

The Importance of Inerrancy

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EVERY GENERATION has its doctrinal problems and this one is no exception. Sometimes those problems develop within the circle of conservatism, a fact which is also true of this day. The discussions which have arisen among conservatives in the field of eschatology are well known, but the debates and sometimes defections in the area of bibliology are less evident. However, they are more serious, since they touch the heart of the authority—to say nothing of the truth—of our faith.

One of these contemporary problems concerns the inerrancy of the Scriptures. *Inerrant* means “exempt from error,” and dictionaries consider it a synonym for *infallible* which means “not liable to deceive, certain.” Actually there is little difference in the meaning of the two words, although in the history of their use in relation to the Bible, *inerrant* is of much more recent use. If there is any difference in the shade of meaning it is simply this: *infallible* includes the resultant idea of trustworthiness while *inerrant* emphasizes principally the truthfulness of the Scriptures.

HISTORY OF THE DOCTRINE

A survey of the history of the doctrine of inerrancy shows that the discussions concerning its importance belong to the modern period. The fathers accepted the inspiration and authority of the Scriptures as an assumed and self-evident fact. Scripture was used to prove the deity of Christ, for instance, in the early debates over this doctrine. Origen constantly referred to the Scripture as final authority in his controversy with Celsus. Augustine has a clear statement concerning inerrancy: “For I confess to your charity that I have learned to defer this respect and honor to those Scrip-

tural books only which are not called canonical, that I believe most firmly that no one of those authors has erred in any respect in writing."¹

The medieval period saw little development in this area of doctrine. Indeed, sterility was the characteristic of the time. Interest was centered "in defining the status of the Bible in relation to that of other authorities in the Church."² Abelard expressed doubt as to the inerrancy of the text, though generally a high view of inspiration was held by most.

It was the Reformers who gave proper emphasis to the doctrines of inspiration and infallibility. And yet these did not occupy a large place in their writings. It seems that they realized the importance of these truths as the basis for true authority against the claim to authority of the Roman church, and yet they were so convinced of these truths that they could take them for granted rather than spending time in a systematic development and defense of these doctrines. Calvin referred to the Scriptures as the "sure and infallible record"³ and the "unerring standard."⁴ Luther declared in no uncertain terms: "I have learned to ascribe this honor i.e., infallibility only to books which are termed canonical, so that I confidently believe that not one of their authors erred. . . ."⁵

It has been in the modern period that the doctrine has of necessity had to be developed. The rationalistic attacks on the reliability of historical matters with a subsequent questioning of the authenticity of the text of Scripture were a denial of inerrancy and rejection of inspiration. It is important to notice that the two doctrines—inerrancy and inspiration—fell together under these attacks. Thus a new theory of inspiration arose which recognized the inspiration of certain truths in general and in so far as they conformed to natural reason. The doctrines of human fallibility in the production of Scripture and the infallibility of human reason in the interpretation of Scripture had gained the day.

But God had prepared others to expound and defend the truth. What the church owes to men like Hodge and Warfield

¹ *Epistolae*, 82. i, 3.

² Geoffrey W. Bromiley, "Church Doctrine of Inspiration," *Revelation and the Bible*, p. 209.

³ *Job*, p. 744.

⁴ *Institutes*, I, 149.

⁵ M. Reu, *Luther and the Scriptures*, p. 24.

can scarcely be measured. Their writings on these matters concerning inspiration are still classics. More recently, and in their train, *Thy Word Is Truth* by Edward J. Young presents and defends well verbal inspiration and inerrancy.

MODERN VIEWS OF THE DOCTRINE

The liberal attack which substituted an inspired experience for an inspired text was soon followed by the neo-orthodox attack. Neo-orthodoxy was in turn followed (but not supplanted) by neo-liberalism. There are similarities between these "new" schools of thought particularly in relation to their views of the Scriptures. Both believe that the Scriptures are at best a fallible witness to revelation (which may have been infallible when it left God but which certainly was corrupted by the time it was recorded in the Bible). Obviously what you choose to guide your life with from this fallible record is up to you, and the entire approach to the worthwhileness of the Scriptures becomes completely subjective. Both believe that revelation cannot be given in propositional truth but only in one's personal encounter with God. The Barthian attempts to rescue from this maze of subjectivity some remnant of authority for the Bible in that it does witness (however fallibly) to Christ who is THE revelation of God. But how can one expect to have a true encounter based on or at least aided by a false witness? Authority, under these conditions, not only does not reside in the Bible but in reality does not even reside in Christ (the witness to whom may be mistaken). Actually it comes to reside in the individual reader's opinion of the particular portion of the Bible which he is reading at the time. The attacks of both neo-orthodoxy and neo-liberalism have been against verbal inspiration and that which is included in it—inerrancy, for the proponents apparently realize that the two stand together.

With great sorrow one notices a tendency among conservatives to attempt to divorce inerrancy from verbal inspiration. In another's words the situation is accurately stated as follows: "Unquestionably the Bible teaches its own inspiration. It is the Book of God. It does not require us to hold inerrancy, though this is a natural corollary of full inspiration. The phenomena which present difficulties are not to be dismissed or underrated. They have driven many sincere

believers in the trustworthiness of the Bible as a spiritual guide to hold a modified position on the non-revelation material. Every man must be persuaded in his own mind. . . . It is possible that if our knowledge were greater, all seeming difficulties could be swept away."⁶ In other words, some because of apparent difficulties in the Bible (such as historical and chronological problems) are concluding that these sections are not inerrant though inspired. One hears more and more these days: "I believe the Bible is inspired, but I cannot believe that it is without error." Inspiration, yes; verbal inspiration, no.

Why is it so? One cannot see motives, but for some it is the result of honest wrestling with problems which has shaken their faith. For others, one cannot help but feel that it is part of the current worship of intellectualism as a sacred cow and a necessary step in achieving the approbation of godless intellectuals so-called. Is inerrancy important or must it be abandoned in this enlightened age?

THE IMPORTANCE OF THE DOCTRINE

The importance of Biblical inerrancy can best be seen in its relationships.

In relation to the character of God. We believe God's Word to be infallible simply because God Himself is infallible. God is true (John 3:33; 17:3; Rom. 3:4; 1 Thess. 1:9), and this true God speaks in the true Scriptures. "What Scripture says is to be received as the infallible Word of the infallible God, and to assert biblical inerrancy and infallibility is just to confess faith in (i) the divine origin of the Bible and (ii) the truthfulness and trustworthiness of God."⁷ But, the critics say, fallible men have corrupted what originally came from God in perfect form. Certainly, this *need* not be true, for God is fully *able* to preserve the record of His revelation inerrant. Only an examination of the Biblical evidence itself can determine whether or not there are errors, but not only is it not necessary that there be errors, but it is more plausible that the God of truth and power would preserve the record without error. "Revelation is but half revelation unless it be

⁶ Everett F. Harrison, "The Phenomena of Scripture," *Revelation and the Bible*, p. 250.

⁷ J. I. Packer, 'Fundamentalism' and the Word of God, pp. 95-96.

infallibly communicated; it is but half communicated unless it be infallibly recorded."⁸ Men were used but they were used by being borne along by the Holy Spirit (2 Pet. 2:21). This is what kept the record from error even though fallible men were used in producing it.

In relation to inspiration. A full and high view of inspiration requires inerrancy as a natural and necessary part of it. Errancy and inspiration are incompatible. "The real reason why men oppose the doctrine of an infallible Scripture is that they are not willing to embrace the Biblical doctrine of inspiration. There is no such thing as inspiration which does not carry with it the correlate of infallibility. A Bible that is fallible—and we speak of course of the original—is a Bible that is not inspired. A Bible that is inspired is a Bible that is infallible. There is no middle ground."⁹

Sometimes in an attempt to preserve inspiration without infallibility, the latter is limited to matters of "faith and practice." In other words, the Bible is infallibly inspired in doctrinal areas which concern the Christian's faith and life, but in "lesser" matters it is only inspired but not inerrant. It is popular, for instance, to exclude today the area of scientific matters from infallibility. "The Bible is not a textbook of science" is the cry. While this is true, such a statement should not be used to deceive people into thinking that when the Bible speaks on a matter that is in the area of science it may be in error. Although the Bible is not a textbook of science, when it records a scientific fact it speaks of that fact with infallible authority just the same as with matters of "faith and practice." If there are these parts of the Bible which are not inerrant, then the question properly arises, Who decides which parts are true and which parts are erroneous? One cannot hold to inspiration and infallibility of certain parts and only the inspiration of other parts.

In relation to the Bible's witness concerning itself. Below we will seek to show briefly that the Bible witnesses to its own infallibility. Obviously, if it is not infallible, it bears a false witness, and cannot be surely trusted in any of the matters on which it speaks. Its inerrancy, therefore, is vital to its

⁸ B. B. Warfield, *The Inspiration and Authority of the Bible*, p. 442.

⁹ Edward J. Young, *Thy Word Is Truth*, pp. 108-9.

own claims.

In relation to authority. As stated above, the authority of the Bible is under attack today by those who charge that such authority is the authority of a "paper Pope." Instead, they say, authority is in Christ, not the Bible for God's Word must not be "petrified in a dead record."¹⁰ This is such a super-pious statement that it apparently cannot be questioned. But questioned it must be, for how can Christ have any authority if the witness to Him (the Bible) is not infallible? And if it is infallible, then it has authority too. (And of course, the fundamentalist does not say the Bible has authority and Christ does not, although the Barthian tries to make our position appear thus.)

There is no other way of knowing about Christ and His authority except through the Bible. If the Bible is subject to error, then conceivably and very likely one of those errors concerns our knowledge of Him. It may concern his supernatural origin, or His deity, or His teachings, or His resurrection. And if in every detail He is not all that He claimed to be (and we would have our doubts if the witness to His claims is not inerrant), then what authority does that kind of person have?

Both the authority of Christ and the authority of the Scriptures depend on the inerrancy of the Scriptures, for statements that are not completely true cannot be absolutely authoritative. Furthermore, parts of the Bible cannot be true and thus authoritative while other parts are not. It is not a book that is authoritative only in matters of "faith and practice." Warfield correctly observed: "The authority which cannot assure of a hard fact is soon not trusted for a hard doctrine."¹¹

THE PROOF OF THE DOCTRINE

Briefly summarized the proof of the doctrine of inerrancy involves four concepts.

It involves the witness of Scripture to its own inerrancy. Is this a valid witness? Yes, for everyone has the right to speak for himself, and indeed there are some things that

¹⁰ J. K. S. Reid, *The Authority of Scripture*, p. 279.

¹¹ *Op. cit.*, p. 181.

would never be known if the one involved did not speak for himself.¹²

There are three classes of Scriptural references that testify to inerrancy. The first is the class of verses which affirm the truthfulness of God (cf. above *In relation to the character of God*). These testify to the truthfulness of the communication of His revelation. The second involves verses which emphasize the abiding character of the complete Scriptures. There are two principal passages. The first guarantees the abiding character of the letters which make up words and the parts of letters which distinguish them from each other. The reference is to the Lord's statements in Matthew 5:17-19 of the relevance of the jot (which is the smallest Hebrew letter) and the tittle (the minor stroke which distinguishes certain Hebrew letters from one another). Of course, the Lord's statement has no meaning if the Scriptures are subject to errancy. The other passage is John 10:33-36 where the Lord states that the Scripture cannot be broken. This is an assertion that the entire Scripture cannot be broken and that the particular words being quoted on that occasion cannot be broken. This is only possible because the Scripture is true in each particular and in all its parts.

The third class of Scriptures contains those in which an argument is based on a word or a form of a word. Of course, if the Bible is not inerrant such arguments cease to be of any weight. When answering the Sadducees the Lord based His argument on the present tense of the verb *to be* (Matt. 22:32). In questioning the Pharisees He set His trap on the single word "Lord" (Matt. 22:43-45). Paul's argument in Galatians 3 is based on the singular form of the word "seed" in contrast to the plural (v. 16). None of these arguments is valid unless tenses, words, and singulars and plurals are to be trusted. And they cannot be trusted apart from inerrancy.

It involves a proper concept of communication. Hodge has best stated this argument as follows: "Men think in words, and the more definitely they think the more are their thoughts immediately associated with an exactly appropriate verbal expression. Infallibility of thought can not be secured or pre-

¹² Cf. Alan M. Stibbs, "Witness of Scripture to Its Inspiration," *Revelation and the Bible*, pp. 108-9.

served independently of an infallible verbal rendering."¹³

It involves the analogy of Christ. Frequently the objection is raised, How can the Bible be without error since all the writings came through the instruments of men who are fallible? The answer to this involves an analogy with the person of Christ. It might be objected that the person of Christ cannot be sinless because humanity is sinful. But the person of Christ is sinless because humanity is not necessarily per se sinful. The first man was created sinless and our Lord took upon Himself the *form* of sinful flesh, but not sinful flesh. Sinfulness is not necessary to humanity; indeed the pattern of real humanity is not to be found in the universal examples of fallen men around us. Likewise, fallibility is not a necessary part of the result of man's being used to convey God's revelation. Usually man does corrupt whatever he touches, but this need not be so, and it was not so in the giving of the Scriptures.

It involves faith. No one who holds to inerrancy denies that there are problems. Nor does he deny that fully satisfactory solutions have not been found to all the problems. But, accepting the witness of Scripture to its own inerrancy, when he meets a problem for which he presently has no solution, he places his trust in the Scriptures rather than his fallible mind. After all, the Bible has proved its reliability in many ways and in many areas, and it is worthy of our trust. Man's knowledge has often proved unreliable and at best it is limited. "It is indeed true that we should not close our minds and researches to the ever-progressing resolution of difficulties under the illumination of the Spirit of truth, but those whose approach to faith is that of resolution of all difficulty have deserted the very nature of faith and of its ground."¹⁴ Even though the problems connected with apparent discrepancies, parallel passages, manner of quotation, absence of original autographs, etc., may not yet have been fully solved, neither have they ever been conclusively demonstrated to contain errors. In the meantime they are proper subjects for reverent, scholarly investigation—reverence that includes a proper faith in the God of truth and His inerrant record of that truth.

¹³ A. A. Hodge, *Outlines of Theology*, p. 67.

¹⁴ John Murray, "The Attestation of Scripture," *The Infallible Word*, p. 7.