

**Free Methodists and Inerrancy**  
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In the late 1970's, I read a letter to the editor in *Christianity Today* from the historian Timothy Smith, a Nazarene professor at Johns Hopkins University, in which he declared that inerrancy was essentially a Calvinist doctrine, incompatible with Wesleyanism. That fired a desire in my own heart and mind to study the doctrine of Scripture in the history of Wesleyanism. I knew that as a Wesleyan-Arminian, I and almost every other Wesleyan I knew heartily affirmed inerrancy and a high view of Scripture. But history could speak for itself. I wanted to find out.

So I began studying the works of the great founders of the Wesleyan movement and poking around in the archives of various holiness denominations seeking answers, trying find out whether Smith was correct or not from a historical perspective. Over the years I have marshaled what I and other Wesleyans believe is unequivocal evidence that the great fountainheads of Methodist theology—John Wesley, Richard Watson and Adam Clarke all clearly affirmed the inerrancy of Scripture.<sup>1</sup> From there I went to discover that Methodist theologians in America, almost without exception, affirmed inerrancy until the late 19<sup>th</sup> century when there was a wholesale move away from a high view of Scripture.<sup>2</sup> But further research revealed that most of the renewal movements and denominations which sprang from the Methodist Church began with a high view of Scripture, even if sometimes their views weren't as informed or theologically precise as their forebears' positions had been. For example a survey of the Nazarene's *Herald of Holiness* and other early denominational writings reveals that the early Nazarene church leaders unequivocally affirmed the inerrancy of Scripture, although subtle shifts began taking place with the writings of A. M. Hills in the 1930's and H. Orton Wiley in the 1940's.<sup>3</sup>

But what about other denominations, such as the Free Methodist Church? Many years ago, back in the early 1980's, I spent some time in the Free Methodist Church archives at Winona Lake, Indiana. But with the press of other ministry duties and writing projects, my notes and Xeroxed copies lay dormant for all these years until the last few months when I have been rummaging through them again. What emerges with frightening clarity is that I was an embarrassingly inexperienced and inept researcher, making copies of pages of old articles but sometimes neglecting to record the page number or even the date of publication. So please accept the limitations which my ineptitude places on this paper and let me share with you some interesting peeks into the denominational windows of Free Methodism at two or three brief periods in their

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<sup>1</sup> Daryl McCarthy, "Early Wesleyan Views of Scripture," *Wesleyan Theological Journal*, 16:2 (Fall 1981): pg 95-105. I have been told that this was the last article affirming inerrancy to appear in this journal though numerous articles by Wesleyan scholars defending a high view of Scripture had preceded it.

<sup>2</sup> Daryl McCarthy, "Inerrancy in American Wesleyanism" in *Inerrancy and the Church*, Chicago: Moody Press, 1984.

<sup>3</sup> Daryl McCarthy, "Nazarenes and the Authority of the Bible: 1908-1988—Eighty Years of Changing Definitions in the Church of the Nazarene," unpublished paper, 2002. Available at <https://www.leadershipanvil.com/resources>.

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history. This will be something like peering through a peephole in the fence of history, listening to what was being said about Scripture at the times we can glimpse.

I am not attempting to present a thorough historical context for these glimpses, but simply let me remind you that the Free Methodist Church came into being around 1860, just before the Civil War, as a response to what several holiness leaders saw as the spiritual decline of the Methodist Episcopal Church. Foremost among these issues was the failure of the Methodist denomination to stand against slavery. So those who broke away adopted the name “Free” to make an unequivocal statement in support of ending slavery. The modifier “free” also indicated their response to the Methodist Church’s practice of selling pews as part of their fundraising campaigns. In the newly-formed denomination, everyone would be free to attend—and to sit where they chose, regardless of their financial support for the church. “Free” also described the style of worship, in contrast to the formal “dead” worship of the Methodists.

### **Free Methodists and the Bible in the Late 1800’s**

It is clear that the early Free Methodists enthusiastically and wholeheartedly embraced the truthfulness and inspiration of the Bible. B. T. Roberts, considered to be one of the primary founders of Free Methodism, in a very practical article on “Infallibility” recites the various mistakes and errors of judgment of the apostles, as a reminder that certainly believers today are not infallible. But he goes on to assert that, “These holy apostles made no mistakes when speaking and writing under the direct and special inspiration of the Holy Spirit. But they were not always thus inspired.”<sup>4</sup>

Roberts, in an editorial in the *Earnest Christian* approvingly quoted John Locke’s statement that the Bible “has God for its author; salvation for its end and truth without any mixture of error for its matter.”<sup>5</sup> This statement is often cited in early Wesleyan literature, so it’s interesting that he attributes it to Locke. Even in matters of science the Bible has authority. In one of the many *Earnest Christian* articles about creation and evolution, Emma Sallow Roberts, the daughter-in-law of B. T. Roberts,<sup>6</sup> states, “Every new discovery in science tends to corroborate the Bible account of the early ages. Scientific men are coming to see that when this book does undertake to make a scientific statement it can be relied upon.”<sup>7</sup>

### **Free Methodists and the Bible in the Early 1900’s**

A 1902 article in *The Free Methodist*, features an article strongly defending the truthfulness and infallibility of the Bible. “...A fallible Bible could be of no value to mankind since no one is authorized to say what should be believed and what rejected. The Bible says ‘that *holy* men of God spake as they were moved by the Holy Ghost,’ and a person that has the temerity to say, the Holy Spirit has told an untruth, must be beside himself, besides being morally corrupt at heart.....Given an infinite God to make and rule the universe, and why should the miraculous be

<sup>4</sup> B. T. Roberts, “Infallibility,” *Earnest Christian* LVIII, no 1 (July 1889): 7.

<sup>5</sup> B. T. Roberts, “Editorial,” *Earnest Christian* LIX, no 2 (February 1890): 67.

<sup>6</sup> Richard R. Blews, *Master Workmen; Biographies of the Late Bishops of the Free Methodist Church During Her First Century, 1860-1960*, Centennial ed. (Winona Lake, Ind.,: Light and Life Press, 1960), 20. Viewed on-line at <http://www.swartzentover.com/cotor/E-Books/FreeMeth.htm>.

<sup>7</sup> Emma Sallow Roberts, “The Bible A Literary Treasure,” *Earnest Christian* LVIII, no.5 (November 1889): 133-136.

doubted?” The author, Bishop George W. Coleman asks, “Who ever heard of a strong adherent of holiness ever teaching the Bible to be only partly true? Such men are never found in that kind of business.”<sup>8</sup>

Another article in 1902 denounced an attack on the infallibility of the Bible by a Northwestern University professor, Prof C. W. Pearson, a Methodist, who had denied the miracles of the Bible and its infallibility.<sup>9</sup> Another article a month later responded to the charges that various Old Testament stories were false. “If they can prove the story of Jonah to be a myth, the life of Christ is either a myth or a fraud....The story of Jonah and the life of Christ are inseparably dovetailed together. Every Christian is as much bound to believe one as the other, and his salvation depends as much upon the credibility of the one as it does upon the credibility of the other.”<sup>10</sup>

Given the intensity of the debate over inspiration and critical theories at the turn of the century, *The Free Methodist* demonstrated a surprisingly open and balanced perspective in at least one article on higher criticism. In a review of George Adam Smith’s newly published book *Modern Criticism and the Preaching of the Old Testament*, comprised of his Lyman Beecher lectures, the reviewer offers a positive perspective. While he grants that although the book is “savoring strongly of the ‘higher criticism,’” he defends it as being “constructive rather than destructive” and “exceedingly rich in evangelical spirit, and devout and reverent in tone.” In spite of the parts of Scripture which are eliminated by higher criticism, Smith claims that he “has left all that is vital to a divine revelation in them.” The reviewer concludes that Smith’s book is “able and authoritative and perhaps the fairest statement of the case which has yet appeared.”<sup>11</sup>

In the spring of 1902 a seven-part series by an R. Yeakel on the “Inspiration of the Holy Scriptures” appeared in *The Free Methodist*. (The archivist who assisted me noted that Yeakel was probably not a Free Methodist.) However, this series indicates some degree of tacit endorsement. In the first installment Yeakel declares that “the Old and New Testaments, as they were written originally in the Hebrew and Greek languages, are divinely inspired in all their parts, and hence as a whole, from beginning to end, they are the word of God.” He quickly adds, “From this assertion it will be seen that I do not claim that the translations of the Bible are inspired. They are the work of man, and like all other human productions, are more or less defective.” In spite of this, he assures the reader that the message of salvation is clear and that the translators’ errors “in no case affect any vital point of the doctrine of divine truth.” He points out however that even though most Bible defenders quote 2 Peter 1:19-21 as their “chief proof text for the reliability of the Bible, this refers only to “what was *spoken* by the prophets...and not of the *recorded* word of God, and thus they unwittingly give away their case at the outset.” So Yeakel proceeds to present what he believes is a solid case for inspiration.<sup>12</sup>

In part two, Yeakel makes a strong defense for the full inspiration of both the Old and New Testaments. He presents 2 Tim 3:15-16 as a more solid ground for the full inspiration of

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<sup>8</sup> “An Infallible Bible,” *The Free Methodist*. 35, no 13 (April 1, 1902).

<sup>9</sup> “Another Attack on the Bible,” *The Free Methodist* 35, no. 5 (Feb 4, 1902).

<sup>10</sup> “Is It Fact or Fable?” *The Free Methodist* 35, no 9 (March 4, 1902).

<sup>11</sup> “Literature,” *The Free Methodist* (May 7, 1901).

<sup>12</sup> R. Yeakel, “The Inspiration of the Holy Scriptures, I,” *The Free Methodist* 35, no 14 (April 8, 1902).

Scripture. “By this declaration it is pointedly stated that every part of the Old Testament scripture is divinely inspired. Paul did not entertain the remotest thought that certain parts of the scriptures were merely human.” He goes on to say that “To Christians it is a fact of special value that the apostle’s (Paul’s) teaching and writing were with ‘words taught by the Holy Spirit.’” He points out that Christ had no guile and was “himself the Truth.” He cites other Scriptures including John 10:34-35; Matt 5:18; Lu 16:17; Matt 24:35 to demonstrate the authority, trustworthiness and durability of the Word.<sup>13</sup>

In parts three through five Yeakel responds to various objections to the truthfulness of Scripture. He points out that even though the Bible reports the words of wicked people and even Satan, it does so accurately and thus is truthful and thus, such accounts of lies and untruths are not a valid argument against inspiration. He easily dismisses the objection that since the Bible uses phenomenological language in describing such natural events as the sun rising and setting, it is not reliable. He grants that there are chronological gaps and contradictions but that the record is sufficiently accurate to achieve the purposes of the Bible. He responds to the charge of contradictions in the Bible by pointing out that these apparent contradictions can usually be harmonized. More than that, he claims, “if we knew all the attendant circumstances of which no mention is made, everything would be clear and easily understood.”<sup>14</sup> He argues that the unique styles of the various writers of Scripture do not in any way contradict “the truth of complete inspiration.” He concludes that “All Scripture, *i.e.*, the entire *holy scriptures*, is inspired of God, the authors writing precisely what God wanted to have written, no more and no less. They were written according to the will of God, in perfect adaptation to the needs of man. The *personal* inspiration of the writers may have varied, but the *records* of the doctrines, history, prophecies, rules of faith and practice, etc., are equally divine;...”<sup>15</sup>

Yeakel goes on to respond to higher critics and their attack on the authorship of the Pentateuch, Daniel and other books with a strong rebuttal citing the words of Jesus, John the Baptist and others in support of the Mosaic authorship of the Pentateuch, the unity of Isaiah and other issues. He observes that in cases where the Bible contradicts modern science on such issues as the rabbit chewing the cud that “the Bible was not given and was never intended for a text-book on natural sciences, and in incidental references to matters outside its theological teachings it often follows current popular conceptions.” He quotes Schaff’s Bible Dictionary as saying, “For popular guidance this description was better than a more scientific one.”<sup>16</sup>

Yeakel closes his series with an eloquent defense of the truthfulness and majesty of Scripture and the unique way it combines the human and the divine elements, just as Jesus combined divine and human as the divine Son of God in human flesh. Even with its limitations in being written by human beings, the Bible tells us about God and the way to eternal life.

“Although this book is not specifically a historical work, yet it is the only book sufficiently ancient to inform us of man’s origin and earliest history, and is, therefore, the basis and key to all correct history. Though it is no work of chronology, it furnishes

<sup>13</sup> R. Yeakel, “The Inspiration of the Holy Scriptures, II,” *The Free Methodist* 35, no 16 (April 22, 1902).

<sup>14</sup> R. Yeakel, “The Inspiration of the Holy Scriptures, III,” *The Free Methodist* 35, no 17 (April 29, 1902).

<sup>15</sup> R. Yeakel, “The Inspiration of the Holy Scriptures, IV,” *The Free Methodist* 35, no 18 (May 6, 1902): 275.

<sup>16</sup> R. Yeakel, “The Inspiration of the Holy Scriptures, VI,” *The Free Methodist* 35, no 20 (May 20, 1902): 307.

more of it than all profane works are able to give, and although it is not a treatise on astronomy and the sciences, yet it contains astronomical and scientific intimations, which have descended even from the earliest times, upon which masters of science look with genuine admiration.”<sup>17</sup>

A four-part series on the “Inspiration of the Bible”, which began in July 1903 in *The Free Methodist*, was written by a prominent Free Methodist leader and bishop, W. T. Hogue, who also served as the editor of the periodical. Hogue presents a case for the infallibility of the Bible and its inerrancy especially in matters of faith and practice. In part one, Hogue argues that even if alleged errors, such as “erroneous dates, mistakes in transcribing, discrepancies between the statements of different writers and even occasional fallacious reasonings,” these would not “invalidate” the Bible’s role as “the infallible guide...in moral and religious matters....” He goes on to assert that “Absolute ‘inerrancy’ is not claimed for these writings, nor is it demanded, either, in order that the book as a whole, be so inspired as to be in fact the word of God and an infallible rule of faith and practice.” What we can argue, he says, is that the Scriptures resulted from “a supernatural divine influence upon the minds of the writers” such that they are “absolutely trustworthy.” He refers to the apparent “discrepancies” between the four Gospels and inserts that they are “only seeming ones.” He insists that “the differences are *not irreconcilable*, and would be cleared up if we knew all the facts.”<sup>18</sup>

In part two, he discusses various theories of inspiration and the mechanical dictation theory is thoroughly repudiated. He refers to the theory of mechanical dictation also as the “verbal” inspiration theory.<sup>19</sup> He goes on in part three of the series to equate the mechanical dictation theory with “plenary inspiration,” which to him meant that every word was so inspired that the individual author exercised no choice in the words and expressions he chose. He argues that what he calls “the dynamical theory” is the “true theory.” According to Hogue the dynamical theory holds that inspiration left room for the author’s freedom of expression; that scripture is a unique combination of human and divine. Hogue asserts that the Bible writers “were so controlled as to make no error of doctrine,....”<sup>20</sup>

Hogue concludes his series by concluding,

Inspiration excludes moral and religious error....Inspiration is no guarantee either of omniscience or of absolute holiness. It does not make the biblical writers authorities on matters of science, philosophy, art, commerce or finance....But it does imply that for purposes of spiritual illumination, quickening, sanctification and guidance, extraordinary, yea, supernatural and divine perception and impulse were vouchsafed to the holy men who produced the various books of the Bible, safeguarding them from error in things pertaining to doctrine and morals, and insuring such an infallible transmission through them of God’s thoughts to men as to make the Bible in the most unique sense an inspired book, perfectly answering all the ends of a divine revelation.<sup>21</sup>

<sup>17</sup> R. Yeakel, “The Inspiration of the Holy Scriptures, VII,” *The Free Methodist* 35, no 21 (May 27, 1902): 323.

<sup>18</sup> “Inspiration of the Bible, I,” *The Free Methodist* (July 14, 1903).

<sup>19</sup> “Inspiration of the Bible, II,” *The Free Methodist* (July 21, 1903).

<sup>20</sup> “Inspiration of the Bible, III,” *The Free Methodist* (July 28, 1903).

<sup>21</sup> “Inspiration of the Bible, IV,” *The Free Methodist* (August 4, 1903).

He goes on to point out, “It matters not how many critical pen-knives have been employed in endeavoring to dissect it with a view to discarding and eliminating certain portions, its integrity at the dawn of the twentieth century remains unimpaired.”<sup>22</sup>

From the perspective of over a century later, Wesleyan inerrantists are left to ponder why Hogue so strongly affirmed the infallibility of Scripture on matters of faith and practice, but left the question of trustworthiness of Scripture in other matters unaddressed in the few articles we have examined at least in this brief slice of history. It may have been simply that he chose to focus on inerrancy in matters of faith and practice without intending to deny inerrancy in other matters. This seems to have been the assumption of Free Methodist historian Leslie Marston who points out that “According to the bishops’ address of 1907, for nearly a half-century the church had ‘unflinchingly borne faithful testimony through all the land to the great fundamental truths of Christianity, and particularly regarding the privilege and obligation of believers to be sanctified wholly in the present life.’” The bishops’ report in 1907 went on to say, “Moreover, in the midst of prevalent assaults of ‘higher criticism’ upon the integrity and inerrancy of the holy scriptures, and of the consequent decline of faith in the supernaturalism of the Bible so common in many other religious bodies of today, it is a source of great satisfaction to us to know that, so far, Free Methodists unquestionably accept the whole Bible as the inspired Word of God, and maintain in simplicity and incorruptibility their faith in Christianity as a supernatural religion.”<sup>23</sup>

### **Free Methodists and the Bible in the 1930’s**

Carl L. Howland, who was elected as editor of *The Free Methodist* in 1931 and served through much of the decade of the 1930’s<sup>24</sup>, wrote a small volume, *Proofs of Inspiration*. (Unfortunately, there is no date and no copyright indicated in the book.) When discussing the historical accuracy of Scripture, Howland acknowledges at the outset, just as his predecessors had, that “no informed person believes that the various translators and copyists of the Bible were inspired.” Even though when the scriptures were first written “they were ‘the very word of God, and consequently wholly without error,’” still we must admit that there are “many minor discrepancies and disagreements found in the extant manuscripts.” Yet none of them affects any vital doctrine, according to Howland.<sup>25</sup>

He declares that in spite of the many attacks on the Bible for hundreds of years, not one historical inaccuracy has been proven. He sees this as further evidence of the divine inspiration of Scripture. So “the believer is not only delighted to find that he has, in his Book, a correct statement of facts as regards the past, but he has a right to claim that such a book, being free from historical errors, must have been protected from such errors by the brooding and breathing Spirit of God.”<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> “Inspiration of the Bible, IV,” *The Free Methodist* (August 4, 1903).

<sup>23</sup> Leslie Ray Marston, *From Age to Age a Living Witness; a Historical Interpretation of Free Methodism's First Century* (Winona Lake, Ind.: Light and Life Press, 1960), 297.

<sup>24</sup> Carl L. Howland, *The Story of Our Church : Free Methodism, Some Facts and Some Reasons* (Winona Lake, Ind.: Free Methodist Publishing House), 30. Viewed on-line at <http://www.swartzentrover.com/cotor/E-Books/FreeMeth.htm> in November 2009.

<sup>25</sup> Carl L. Howland, *Proofs of Inspiration* (Winona Lake, Indiana: Free Methodist Publishing House), 36.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 39.

Howland defends the scientific trustworthiness of Scripture even as he admits that “the Bible is written in popular rather than scientific language.”<sup>27</sup> He quotes Arthur T. Pierson’s statement about Scripture,

No scientific fact is ever misstated, though common, popular phraseology may be employed ... After a study of the Word on the one hand and natural science on the other, I believe we may safely challenge any living man to bring one well-established fact of science against which the Bible really and irreconcilably militates! God led inspired men to use such language as, without revealing scientific facts in advance, accurately accommodates itself to them when discovered. The language is so elastic and flexible as to contract itself to the narrowness of human ignorance, and yet expand itself to the dimensions of knowledge.<sup>28</sup>

He goes on to examine the phenomenological language of the Bible (such as the sun rising and setting) and defends it against those who say such statements are evidence of error. He points out that “the Bible is written in popular language rather than scientific language....The Bible was given to teach religion, not science; but being God’s book it can not contradict true science.”<sup>29</sup> He asserts that since most literature which was written during the period when the Bible was being written contained myths, historical inaccuracies and certainly unscientific statements, it is doubly amazing that the Bible contains no such errors.<sup>30</sup>

Howland closes by admitting that there is “no mathematical proof of Scripture inspiration.” It is certainly possible for an individual to dismiss the claims for the Bible’s inspiration. “But, thank God, the proof of divine inspiration is so satisfactory to the willing heart that he is not only able to maintain his ‘intellectual self-respect’ while he believes in it, but his confidence in that inspiration is in him with all the strength of moral certainty.”<sup>31</sup>

Howland gives us a brief glimpse of how Free Methodists (or at least one Free Methodist) saw themselves in relation to the Fundamentalist-Liberal split occurring in America in the 1920’s and 30’s in a brief comment in his book *The Story of Our Church*. He declares that “The doctrinal position of the Free Methodist Church may be described as Fundamentalist Arminian.”<sup>32</sup> The term “fundamentalist” carried a significant meaning especially at that time. So we can be sure he used this term very deliberately.

### **Free Methodists and the Bible during the mid-1900’s**

In a 1951 book about the denomination, Howland said that a declaration from the Presbyterian Church twenty years before “would be assented to by the Free Methodist Church.” The Presbyterian statement said, “The Scriptures as we now have them, when freed from the errors of copyists, translators and printers are the very Word of God, and consequently wholly without

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 42.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 43.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 42-43.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 44.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 58.

<sup>32</sup> Howland, *The Story of Our Church : Free Methodism, Some Facts and Some Reasons*, 30.

error.”<sup>33</sup> Apparently, the denomination or at least some in the denomination had remained certain and clear on the inerrancy of Scripture from the early 1900’s to the mid-century point.

In 1951, the Free Methodists and the Wesleyan Church were contemplating a merger. The “Tentative Report of the Joint Commission” included this proposed statement on Scripture: “The Holy Scriptures were given by inspiration of God and are fully inerrant in their original manuscripts,....”<sup>34</sup>

A few years later in 1969, the National Holiness Association was struggling to develop a recommendation to their member denominations on Scripture. Lloyd H. Knox with Free Methodist’s Light and Life Press, presented a statement, “Toward a High View of the Scriptures” to the Wesleyan Theological Society, asking for their help. Knox’s bias against inerrancy is clear throughout his paper as he consistently links inerrancy with fundamentalism, which for him is a negative association. He is clearly unhappy that the NHA had recently (I can’t determine when this occurred) inserted a statement on Scriptures which said, “That the Old and New Testaments constitute the divinely inspired word of God, inerrant in the originals, and the final authority for life....”<sup>35</sup>

Knox reports that the NHA Board was recommending adoption of a new statement which “(1) should be an affirmation rather than a negation, (2) should express the highest possible view of the authenticity and credibility of our Scriptures, (3) should not needlessly exclude brethren holding a high view of Scriptures, and (4) should employ dynamic rather than mechanistic semantics.” Knox presents a lengthy statement from Nazarene theologian H. Orton Wiley advocating a “Dynamical or Mediating Theory.”<sup>36</sup> (It is disappointing that Knox voices the same erroneous pairing of mechanical dictation with inerrancy that many Wesleyan opponents of inerrancy are still mouthing decades later.)

Knox laments the “trend toward fundamentalism” which he sees demonstrated with two recent mergers of holiness denominations (which he didn’t identify) including “fully inerrant in their original manuscripts” or “inerrant in the original manuscript” in their doctrinal statement. “The trend is disquieting to those who believe their current statements are not sufficiently protective against contemporary theological errors on the left but see ‘inerrant in the originals’ as an equally dangerous alternative on the right.” He grants that “There does seem to be considerable confusion and uncertainty as how best to state our high view affirmatively and at the same time protect against current theological error.”<sup>37</sup>

He then presents the statement on Scripture from fourteen holiness denominations, dividing them between those who descended from the Church of England’s Thirty-nine Articles and those from other traditions. Of the nine descendants from the Anglican statement, only four use the word “inerrant:” Holiness Christian Church, Wesleyan Methodist, Wesleyan Church (the result of the

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid. 81.

<sup>34</sup> “Tentative Report of the Joint Commission of the Wesleyan and Free Methodist Churches on Union,” Free Methodist Archives, 1951.

<sup>35</sup> Lloyd H. Knox, “Toward a High View of the Scriptures,” presented to the Wesleyan Theological Society, Nov 7, 1969.

<sup>36</sup> Knox, 1.

<sup>37</sup> Knox, 1.

merger between the Wesleyan Methodists and Pilgrim Holiness), and Nazarene (though the Nazarene statement uses it in a circumscribed form, “inerrantly revealing the will of God....”). The Evangelical Church of North America, Evangelical Methodist, Pilgrim Holiness, Salvation Army and Free Methodist did not specifically affirm inerrancy, even though their statements on all other counts were strong affirmations of Scripture.

Of the five descended from traditions other than Anglicanism, only the Missionary Church affirmed inerrancy. The Rocky Mountain Yearly Meeting of the Friends Church, United Missionary Church, Churches of Christ in Christian Union and the Brethren in Christ did not, though again their statements were strong in all other regards. (Based on my observation, personal acquaintances and limited research, I believe it might be assumed that many of these denominations affirmed inerrancy of Scripture on a practical basis, but they had simply not incorporated the term into their doctrinal statements because it was assumed and because they had not addressed this issue with theological precision. I know this was certainly the case with the small conservative holiness denomination I grew up in, the Church of God (Holiness).)

But the tone of Knox’s report betrays his own biases. He portrays those who affirm inerrancy as holding a fundamentalist position—“inerrant in the originals”—which is “an essentially mechanical and exclusive negation.” Yet he struggles because “at the other pole” an affirmation that the Scriptures “contain all things necessary to salvation” “is an affirmation which some feel is composed of words no longer adequate to express a satisfactorily high view.” The inerrant position is “rigid and leads to error on the right” and is “intolerant in matters such as: baptism, last things, etc.” though he gives no examples of this intolerance. (But knowing the Wesleyan movement, it’s not hard to imagine a rigidity on lesser important issues.) The broader position he believes is “Flexible but opens door to error on the left” but on the positive side it is “Tolerant in matters such as: baptism, last things, etc.”<sup>38</sup>

He concludes that “our hope in the midst of the current divisive process is our common *confidence in the Holy Scriptures as unique and ultimate in authority and authenticity, even in those Scriptures coming to us now in a plethora of versions, translations, and languages.*” He goes on to add this statement: “We can assume that every person and institution (denomination) associated with NHA holds a high view of Scriptures.” He expresses a strong hope that the members of NHA can develop a “a restatement of our high view of Scripture which will be an affirmation rather than a description, which will go beyond the statement taken from the papal versus Reformation conflict of the sixteenth century, which will reflect our mid-position between the theological left and right,....”<sup>39</sup>

In the middle of this merger discussion, we see that the section on “The Sufficiency of the Holy Scriptures for Salvation” in the 1969 Free Methodist Discipline’s Articles of Religion focuses on the fact that “The Holy Scriptures contain all things necessary to salvation;....” This section is essentially unchanged from the Discipline of 1862.

In 1972, the two denominations were still contemplating union. The Free Methodist Board of Administration recommended that the Committee on Merger Exploration (COME) consider a

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<sup>38</sup> Knox, 4.

<sup>39</sup> Knox, 4.

statement that affirmed the “authority” of Scripture, but there is no mention of infallibility or inerrancy. Interestingly enough, the statement goes on to “recognize the findings of critical scholarship over the past century and a half, which have illuminated the Scriptures not only in terms of their divine origin but their human history as well.” They recommended that the statement on Scripture “be characterized by freshness of language, avoiding wherever possible words that have become emotionally charged and thus imprecise....”<sup>40</sup> I am not privy to what words they were prohibiting with their recommendation, but one can wonder if this included “emotionally charged” words like “inerrancy.”

In my limited research and knowledge of the denomination’s history, I have not been able to discover what made the difference, but the “Proposed Articles of Agreement and Constitution” submitted by the Committee on Merger Exploration (COME) which were approved by the general boards of administration for both denominations, Free Methodist and The Wesleyan Church, was released on May 25, 1974 contained a much stronger affirmation of Scripture. The article on “The Scriptures” and their “Sufficiency and Authority for Salvation” unequivocally affirms, “We believe the Holy Scriptures are God’s record, uniquely inspired by the Holy Spirit. They have been given without error, faithfully recorded by holy men of God as moved by the Holy Spirit, and subsequently transmitted without corruption of any essential doctrine. They are the authoritative record of the revelation of God’s acts in creation, in history, in our salvation, and especially in His Son, Jesus Christ.”<sup>41</sup>

The statement goes on to affirm that “this written Word fully reveals the will of God concerning man in all things necessary to salvation and Christian living;” and then goes on with a full section each on the Old Testament and the New Testament.

This merger did not take place. I wish I knew if the statement on Scripture played any role in nixing the union.

## **Conclusion**

I have not attempted to present a comprehensive history of the doctrine of Scripture in the Free Methodist Church of North America. Rather, I have chosen some peepholes in the fence of history, peering through these and listening to what was being said about Scripture during these slices of time. So any conclusions we come to are tentative and limited in value. But hopefully they can give us a more informed understanding of the conversation in this Wesleyan denomination, along with a better grasp of some of the forces and thoughts which influence the broader Wesleyan movement today.

These small glimpses indicate that the Free Methodists have struggled to define a doctrine of Scripture. There are several possible ways to interpret this struggle. Those of us who affirm inerrancy in the post-inerrancy summit conference era (in 1978 the International Council for

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<sup>40</sup> “Progress Report of the Committee on Merger Exploration,” Board of Administration, Free Methodist Church of North America, May 25, 1972. Free Methodist Archives, Winona Lake, Indiana.

<sup>41</sup> “Free Methodist Church of North America and The Wesleyan Church Proposed Articles of Agreement and Constitution.” I was given a copy from the Wesleyan Church Archives, Marion, Indiana.

Biblical Inerrancy Summit Conference produced the Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy<sup>42</sup>) need to be careful to not read our understanding of terms and issues—all of which were sharpened and refined through the Chicago Statement—back into these historical accounts. Many times throughout the historical development of doctrine, controversies have sharpened the use of terms and helped the Church define positions more clearly.

Here is what we know.

- From the beginning Wesleyans held a high view of Scripture and its infallibility and inerrancy.
- The theological decline of the Methodist Episcopal Church in America during the late nineteenth century was very much related to its retreat from a robust affirmation of Scripture.
- The Free Methodist Church began as a protest to the theological and spiritual decline of the Methodist Church.

Therefore, it seems reasonable to assume that some of the statements regarding Scripture's infallibility and inerrancy were made within the context of the historic high view of Scripture among Wesleyans. We now have the advantage looking back to see the inevitable trajectory of what we might call "soft" statements on Scripture. What is assumed but not articulated clearly in one generation will be questioned in the next generation and surely debunked in the third.

My research regarding Free Methodists was limited in scope and access to resources, but it seems reasonable to assume that Free Methodist leaders in the early 1900's were more conservative than their limited focus on "inerrancy in matters of faith and practice," sound to us today. It may be that when they spoke of inerrancy in those matters, they were speaking in the context of an assumed conservatism throughout Free Methodism. They may have been thinking, "Of course Scripture is inerrant in all matters it addresses, but we are focusing on faith and practice." But in the mid- to late-twentieth century the scope of inerrancy needed to be more clearly defined in response to the assault of liberalism within their ranks, just as it had encroached upon the Methodist Episcopal Church a century earlier.

But then again, maybe it is possible that they were looser in their understanding of Scripture's inspiration and inerrancy than other holiness denominations were at that time. I don't know, but it is certainly a subject that is worthy of further study and I welcome suggestions and input from Free Methodists themselves.

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<sup>42</sup> The ICBI Chicago Statement provided a more comprehensive, biblically grounded and tightly reasoned case for and explanation of inerrancy than any previous statement. Available on-line several places including <http://www.bible-researcher.com/chicago1.html>.

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