

Sparks, Kenton L. *God's Words in Human Words: An Evangelical Appropriation of Critical Biblical Scholarship*. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008. Paper. 415 pages.

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Overview

Both the impetus behind Kenton Sparks composing *God's Words in Human Words*, and his attempt therein to assist Christians who are wrestling with problems pertaining to Scripture, may appear admirable, at least on the surface. “[W]hat is sorely needed in every age—for the sake of believers and unbelievers alike—is a church that knows how to thoughtfully consider and assimilate the fruits of academic endeavors to its faith in Christ” (18). Faith and scholarship, he argues, ought to be bedfellows rather than adversaries; otherwise, Christians will likely have very little to say to those not sealed off from academic inquiry. Consequently, agnostics will continue to be made out of believers, and skeptics will persist in feeling justified about their unbelief. Sparks wishes to counter this trend, and to rescue the church—specifically the evangelical wing of the church—from what he considers to be a naïve and outdated approach to the Bible. Believers rely too often on the ineffective tactic of beating the fundamentalist drum louder when threatened with the findings of modern scholarship. Instead, challenges to Scripture ought to be acknowledged and confronted. By a healthy integration of faith and critical study, he deduces that Christians’ confidence in God’s truth will remain intact, and even be strengthened.

What could be mistaken, however, for a vigorous denouncing of the anti-intellectualism which plagues much of evangelicalism today, or for a robust apologetic that exhibits the reliability of the biblical manuscripts, turns out to be a capitulation on the crucial issue of Scripture’s inerrancy. In Sparks’s judgment, the problem lies not with the presuppositions and methods of modern historical criticism. Rather, the culprits are Christians who retain an inveterate understanding of their sacred text. Though he denounces approaches to Scripture that are either strictly “secular,” viewing it as a purely human product, or myopically “traditional,” defending its presumed inspiration and infallibility, it is clearly the latter view which is under fire here. As a solution, Sparks admonishes the church to embrace the findings of historical criticism while simultaneously adhering to the Bible’s doctrinal truths. He calls this reassessment the “constructive” approach, or “believing criticism.”

He opens with an examination of how epistemology and hermeneutics have been understood by Christians during the pre-modern, modern, and post-modern eras. Sparks’s own position is one of “practical realism,” which is “the only contemporary approach . . . that admits our capacity *to know* without falling into the illusion that we have access to error-free, God-like knowledge” [emphasis his] (52). Though post-modern, it is said to resemble the pre-modern Christian viewpoint as well.

The issue of historical criticism follows, with some of its assumptions admitted: everyday conversation is best understood in its historical context; since patterns of life are uniform throughout history, miracles happened no more in the past than they do today; traditional views about a text's veracity are discarded in favor of a modern critical approach. After applying historical criticism to some Mesopotamian scripts, Sparks makes his case for this method of inquiry being "essentially correct and reasonably justified" (76). This is the longest section of the book, as Sparks attempts to answer two interrelated questions: What is the result when historical criticism is applied to the Bible? To what extent does historical criticism affect the theology of the Bible? Readers who have not previously dealt with the examples cited (not to mention the full text of Scripture) will feel unprepared and perhaps overwhelmed. To shore up his position that inerrancy is no longer tenable, he examines four different evangelical rejections of an errant Bible: erroneous yet warranted rejections; fideistic refutations; philosophical critiques; and eight strategies categorized as "critical anti-criticism." Sparks opposes each of these by stressing the presumably undeniable findings of historical criticism (especially regarding the Old Testament), and the wrongheaded nature of a Cartesian quest for epistemic certitude.

Suggestions for a "constructive" approach to biblical criticism ensue. Scholars who have tried to harmonize modern criticism with faith in God's Word are reviewed, and the issue of hermeneutics is revisited. Here Sparks admits his great affinity for Barth, who understood biblical histories to be sagas and legends. Somewhat similarly, Sparks thinks different genres of human speech permit the divorcing of a text's theological meaning from its literal meaning. Barth also claimed that not only does God's sovereignty allow him to communicate through human errors, but that fallible humans could not understand him through any other means. Sparks takes this idea of accommodation further: nearly every interpretation of God's words throughout history contains truth—despite their apparent contradictions. This, he argues, helps explain inconsistencies found between biblical authors, and indicates that God's message meets each community's unique outlook.

The remainder of the book could be considered ancillary, for Sparks merely goes on to offer more suggestions—often unconventional and troubling ones—on how to understand Scripture rightly. Additional sources of divine truths, which are said to supplement what God has revealed in his Word, include the created order, academic disciplines, personal experiences, ecumenical communities, the insights of non-Christians, non-canonical documents, and virtually everything, since theology pertains even to "the proverbial 'price of tea in China'" (286). (Though, Sparks's affinity for assimilation apparently ceases when such sources produce alternate views of inerrancy.) He concludes with a lengthy admonition for evangelical institutions to reconsider their stance on inerrancy, for the sake of the church's intellectual integrity and future survival.

Sparks is no slouch, to be sure. His erudition regarding ancient Israel and the Old Testament—his own areas of expertise—is evident from his previous publications (though, too, these are not above reproach). Additionally, Sparks has obviously imbibed deeply from the well of biblical criticism, having become familiar both with its history

and with its apparent implications for traditional Christianity. The case for “believing criticism” is lucidly presented, being seasoned with many helpful examples, and the summaries of complicated histories and heady philosophies effectively provide the uninitiated reader with the background needed to follow his line of reasoning. His efforts may cultivate dialogue between “secularists” and “traditionalists,” but *God’s Word in Human Words* will primarily serve to further the conversation regarding biblical authority already underway within evangelicalism.

Critique

It is therefore unfortunate that Sparks attempts to separate an inerrant theology from the inerrant Word. In fact, this proves to be the Achilles’ heel of his entire work. For he maintains that the flawed and finite words of Scripture were produced by flawed and finite authors who had flawed and finite perspectives of reality; yet they nevertheless are said to convey divine and inerrant truths revealed by the divine and inerrant God who has a divine and inerrant perspective of all things. In short, though the Bible is riddled with errors, it nevertheless functions as the vehicle for absolute truth.

Sparks is merely repeating and combining some of the most notoriously vacuous theological positions of the twentieth century. He essentially advocates a Bultmannian embracement of truth which transcends the objective-subjective distinction—that is, one which “gets beyond” the God-element and the human-element of Scripture. Also, in making a bifurcation between religious truth and secular truth, he rehashes Barth’s meta-history, attempting to rescue Christianity by removing it from the empirical world. These treatments of Scripture reduce Christianity to groundless God-talk, leaving believers with little to no objective basis for their faith.

As is predictable, Sparks exempts the human writers of Scripture from accuracy when touching on non-theological topics, such as history and science. But he does so by laying the blame at the feet of their communities. These communities, which shaped the authors’ standards for truth and their methods of recording it, had limited and imperfect understandings of reality. Just as we do not think Augustine, Aquinas, or Calvin never erred in their interpretations of Scripture, since they were products of flawed communities, neither should we assume Isaiah or Paul were any less fallible. Thus, an inerrant Bible is not to be expected or even desired. Sparks deems the very notion an insatiable Cartesian invention, a thirst for incorrigible certitude created by Enlightenment arrogance. Instead, “God has selected to speak to human beings through *adequate* rather than *inerrant* words” [emphasis his] (55). He believes this is the fundamental approach to truth, Scripture, and interpretation found in both pre-modern and post-modern Christianity, and should be embraced by evangelicals today.

But as John Warwick Montgomery has persuasively demonstrated through several salient arguments, one cannot have his poisoned cake and eat it unscathed, too. (See his helpful essay, “Inspiration and Inerrancy: A New Departure” in *Crisis in Lutheran Theology*, vol. 1 [Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1967], 15-44.) Upholding a non-inerrant word from

God is simply not a viable position; it is found wanting when weighed on the scales of epistemology, analytic philosophy, and simple logic.

Firstly, propositional truths are marginalized by Sparks's viewpoint since he thinks all expressions and interpretations of truth are inherently flawed. Meaningful communication becomes a hopeless endeavor, for even if objective truths were expressed, their proper meaning could never be known. Thus, Sparks's text falls prey to its own assertions, with the reader left wondering why he attempted to convey meaning in the first place. By his own reasoning, his judgments about hermeneutics and inerrancy are merely imperfect products generated by *his* flawed community. Likewise, his assessments and recommendations are binding on no one, for every interpretation they receive is as defective as the community which spawned it.

Secondly, it logically follows that since the human authors of Scripture were incorrect when making historical and scientific assertions, their theological claims would likewise be tainted with human fallibility. Though Sparks claims that God in his wisdom revealed truths through errant words to accommodate imperfect humans, this would in no way safeguard against inaccuracies being embedded in the theological statements of Scripture. Nor would there remain any convincing reason for regarding an errant Bible as the unique Word of God instead of Homer's *Iliad*, Marx's *Communist Manifesto*, or something worse. Mere assertions of divine authorship are insufficient once the content is less than factual.

Thirdly, if Sparks is right that God speaks through fallible words, the skeptic (and even the believer) has every right to blame God for the errors in the Bible. And since few people prior to the advent of historical-criticism would have been aware of these "divine errors," that means God would have purposely misled people—through no fault of their own—into believing untruths. This draws into question the perfect character of God. One is therefore likely to conclude that either he himself is fallible, or he simply does not exist.

Fourthly, not only is there is no available means for distinguishing between Scripture's theological and non-theological points, but any to attempt to do so is, as Montgomery states, "antithetical to the very heart of the Biblical faith." Time and again we read that the God of Israel connected theological truths with empirical evidences—namely, historical and scientific truths. The most strikingly obvious example is the incarnation, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ (cf. John 1:14; 2 Pet 1:16; 1 John 1:1-3). The apostle Paul even claimed that entire Christian faith is dependent on the historical fact of the resurrection (1 Cor 15:12-20); and the early Christians fought tooth and nail against the Gnostic portrayals of Jesus that separated him from temporal reality.

If the import of God's activity in the spacio-temporal realm is not theological, or if the events of Jesus' earthly life are removed from empirical inquiry, then the Christian claim is no different than that of other religions, being reduced to a mere fantastical claim that cannot be investigated. That is to say, the central tenet of Christianity—that "God was in Christ reconciling the world unto himself, not counting men's sins against them" (2 Cor

5:19)—becomes neither verifiable nor falsifiable, and is put on par with the invisible, intangible, unperceivable “gardener” described in the infamous Flew-Wisdom parable. Belief in this a-historical Jesus amounts to the very fideism Sparks’s claims to reject, with one’s faith being forced to rest upon a personal, inner experience. But whether or not this experience is an encounter with the biblical God is simply unknowable.

Fifthly, none of the hermeneutical resources suggested by Sparks (including the created order, academic disciplines, personal experiences, etc.) is adequate since none is reliable enough to provide a principle of discrimination that distinguishes what is truly God’s Word from all of the rubbish. It amounts to sifting through a dung heap for gold without a metal detector! Why should a collection of fallible interpreters plus a fallible text yield up the gold of the Gospel?

Sixthly, since Jesus verified his claims of divinity by rising from the dead (cf. Matt 12:38-40; John 2:18-19), he qualifies as the one person in the history of the world whose perspective is infinite, flawless, and boundless. His truths are therefore eternal truths. This goes for the words expressed from his own mouth, and for those he uttered through his prophets and apostles (cf. John 14:16; 16:23; 2 Pet 1:20-21). And we can only presume he went through the trouble of doing so not only because he is fully capable of expressing such propositions, but also for the chief purpose of making them known to his finite creatures (cf. John 8:32: “Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free”). Sparks claims that Jesus’ words contain errors, indicating he spoke either according to his limited human nature or simply in the parlance of his times. But again, this divorces the words of Christ from any objectively meaningful content, and relegates all interpretations of his words—including Sparks’s!—to the realm of subjective opinion.

Montgomery further notes that the decision of many to jettison the inerrancy of Scripture has not, in fact, been warranted by irrefutable evidence uncovered by the unbiased methods of Modernism (such as the historical-critical enterprise). Rather, the issue is philosophical. Modernistic *a priori*s are what primarily determine conclusions of non-inerrancy, with only particular interpretations of the data being accepted—such as ones without supernatural connotations.

To be fair, the evidences Sparks cites for the historical-critical method having demolished the traditional view of inerrancy should not be ignored altogether. While they cannot all be addressed here, a single example will demonstrate that his presumed open-and-shut cases are hardly beyond reasonable dispute. Sparks confidently asserts that the different date given for the crucifixion in John’s gospel when compared to the synoptics illustrates that the former account contains historical inaccuracies. Yet this supposedly lethal contradiction has been disarmed for some time now. The discovery of a second Jewish calendar being in use in John’s day accounts for the inconsistency. Strangely enough, it ends up being Sparks whose misplaced confidence resembles a God-like certainty which seems to stem from that Cartesian mindset he considers so nasty!

We learn more about the author’s own mindset through his attempts at persuasion, beginning with his opening example. The heliocentric view shared by Galileo and

Copernicus was not dangerous, despite what church authorities feared, because it was true. Once faulty and outmoded notions about the Bible were discarded, Christians could accept this truth by assimilating the fruits of academic endeavors to their faith in Christ. Thus, Sparks continues, traditional readings of Scripture ought to be abandoned in favor of modern scholarship, which he claims has established the following facts: the Pentateuch was not written by Moses, and contains myths and legends; the four Gospels present markedly different accounts of Jesus, and contain fictional elements; Revelation wrongly predicted the Second Coming of Christ would occur during the Roman period. Connecting these points with the case of Galileo lends them credence—especially in the mind of believers (the intended audience) who wish to avoid being classified as closed-minded or ignorant.

Regrettably, this use of weak analogies—assuming that two situations which have similar circumstances also have similar outcomes—is not an isolated incident in Sparks’s work. Also prominently featured are false dichotomies—assuming there to be only two options, and since one appears wrong or absurd the other must therefore be right. Noted here are but a few examples of this sort of fallacious reasoning used by Sparks. 1) Lorenzo Valla’s discovery that the Donation of Constantine is a forgery indicates that historical-critical scholarship accurately exposes errors in Scripture. 2) Prophecies found in Assyrian texts either went unfulfilled or were constructed after the event had already come to pass, which sheds light on how to understand biblical prophecy. 3) To adhere to a fully inerrant Bible one must deny its human element. 4) The fact that Gleason Archer felt the need to compose his *Encyclopedia of Biblical Difficulties* indicates that errors actually do exist in the Bible. 5) Just as the Catholic Church has painted itself into a corner by maintaining ecclesial infallibility, the evangelical church will paint itself into a corner by remaining intractable on inerrancy. 6) Holding to a six-day Creation or thinking Noah’s ark exists is akin to gullibly assuming the eschatological elements of Daniel and Revelation are literally unfolding before our eyes. 7) If Scripture is seen as authoritative and inerrant, then a return to sanctioned slave trading and a flat-earth cosmology may well result. 8) Because God does not perfect people morally once they become Christians, there is no reason to think he perfects their writings once they become his inspired authors. 9) Post-modern epistemology requires Christians to be humble in what they preach and teach, which is why the Emergent Church’s approach to truth should be emulated. 10) The church needs to “come to grips with the scientific reality” of evolution (361), just as it was forced to do with the views of Galileo.

Nearly as disconcerting as his extrapolations and conjectures is Sparks’s reference to the tragic death of Edward Carnell. Carnell’s downfall, we are told, resulted in part from the cognitive dissonance he experienced in attempting to reconcile problems unearthed by “intensive and meticulous study of philosophy, theology, and Scripture . . . with evangelical ideas about the Bible, especially with the doctrine of inerrancy” (368). The words of Carnell’s psychiatrist are cited as confirmation: “[Carnell] was often angry at the rigidity of creedal and moral codes in which he was trapped by his connections with Fuller Theological Seminary” (369). This quote comes from Rudolph Nelson’s biography, *The Making and Unmaking of an Evangelical Mind: The Case of Edward Carnell*. Inside, one reads that Carnell did wrestle seriously with the issue of inerrancy at

times, but that different interpretations of what that meant for him are available. Moreover, Nelson included this revealing admission by Carnell:

I want you to know that I am fully aware that the root of my anxieties goes back to my childhood. I am a minister's son who was raised in a highly legalistic and emotionally erratic atmosphere. The scars of these early childhood experiences remain with me.

It thus seems dubious that Sparks's position against traditional inerrancy is strengthened by his use of this complicated case. And as C.S. Lewis noted in *God in the Dock*, psychological arguments can cut both ways when employed to determine matters of truth. Thus, one could just as easily claim that Sparks's own cognitive dissonance is exposed by his reference to Carnell; it is merely an attempt to distract the reader from the haunting philosophical problems one is forced to struggle with if "believing criticism" is maintained.

Conclusion

God's Words in Human Words is impressive in several regards. It covers a substantial amount of material in a coherent fashion, allowing the reader to follow and digest the author's points. The extensive references provided are undoubtedly helpful for the would-be researcher. And, unlike many contemporary scholars who oppose traditional Christian viewpoints, Sparks seldom gives the impression that he is snobbishly condescending toward those who disagree with him.

But in the final analysis, Sparks's claim that God's inerrant truths are expressed through man's errant words amounts to a fatally flawed position. One cannot have it both ways—either God inspired prophets and apostles to record the truth, or he did not. To insulate religious truths from empirical truths is to remove the possibility of objectively determining which truths, if any, are from God. Only subjective experiences would then remain, which cannot be relied on for questions of epistemology.

Crucial in this argument is the evidence for the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, God incarnate. For if the bare fact of the resurrection is established as probable, then Jesus' words end up being the final authority on what qualifies as God's Word, and what qualities it has. Historical criticism, despite its current reign in most academic circles, has not so dismantled the gospel accounts that their historical reliability is no longer tenable. However, those who are not already well steeped in the debates over biblical inerrancy, the arguments for the historicity of the New Testament documents, or the pros and cons of modern critical scholarship, should become sufficiently acquainted with such issues before attempting to tackle this tome of Sparks.