that Jesus said something. Any meaningful doctrine of inerrancy requires that whether Jesus spoke in Aramaic or Swahili he in fact made reference to the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit on the occasion recorded in Matthew 28:19.

Otherwise, it would be obvious that the underlying question of what Jesus in fact said and did ends up totally severed from the question of the "inerrancy" of the edited text. The kind of "non-verbatim" accounts that you refer to in your letter could be inerrant only if they accurately reflected what was actually said on the given occasion anyway; they could not genuinely remain inerrant statements concerning the particular occasion just because they happen to state infallible general truths.

Example: Prophet A declares in the year 1900: "My people, all is relative." His believing community, in the wake of Einstein, records that he said: "My people, all is relative -- and $E=mc^2$. The redacted statement might indeed be infallible (assuming $E=mc^2$ is ultimately true), but that is not in fact what the prophet said originally (and it makes no difference whatever whether he originally spoke in Aramaic, Chinese, etc.).

(4) Maybe this helps to clarify why Osborne's use of the Spirit is indeed deus ex machina, indistinguishable from what many liberals are doing. Regardless of the disparity between the original events and words of Jesus' ministry on the one hand, and the resultant text of Scripture on the other, the Holy Spirit has produced a genuine revelation! By the same logic, such a claim could be made for the Bible no matter what its final text said. The Holy Spirit becomes a subjective justification for accepting a book that continually makes statements about what Jesus said and did that do not necessarily reflect accurately the details of the ministry that he in fact had. This is pure Schwärmerei.

(5) What I have already said should make plain that your reasoning is very much off when you remind me that "John tells us of the vast amount of material relating to what Christ did and what he said." I nowhere maintain (nor does anyone else I know) that Jesus never said anything beyond what the Gospels contain. The issue is, rather, whether what is recorded as to what he said represents historical fact rather than truths which may be "inerrant" in a general sense but are not an accurate representation of Jesus' life and ministry.

(6) I majored in Greek and Latin classics as well as philosophy at Cornell (a classical education which would not have hurt some of our evangelical biblical scholars, I might add). I discovered that the very techniques they use were weighed in the balance and found wanting in classical scholarship. My professors never tired of demonstrating the foolishness of 19th century attempts at "finding the true and original meaning" of classical texts through redaction and tradition criticism. With tremendous difficulty, classical scholarship pulled itself out of the "conjectural" morass of 19th century scholarship. Now classicists go back to the principles of harmonization set forth in Aristotle's Poetics to deal with discrepancies, stylistic variations, etc. The entire history of Western law works on the same basis of harmonization in the "construction of documents" (wills, probate, executed deeds, etc.). It is simply appalling to me that people like Osborne and Gundry continue to work with conjectural methodology that no one today gives two whoops for outside of the Biblical field. C. S. Lewis was precisely correct from the standpoint of English literary scholarship when he argued that tradition and redaction criticism are irredeemable -- and his position on the inerrancy of Scripture was considerably weaker than ETS is supposed to maintain.

(7) You say: "Your faulty assumption, as I see it, is to equate such a conscious editing process of selecting and shaping the content of the Gospels with a falsifying of the Gospel accounts." By now, I should hope that it would be evident that Osborne, Gundry, and company do in fact "falsify the Gospel accounts", for the "inerrant" resultant text can and does often present a false picture of what Jesus actually said and did. Whether one attaches the word "inerrant" to the result is really of little consequence. It is meaningless to use the word inerrancy for a situation in which the "inerrant" record says that Jesus did things and said things temporally, geographically, and substantively which he did not in fact do. At very best, Osborne's approach de-historicizes Christian belief -- leaving it with a Bible that is "inerrant" in the sense that everything it says reflects ultimate truth, but need not historically represent what actually happened or what was actually said by the biblical characters themselves. In this connection, you might enjoy taking a look at the quotation from Jean Guitton appearing in the preface to my Where is History Going? I think that Guitton would make the same comment to Osborne.

