

THE BIBLE IS WITHOUT ERROR

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As the father and son walked through the department store the little boy was singing to the top of his voice, “The B-I-B-L-E, yes that’s the book for me!” The father was somewhat embarrassed that the child’s volume level was attracting attention from other shoppers and the employees, but the truth he was proclaiming is one that is fundamental to the Christian faith. As that chorus continues, it asserts that “I stand alone on the Word of God, the B-I-B-L-E,” an assertion that forms that basis for all that we believe and practice.

The first article of the Statement of Fundamental Truths of the Assemblies of God states the same truth in more sophisticated language: “The Scriptures, both the Old and New Testaments, are verbally inspired of God and are the revelation of God to man, the infallible, authoritative rule of faith and conduct (2 Timothy 3:15-17; 1 Thessalonians 2:13; 2 Peter 1:21).”¹ This statement, which sets forth the official position of the Assemblies of God, clearly affirms the primacy of the Bible and upholds an extremely high view of Scripture in the faith and life of the believer.

There are a number of theological assertions being made about the high view of Scripture by the Statement of Fundamental Truths. Perhaps one of the most important for consideration is that the Bible is confessed to have authority for the beliefs and practices of the believer. To say that the Bible has authority is to affirm that it comes with the force of command; that is, it possesses the power to demand obedience from every human being. His very voice comes to humankind through the voices of the inspired writers of Scripture.

¹ Minutes of the 46th Session of the General Council of the Assemblies of God, 105. For a full treatment of the Statement of Fundamental Truths of the Assemblies of God see William W. Menzies, Bible Doctrines: A Pentecostal Perspective, revised and expanded by Stanley M. Horton (Springfield, MO: Logion Press, 1993).

There are alternative views of authority held by others within the broad scope of Christendom. For some the creeds and confessions of the Church become the authoritative basis for belief and practice. Distilled in those affirmations of faith is the means for judging appropriateness in other areas. For others the pronouncements of the Church, either through a group of authoritative persons or a given person, becomes the authority. The authority base of reason is held to be absolute by others. That which cannot be held rationally is to be discarded because the human capacity to reason governs all. At the other end of this particular spectrum would be the elevation of the realm of human feeling to the ultimate level of authority. This alternative would allow for the experience of human beings to be the final word for consideration of belief and practice.²

It should be noted that the alternative authority sources mentioned all have their origin in the human creation, not in the Creator. To assert that the Bible is the authority is to base authority in the God who created human beings and endowed them with reason, emotions, and volition. It is also to acknowledge that the Bible is the revelation of God to humankind, allowing humans to understand what He expects of them and has provided for them. In the preamble to the Statement of Fundamental Truths the Assemblies of God appeals to the Bible as the source of authority by declaring that “[t]he Bible is our all-sufficient rule for faith and practice.”³

The Pauline declaration of 2 Timothy 3:16, “All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness,”⁴ is a basis for the theological assertion that the Bible is inspired. The Scripture is the product of the breath of the living God, not the rational musings about God by human authors. That is not to deny the use by God of human authors, but it is to declare that what they wrote was supernaturally superintended by God

² For further treatment of these options to authority in theology see Benny C. Aker and James H. Railey, Jr., “Theological Foundations,” in Systematic Theology, Revised edition, ed. Stanley M. Horton (Springfield, MO: Logion Press, 1994), 39-60.

³ Minutes, 104.

⁴ Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture quotations are from the New International Version.

to insure that their product was His word to them and through them. Peter, in 2 Peter 1:20, pictures this process as human authors speaking from God “as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit.” These biblical passages give clear impetus to the understanding that the Bible comes to us from a divine source, and that that divine source worked powerfully in the communication of truth to us. God is the author of the Bible, thus giving to the Bible ultimate authority.

When discussing the issue of the inspiration of the Bible the terms plenary and verbal often are used. In a sense they are redundant, for to say that the inspiration of the Bible is verbal is to say that the very words employed were the exact ones God desired used to convey His word, and to say that the inspiration of the Bible is plenary is to say that the entirety of the Bible is inspired. If the words carry the force of the inspiring activity of the Holy Spirit of God, the totality of the Bible, then, is inspired. The redundancy, however, is an important one which emphasizes the claim that God’s activity in inspiration extends throughout the canonical material, including the words used by the human authors.

A high view of the Bible includes the assertion that it is infallible. By this confession the believer is noting that Scriptural material cannot be broken, destroyed, or rendered null and void. Having been given by God and with His authority, the Bible will stand the test of time, will come to pass, and will become alive in the believers’ lives as they with faith respond to its claims and expectations. Throughout human history attempts to destroy the Bible have been made, but each of them has come to naught as the Bible has proven its infallibility.

In recent theological, and for that matter practical, discussions, another word has entered the lexicon of believers as they have tried to ascertain and express what they believe about the Bible. That word is inerrancy. This is not to say that the word is either new or novel, but it is to note that it has come to the fore and has demanded more attention than previously it did. It is true that in some ways the words infallible and inerrant could be defined similarly. However, there is value in using both of them in the discussion of the Bible’s importance. For now the word inerrancy is to be understood as affirming that the Bible is true, that it does not contain any error,

and that what it affirms or asserts is to be accepted as truth without any admixture of anything less than full truth.

With his book, The Battle for the Bible, Harold Lindsell focused attention on the issue of inerrancy for the American Evangelical community.⁵ His insistence on an inerrant Bible evoked a renewal of the debate about the Bible as the source of authority. His setting up of inerrancy as the criterion by which one could be said to be evangelical raised not only the eyebrows but the ire of some of his contemporaries. The responses were fast in coming, and for a brief period it appeared that American Evangelicalism might be swamped by the controversy.

Jack B Rogers and Donald K. McKim provided an alternative to Lindsell with their book, The Authority and Interpretation of the Bible: An Historical Approach.⁶ The Rogers-McKim proposal argued that the proper view of the Bible in the church was that it was infallible regarding its main function, the story of God's salvation. In other areas (science, e.g.) technical errors are to be expected because God accommodated Himself to the mentality and world view of the authors of the Bible. They argued that this view was held by Augustine, Chrysostom, Luther, Calvin, the Westminster Divines, Bavinck, Berkouwer, Barth, and Brunner. Rogers and McKim argued that resting authority in the theory of inerrancy is the result of the Scholasticism of the seventeenth century, especially as it came to Princeton Seminary in the United States through Scottish Common-Sense Realism and the writings of Francis Turretin.

A critical response to the Rogers-McKim proposal came from John D. Woodbridge of Trinity Evangelical Divinity School.⁷ He argued that the inerrancy of all matters in the Bible is the oldest position held in the church and that the linchpins of the Rogers-McKim proposal,

⁵ Harold Lindsell, The Battle for the Bible (Grand Rapids, Zondervan, 1976).

⁶ Jack B. Rogers and Donald K. McKim, The Authority and Interpretation of the Bible: An Historical Approach (New York: Harper and Row, 1979).

⁷ John D. Woodbridge, Biblical Authority (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1982).

Augustine, Chrysostom, Luther, Calvin, and the Westminster Divines, actually supported total inerrancy. Thus, the proposal did not, he argued, use its source material well.

Lindsell entered the fray again with a sequel to his first book in which he reiterated the charges against those who would not agree to the call for seeing the Bible as inerrant in absolute terms.⁸ More institutions, denominations, and individuals were identified as having suspect views on the inerrancy issue.

In 1977, the International Council on Biblical Inerrancy (ICBI) was founded with the purpose of the “defense and application of the doctrine of biblical inerrancy as an essential element for the authority of Scripture and a necessity for the health of the church.”⁹ The ICBI produced a number of scholarly works which attempted to defend the position of inerrancy correctly and call the American Evangelical church back to that position.¹⁰

While the most recent turmoil in American Evangelicalism occurred in the 1970s and onward, by no means was that the first raising of the issue. Indeed, in some respects it is accurate to say that the issue of the inerrancy of the Scripture played a major role in the Modernist-Fundamentalist controversy of the early part of the twentieth century. Fighting against the perceived inroads of Darwinism, Liberalism, and Higher Criticism, the Old

⁸ Harold Lindsell, The Bible in the Balance (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1979).

⁹ James Montgomery Boice, “The International Council on Biblical Inerrancy,” in The Foundation of Biblical Authority, ed. James Montgomery Boice. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1978), 9.

¹⁰ Among the books which have come out of the work of the International Council on Biblical Inerrancy are: Norman L Geisler, ed., Inerrancy (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1979), Norman L. Geisler, ed., Biblical Errancy: Its Philosophical Roots (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1981), Gordon Lewis and Bruce Demarest, eds., Challenges to Inerrancy (Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1984), John Hannah, ed., Inerrancy and the Church (Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1984), and Earl Radmacher and Robert Preus, eds., Hermeneutics, Inerrancy, and the Bible (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1984).

Princetonians (A. A. Hodge, Benjamin Warfield, Charles Hodge, J. Gresham Machen, et. al.) argued for the inerrancy of the autographs (the original writings) of Scripture.¹¹

As can be seen from this brief sketch of the contemporary history of the debate about the inerrancy of the Bible, there are several views being argued for from different perspectives. For purposes of this article the various views on this issue can be arranged under four headings:

(1) Inerrancy is an issue which is irrelevant to theological concern; (2) Inerrancy relates only to the purpose of the Scriptures; (3) Inerrancy must be understood as limited to the material which explicitly relates to the provision of salvation; and, (4) Inerrancy is to be seen as complete, encompassing the entirety of the Bible.

David Hubbard argued that the concept of the inerrancy of the Scriptures is essentially irrelevant to theological concern.¹² He asserted that inerrancy is not clearly taught by the Bible itself and is a negative concept which focuses one on matters non-essential to faith. Thus, to argue about inerrancy only creates disunity within the Church and fails to address the more important and larger teachings of the Scripture. Thus, the term, and concept, inerrancy should not be a part of the theological debate about the value and authority of the Bible.

Asserting a similar view, scholars like Jack Rogers argue that the purpose of the Bible is to bring humans into personal fellowship with Christ.¹³ To say that the Scriptures are inerrant is only to affirm that they accomplish their purpose, not that they are necessarily factual or accurate in what they assert. The material presented in the Bible is not considered inerrant; that the Bible

¹¹ A representative work from this period espousing the inerrantist view is Benjamin B. Warfield, "The Real Problem of Inspiration," in The Inspiration and Authority of the Bible, ed. Samuel G. Craig (London: Marshall, Morgan and Scott, 1951).

¹² David A. Hubbard, "The Current Tensions: Is There a Way Out?," in Biblical Authority, ed. Jack Rogers (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1977), 149-181.

¹³ Jack B. Rogers, "The Church Doctrine of Biblical Authority," in Biblical Authority, ed. Jack Rogers (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1977), 15-46. For a full treatment of his views, see Rogers and McKim, The Authority and Interpretation of the Bible.

accomplishes the purpose of establishing fellowship with God is that which can be said to be inerrant.

The view that inerrancy must be seen as limited is held by scholars such as Stephen Davis who limits the inerrancy of the Bible to its teachings about salvation.¹⁴ Thus, the Bible can be said to be inerrant in the passages in which it teaches the way of salvation, but may contain errors in the passages in which it speaks of matters of history, science, geography, etc. In these areas the cultural understandings of the human authors are expressed, and they may not be without error any more than the views of other human authors of the same time periods.

In each of these first three options as to understanding inerrancy, the Bible is not viewed as being completely inerrant. Limitations are placed upon the concept so that the Bible is less than inerrant. The fourth option which is current in contemporary theological debate does emphasize that inerrancy should be applied to the entirety of the biblical material.

The fourth view on the inerrancy of the Bible, that it is complete, is held by scholars like Harold Lindsell¹⁵ and Millard Erickson.¹⁶ This view holds that the Bible is fully true in all it teaches or affirms, as it is correctly interpreted. To say this is to acknowledge that the Bible records correctly some material that it does not affirm (for instance, the sayings of the devil in his conversations with God about Job). Further, to assert complete inerrancy is to demand that the activity of properly interpreting the Biblical material take a very high priority for the believer. While it is beyond the purpose of this article, the concern for proper hermeneutical treatment of the Scripture must include such issues as authorial intent, cultural nuances, historical circumstances, grammatical and syntactical construction, and word meanings and studies.

¹⁴ Stephen T. Davis, The Debate About the Bible: Inerrancy Versus Infallibility (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster Press, 1977).

¹⁵ Lindsell, Battle for the Bible, and Bible in the Balance.

¹⁶ Millard J. Erickson, Christian Theology, Vol. 1 (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1983), 221-240.

It must also be noted that the argument for the inerrancy of the Bible focuses directly on the autographs (the original writings) and indirectly on the copies of those autographs. It is possible that minor errors occurred in the process of copying the sacred Scripture, a fact which could account for the perceived discrepancies to which opponents of complete inerrancy often appeal. The work of textual criticism has been very instrumental in closely re-establishing the autographs, and through careful comparison and analysis the apparent discrepancies can either be harmonized or studied further in light of future discoveries in archaeology.

Paul Feinberg, in an article in the Evangelical Dictionary of Theology, notes that the argument in support of the position which sees the Bible as completely inerrant rests on four pillars.¹⁷ First, one could argue for the inerrancy of the Bible from the Bible itself. That the Bible does declare that it is inspired requires that it also be inerrant. The Pauline passage referred to earlier from 2 Timothy says that the Scriptures are the product of the breathing out of God. That breathing out could hardly be in error.

Israel was given strict understandings about the nature of the work of the true prophet as being absolutely true in all respects. In Deuteronomy 13:1-5 and 18:20-22 the requirement is clear: the message of the prophet must be verifiably true in all respects if the prophet is to be accepted as true. Such an expectation, made of oral expressions, some of which were undoubtedly reduced to writing, could be extended to all of the biblical material. This is further evidenced by the expectation of those involved in the process of canonization that the authors of biblical books have been prophets (or apostles, for the New Testament).

Jesus taught that the Scriptures were authoritative and inerrant. He declared, “Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them. I tell you the truth, until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the Law until everything is accomplished (Matt. 5:17,18).” In another place Jesus asserted that “the Scripture cannot be broken (Jn.

¹⁷ Walter A. Elwell, ed. Evangelical Dictionary of Theology (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1984), s.v. “Bible, Inerrancy and Infallibility of,” by Paul D. Feinberg.

10:35).” As He neared the end of His earthy life and ministry He declared “[h]eaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away (Matt. 24:35).”¹⁸

The view of God which the Bible teaches certainly supports the teaching of the inerrancy of the Bible. Scripture declares unequivocally that God cannot lie (Num. 23:19; 1 Sam.15:29; Titus 1:2; Heb. 6:18). God is the author of the Bible; His character is displayed in the writing of the Bible; and, the Bible must be reflective of His inerrant character.

The inerrancy of the Bible can be supported, secondly, by an appeal to the history of the Church. This argument notes that in the history of the Church the view that the Bible was inerrant was the majority view, or at least that it has been held by some throughout history. The major figures in the Church, such as Augustine, Calvin, and Luther, can be cited as holding to a Bible without error.¹⁹

The third way in which the argument for the inerrancy of the Scripture can be made is to assert the need for all of the Bible to be truth if any of the Bible is to be accepted as true. How would one be able to discern which parts of the Bible were true if uncertainty remained as to the truthfulness of all of it? Further, if one were to deny the truthfulness of the Bible in areas that could be verified (geographical or historical areas, for example) how could one trust its truthfulness in areas beyond human ability to verify (the plan of salvation, for example)? Thus, inerrancy must be accepted so that there is a ground for truth in the revelation of God to human beings, the Bible.

The fourth way in which the inerrancy of the Bible can be defended is to note that should it be denied other areas of faith would become subject to question. For example, what might happen to the theology about the Christ if one could no longer accept as true the biblical

¹⁸ For a detailed presentation of the view of Christ toward the Bible see John W. Wenham, Christ and the Bible (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1984).

¹⁹ See, for example, Woodbridge, Biblical Authority.

testimony about Him? How could views about the promises of God relative to the future be held if the basis for those promises was swept away into the realm of doubt and uncertainty?

The affirmation that the Bible is inerrant is one which takes seriously the work of God in inspiring the Scripture. He has not haphazardly provided His word to humans, but has engaged Himself to assure that His revelation was communicated correctly. Believers can go to the Bible with the confidence that there they will find truth and not error, revelation and not deception, life and not death. The debate will continue as to the proper understanding of the concept of inerrancy, but let us declare in the words of the little chorus which the young lad sang in the department store, "God's Word has never failed, no, no, no"