Dr. Roger Nicole is one of the intellectual giants of American evangelicalism. The professor emeritus of theology at RTS-Orlando played a leading role in the shaping of evangelical theology, both as one of the founders of the Evangelical Theological Society and as a professor at what eventually became Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary.

Still sharp of mind at age 92, Dr. Nicole has faced recent personal tragedy, as barely two weeks after this interview was recorded, his wife, Annette, went home to be with the Lord. Her death underscores the urgency of documenting Dr. Nicole’s legacy in the evangelical world.

In that spirit, John R. Muether, RTS library director and RTS-Orlando professor of church history, sat down with Dr. Nicole to talk about his experiences and his theological passions. Paul Schwarz, RQ managing editor, also contributed to the interview.

The inerrancy of Scripture is a controversial doctrine in some quarters. How do you define inerrancy, and how is the term given to being misunderstood?

Inerrancy is an articulation explicit of the nature of the influence of God on Scripture, which takes a full account of the fact that it is God's Word. The question, therefore, is "What can be defined as an error, and what does inerrancy therefore avoid?" If that is not properly understood, then some people may have a mistaken notion of what we want to assert.

The way to define error, therefore, is take account of precisely what Scripture says and what phenomena are there. Some impact is found in the nature of the source or the source of the doctrine. Some people think that all that needs to be said is that God is truth, and that Scripture is therefore truthful, They say it in a general way, somewhat in the sense in which a person may intend to tell the truth but adds erroneous elements that do not affect the major matter of the testimony, that may impinge on the major statement made but diminish the validity of what is being said.

At that point precisely, we need to discover what properly can be called an error and what that means in respect to God. Some people say there is no biblical basis for talking about inerrancy, and that is the point I wish to controvert.

Very definitely, inerrancy does not come as a result of testing all the statements of Scripture and finding them to be true, because if that were the case, we would never end this job. Therefore, inerrancy is not some concept that theologians have developed and then placed onto Scripture, then having to validate it by checking any kind of statement that might contradict what was said. That is not the origin of the doctrine of inerrancy.

The origin of inerrancy is that God is the divine author of Scripture, and Scripture is presented as the Word of God, which it is, actually, jointly and concurrently with being the word of the human authors whom God used. Therefore, the concept is that we need to have a representation of the activity of God that is in keeping with the character of God Himself. For God, in fact, any error would be a lie.

The difference between an error and a lie is that a lie is a faulty representation consciously presented by someone who knows better, and an error is an unintentional departure from a factual element. But with God, there cannot be just an error, because God knows everything, and therefore any statement He would make that is not conformed to factual truth
would be a lie on His part. It is a most perverse approach to God to say that He is capable of lying.

This has been articulated precisely by the Evangelical Theological Society, whose original statement, still maintained, is “The Bible alone, and the Bible in its entirety, is the Word of God written and is therefore inerrant in the autographs.” Inerrancy is an implication of all necessity of the character of God as the primary author of Scripture.

What would you say to those who argue that inerrancy is a modern idea created by desperate evangelicals responding to the conclusions of higher criticism?

That would be answered by checking in the history of doctrine, looking at all the major thinkers in the Christian faith, and finding out what they thought about the Bible and whether they thought there were errors to be corrected. The doctrine of the Bible has been that this is the Word of God, and you don't correct God.

The doctrine is manifest in the question of the reverence of the Jews for the Old Testament, also demonstrated by Jesus in His approach to Scripture and maintained by the Apostles. The doctrine of the church from the start has been uniformly that the Bible, being the Word of God, cannot actually contain errors — that is, departures from factual truth.

Now study of Scripture indicates in the first place that God was not concerned for us to have one text absolutely identical with the autographic text given at the start. We know that because there are various forms in which the Bible has come to us. The way in which the Word has been transmitted has not been marked by the same inerrancy as the one we find in God Himself. It has not impinged on the substance of the Scripture because we are able to reproduce 99 and 44 percent of the actual text in the autographs. Thus we are not at a loss, because in the process of transmission, various people have committed errors in reproduction.

Orthography is a matter of human convention and does not impinge on the truth itself being presented. Somebody who makes mistakes in spelling may not necessarily be accused of diverging from the truth. We do find certain names spelled differently in different parts of Scripture, and that is not a problem because the spellings were the spellings of the authors, not what God Himself authenticated. Similarly, with questions of grammar, the grammar used is the grammar of the people who wrote under the direction of God, who is not concerned about what academicians may have considered a proper expression.

So are you saying that inerrancy can be harmonized with accommodation to human conventions?

Yes, but not to the point of departing from the actual facts, for a report must be in accord with the actual events that have occurred. Of course, you have approximations — figures that are not an absolutely precise formulation.

So inerrancy does not mean scientific precision?

Correct, and accommodation is constantly being used. If you ask me my age, I will say I am 92 years old, and that's good enough. In fact, I should say I am 92 years, two months, three days, four hours, 15 minutes, and so many seconds and fractions of seconds. That would be the
exact number. But 92 is the appropriate formulation that gives the information desired, while the other would be superficial and damaging, because it leads us away from the major subject.

Similarly, the Bible uses phenomenological language, not astronomical language. The words "sunset" and "sunrise," found in even the most accurate scientific journals and volumes, would suggest a very different conception of the relationship of the sun and the earth that what we know to be the case. The Bible uses phenomenological language to describe an event in terms of its appearance for somebody situated on the earth, and it is not a violation of truth.

In the same way, quotations from one language or from one person to another, or from one part of the Bible to another, are not bound to literal accuracy at every point, because this was not the way in which ancient people quoted. They could not do otherwise, because they didn't have the books that easily. This is a result of the invention of printing, which permits very careful checking at every point. Therefore now we demand of scholars to make absolute identity in quotation without making any kind of change. But this was not the case in the days of our Lord, therefore the quotations we find are expressed freely, and in some cases are modified somewhat in order to put the emphasis on that part of the quotation relevant to the citation made. On that account, in order to make a special emphasis, the quotation may be made somewhat differently. It is appropriate, without any error, to make quotations that way as a reference to another passage without the complicated system of scholarship we now have to assure absolute identity.

So in all those areas, we don't have errors; we have an expression of the truth in ways appropriate for the people of the time. But if I wrote that Abraham had died at the age of 169 years, it simply would not be an equivalent that he died at 92. So the larger figure found in Genesis is the one that needs to be recognized, because things happened when Abraham was 100, but it is not stated very much else beyond that time.

You're conceding that the Bible uses approximations and acknowledging that God accommodates Himself to the literary conventions of the people to whom He's revealing Himself, which includes things like phenomenological versus astronomically precise language. So what's the big deal — what's at stake with the doctrine of inerrancy?

What is at stake is to recognize that whatever the Bible says is conformed to factual identity or reality and does not depart in the way in which it is presented from proper criteria of truth. The correspondence between what the Bible says and what is in fact occurring or has occurred is what is involved. There are difficulties — passages where we seem to have a problem, but the fact that we are not able to find a complete reconciliation ought not lead us to challenge something as firmly established as the fact that God Himself acknowledges to be the author. It is stated in more than 2,000 places in Scripture that this is what God says.

Take a moment to walk us through a problem passage in Scripture that critics claim disproves inerrancy and how you would sustain inerrancy in that passage.

I will give a simple example of the healing of blind people in the vicinity of Jericho, which is recorded in three Gospels — Matthew, Mark and Luke. In Matthew we hear about two blind people being healed as Jesus came out of the city. In Mark only one blind person is mentioned — Bartimaeus — and he's coming out of the city. In Luke there's only one blind person mentioned, and that person is mentioned as Jesus came in to the city.
So there is no contradiction between two blind people and one blind person. If there were two, then surely there was one. Mark may have mentioned something that happened to one person known by the people in the church and did not feel he has to describe completely all the blind people who may have been helped. So the difference in number does not amount to an error; it amounts to a selection permissible at every point unless there is only one blind person at this point. But it is never stated that way.

So Matthew is certainly right and is not in contradiction with Mark and Luke. It's only a question of number, of the result — it is not a problem. But then the question is, assuming there were not two places for healing, how does the place of healing relate to the city of Jericho? Matthew and Mark say that it's coming out of Jericho, and in Luke it's coming into Jericho. Here we seem to be in the presence of a flat contradiction unless we assume that Jesus healed some people at the entrance and then somebody else at the departure.

But the stories resemble each other so much in all three Gospels that it is difficult to think we have two separate events. So the question is, "How could it be at the same time into Jericho and out of Jericho?" This is very simple for us Americans because we have places called "North" and "South" [and other directional titles]. Jericho actually was a city where the Jews were primarily residing in one part, with another part of the city containing people with no consideration, particularly the ones who were taking the taxes.

One could be going from one of those places in Jericho to the other, and the person coming out of the Jewish Jericho might be the person going into the [area of the] tax collector. In fact, in Luke, this story is followed by the story of Zacchaeus. Very interestingly, we know where Jesus was going in that story — "I'm going to your home tonight." He was going into the Jericho of Zacchaeus, which was going out of the Jericho of the Sadducees and the Pharisees.

Here you have a place in between those two divisions, with perhaps some space in between that would indicate the location of the healing. So it could be described differently depending on which Jericho you have in mind. That would be a very easy explanation that may be available. In fact, archaeology confirms that there were those two Jerichos. The details or descriptions that may seem to conflict, when understood properly in terms of the data of the situation, turn out to be absolutely accurate.

What, then, are the greatest threats to the doctrine of inerrancy today?

The greatest threat is that if you deny inerrancy in the sense that you say the Bible maintains things that God does not stand for, or garble the events that actually occurred, then the authority of Scripture as being God's Word has been challenged and perhaps actually canceled. As a result, you have lost the supreme criterion of truth — what God has said cannot be false, and therefore it must have authority over us, and one has to accept His Word. This is true also at the family level. If kids catch their parents lying, it will challenge their authority in whatever they say.

In the body of Christ today, where do we see the bad fruit of a faulty view of inerrancy?

We find that challenge in churches today where people say we ought to receive practicing homosexuals as members. Scripture has said clearly that homosexuality is so nefarious that those who practice it may be punished with death in the Old Testament law. The New Testament presents it as so bad as to show the depths of corruption unparalleled in humanity, and it states
expressly that those who practice that will not go to heaven.

There are people who say, "OK, these are in the Bible, but it represents customs of that
time, so therefore there's no authority of God in there." But if you have liberty to do that, then
you can take whatever it says and say, "That's for days gone by, and we can't have that
anymore." Therefore it is our feelings, our practices and our sin that begins to be the authority
instead of God. The damage is terrific. It's a leak so bad that all the liquid may go through it.

You've been fighting this good fight on inerrancy for more than 60 years now. Do you see
evangelicalism progressing in its doctrine of inerrancy, or do you find it under constant
assault?

Yes, I find it under constant assault because the problem has entered the church, not by
people on the outside who say the Bible is ridiculous. You expect people from outside the body
of Christ to find difficulties and raise objections because they want to challenge the authority all
the way through. So the church has understood well that it was its business to respond to those
attacks.

But now the problem is within the church and in the seminaries, where presentations are
being made in which the actual arrangement of the Bible is challenged. In biblical criticism they
are telling us that the law in Exodus and Leviticus was not given by God in the time of Moses at
all but by the priestly people in exile. There is a reversal of the whole history of Israel made now
in terms of an evolutionary approach instead of taking the plain facts of the Bible.

That kind of criticism by people within the church first came in the 19th century. There
were some difficulties as to whether Moses is the full author of the Pentateuch. Their approach,
though, was that what the Bible tells us is true, and therefore we have an appropriate portrayal of
the development of Israel.

But biblical criticism has revamped the whole thing and reordered the books in terms of
an entirely external approach and asserting that the revelation in Israel simply followed a pattern
that can also be followed in other religions and that is purely a human phenomenon.

Why does there seem to be a recurring pattern of voices within evangelicalism challenging
the doctrine of inerrancy? Are we succumbing to the temptation of higher criticism? Are
we seeking prestige in the academy? Why is this a besetting problem for evangelicalism?

Seeking prestige is, of course, a question of the spiritual disposition of the people
enrolled. I certainly don't want to present judgments at that point.

What happens, of course, is that the critical approach has been so thoroughly endorsed at
the graduate level that the people in the universities are constantly confronted with it. And if they
are not carrying through with it, they are at times discriminated against.

I have the case of a thesis by one of my Gordon-Conwell colleagues who was writing
about the Old Testament. He had a view contrary to the prescribed approach to Scripture, and he
was rejected for his doctoral thesis on the grounds that he did not sufficiently acknowledge the
critical view. So especially in the area of Scripture, if you accept inerrancy, you disqualify
yourself, so to speak, in this particular way.

The idea of establishing academic respectability for evangelicalism in the context of the
hostility of higher critics and liberalism brings us to your role in the establishment of the
Evangelical Theological Society. That was surely one of the goals — to create a community of scholarship.

[The goal] in the first place was the development of churches in which Bible truth continued to be taught irrespective of what the theories of scholars might be. Many times you had a new denomination that developed because the other had abandoned the fruitful ground of biblical authority and were moving on into other directions. The ETS was an effort to bring together people with differences of opinion on a number of things, but who were together on recognizing the authority of Scripture.

To be sure this authority was received in its fullness, this concept of inerrancy was put forward as being an immediate, irresistible implication of the divine authorship of Scripture. The critical view invariably emphasizes an analysis of Scripture purely in terms of human authorship.

As I study the origins of ETS, there were two trajectories you were trying to combat — number one, the stranglehold of liberalism in the academy, and secondly, the constant tendency among conservatives to separate and fragment.

I talked about the first tendency, and that's why we had to have something special. We could not have a community of scholars in which the foundation of how the Bible was considered was not established. We felt that [certain other] discussions were irrelevant to our understanding because they sought to find the origin of biblical ideas in other religions and things of that kind. It was proceeding on entirely different ground, and making that structure without that foundation.

When you're working on the second and third floor of a house, you need a solid foundation. If you have no foundation, then you're not building. On the other hand, conservative people have at times been opposed to scholarship that challenged the truth because they held that people who were developed in their intellectual understanding were inevitably wrong and would challenge the truth of God's statements. As a result, they had contempt for scholarship. Fundamentalists were known as disregarding and rejecting arbitrarily anything smacking of scholarship.

Those were interesting days — the formation of ETS. It was a small band of brothers; you, Harold Ockenga, Carl Henry and that whole group was a remarkable generation of men.

Yes, because the evangelical movement remained strong in the United States until 1880, when the evolutionary approach to religious matters and the biblical criticism began to have its massive influence in seminaries. At that point, the faculty of Princeton Theological seminary was a bulwark of strength in obedience to God. This was notable in Benjamin Warfield, one of the scholars most accomplished and very clear in his commitment to Scripture and to the Reformation’s formulation about the impact of the Bible and the nature of Christian doctrine.

But you had increasing waves and invasions at the lay level of the biblical criticism approach. Even at present, if you ask whether people believe in the virgin birth, the majority of Christians believe in it even though people in scholarship tend to hold it to be a miracle that did not occur. The manner in which Jesus was born, they say, must have been by virtue of Mary’s contact with a male.
So what you were seeking to do in the 1940s was to recover what had characterized evangelicals in America up to 1880.

Yes, we felt we were in the mainline of the Christian faith, which was pressing for an acceptance of Scripture as the divine authority that would be unchallengeable. Also, I saw some movements in church history that reacted against the overtaking of the church by principles or tendencies not in keeping with the Word of God. I felt very strongly that the Reformation was a great movement of return to the authority of the Word because it was now marvelously supported by the presence of printing, which enabled church people and not just the scholars to have access to the Word of God. Therefore it was primarily a return to the authority of Scripture.

This was expressed very powerfully by Martin Luther in 1520 when he said it is damaging to oppose the Word of God and one's conscience in order to take any tradition, any council, any pope as being the supreme authority. There you had a return to biblical formulation over ecclesiastical domination.

Then under the challenge of scientific discoveries and so on, the authority of the Bible began to be questioned, especially in the 18th century in France with people like Diderot, Rousseau and Voltaire. They were attempting an emancipation from what they called the "paper pope."

Against that there were churches that became dormant — the vitality of the church was being directed elsewhere. Then there were renewal movements, with the Wesleys and Zinzendorf, and a movement of free churches. I especially studied the movement of free churches in Europe, which caught on in Scandinavia, Switzerland, Scotland and the Netherlands.

This is interesting, because a lot of people look at the state of the church today and say the church desperately needs a new Reformation. From the way you describe it, there seems to have been a consciousness on the part of you and your colleagues that you were doing something like a new Reformation. Were you consciously thinking along those lines?

I would have to say personally that I think the old Reformation was good enough, and that is what we need still. What's new sometimes is not good — people [complain], "That's not new," but [something] may not [necessarily] be objectionable [just] because it is not new. In a sense we date our Christianity to Jesus and back down to Abraham.

But you were laboring in the spirit of those Reformers who came before you.

That is correct. And it is God's Spirit who has guided His people outside of a secular world in which they were more and more estranged. We need contact with the Holy Spirit of God to carry on in the right direction. Instead of that, we commit ourselves to being secularized and conformed to secular ideas and approaches, which damage the purity and effectiveness of the church.

The church is like a ship, which has to be in the water. But when the water is in the ship, there’s damage.

You've spoken and written about the explosion of evangelicalism in print and academic institutions — how would you assess the legacy of the ETS since its founding?
I find that no formulation of faith guarantees the church soundness. It is something on which you have to be watching. The walls are not enough to protect the city; you also need people on the wall to guard the city. A wall is a very good thing to assist in this process, and as a result, a city with good walls and good guards is safer than a city that doesn't have walls and can be invaded by almost any point.

On that account, the ETS took a very strong position on the inerrancy of Scripture, because that was one thing on which we agreed. There were many other things on which we did not agree — the age of baptism, the constitution of a church, Arminianism and Calvinism, perfectionism, and so on. We had a number of people with different opinions. The Bible was the center, and therefore the acceptance of authority. If we didn't have that, then the leak would inevitably started.

I would have to say that the legacy of the ETS is this great formula, and I warned them not to abandon this because it really manifests our foundational unity.

Another area of lifelong interest of yours, and where you've made vital contributions to evangelical theology, is the doctrine of the atonement. Why did this become the focus of so much of your scholarly attention?

In my conception, the atonement is the Grand Central Station of the whole of Christian doctrine. All the lines of Christian truth touch the atonement. Christianity is basically a redemptive religion; what we need is God's redemption. The atonement is simply a statement that God has done what was needed, and He's doing it.

The first lecture I gave on this subject was in 1947 in Portland, Oregon, at Western Conservative Baptist Theological Seminary. My theme was that the atonement is central, and I proved this by the strong emphasis on the redemptive nature of the Jewish and Christian faith.

I traced this redemptive significance from Genesis to Revelation. A key verse is 1 Corinthians 2:2: "I have determined not to know anything among you save Jesus Christ and Him crucified." I found a great precedent there that the apostle Paul dealt in many things, but the center was redemption. Every element of Christian faith — the doctrines of Scripture, God, humanity, sin, salvation, the church, Christ, ecclesiology, soteriology and eschatology — all those have their lines connecting with the atonement.

Why is substitution so unpalatable to some people?

Because they don't want to have this done for them, and they want to be part of the doing. They think they have abandoned their individuality if Christ has taken their sin and put His righteousness on them. So substitution is anathema for the unregenerate human mind.

These theologians cannot explain the intensity of the suffering of Christ on the cross. I ask them "How could God, a holy God whom you love and have loved, permit the cross to take place, though Jesus was completely innocent?" They have no explanation for that.

If you had to point students to the place to go to read about the atonement, what book would you send them to?

That would depend upon what kind of ambience or atmosphere they were functioning with. But a great line of work would be George Smeaton on The Doctrine of the Atonement as
Taught by Christ and The Doctrine of the Atonement as Taught by the Apostles, or more modern, The Apostolic Preaching of the Cross by Leon Morris.

The various elements are present there, but substitution is at the root. If you take out substitution, you've lost your foundation; it just doesn't make any sense at all. When others criticize the Atonement, it's hard for them to account for the intensity of the suffering of Christ.

If you look at competing theories of the atonement — Christus Victor, moral influence and governmental theory — they should not be taught at the exclusion of substitution.

They want the fruit but they remove the root. I agree with them in having a fruit, but they don’t have a right to it. The fruit they want is good, but the way in which they get it is ruined because there's no root. If they remove substitution, they've ruined the whole business. They are building a big aqueduct in the desert.

One way in which people reject the atonement is they don't like the wrath of God. Talk a little bit about the work you did in defending the classic doctrine of propitiation.

St. Anselm said, "You have not yet considered how grievous a thing sin is." Other theories of the atonement are developed as people hold a palliative attitude or understanding of sin. They say everything is basically all right with human beings. Then I say, why did God permit the enormous suffering of Christ, which was much more moral and spiritual suffering than physical suffering?

It seems as though the recurring pattern in all these challenges to the atonement from all these different quarters seems to be the higher we elevate humanity, the lower we regard the Cross.

And the higher we elevate Christ, the bigger is the Atonement also. If somebody says there is no hell, then I say, “Why did Jesus have to say, ‘My God, why have You forsaken Me?’” I say Jesus literally suffered the pain of hell for me. It's not lasting, but that is part of it.

Where do we find particular threats to the doctrine of the atonement today?

Some evangelists are strong in emphasizing the universality of the Atonement, while I believe the Atonement to be effective. The atonement is a propitiation for those who are being saved, and the others are not propitiated in the same way. There are many people who say the Atonement is complete for everybody but then you have to accept it, and that makes it effective.

One thing you hear from evangelists that's good is, "God invites you. Don't say, ‘That's OK for somebody else.’ This is a message to you." That part of universality I fully accept; God demands of us to make Christ known to anyone we can reach. That is how the work of the Holy Spirit is accomplished also, and God changes their hearts and causes them to accept. But if you make the atonement universal, then God actually wanted to do something and He failed.

You have made a point against the charge that the Reformed believe in a limited atonement. You have argued that you can turn the argument around.
I hate the term "limited" — I think it is a misnomer. The question is not a question of limits; it's a question of extent. I prefer "definite" or "particular," especially "particular" because it goes particularly to certain individuals. It's an immense mistake to think otherwise because anybody who is not a universalist will have to say the atonement didn't work for everybody. And if it didn't work, then God failed in what He intended to do.

Some say it's a medicine that heals, but not unless you take it. That of course is true, but God has prepared that medicine and has exempted of His wrath those who take it. So taking it is essential, but that's not what makes it effective. What is effective is God's purpose, and then they take it according to that purpose.

Evangelism is necessary, but to approach people, you've got to make them conscious of what goes on, and you want them to respond. If they don't respond, then they bypass the blessing.

So the free offer of the gospel does not in any way conflict with notions of definite atonement.

That's right — the free offer of the gospel is not in conflict with predestination. The offer is made to people who are not predestined, and that is also part of God's purpose, because at that point, they confirm His judgment by rejecting the very thing they would have every good reason to take. It's like if they give me a medicine and I take it, I tilt the glass up, [but then turn the glass upside down to refuse the medicine].

I'm very concerned about definite atonement, because I think it is the thing that saves. If evangelical Arminians emphasize that human decision is significant in part of God's purpose, that's what I want to see too. They misunderstand Calvinists and think we deny this, but we don't deny it, if we are wise.

Also, some people only preach predestination that does not talk about the reality of your decision, which is abridging the gospel in another damaging way. That's a big mistake of the hyper-Calvinist.

This brings up something you have spoken about, written about and modeled to many of your students — the art of disagreeing, the challenge to demonstrate respect to those with whom you disagree. Talk a little bit about how you've learned and cultivated that.

It came precisely on the matter of the atonement. Because ordinarily in a given class, there were objections, I would answer them in class, and naturally I would want to win those other students there with me. So I was always trying to respond in a way that would be winsome and would convince them. I thought it would be good for students to see that I would readily take care of questions they asked. In that, I was different from some of my colleagues.

In reflecting on what strategy one should use when dealing with people who differ, I realized these were people I cherished — they were the students. I didn't want to say, "I am the professor; you are the student — just take what I'm saying." That wouldn't work. They would say, "He is a dictator," and I would undermine everything I was doing with them.

When I celebrated my 30th anniversary of teaching, I was asked to give a lecture in the chapel at Gordon-Conwell. Instead of taking a theological subject, I took something about the practice of theology and how to present it. At that point I felt led to put into order the things I had thought through in connection with the problems I was facing. My theme was, “Polemical
Theology, or how to deal with people who differ from me.” I had three questions in order: “What do I owe them?” “What can I learn from them?” and “How can I cope with them?”

First, “What do I owe?” I owe them to seek to understand what makes them tick and why they express themselves as they do. Also, I owe them to go back as much as I can to a place where we can agree, so as to see whether we can form an agreement so that you limit disagreement as much as you can. In that way you become not an enemy but a friend who guides them.

Then there’s “What can I learn from them?” Many people are not thinking of learning themselves; they are thinking of teaching. I say, “What do they indicate to me where I can improve?” In that, of course, I can learn that I'm wrong. If I learn that, it's a great blessing because then they are helping me know the truth and not carry on in the wrong.

I can also learn that I'm not expressing myself well, so that they don't understand what I'm trying to say. So I have to learn to express myself better so it will have better acceptance. I may also learn that there's something further that belongs to the subject that I have omitted. They are pointing out a deficiency I have in which I failed to represent the whole case.

Then I can learn that in order to reach people, I have to find other ways of approaching them than what I've done so far. If I find out I don't communicate, it's great for me to know it because I'm going to improve this.

Finally there’s “How can I cope with them?” What can I do to vindicate the truth I have and reject the error I see with them. You can use biblical ways—not just proof texts, but also ways in which the main movement of the Bible helps us. Then you can use other arguments. Logic is already a possibility — you show that things don't fit with this or that. History can be a way.

Sometimes I intentionally don’t mention a certain objection. I know it is coming, so on purpose I don't mention it. I let them do it because I know I can overcome it.

A remarkable pedagogical technique I see you display time and again is when a student raises a standard criticism to something you're saying, and he cites a few passages. You stop him and say, "I want to address your question, but first we have to perfect your argument. You should argue from this passage." So you actually make a better case for him, and then in a very loving way proceed to demolish it.

[When I do that, he's saying to himself,] “This guy understands me. He understands what I want to say.” That's why I said it's important not only to hear what they say, but also try to find out what they mean and what they aim at. In many cases I can share with them in their aim. If our aim is the same, then really I'm on their side anyway. We don't need to press.

That's the point — don't press the difference, but try to press the things you aim at together. I want to be sure to take the benefit from that.

I'd like to wrap this up by having you address the justification controversy as you've expressed it in print.

On the justification controversy you have three major upholders of the difference to be established. One of them is E.P. Sanders, who teaches at Duke University and who studied in a special way the position of Jewish people in what they call the "second temple," which is about the time of Jesus and thereabouts. Another is James Dunn, who used to hold the Lightfoot Chair.
of Divinity at the University of Durham. And then there is N.T. Wright.

These people have very different approaches, but the one thing common in them, as I see it, is the “New Perspective on Paul.” That is to say that Paul, in Romans and Galatians, did not discuss the way by which salvation is provided in Christ, but discusses the propriety of including Gentiles as well as Jews in the church.

They have shifted the center of gravity of those two most important letters, which were really the favorite letters of the Reformation, and made it center on an entirely different object — that is, to show that the Gentiles are not excluded as in some way they were in the Old Testament, but are to be incorporated as well as Jews in Christianity.

The first reflection I make is that the doctrine in question was certainly of very great concern in the early church. The Book of Acts, in my judgment, is written so as to lead us to see how the Holy Spirit guided the church step by step into understanding they were now not to exclude the Gentiles as foreign and did not have to ask all people to go through Judaism in order to get to the Christian faith — they can be accepted directly on the ground of repentance and faith.

This was done step by step in the Book of Acts, and I see the advancing understanding they had from Acts 2, which announces the whole thing with that multiplicity of languages anyway. This was actually formulated in Acts 15 as a decision of the church to which there would be no objection and given by the Holy Spirit. I find this done very, very plainly.

I also find it in the Epistle to the Ephesians. Chapter 2 has a big statement about how the two are now formed into one body. It now includes certainly the Gentiles as well as the Jews. Thus, to say that Romans and Galatians do nothing but that is, in my judgment, to abstract in those letters one or two passages that bear on that subject as well, but overlook the major emphasis. It is a whole emphasis of how God takes us out of sin into the sphere of righteousness by propitiating and purging our sins, and vesting us with the righteousness He owns and that Christ secured for us. This is atonement by substitution.

Those Epistles were the foundation on which the Reformation based its criticism of the sacramentalism of the Roman church in order to go back to a pure gospel approach. [The New Perspectives people] take an approach, then, that nullifies the major teaching of those two Epistles, which is actually found in other Scriptures as well.

Here you have a denial of the major emphasis of a very important Scripture — Romans. The problem of the Gentiles was a problem, in my judgment, until 50 A.D. By then, I believe the matter was solved. In the list of people saluted in Romans 16, a lot of them were Gentiles — they don't have Jewish names. And today the church is in overwhelming majority Gentile; 2 billion against a few million of Jews! To restrict Romans and Galatians to that issue is to make them practically irrelevant for today.

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