

SINCE YOU ASKED
(Question Column Conducted by Joseph T. Bayly)

Because this question recurs most frequently in one form or another, the following statement, privately circulated, and here quoted as an answer in relation to contemporary objections, was made by the late Gresham Machen, author of such classics as "The Origin of Paul's Religion" and "The Virgin Birth of Christ".

We stand for the complete truthfulness of the Bible as the Word of God. It is often said that the Bible is infallible in the inner, religious sphere, but fallible like other books when it comes to deal with external history. We reject any such distinction. Our religion is no bottomless mysticism; the Christian religion is founded squarely upon events like the death and resurrection of our Lord, that took place in the external world. Unless the Bible can give us knowledge of those basic events, it can be no infallible guide for our souls.

Thus we hold that the Bible is not partly true and partly false, but true throughout. In saying that, we are well aware of the favor that we are sacrificing. There are many who would be inclined to treat with respect what we say about many things--what we say, for example, even in defense of the virgin birth and bodily resurrection of our Lord--but who regard us as having placed ourselves beyond the pale of serious consideration when we hold that the Bible is true from beginning to end. It would be convenient, therefore, for us to keep in the background what we believe about this point, and thus to retain a larger measure of favor from the modern Church. Much could be said, from the point of view of policy, in favor of such an attitude. But it is an attitude which we can never adopt. There is to our mind no profession more despicable than the profession of teaching when one thing is said in the classroom and another thing to the Church at large. And so we say plainly, to the ruin, in many quarters, of our reputation, but with the approval of our consciences, that we hold the Bible to be free from the errors that mar other books, to be the blessed, holy infallible Word of God.

We do not, indeed begin with that conviction in our defense of the Christian religion; and so we can find common ground for discussion with many whose view of the Bible is very different from ours. When, for example, we argue in favor of our belief in a personal God, we do not base our argument at all upon the infallibility of the Bible; what we say in that sphere, therefore, may commend itself to many whose view of the Bible is very unfavorable indeed. Or when we defend our belief in the resurrection of our Lord, again our argument is independent of the question whether the Bible is infallible or not. Even prior to any belief in the infallibility of Scripture, a scientific treatment of the sources of information will, we think, lead the historian to hold that Jesus of Nazareth was raised from the dead on the third day. There are many Christians who can go with us that far, and yet cannot accept our view of the Bible; and we rejoice in the measure of their agreement with us. Our view of the Bible is not the beginning, we think, but rather the end, of any orderly defense of the Christian religion. First the general truth of the Bible in its great outlines as an historical book, and the supernatural origin of the revelation that it contains, then the full truthfulness of the Bible as the Word of God--that is the order of our apologetic.

Nevertheless, although we do not begin with the doctrine of the infallibility of Scripture, we do come to it in the end; and when we have come to it, we build upon it our orderly exposition of the Christian faith. As apologists, in other words, we end with the infallibility of Scripture, but as systematic theologians we begin with it. Systematic theology, we think logically begins at the point where apologetics has left off. Apologetics establishes the full truthfulness of the Bible, and then systematic theology proceeds to set forth the teaching that the Bible contains.