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The Mandate of Biblical Inerrancy: Expository Preaching¹

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The special attention evangelicalism has given to the inerrancy of Scripture in recent years carries with it a mandate to emphasize expository preaching of the Scriptures. The existence of God and His nature requires the conclusion that He has communicated accurately and that an adequate exegetical process to determine His meaning is required. The Christian commission to preach God's Word involves the transmitting of that meaning to an audience, a weighty responsibility. A belief in inerrancy thus requires, most important of all, expositional preaching that does not have to do primarily with the homiletical form of the message. In this regard expository preaching differs from what is practiced by non-inerrantists.

The theological highlight of recent years has without question been evangelicalism's intense focus on biblical inerrancy.² Much of what has been

1. This essay was initially given as a response at the International Council on Biblical Inerrancy, Summit II (November 1982). It was subsequently published under the title "Inerrancy and Preaching: Where Exposition and Exegesis Come Together" in the book *Hermeneutics, Inerrancy, and the Bible*, ed. by Earl Radmacher and Robert Preus. Copyright © 1984 by the Zondervan Corporation. Used by permission. An updated revision was published under this same title in *The Master's Seminary Journal* 1, no. 1 (Fall 1990): 13-15. The essay has been adapted for inclusion in this volume.

2. Over a ten-year period (1977-1987), the International Council on Biblical Inerrancy held three summits for scholars (1978, 1982, 1986) and two congresses for the Christian community at large (1982, 1987) to formulate and disseminate the biblical truth about inerrancy.

written defending inerrancy³ represents the most acute theological reasoning our generation has produced.

Yet it seems our commitment to inerrancy is somewhat lacking in the way it fleshes out in practical ministry. Specifically, evangelical preaching ought to reflect our conviction that God's Word is infallible and inerrant. Too often it does not. In fact, there is a discernible trend in contemporary evangelicalism *away* from biblical preaching and a drift *toward* an experience-centered, pragmatic, topical approach in the pulpit.

Should not our preaching be biblical exposition, reflecting our conviction that the Bible is the inspired, inerrant Word of God? If we believe that "all Scripture is inspired by God" and inerrant, must we not be equally committed to the reality that it is "profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness; that the man of God may be adequate, equipped for every good work" (2 Tim. 3:16-17)? Should not that magnificent truth determine how we preach?

Paul gave this mandate to Timothy: "I solemnly charge you in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who is to judge the living and the dead, and by His appearing and His kingdom: *preach the word*; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, exhort, with great patience and instruction" (2 Tim. 4:1-2, emphasis added). Any form of preaching that ignores that intended purpose and design of God falls short of the divine plan. J. I. Packer eloquently captured the pursuit of preaching:

Preaching appears in the Bible as a relaying of what God has said about Himself and His doings, and about men in relation to Him, plus a pressing of His commands, promises, warnings, and assurances, with a view to winning the hearer or hearers . . . to a positive response.⁴

The only logical response to inerrant Scripture, then, is to preach it *expositionally*. By *expositionally*, I mean preaching in such a way that the meaning of the Bible passage is presented *entirely* and *exactly* as it was

3. Paul D. Feinberg, "Infallibility and Inerrancy," *Trinity Journal* 6, no. 2 (Fall 1977): 120, crisply articulates critical inerrancy as "the claim that when all facts are known, the scriptures in their original autographs and properly interpreted will be shown to be without error in all that they affirm to the degree of precision intended, whether that affirmation relates to doctrine, history, science, geography, geology, etc."

4. James I. Packer, "Preaching As Biblical Interpretation," *Inerrancy and Common Sense*, ed. by Roger R. Nicole and J. Ramsey Michaels (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1980), 189.

intended by God. Expository preaching is the proclamation of the truth of God as mediated through the preacher.⁵

Admittedly, not all expositors have an inerrant view. See William Barclay's treatment of Mark 5 or John 6 in *The Daily Study Bible Series*. It is also true that not all with an inerrant view practice expository preaching. These are, however, inconsistencies because an inerrantist perspective demands expository preaching, and a non-inerrantist perspective makes it unnecessary.

Putting it another way, what does it matter that we have an inerrant text if we do not deal with the basic phenomena of communication, e.g., words, sentences, grammar, morphology, syntax, etc.? And if we do not, why bother preaching it?

In his much-needed volume on exegetical theology, Walter Kaiser pointedly analyzes the current anemic state of the church due to flock-feeding that is rendered inadequate because of the absence of expository preaching:

It is no secret that Christ's Church is not at all in good health in many places of the world. She has been languishing because she has been fed, as the current line has it, "junk food"; all kinds of artificial preservatives and all sorts of unnatural substitutes have been served up to her. As a result, theological and Biblical malnutrition has afflicted the very generation that has taken such giant steps to make sure its physical health is not damaged by using foods or products that are carcinogenic or otherwise harmful to their physical bodies. Simultaneously a worldwide spiritual famine resulting from the absence of any genuine publication of the Word of God (Amos 8:11) continues to run wild and almost unabated in most quarters of the Church.⁶

The cure is expository preaching.

The mandate, then, is clear. Expository preaching is the declarative genre in which inerrancy finds its logical expression and the church has its life and power. Stated simply, inerrancy demands exposition as the only method of preaching that preserves the purity of Scripture and accomplishes the purpose for which God gave us His Word.

5. D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Preaching and Preachers* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1971), 222.

6. Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., *Toward an Exegetical Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1981), 7-8.

R. B. Kuiper reinforces this mandate when he writes, "The principle that Christian preaching is proclamation of the Word must obviously be determinative of the content of the sermon."⁷

INERRANCY, EXEGESIS, AND EXPOSITION

Postulates and Propositions

I would like to begin the main discussion with these logically sequential postulates that introduce and undergird my propositions (as well as form a true basis for inerrancy).⁸

1. God is (Gen. 1:1; Psalms 14, 53; Heb. 11:6).
2. God is true (Exod. 34:6; Num. 23:19; Deut. 32:4; Pss. 25:10 and 31:6; Isa. 65:16; Jer. 10:8 and 10:11; John 14:6 and 17:3; Titus 1:2; Heb. 6:18; 1 John 5:20, 21).
3. God speaks in harmony with His nature (Num. 23:19; 1 Sam. 15:29; Rom. 3:4; 2 Tim. 2:13; Titus 1:2; Heb. 6:18).
4. God speaks only truth (Pss. 31:5 and 119:43, 142, 151, 160; Prov. 30:5; Isa. 65:16; John 17:17; James 1:18).
5. God spoke His true Word as consistent with His true Nature to be communicated to people (a self-evident truth that is illustrated at 2 Tim. 3:16-17 and Heb. 1:1).

Therefore, we must consider the following propositions.

1. God gave His true Word to be communicated *entirely* as He gave it, that is, the whole counsel of God is to be preached (Matt. 28:20; Acts 5:20; 20:27). Correspondingly, every portion of the Word of God needs to be considered in the light of its whole.

7. R. B. Kuiper, "Scriptural Preaching," *The Infallible Word*, 3d rev. ed., ed. by Paul Woolley (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1967), 217.

8. See Norman Geisler, "Inerrancy Leaders: Apply the Bible," *Eternity* 38, no. 1 (January 1987): 25, for this compact syllogism:
 God cannot err;
 The Bible is the Word of God;
 Therefore, the Bible cannot err.

2. God gave His true Word to be communicated *exactly* as He gave it. It is to be dispensed precisely as it was delivered, without altering the message.
3. Only the exegetical process that yields expository proclamation will accomplish propositions 1 and 2.

Inerrancy's Link to Expository Preaching

Now, let me substantiate these propositions with answers to a series of questions. They will channel our thinking from the headwaters of God's revelation to its intended destination.

1. *Why preach?*

Very simply, God so commanded (2 Tim. 4:2), and the apostles so responded (Acts 6:4).

2. *What should we preach?*

The Word of God, i.e., *Scriptura sola* and *Scriptura tota* (1 Tim. 4:13; 2 Tim. 4:2).

3. *Who preaches?*

Holy men of God (Luke 1:70; Acts 3:21; Eph. 3:5; 2 Pet. 1:21; Rev. 18:20 and 22:6). Only after God had purified Isaiah's lips was he ordained to preach (Isa. 6:6-13).

4. *What is the preacher's responsibility?*

First, the preacher needs to realize that God's Word is not the preacher's word. But rather,

He is a messenger, not an originator (*εὐαγγελίζω* [*euaggelizō*]).

He is a sower, not the source (Matt. 13:3, 19).

He is a herald, not the authority (*κηρύσσω* [*kērussō*]).

He is a steward, not the owner (Col. 1:25).

He is the guide, not the author (Acts 8:31).

He is the server of spiritual food, not the chef (John 21:15, 17).

Second, the preacher needs to reckon that Scripture is *ὁ λόγος τοῦ θεοῦ* (*ho logos tou theou*, "the Word of God"). When he is committed to this awesome truth and responsibility,

His aim, rather, will be to stand under Scripture, not over it, and to allow it, so to speak, to talk through him, delivering what is not so

much his message as its. In our preaching, that is what should always be happening. In his obituary of the great German conductor, Otto Klemperer, Neville Cardus spoke of the way in which Klemperer "set the music in motion," maintaining throughout a deliberately anonymous, self-effacing style in order that the musical notes might articulate themselves in their own integrity through him. So it must be in preaching; Scripture itself must do all the talking, and the preacher's task is simply to "set the Bible in motion."⁹

A careful study of the phrase *λόγος θεοῦ* (*logos theou*, "the Word of God") finds over forty uses in the New Testament. It is equated with the Old Testament (Mark 7:13). It is what Jesus preached (Luke 5:1). It was the message the apostles taught (Acts 4:31 and 6:2). It was the word the Samaritans received (Acts 8:14) as given by the apostles (Acts 8:25). It was the message the Gentiles received as preached by Peter (Acts 11:1). It was the word Paul preached on his first missionary journey (Acts 13:5, 7, 44, 48, 49; 15:35-36). It was the message preached on Paul's second missionary journey (Acts 16:32; 17:13; 18:11). It was the message Paul preached on his third missionary journey (Acts 19:10). It was the focus of Luke in the Book of Acts in that it spread rapidly and widely (Acts 6:7; 12:24; 19:20). Paul was careful to tell the Corinthians that he spoke the Word as it was given from God, that it had not been adulterated and that it was a manifestation of truth (2 Cor. 2:17; 4:2). Paul acknowledged that it was the source of his preaching (Col. 1:25; 1 Thess. 2:13).

As it was with Christ and the apostles, so Scripture is also to be delivered by preachers today in such a way that they can say, "Thus saith the Lord." Their responsibility is to deliver it as it was originally given and intended.

5. *How did the preacher's message begin?*

The message began as a true word from God and was given as truth because God's purpose was to transmit truth. It was ordered by God as truth and was delivered by God's Spirit in cooperation with holy men who received it with exactly the pure quality that God intended (2 Pet. 1:20-21). It was received as *Scriptura inerrantis* by the prophets and apostles, i.e., without wandering from Scripture's original formulation in the mind of God.

Inerrancy then expresses the quality with which the writers of our canon received the text we call Scripture.

9. Packer, "Preaching," 203.

6. *How is God's message to continue in its original true state?*

If God's message began true and if it is to be delivered as received, what interpretive processes necessitated by changes of language, culture, and time will ensure its purity when currently preached? The answer is that only an exegetical approach is acceptable for accurate exposition.

Having established the essential need for exegesis, the next logical question is, "How is interpretation/exegesis linked with preaching?"

Packer answers best:

The Bible being what it is, all true interpretation of it must take the form of preaching. With this goes an equally important converse: that, preaching being what it is, all true preaching must take the form of biblical interpretation.¹⁰

7. *Now, pulling our thinking all together in a practical way, "What is the final step that links inerrancy to preaching?"*

First, the true text must be used. We are indebted to those select scholars who labor tediously in the field of textual criticism. Their studies recover the original text of Scripture from the large volume of extant manuscript copies that are flawed by textual variants. This is the starting point. Without the text as God gave it, the preacher would be helpless to deliver it as God intended.

Second, having begun with a true text, we need to interpret the text accurately. The science of hermeneutics is in view.

As a theological discipline hermeneutics is the science of the correct interpretation of the Bible. It is a special application of the general science of linguistics and meaning. It seeks to formulate those particular rules which pertain to the special factors connected with the Bible. . . . Hermeneutics is a science in that it can determine certain principles for discovering the meaning of a document, and in that these principles are not a mere list of rules but bear organic connection to each other. It is also an art as we previously indicated because principles or rules can never be applied mechanically but involve the skill (*technē*) of the interpreter.¹¹

10. Ibid., 187.

11. Bernard Ramm, *Protestant Biblical Interpretation*, 3d rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1970), 11.

Third, our exegesis must flow from a proper hermeneutic. Of this relationship, Bernard Ramm observes that hermeneutics

stands in the same relationship to exegesis that a rule-book stands to a game. The rule-book is written in terms of reflection, analysis, and experience. The game is played by concrete actualization of the rules. The rules are not the game, and the game is meaningless without the rules. Hermeneutics proper is not exegesis, but exegesis is applied hermeneutics.¹²

Exegesis can now be defined as the skillful application of sound hermeneutical principles to the biblical text in the original language with a view to understanding and declaring the author's intended meaning both to the immediate and subsequent audiences. In tandem, hermeneutics and exegesis focus on the biblical text to determine what it said and what it meant originally.¹³ Thus, exegesis in its broadest sense will include the various disciplines of literary criticism, historical studies, grammatical exegesis, historical theology, biblical theology, and systematic theology. Proper exegesis will tell the student what the text says and what the text means, guiding him to make a proper personal application of it.

Interpretation of Scripture is the cornerstone not only of the entire sermon preparation process, but also of the preacher's life. A faithful student of Scripture will seek to be as certain as possible that the interpretation is biblically accurate.¹⁴

Fourth, we are now ready for a true exposition. Based on the flow of thinking that we have just come through, I assert that expository preaching is really exegetical preaching and not so much the homiletical form of the message. Merrill Unger appropriately noted,

It is not the length of the portion treated, whether a single verse or a larger unit, but the manner of treatment. No matter what the length of the portion explained may be, if it is handled in such a way that its real and essential meaning as it existed in the light of the overall

12. Ibid. See also Jerry Vines and David Allen, "Hermeneutics, Exegesis and Proclamation," *Criswell Theological Review* 1, no. 2 (Spring 1987): 309-34.

13. This definition has been adapted from John D. Grassmick, *Principles and Practice of Greek Exegesis* (Dallas: Dallas Theological Seminary, 1974), 7.

14. Al Fasol, *Essentials for Biblical Preaching* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1989), 41.

context of Scripture is made plain and applied to the present-day needs of the hearers, it may properly be said to be expository preaching.¹⁵

As a result of this exegetical process that began with a commitment to inerrancy, the expositor is equipped with a true message, with true intent, and with true application. It gives his preaching perspective historically, theologically, contextually, literarily, synoptically, and culturally. His message is God's intended message.

Now because this all seems so patently obvious, we might ask, "How did the church ever lose sight of inerrancy's relationship to preaching?" Let me suggest that in the main it was through the "legacy of liberalism."

THE LEGACY OF LIBERALISM

An Example

Robert Bratcher, a former research assistant with the American Bible Society, is the translator of ABS's *Good News For Modern Man* and also an ordained Southern Baptist pastor. As one of the invited speakers to a Christian Life Commission of the Southern Baptist Convention, he addressed the topic "Biblical Authority for the Church Today." Bratcher was quoted as saying,

Only willful ignorance or intellectual dishonesty can account for the claim that the Bible is inerrant and infallible. No truth-loving, God-respecting, Christ-honoring believer should be guilty of such heresy. To invest the Bible with the qualities of inerrancy and infallibility is to idolatize [*sic*] it, to transform it into a false god.¹⁶

This thinking is typical of the legacy of liberalism that has robbed preachers of true preaching dynamics. I ask, Why be careful with content which does not reflect the nature of God, or with content whose truthfulness is uncertain?

15. Merrill F. Unger, *Principles of Expository Preaching* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1955), 33.

16. "Inerrancy: Clearing Away Confusion," *Christianity Today* 25, no. 10 (29 May 1981): 12.

False Notions

Bratcher and others who would subscribe to "limited" or "partial" inerrancy are guilty of error along several lines of reasoning.¹⁷ *First*, they have not really come to grips with that which Scripture teaches about itself.

Benjamin Warfield focused on the heart of the issue with this inquiry: "The really decisive question among Christian scholars . . . is thus seen to be, 'What does an exact and scientific exegesis determine to be the Biblical doctrine of inspiration?'"¹⁸

The answer is that nowhere do the Scriptures teach that there is a dichotomy of truth and error, nor do the writers ever give the slightest hint that they were aware of this alleged phenomenon as they wrote. The human writers of Scripture unanimously concur that it is God's Word; therefore it must be true.

Second, limited or partial inerrancy assumes that there is a higher authority to establish the reliability of Scripture than God's revelation in the Scriptures. They err by *a priori* giving the critic a place of authority over the Scriptures. This assumes the critic himself is inerrant.

Third, if limited inerrancy is true, then its promoters err in assuming that any part of the Scriptures is a trustworthy communicator of God's truth. An errant Scripture would definitely disqualify the Bible as a reliable source of truth.

Presuppositions are involved either way. Will men place their faith in the Scriptures or the critics? They cannot have their cake (trustworthy Scripture) and eat it too (limited inerrancy). Pinnock aptly noted, "The attempt to narrow down the integrity of the Bible to matters of 'faith' and its historical reliability is an unwarranted and foolish procedure."¹⁹

If the Bible is unable to produce a sound doctrine of Scripture, then it is thus incapable of producing, with any degree of believability or credibility, a doctrine about any other matter. If the human writers of Scripture have erred in their understanding of Holy Writ's purity, then they have disqualified themselves as writers for any other area of God's revealed truth. If they are so disqualified in all areas, then every preacher is thoroughly

17. These arguments have been adapted from Richard L. Mayhue, "Biblical Inerrancy in the Gospels," unpublished paper (Winona Lake, Ind.: Grace Theological Seminary, 1977), 12-15.

18. Benjamin Breckinridge Warfield, *The Inspiration and Authority of the Bible* (reprint, Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1948), 175.

19. Clark H. Pinnock, "Our Source of Authority: The Bible," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 124, no. 494 (April-June 1967): 154.

robbed of any confidence and conviction concerning the alleged true message he would be relaying for God.

The Bottom Line

G. Campbell Morgan, hailed as the twentieth century's "prince of expositors," was a messenger widely used by God. There was a time in his life, however, when he wrestled with the very issue we discuss. He concluded that if there were errors in the biblical message, it could not be honestly proclaimed in public.

Here is the account of young Campbell Morgan's struggle to know if the Bible was surely God's Word:

For three years this young man, seriously contemplating a future of teaching and ultimately of preaching, felt the troubled waters of the stream of religious controversy carrying him beyond his depth. He read the new books which debated such questions as, "Is God Knowable?" and found that the authors' concerted decision was, "He is not knowable." He became confused and perplexed. No longer was he sure of that which his father proclaimed in public, and had taught him in the home.

Other books appeared, seeking to defend the Bible from the attacks which were being made upon it. The more he read, the more unanswerable became the questions which filled his mind. One who has never suffered it cannot appreciate the anguish of spirit young Campbell Morgan endured during this crucial period of his life. Through all the after years it gave him the greatest sympathy with young people passing through similar experiences at college—experiences which he likened to "passing through a trackless desert." At last the crisis came when he admitted to himself his total lack of assurance that the Bible was the authoritative Word of God to man. He immediately cancelled all preaching engagements. Then, taking all his books, both those attacking and those defending the Bible, he put them all in a corner cupboard. Relating this afterwards, as he did many times in preaching, he told of turning the key in the lock of the door. "I can hear the click of that lock now," he used to say. He went out of the house, and down the street to a bookshop. He bought a new Bible and, returning to his room with it, he said to himself: "I am no longer sure that this is what my father claims it to be—the Word of God. But of this I am sure. If it be the Word of God, and if I come to it with an unprejudiced and open mind, it will bring assurance to my soul of itself." "That Bible found me," he said, "I began to read and

study it then, in 1883. I have been a student ever since, and I still am (in 1938)."

At the end of two years Campbell Morgan emerged from that eclipse of faith absolutely sure that the Bible was, in very deed and truth, none other than the Word of the living God. Quoting again from his account of the incident: "... This experience is what, at last, took me back into the work of preaching, and into the work of the ministry. I soon found foothold enough to begin to preach, and from that time I went on."

With this crisis behind him and this new certainty thrilling his soul, there came a compelling conviction. This Book, being what it was, merited all that a man could give to its study, not merely for the sake of the personal joy of delving deeply into the heart and mind and will of God, but also in order that those truths discovered by such searching of the Scriptures should be made known to a world of men groping for light, and perishing in the darkness with no clear knowledge of that Will.²⁰

May God be pleased to multiply the tribe of men called "preachers" who, being convinced of the Bible's inerrant nature, will diligently apply themselves to understand and to proclaim its message as those commissioned of God to deliver it in His stead.

OUR CHALLENGE

One of the most godly preachers ever to live was Scotland's Robert Murray McCheyne. In the memoirs of McCheyne's life, Andrew Bonar writes,

It was his wish to arrive nearer at the primitive mode of expounding Scripture in his sermons. Hence when one asked him if he was ever afraid of running short of sermons some day, he replied—"No; I am just an interpreter of Scripture in my sermons; and when the Bible runs dry, then I shall." And in the same spirit he carefully avoided the too common mode of accommodating texts—fastening a doctrine on the words, not drawing it from the obvious connection of the passage. He endeavoured at all times to preach the mind of the Spirit in a passage; for he feared that to do otherwise would be to grieve the Spirit

20. Jill Morgan, *A Man of the Word: Life of G. Campbell Morgan* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1978), 39–40.

who had written it. Interpretation was thus a solemn matter to him. And yet, adhering scrupulously to this sure principle, he felt himself in no way restrained from using, for every day's necessities, all parts of the Old Testament as much as the New. His manner was first to ascertain the primary sense and application, and so proceed to handle it for present use.²¹

The expositor's task is to preach the mind of God as he finds it in the inerrant Word of God. He understands it through the disciplines of hermeneutics and exegesis. He declares it expositively then as the message which God spoke and commissioned him to deliver.

John Stott deftly sketched the relationship of the exegetical process to expository preaching:

Expository preaching is a most exacting discipline. Perhaps that is why it is so rare. Only those will undertake it who are prepared to follow the example of the apostles and say, "It is not right that we should give up preaching the Word of God to serve tables. . . . We will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the Word" (Acts 6:2, 4). The systematic preaching of the Word is impossible without the systematic study of it. It will not be enough to skim through a few verses in daily Bible reading, nor to study a passage only when we have to preach from it. No. We must daily soak ourselves in the Scriptures. We must not just study, as through a microscope, the linguistic minutiae of a few verses, but take our telescope and scan the wide expanses of God's Word, assimilating its grand theme of divine sovereignty in the redemption of mankind. "It is blessed," wrote C. H. Spurgeon, "to eat into the very soul of the Bible until, at last, you come to talk in Scriptural language, and your spirit is flavoured with the words of the Lord, so that your blood is Bibline and the very essence of the Bible flows from you."²²

Inerrancy demands an exegetical process and an expository proclamation. Only the exegetical process preserves God's Word entirely, guarding the treasure of revelation and declaring its meaning exactly as He intended it to be proclaimed.²³ Expository preaching is the result of the exegetical

21. Andrew A. Bonar, *Memoir and Remains of Robert Murray McCheyne* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1978), 94.

22. John R. W. Stott, *The Preacher's Portrait* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1961), 30-31.

23. See 1 Tim. 6:20, 21 and 2 Tim. 2:15.

process. Thus, it is the essential link between inerrancy and proclamation. It is mandated to preserve the purity of God's originally given inerrant Word and to proclaim the whole counsel of God's redemptive truth.²⁴

24. These central truths about the inerrant Bible, hermeneutics, exegesis, and preaching reflect the heart of The Master's Seminary curriculum and the faculty's commitment to prepare faithful expositors of God's Word for the 1990s and into the twenty-first century.