

## **THEOLOGY AND BIBLICAL INERRANCY**

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Theology begins with an idea of God or with an awareness of God. Christian theology finds its meaning in the Christ who makes God known in redemption to man who needs a Saviour. Scriptures are the means used by the self-revealing God to communicate His redemptive concern and activity in an objective and verifiable way to His creatures.

### **I. Inerrant Scriptures Implied In A High View of God**

The ability and concern of the Deity will determine the quality of the Word of God. If God is not able or not disposed to give an adequate disclosure of Himself in terms understandable to man, the so-called Scriptures can never rise above human, fallible recording of the history of man or, at most, the imaginations of men about what God may be like or what His attitude may be toward man. A finite God would, at best, produce a limited and faulty Scripture. Or a God who did not love with an everlasting love would give an inadequate Scripture to unworthy and sinful man if he concerned Himself at all with the human needs.

Therefore, the idea of an inerrant Bible derives immediately from the idea of an infinite and loving God who, having used every other means of self-revelation, spoke at last

by his Son, whom he hath appointed heir of all things, by whom also he made the worlds; Who being the brightness of his glory, and the express image of his person, and upholding all things by the word of his power, when he had by himself purged our sins, sat down on the right hand of the Majesty on high (Heb. 1:2, 3 KJV).

The Old Testament is not just a faulty human record of God's revelation to man. The communication is so intrinsically involved in the revelation itself that one must say that the Word is that revelation. God spoke (Heb. 1:1). And by their own constantly repeated insistence, the Old Testament writings are the Word of the Lord. That Word does not simply report concerning truth. As Jesus said to the Father, "Thy word is truth" (John 17 :17). It is truth as the Old Testament revelation. It is truth as the Old Testament predictions of the coming of Christ. It is truth in its total contents, which support the whole theme of redemptive revelation. It is all truth. "One jot or one tittle shall in no wise pass from the law till all be fulfilled" (Matt. 5:18, KJV). While Jesus does not use the late Latin word "inerrant," He goes beyond the term to its strictest possible application to the Old Testament. The Word of God cannot fail in the least degree.

### **II. Inerrant Scriptures Implied In The Authority Of Jesus Christ**

Then out of the advent, person, and work of Jesus flows the New Testament. The Redeemer, redemption history, and the apostolic witness flow into one. The result is the New Testament. As the Old Testament (the words about the coming Jesus) had to be infallibly fulfilled, so these words of Jesus will not pass away (Matt. 24:35). They are the revelation of ultimate and absolute truth, and thus more sure than the heavens and the earth which belong to the realm of changing phenomena. The New Testament is also the voice of the living God, deriving its existence and authority from the living Christ.

Thus, biblical inerrancy derives from theology. The infinite God and His well-beloved Son alone account for the Scriptures. And their Word is inerrant.

### **III. Conversely, Inerrant Scriptures Reveal God And Christ**

The converse is also true. Our knowledge of God and of His Christ derives from the Scriptures. Modern man would be groping in pagan darkness but for the revelation of God in the Written Word. If this is not an inerrant Word, there is no certain knowledge only another tantalizing mythology or human philosophy.

Yes, the circularity of the argument is evident. God is the source of the inerrant Scriptures and the Scriptures are the source of our knowledge of God. And who can tell, even in the current Christian community, which dawns first in the child's consciousness-the basic, inevitable awareness of God or the relevance of the Scriptural witness to God?

#### **IV. Inter-locking *A Prioris***

Nor does it matter. Man's approach to either God or the Scriptures is in the realm of the *a priori*. Only by faith can one be certain of the true God or of the truthfulness of the testimony of His Word. If one is sure of either, he has no reason to doubt the other. Conversely, if one disbelieves one, he can find no solid ground for accepting the other. We have here not one *a priori* fact and one or two inferences but two or three interlocking *a prioris*. Accept any one and the others become reasonable inferences. But it matters little with which you start. None is proved by "scientific" demonstration. Nor does it need to be. Each has its certainty in faith.

Begin with an infinite, loving God and it is reasonable that He would reveal Himself explicitly in the Redeemer and universalize that revelation in an utterly reliable set of documents. Begin with Jesus Christ and He will reveal the Father, of whom He is the express image. He will also imbed this revelation in a totally relevant and authoritative form accessible to all men. Or begin with the inerrant Scriptures and there is no room to doubt the infinite, loving God or His well-pleasing Son. MI stand together-not as rival alternatives but as interlocking aspects of one progressive revelation, addressed primarily to faith. The approach is *a priori*-not *a posteriori*. "Through faith we understand" (Heb. 11:2), and without faith it is impossible either to approach God or to please Him (Heb. 11:6).

#### **V. Importance Of Biblical Inerrancy To Theology**

If an inerrant Bible is related to a high view of God and to the authority of Jesus Christ, both as a direct implication of them and as our source of knowledge concerning them, who could deny the importance of biblical inerrancy to Christian theology? To deny or ignore biblical inerrancy would be to pull out the keystone and let the whole structure of theology collapse. Certainty could not survive in any area of doctrine. Man would be left to the subjectivity of his own opinions. The following ten propositions, together with the brief commentary on them, underscore the crucial importance of biblical inerrancy to Christian theology.

*A. Scripture is the primary source of Christian theology.* In Protestantism at least this is the one point on which more agree than on any other. All attribute their certainty to a sure Word of God. There was a time, of course, when the New Testament did not hold this place, simply because it was not yet written. Even then Jesus and the apostles used the Old Testament constantly to proclaim and to prove the great truths that were held sacred as from God Himself. Jesus introduced some of His most radical teachings by the twofold affirmation that He came not to destroy but to fulfill the Old Testament, and that no part of the Old Testament, however tiny, would fall short of fulfillment (Matt. 5:17, 18).

When Jesus was defending His life against the charge of blasphemy involved in claiming to be the Son of God, the common ground between Jesus and the Jews was the confidence of all that "the scripture cannot be broken" (John 10:35). Thus Paul said with confidence that all Scripture, God-breathed as it is, can be used with profit for doctrine. Jesus Himself was not content, as the risen Lord, to proclaim the great truths about Himself in His own words. He opened their understanding

that they might understand the Scriptures in the light of His declarations (Luke 24:44-48).

Following the example of Jesus and the apostles, the early church taught as authoritative only what the Scriptures said, as enlarged, of course, to contain the New Testament fulfillment. This has been the hall-mark of a live and orthodox church through the centuries. As Wesley quotes Luther, "Divinity is nothing but a grammar of the language of the Holy Ghost." (1) The most significant exception to this approach, the Roman Church, did not so much set aside the Scriptures as add to them a tradition which they claimed to have preserved from apostolic times. Only the boldest deviant movements have dared to forego the claim of a biblical theology. And their lack has generally led to disaster or obscurity.

*B. Scripture is the norm for distinguishing between truth and error, orthodoxy and heresy.* Jesus told the crafty Sadducees that the source of their error was in "not knowing the scriptures." Lacking at this point, they failed in the practical consideration: neither did they know "the power of God" (Matt. 22:29). The same norm of truth as opposed to error is everywhere implicit and often explicit throughout the Scriptures. And the only effective appeal through the centuries by which the Church has been called back to truth, life, or purity has been a challenge to return to the Scriptures. No lasting reformation or spiritual revival has found its norm elsewhere. This is the basic weakness of the more recent movements of Barth, Bultmann, and Tillich. Other powers may bring change, but only the Scripture really reproves and corrects (II Tim. 3:16).

*C. Scripture gives Christian theology its unique authority and authenticity.* Christian theology, unlike other systems, has not only a content and a norm, but also an authority from which a valid call may issue for a return to the truth and to the old paths. Because of a Scripture that claims to be inerrant, it is possible to believe that a consistency can exist among the various elements of revelation that extend over many centuries, that are mediated through a variety of men, that are communicated in at least three different languages, that occur in a variety of cultures, and that appeared under a variety of governments-good and bad.

The principle of consistency is the authority of truth-the utterance of the Living God. God's commandments, promises, predictions, and mighty works show an amazing self-consistency that steers a perfect path through the maze of man's sin, confusion, and rebellion. No other religion has the benefit of such authentic control as the inerrant Scriptures. Thus no other religion is in a position to develop a theology of such authority and authenticity as is possessed by a truly biblical theology. It is Scripture that gives valid form and preservation to the divine revelation.

*D. The authority of Christian theology is based on the assumption of the utter reliability of the Scriptures.* Christianity is a preaching religion. Its beliefs are not opinions to be discussed in forums but truths to be proclaimed. On these truths rest the destiny of the hearer, the individual happiness and effectiveness of the person, and the good of society. The preacher cannot afford to be wrong in his proclamation. His source must be reliable. The whole Bible, all Scripture, must be God-breathed and hence profitable in the variety of uses that grow out of its proclamation. If at any point the Bible is not reliable, it is no stronger than its weakest link. Scripture would then break under the pressure of real life.

John Wesley compressed life's problems to one. He said, "I want to know one thing, the way to heaven." The answer is likewise reduced to one. "God himself has condescended to teach me the way." The way is in one document. "He hath written it down in a book." So Wesley became a "man of one book." He said, "O give me that book! At any price, give me the book of God! I have it: here is knowledge enough for me." (2)

This certainty concerning the reliability and effectiveness of the Scriptures is the mark of a truly Christian theology. Revelation cannot be separated from the God who gave it. God reveals Himself in Scripture. Augustine puts into the mouth of God the words, "Indeed, O man, what My Scripture

says, I say." (3) This conviction of the utter reliability of the Scriptures is the foundation-stone of theology.

*E. This reliability is normally conceived in terms of inerrancy and infallibility.* Examples hardly need to be given. Exceptions within the Church -are mostly related to the modern attacks on the Scriptures by the same rationalistic biblical criticism that claims to make the Scriptures more understandable. Wesley's view is typical of the normal approach to the Scriptures when he cries, "Every part thereof is worthy of God; and all together are one entire body, wherein is no defect, no excess." (4) And again when he says, "Nay, if there be any mistakes in the Bible there may as well be a thousand. If there be one falsehood in that book it did not come from the God of truth." (5) Who can doubt that this thorough confidence in the inerrancy of the Scriptures was a vital factor in the effectiveness of Wesley in his contribution to the great Evangelical Revival?

Luther says in the same vein, "I have learned to ascribe the honor of infallibility only to those books that are accepted as canonical. I am profoundly convinced that none of these writers has erred." (6) Anglican documents agree. In The Homilies we read that the Scriptures as a body were "written by the inspiration of the Holy Ghost" and are thus "the Word of the living God," "his infallible Word." (7) The same idea pervades all parts of the New Testament, the Church Fathers, and the significant Christian works through the centuries, in words appropriate to the times.

*F. The authority of Jesus Christ is at stake.* This proposition applies in at least three ways. The veracity of Jesus' teaching is at stake. No one ever spoke more strongly than He about the detailed reliability of the Scriptures. God would not let one tiniest bit fail of fulfillment (Matt. 5:18). "The scripture cannot be broken" (John 10:35). Wesley comments: "That is, nothing which is written therein can be censured or rejected." (8) Jesus knew, believed, studied, expounded, venerated, obeyed, and fulfilled the Scripture. This amounts to complete endorsement of the Scriptures by both precept and example. If He points us unwaveringly to the written Word as a firm foundation of our faith and hope, His veracity is at stake in the decision that is to be made about the complete reliability of the Word. If He fails us here, we are betrayed.

The authority of Jesus is at stake in another way. If the Scriptures are not reliable in detail, we know very little about the Jesus who lived in Palestine. Virtually all that we know of Him is recorded in the Bible. If even part of the record is unreliable, we have no stick to measure what we can trust and what we cannot. There would be no stopping point short of Bultmann's conclusion that we know little or nothing for sure of the historical Jesus. (9) All would be colored by prejudiced reporting or would be under the shadow of uncertainty. He who takes away my Bible takes away my Lord, and "I know not where they have laid Him" (John 20:13).

In still a third way the authority of Jesus is involved. In a peculiar sense the New Testament is His book. He chose and commissioned the apostles. He gave them the power of proxy. Whoever received the apostle was actually so treating the Master (Matt. 10:40). As witnesses to Christ, and as Spirit-filled interpreters for Christ, they conveyed to the apostolic church the gospel which was given to them. As the apostles passed on the tradition which was given to them by the Lord, they believed that their Spirit-inspired witness was Christ Himself speaking. Note Ephesians 4:21, where Paul says the Ephesians heard Christ and were taught by Him.

To Paul it made no difference whether the tradition was taught by word or by epistle. The communication and the obligation were the same. (See II Thess. 2:15.) If the Spirit inspired, apostolic witness to Christ, namely the books of the New Testament, cannot be accepted as infallibly true, it is not the apostle that is discredited; it is the Lord Himself. The authority of Jesus is at stake in the question of the inerrancy of the New Testament.

*G. The validity of redemption is likewise at stake.* If, as Jesus Himself repeatedly declared, in harmony with the whole Old and New Testaments, the purpose of Jesus' coming was as a vicarious

Redeemer, the history and authority called into question are redemption history and redemption authority. If the inerrant facticity of the biblical accounts cannot be trusted implicitly, which parts can or cannot be so trusted? Must I choose subjectively, according to my own inclination or philosophic background? Should I posit the source of redemption history in the truth of God or in the Gnostic mythology? If there is no sure Word of God that settles the issue straight across the board, I may, with Bultmann, find the idea of one person's dying for another as abhorrent to naturalism as is the idea of a fully inspired and inerrant Scripture. But in that case I would find my-self a lost sinner without redemption.

H. *Doubt or denial of inerrancy is historically accompanied by doubt or denial of other basic doctrines, widespread unbelief, a sick church, and vigorous and triumphant anti-Christian movements.* Until recent times such doubt had little standing in the Church. It is a modern peculiarity that atheists and agnostics claim to be Christians, and that Christians claim to be atheists and agnostics. Those who have an inerrant Bible have not found their God dead. He is very much alive. One wonders if the compromise on the Bible is not the wedge that opened the door for the massive unbelief that is sweeping over so much of the Church today. One wonders further if professed Christians can really find a resting place short of complete apostasy on the one hand or a return to a fully authoritative Word of God on the other. Currents run swiftly nowadays. One may not have long to wait for the answer.

I. *Doubt or denial of inerrancy logically destroys the basis of Christian theology.* If the doctrine of God, the person of Jesus Christ, and the fact of redemption could not survive with certainty the loss of inerrancy, what logical expectation is there of preserving any vital doctrine of Christian theology on the basis of an errant Scripture? To labor the point would be to insult one's intelligence.

J. *The hope of Christian theology is in an inerrant Scripture.* The answer is clear. Not only is inerrancy important to Christian theology; it is essential. The decision of this generation on inerrancy may determine the future of Christian theology for a long time to come, if Jesus tarries.

## DOCUMENTATIONS

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