

The Creeds of the Church

Session 10—The History of the Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy

I. The Historical Landscape

The Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy was produced during a 3-day meeting of the International Council on Biblical Inerrancy in 1978. This meeting was attended by some 200 pastors and Bible scholars to address the question of inerrancy. The reason that such a council was felt to be needed is best understood by a survey of the historical (as well as philosophical/theological) climate of the day.

First, consider 3 major societal factors that affected the centuries following the Reformation:

A. The Ascendancy of Protestantism

As history marched forward from the Reformation era, Protestantism continued to gain ground. By the late 17th century, Germany, Switzerland, England, Scotland, and the Netherlands were solidly Protestant. The colonization of the New World led to a continued spread of Protestantism, with England and France striving for control of North America. When England won the French-and-Indian War in 1763, the destiny of North America as predominantly Protestant was virtually guaranteed.

B. Utopianism

The industrial age in the West led to new advances in travel (rail, automobiles, aviation), electrical industries, radio and motion picture technology, medicine, etc. Even World War I didn't dampen spirits much. The defeat of the Germans in 1918 led to an assumption that large-scale warfare was now a thing of the past. Prosperity bloomed throughout the Western world.

C. Depression and the Second World War

All of this tacit utopianism was shattered by the Great Depression in 1929 and then the onset of World War II in 1939.

II. The Philosophical Landscape

A. The Humanist Soil of Relativism—Erasmus vs. Luther

Underlying the observable history of the Protestant nations was a certain philosophical/theological landscape that evolved slowly over the centuries.

When Martin Luther broke from the Roman Catholic Church in Germany in 1517, he did so while having ongoing conversations with a Dutch humanist named Desiderius Erasmus. Erasmus was critical of many of the same abuses in the

Catholic church that had inspired Luther and others to move away from the Roman church, leading many of the early reformers (like Luther) to be hopeful of Erasmus' own eventual break with Rome. However, while critical, Erasmus remained firmly within the Roman Catholic Church and entered into a prolonged debate with Luther over the issue of the freedom of the will (leading to Luther's eventual writing and publication of *The Bondage of the Will*).

His adherence to the Roman church notwithstanding, Erasmus was hugely instrumental in the Protestant Reformation due to his love of the Greek New Testament manuscripts. He compiled several different editions of the Greek New Testament, based on manuscripts that were being more and more widely circulated throughout western Europe at that time thanks to the immigration of eastern Christians out of Turkish lands. Erasmus' second edition of the Greek New Testament was the basis for Luther's German translation, and his third edition was likely the basis both for William Tyndale's English Bible in 1526, and the later King James Version (1611).

Ironically though, Erasmus himself was uncertain how much authority to vest in the Bible. He felt confident enough in the moral teachings of the Bible, but he questioned the clarity of the Bible on other doctrinal matters. In "On the Freedom of the Will: A Diatribe or Discourse," he wrote:

There are some things which God has willed that we should contemplate, as we venerate himself, in mystic silence; and, moreover, there are many passages in the sacred volumes about which many commentators have made guesses, but no one has finally cleared up their obscurity: as the distinction between the divine persons, the conjunction of the divine and human nature in Christ, the unforgivable sin; yet there are others things which God has willed to be most plainly evident and such are the precepts for the good life.

In *The Bondage of the Will*, Luther responded to him:

The Holy Spirit is no Skeptic, and it is not doubts or mere opinions that he has written on our hearts, but assertions more sure and certain than life itself and all experience.

Erasmus' skepticism and unwillingness to accept clear biblical revelation laid the groundwork for the relativism that would characterize a major segment of later philosophical thought.

B. The Rise of Relativism

Relativism is the idea that truth is variable depending upon one's worldview or perspective. There is no objective truth (no correspondence theory of truth).

It is famously difficult to pinpoint philosophical relativism to a particular date. It appears in small ways in various writings all around Europe throughout the 16th, 17th, and 18th centuries. It seems to have gained ground in the 18th and 19th centuries and bore full fruit in the 20th century and beyond. Relativistic philosophers found more audiences for their books in the late 19th and early 20th centuries than ever before. Friedrich Nietzsche best embodies this trend, and the political strongmen of the 20th century (Benito Mussolini, Adolph Hitler, Lenin, Joseph Stalin) illustrate its results. The postmodernism that was popular at the end of the 20th century was the ideological descendent of relativistic philosophies.

III. The Theological Landscape

As is usually the case, the theological landscape of the day reflected the cultural and philosophical trends. In theological circles, the rise of relativism led to the question of the authority and reliability of Scripture. These questions were asked and answered in various ways throughout the past few centuries. There are four sign-posts of the theological landscape that we will examine:

A. The Fundamentalist-Modernist Controversy

Karl Barth is considered one of the major influencers of modern theological thought, especially as it pertains to the application of relativistic thought to theology in the first half of the 20th century. Barth wrote, for example:

The Bible becomes the Word of God when it is sensed as being holy by the reader.

And,

The concepts of the Bible are inspired, but not the words.

Barth's theological influence led to an increasingly skeptical view of the reliability of the Bible as the revelation of God.

The Fundamentalist-Modernist Controversy originally began within the Presbyterian Church. At the center of this debate was the question of the inerrancy of the Bible.

In 1910, the Presbyterian Church in the USA affirmed (under some duress) what came to be known as the Five Fundamentals (required for ordination):

1. The inspiration and inerrancy of Scripture
2. The virgin birth of Christ
3. The belief that Christ's death was an atonement for sin
4. The bodily resurrection of Christ
5. The historical reality of Christ's miracles

NB: Later “Fundamentalism” took on a distinctly Dispensationalist flavor, with the elevation of a premillennial return of Christ elevated to the level of a “Fundamental” of the faith.

B. Seminary Drift

The lack of trust in the authority and reliability of the Bible led to a repeated pattern of faculty leaving one institution and starting a new one, in the hope that the new seminary would be more dedicated to the historic Christian faith than the previous one.

1. In 1701, Yale University was founded, in part because much of the faculty of Harvard University was deemed overly liberal in their interpretations of Scripture.
2. In 1746, the College of New Jersey (later named Princeton) was founded and seen by many (including Jonathan Edwards) as the future defender of orthodoxy in light of the increasing liberalization of Yale. And it did continue to produce fine churchmen for many decades.
3. In 1929, J. Gresham Machen left Princeton to found Westminster Theological Seminary in Philadelphia, as a result of the rise of relativistic theology at Princeton.
4. At roughly the same time, Fuller Seminary was founded (1947) on the West coast and Gordon-Conwell (1969) on the East coast, through the advocacy of people like Billy Graham and Harold John Ockenga, as bastions of evangelicalism. (**NB:** Fuller has already drifted into theological liberalism since then.)

C. R.C. Sproul and Ligonier

R.C. Sproul started Ligonier Ministries in 1971 to distribute theologically sound Bible teaching via publications, cassette recordings, and radio broadcasts. Ligonier grew into a vastly influential ministry.

D. The International Council on Biblical Inerrancy

In 1978, Sproul championed what he called the International Council on Biblical Inerrancy in Chicago. This council was attended by 200 evangelical scholars and pastors, to address rising concerns about inerrancy.

This council included luminaries like Harold Lindsell, Francis Schaeffer, Carl F.H. Henry, Harold John Ockenga, Jay Adams, J.I. Packer, D. James Kennedy, John MacArthur, Walter Kaiser, Jim Boice, D.A. Carson, Henri Blocher, and others.

The result of their meeting was the Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy.