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On Sliding Down Hills

By Roger Chambers

I've watched a few sessions of the Winter Olympics. Question: Just how many ways can a person slide down a hill? At Sarajevo they used everything from skis that double as glider wings to what looked like the union of a miniature space ship with a truck fender. The brain loses itself in the blur of colorful shapes hurtling endlessly across a background of white.

The mind wanders to a different kind of sliding - a theological sled ride. Logicians speak of the *Slippery Slope Fallacy*. It's when you reason that if *A* occurs, *B* is bound to follow; then comes *C* followed by *D*, and right on down the hill. *A* starts one down the Slippery Slope; the slide is inevitable because the hill is just that - slippery. It is a chain reaction. In another metaphor it is called "the camel's nose under the tent." Allow the nose, and the next thing you know your tent is decorated in wall-to-wall camel.

Example of the *Slippery Slope Fallacy*: A nervous father declares that his teenage son cannot let his hair grow down over his ears "like a girl." Why? Because once that is permitted, the forces of feminization are set in motion. This week long hair next week eye makeup; by summer the kid is sporting an earring; a year from now the process of sissification is complete - Claude has become Claudette. Sounds reasonable when you say it, but it is fallacy. Every day we see young men with ear-covering hair, but who are, nonetheless, as masculine as a Marine drill sergeant. It does not follow that long hair automatically unmans a fellow.

But is this kind of argument always faulty? For example, might not a social scientist reason soberly that welfareism leads to socialism, and that socialism naturally and inevitably shades into communism? The error in the *Slippery Slope Fallacy* is to assume - without grounds - that there is something in *A* that necessarily leads to *B*, and so on. One can argue legitimately that *A* leads to *B* and *C* by meeting two conditions: (1) Demonstrate that a slant exists - that there is, in fact, a hill to slide down. (2) Show that *A* is not anchored - tied down to keep it from sliding into *B*. It also helps the argument to demonstrate precedent, i.e., that under parallel circumstances has always evolved into *B* and *C*.

Which brings me to my subject (about time!): the inerrancy of Scripture. I am not in this essay discussing whether inerrancy is defensible; I am here saying only that the denial of inerrancy is dangerous. This point is important in itself and needs to be considered independently within the larger controversy over inerrancy. Errancy - the denial of inerrancy - is the first step over the edge of a hill which is so genuinely slippery that a bad fall is almost guaranteed.

We inerrantists warn that the rejection of inerrancy in one generation leads to the abandonment of the Faith in the next, or at least creates a surge in that direction. For circumstantial evidence we point to the slide into unbelief that occurred in our own brotherhood history. Harold Lindsell in *The Battle for the Bible* documents this universal trend among Evangelical churches and schools. He shows that once inerrancy goes, this fundamental expression of doubt leads to the questioning and ultimate rejection of those truths and doctrines that lie at the heart of orthodox Christianity. The slide is usually a slow one, but is, nevertheless, an inexorable and deadly descent to the lowlands of apostasy.

Errantists object. They point out, quite accurately, that there is an important difference between modern scholars who reject inerrancy and the old classical liberals. The distinction is this: Turn-of-the-century liberals worked from an anti supernatural bias; those among us who deny inerrancy, in contrast, hold to a revelational base - they heartily affirm that God is directly active in His creation. When inerrantists predict

that, this distinction notwithstanding, errancy is Step One toward infidelity, we are accused of committing the *Slippery Slope Fallacy*.

Is the logic of the inerrantist defective? Are we seeing ghosts under the bed? I do not think so. I remind you of the two conditions that separate fallacy from sound argument: (1) Does the slippery slope exist? (2) is *A* (errancy in this case) nailed down so that it will not slide?

Does the very "stuff" of errancy have within it a tilt toward unbelief? If so, the slippery slope is real, not imagined. I say that the slant is genuine. It can be identified in at least two particulars. One, the general tendency of man to doubt the Word of God. Scripture explains, history records, and experience confirms. that the battle for faith is never fought on level ground. Man's corrupted will perches heavily on one end of the teeter-totter (to mingle metaphors). In brazen defiance of clear truth, men doubt that which restricts and judges human activity. Men are, as a race, anxious to hear that the Bible is not necessarily true at every point; it might not be binding at the very point at which a man wants his freedom.

The second tilt in errancy is this: It usually pushes one to adopt the historical critical method. Scholars who do not believe that everything in Scripture is the true Word of God cannot (and do not) forever resist the pressure to say what in the Bible must be believed and what is optional. How to decide? Answer: the historical-critical method. And of course this is the method being used.

Some defenders of this methodology claim that it is neutral. It isn't. The father of the historical-critical method was Johann Salomo Semler (late 18th century), he was in revolt against the supernatural. His dictum: "The root of evil (in theology) is the interchangeable use of the term 'Scripture' and 'Word of God.'" After Semler, one critic repudiated the thinking and conclusions of another in a steady progression to the agnostic refusal to set any Word of God in Scripture.

Errantists often defend the alleged neutrality of the historical-critical method by pointing to the legitimate use of history and criticism on behalf of divine revelation. Lower or textual criticism reconstructs the original text from the copies available to us. A historical process establishes date, authorship, authenticity, credibility, and canonicity, i.e., we are assured of a trustworthy Bible. We are able to see Scripture set in history; we view the thrilling connections between the Bible and the movement of history.

Here the negative-critical aspect of the method comes in to taint and slant the whole thing. And the "critical" has been the dynamic of the system - not the "historical." I say that once the trustworthiness of the text has been established, its character is self-evident: It is a true revelation of and from the God who cannot lie. If it is that, the only logical and legitimate response is acceptance, trust, and obedience. Criticism continues only if one assumes that Scripture is something less than a true revelation.

The historical-critical method contain a set of assumptions. It excludes by definition the traditional orthodox view of an inerrant Bible. The methodology says that not all of the Bible is true in the normal sense of the word. This is an *a priori* - a negative prejudgment that predetermines direction and result. The historical-critical method is meaningless once a trustworthy text is established, unless divine Scripture is to be distinguished from human scripture. If the Bible, by its character and in its claims about itself, is completely true, then the critical process of identifying *Word* within *Scripture* does not apply.

The practitioner of the historical-critical method can never discover that the Bible is more than it claims to be; his method assumes that it is not just what it claims to be; he can only find that the Bible is less than it claims to be. It is built into the method. How can we be surprised that, as a matter of history, Scripture has always emerged from the historical-critical method in a battered condition? A thing slides down, not up, a slippery slope.

What about the second condition required to legitimize the argument? Errantists assure us that *A* (errancy) will not lead to *B* and *C* (the dismemberment of Biblical faith). *A*, we are told, can be anchored at the top of any slippery slope that might exist; i.e., the denial of inerrancy does not necessarily open the door to wholesale doubt of the Bible. My errantist brothers exalt the Christ, believe in miracles, affirm revelation (specially defined), and love the Gospel. But will their view of inspiration cause their grandchildren to believe less than they themselves believe? Errantists see themselves occupying the proper center position between what they often call fundamentalistic scholarship on one side and German-style hyperanalytical academics on the other. But will the center hold? In some cases it is not holding; in others it will not hold. It can't. Errancy is poised on the top of a slippery slope and errancy is not tied down.

The rejection of inerrancy, by its nature, is the move from an objective to a subjective trust in Scripture. If all the Bible is not true, then the believer must run the words of the text through the sieve of his mind and filter out that which is false. On what basis does he do this? Answer: taste. The errantist must subject Scripture to a taste test. His taste might be informed by that which he counts as sound learning; his might be a highly-refined taste - but it is taste all the same. And taste will never hold the top of the slippery slope; it is subjective - rootless.

It is not right to say that all representatives of the historical-critical method are unrestrained subjectivists. The method contains much objectivity; but it is subjective at its base. The Bible, you see, does not tell us that a distinction is to be made between Word of God and Scripture – of course it does not say how to identify one over against the other. If one assumes that this distinction exists, it is left to him to say how he will decide