
HOW TRUE IS THE BIBLE?

FROM THE BEGINNING OF THE CHRISTIAN CHURCH UNTIL WELL INTO THE EIGHTEENTH century the vast majority of Christians of all denominations acknowledged that the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments were uniquely the Word of God. In these books God speaks. And because God speaks in Scripture—as he does nowhere else in the same way—all who claimed to be Christians recognized the Bible as a divine authority binding upon all, a body of objective truth that transcends subjective understanding. In these books God’s saving acts in history are told to human beings so that we might believe. And the events of that history are divinely interpreted that men and women might understand the gospel and respond to it intelligently both in thought and action. The Bible is the written Word of God. Because the Bible is the Word of God, the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments are authoritative and inerrant.

The View of the First Sixteen Centuries

There are many statements to substantiate the existence of this high view of Scripture in the documents of the early church. Irenaeus, who lived and wrote in Lyons in the early years of the second century, wrote that we should be “most properly assured that the Scriptures are indeed perfect, since they were spoken by the Word of God and His Spirit.”¹ Cyril of Jerusalem, who lived in the fourth century, said, “Not even a casual statement must be delivered without the Holy Scriptures; nor must we be drawn aside by mere

¹Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, II, xxvii, 2. *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 1, ed. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson (1885; reprint ed., Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, n.d.), p. 399.

probability and artifices of speech. . . . For this salvation which we believe depends not on ingenious reasoning, but on demonstration of the Holy Scriptures."²

In a letter to Jerome, the translator of the Latin Vulgate, Augustine said, "I . . . believe most firmly that not one of those authors had erred in writing anything at all. If I do find anything in those books which seems contrary to truth, I decide that either the text is corrupt, or the translator did not follow what was really said, or that I failed to understand it. . . . The canonical books are entirely free of falsehood."³ And in his treatise "On the Trinity" he warns, "Do not be willing to yield to my writings as to the canonical Scriptures; but in these, when thou hast discovered even what thou didst not previously believe, believe it unhesitatingly."⁴

The same position holds for Luther. Some hold that Luther's reference to the Bible as "the cradle of Christ" proves that he believed in a revelation within the Bible (not one that was identical with it) and that he held the Scriptures in less esteem than the Christ they speak of. For some this means that not all the Bible is the Word of God. But this is not right.

Luther's phrase, the "cradle of Christ," occurs at the end of the third paragraph of his "Preface to the Old Testament." And there, as the late Lutheran scholar J. Theodore Mueller has demonstrated, Luther is actually defending the value of the Old Testament for Christians. Far from deprecating Scripture, Luther is actually concerned "to express his most reverent esteem of Holy Scripture, which offers to man the supreme blessing of eternal salvation in Christ."⁵ Luther himself says, "I beg and faithfully warn every pious Christian not to be offended by the simplicity of the language and the stories that will often meet him here [in the Old Testament]. Let him not doubt that, however simple they may seem, they are the very words, works, judgments, and deeds of the high majesty, power, and wisdom of God."⁶

²Cyril of Jerusalem, *Catechetical Lectures*, IV, 17. *The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, Series 2, vol. 7, ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace (1893; reprint ed., Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, n.d.), p. 23.

³Augustine, *Epistles*, 82. *The Fathers of the Church*, vol. 12, "St. Augustine: Letters 1-82," trans. Wilfrid Parsons (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1951), pp. 392, 409.

⁴Augustine, "On the Trinity." Preface to chap. 3, *The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, Series 1, vol. 3, ed. Philip Schaff (Buffalo: The Christian Literature Company, 1887), p. 56.

⁵J. Theodore Mueller, "Luther's 'Cradle of Christ,'" *Christianity Today*, 24 October 1960, p. 11.

⁶Martin Luther, "Preface to the Old Testament," *What Luther Says: An Anthology*, ed. Ewald M. Plass, vol. 1 (St. Louis: Concordia, 1959), p. 71. The passage is quoted in a slightly different translation by Mueller, "Luther's 'Cradle of Christ.'"

In another place Luther says, "The Scriptures, although they also were written by men, are not of men nor from men, but from God."⁷ Again, "We must make a great difference between God's Word and the word of man. A man's word is a little sound, that flies into the air, and soon vanishes; but the Word of God is greater than heaven and earth, yea, greater than death and hell, for it forms part of the power of God, and endures everlastingly."⁸

In some places Calvin is even more outspoken. Commenting on 2 Timothy 3:16, the Geneva reformer maintains,

This is the principle that distinguishes our religion from all others, that we know that God hath spoken to us and are fully convinced that the prophets did not speak of themselves, but as organs of the Holy Spirit uttered only that which they had been commissioned from heaven to declare. All those who wish to profit from the Scriptures must first accept this as a settled principle, that the Law and the prophets are not teachings handed on at the pleasure of men, or produced by men's minds as their source, but are dictated by the Holy Spirit.

He concludes, "We owe to the Scripture the same reverence as we owe to God, since it has its only source in Him and has nothing of human origin mixed with it."⁹ In his comments on the Psalms he speaks of the Bible as that "certain and unerring rule" (Ps. 5:11).

John Wesley says the same. "The Scripture, therefore, is a rule sufficient in itself, and was by men divinely inspired at once delivered to the world."¹⁰ "If there be any mistakes in the Bible, there may well be a thousand. If there be one falsehood in that book, it did not come from the God of truth."¹¹

It was the glory of the church that in the first sixteen or seventeen centuries all Christians in every place, despite their differences of opinion on theology or on questions of church order, exhibited at least a mental allegiance to the Bible as the supreme and inerrant authority for the Christian in all matters. It might be neglected. There might be disagreements about what it actually teaches. It might even be contradicted. Still it was the Word

⁷Martin Luther, "That Doctrines of Men Are to Be Rejected," *What Luther Says: An Anthology*, vol. 1, p. 63.

⁸Martin Luther, *Table Talk*, 44, *A Compend of Luther's Theology*, ed. Hugh Thomson Kerr (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1943), p. 10.

⁹John Calvin, *Calvin's New Testament Commentaries*, vol. 10, "The Second Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Corinthians and the Epistles to Timothy, Titus and Philemon," trans. T. A. Small (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1964), p. 330.

¹⁰John Wesley, *A Roman Catechism*, Question 5, *The Works of John Wesley*, vol. 10 (1872; reprint ed., Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, n.d.), p. 90.

¹¹John Wesley, *The Works of John Wesley*, 4:82.

of God. It was the only infallible rule of faith and practice.

Post-Reformation Views

In the post-Reformation period the orthodox view of Scripture came under increasingly devastating attacks. In the Roman Catholic Church the attacks came from the Church's established traditions. Already weakened by centuries of appealing to the early church fathers rather than to the Scripture in defense of a point of doctrine and in violent reaction to the Protestant Reformation, the Roman Catholic Church in 1546 took the step of officially placing the tradition of the Church alongside Scripture as an equally valid source of revelation. The full significance of that decision was doubtlessly overlooked at the time of the Council of Trent, but it was monumental. The act had tragic consequences for the Roman Catholic Church, as the continuing development of debilitating doctrines, such as Mariology and the veneration of the saints, indicates. In theory, the Bible remains inerrant, at least for large sectors of Catholicism. But the deep human preference for traditions rather than an absolute and inerrant Word inevitably shifts the balance of authority away from God's Word.

In Protestantism the attack came from the so-called higher criticism. For a time, as the result of their heritage and sharp polemic against Catholicism, Protestant churches generally held to an infallible Bible. But in the eighteenth and particularly in the nineteenth century a critical appraisal of the Scriptures, backed by a naturalistic rationalism, succeeded in dislodging the Bible from the place it had held previously. For the church of the age of rationalism, the Bible became man's word about God and man rather than God's word to man. Eventually, having rejected the unique, divine character of the Bible, many critics rejected its authority also.

The Catholic Church weakened the orthodox view of the Bible by exalting human traditions to the stature of Scripture. Protestants weakened the orthodox view of Scripture by lowering the Bible to the level of traditions. The differences are great, but the results were similar. Neither group entirely denied the revelational quality of Scripture. But in both cases the unique character of Scripture was lost, its authority forfeited and the function of the Bible as the reforming voice of God within the church forgotten.

The fact that neither of these two positions is tenable should be evident to everyone and should push the church back toward its original position. But this does not seem to be happening. Instead, some evangelicals who have traditionally insisted on an inerrant Word seem to be moving in a more liberal direction, displaying an increasingly ambivalent attitude toward infal-

libility.

We must be extremely careful at this point. There is value in questioning what we should mean by "inerrancy," which differs from outright and dangerous rejection of it. For example, some very conservative scholars have asked whether *inerrancy* is really the best term to use in reference to the Bible since it would seem to demand a precision of detail so exact as to include even a need for faultless grammar, which does not exist. They have preferred the word *infallibility* at this point. Others have faulted the term *inerrancy* for seeming to require modern, scientific standards of accuracy in expression which the ancient writers obviously did not have. Such scholars have preferred to speak of the Bible as *trustworthy* or *truthful*. But these are not the areas of real concern. In these areas there may well be movement, based on the knowledge that no one term—*inerrancy*, *infallibility*, *trustworthiness*, *reliability*, *truthfulness*, or others—perfectly describes what we mean. But there must not be movement in holding to the unique character and authority of the Bible, in whole and in part, as the Word of God. The word *inerrancy*, whatever its limitations, at least preserves this emphasis.

The Philosophy of Modern Criticism

Modern biblical criticism is generally credited with bringing down the old inerrancy view. It is said that inerrancy was a possible option in days when men and women knew very little about the biblical texts or biblical history. But modern discoveries have changed all that. Today we know that the Bible contains errors, so we are told, and therefore the overthrow of biblical infallibility is a *fait accompli*. For example, Quirinius was apparently "not strictly" the governor of Syria at the time of Christ's birth (Lk. 2:2). Moses "did not" write the Pentateuch. One scholar wrote, "The scientific development of the last century has rendered untenable the whole conception of the Bible as a verbally inspired book, to which we can appeal with absolute certainty for infallible guidance in all matters of faith and conduct."¹²

But does modern critical study demand radical change of our view of Scripture? Doubts emerge when we realize that most of the alleged errors in the Bible are not recent discoveries, due to scientific criticism, but are only difficulties known centuries ago to most serious biblical students. Origen, Augustine, Luther, Calvin and countless others were aware of these problems. They knew that various biblical time periods are reported differently

¹²W. L. Knox, *Essays Catholic and Critical* (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1931), p. 99.

by different writers. (For example, Genesis 15:13 says the duration of the bondage in Israel in Egypt was four hundred years while Exodus 12:41 says it was four hundred and thirty years.) They knew details of parallel narrations sometimes vary (as in the number of angels at the tomb of Christ following the resurrection). But they understood these to result merely from the authors' varying perspectives or specific intent in writing. They did not feel compelled to jettison the orthodox conception of Scripture because of these problems.

The real problem with inerrancy therefore goes beyond the data produced by scientific criticism to the philosophy underlying the modern critical enterprise. That philosophy is naturalism. This world view denies the supernatural, or it seeks to place it beyond scientific investigation. The supernatural therefore has no direct correlation with the specific words of the biblical text. It is, to use Francis Schaeffer's term, an "upper story" reality, beyond proof or contradiction. Thus, writes Pinnock,

Negative criticism is now the tool of the new theology. It is no longer employed in a hit-and-run way to ferret out objectionable features of biblical teaching. It now serves to discredit the entire notion at the heart of Christianity that there is a body of revealed information, normative for Christian theology. In the modern interest in hermeneutics we see no revival of concern to take Scriptural truth seriously, but only an attempt to use the Bible in a new, non-literal, existential way.¹³

A prime example of this would be the theology of Rudolf Bultmann, who writes volumes of theological exposition but who denies that Christian revelation possesses propositional content at all.

If that is the real issue in the inerrancy debate, then the debate is obviously far more important than whether or not a few insignificant errors can be shown to exist in the Scriptures. What is at stake is the whole matter of revelation. Can God reveal himself to humanity? And, to be more specific, can he reveal himself in language, the specifics of which become normative for Christian faith and action? With an inerrant Bible these things are possible. Without it, theology inevitably enters a wasteland of human speculation. The church, which needs a sure Word of God, flounders. Without an inerrant revelation, theology is not only adrift, it is meaningless. Having repudiated its right to speak of Scripture on the basis of Scripture, it forfeits its right to speak on any other issue as well.

¹³Clark H. Pinnock, *A Defense of Biblical Infallibility* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1967), p. 4.

The Case for Inerrancy

Divine truthfulness is the rock beneath a defense of Scripture as the authoritative and entirely trustworthy Word of God. The steps in the defense are as follows:

1. The Bible is a generally trustworthy document. Its reliability is established by treating it like any other historical record, like, for instance, the works of Josephus or the accounts of war by Julius Caesar.

2. On the basis of the history recorded by the Bible we have sufficient reason for believing that the central character of the Bible, Jesus Christ, did what he is claimed to have done and therefore is who he claimed to be: the unique Son of God.

3. As the unique Son of God, the Lord Jesus Christ is an infallible authority.

4. Jesus Christ not only assumed the Bible's authority; he taught it, going so far as to teach that it is entirely without error and is eternal, being the Word of God. "For truly, I say to you, till heaven and earth pass away, not an iota, not a dot, will pass from the law until all is accomplished" (Mt. 5:18).

5. If the Bible is the Word of God, as Jesus taught, it must for this reason alone be entirely trustworthy and inerrant, for God is a God of truth.

6. Therefore, on the basis of the teaching of Jesus Christ, the infallible Son of God, the church believes the Bible also to be infallible.¹⁴

In other words, the case for inerrancy rests on and is an inevitable consequence of the type of material presented in chapters 3—4. The Bible as a historical document gives us reliable knowledge of an infallible Christ. Christ gives the highest regard to Scripture. Consequently, the doctrines of Christ should and must be the doctrines of his followers.

The Case against Inerrancy

Many who follow the logic of the traditional defense of the inerrancy of Scripture are nevertheless bothered by what seem to be insurmountable objections. Let us look at these objections and see whether they are as formidable as they appear.

The first objection is based on the *character of the biblical texts*. "Granted," someone might say, "that these are reliable historical documents; isn't it true, nevertheless, that this is precisely one of the problems? They are obviously

¹⁴This classical approach to the defense of Scripture is discussed at length by R. C. Sproul in his essay "The Case for Inerrancy: A Methodological Analysis," in *God's Inerrant Word*, pp. 248–60.

historical and therefore human documents. They are selective in what they contain. They use the limited, sometimes figurative language of the age in which they were written. Parallel accounts reveal different points of view possessed by the different authors. The literary polish of the material varies. Is that what we are to expect of a divine revelation? Doesn't this in itself mean that we are dealing with a purely human book?"

It is not up to us, however, to say in what form a divine revelation must be given nor to insist that the revelation cannot be divine because of certain characteristics. Obviously, nothing human is a fit vehicle for God's truth. But God is not prevented from stooping to use human language to convey his truth inerrantly. Calvin compared God's action to that of a mother who uses baby talk in communicating with a child. It is obviously a limited communication, for the child cannot converse on the mother's level. But it is true communication nonetheless. Therefore the character of the documents in itself has nothing to do with the inerrancy question.

A second objection to inerrancy begins where the first objection leaves off. It deals not so much with the character of the biblical books but with the simple fact that they are *obviously human productions*. "To err is human," such critics maintain. "Consequently, the Bible, as a human book, must contain errors."

At first glance this argument may appear logical, but further examination shows that it is not necessarily so. While human beings do err, it is not true that a given individual will err all the time or in any case necessarily. For example, the development of a scientific equation is, for the purpose for which it is given, literally infallible. The same can be said for a correctly printed announcement of a meeting, instructions for operating a car and other things. "To be sure," as John Warwick Montgomery notes in developing this argument, "the production over centuries of sixty-six inerrant and mutually consistent books by different authors is a tall order—and we cheerfully appeal to God's Spirit to achieve it—but the point remains that there is nothing metaphysically inhuman or against human nature in such a possibility."¹⁵

The analogy between the conception and birth of the Lord Jesus Christ and the giving of our Bible is instructive. We read that, when the Lord was conceived in the womb of the virgin Mary, the Holy Spirit overshadowed her so that the child that was born was called "the Son of God" (Lk. 1:35). The

¹⁵John Warwick Montgomery, "Biblical Inerrancy: What Is at Stake?" in *God's Inerrant Word*, p. 33.

divine and the human met in Christ's conception, and the result was also in its turn both human and divine. Christ was a real man. He was a particular person, a Jew. He had a certain measurable weight and a recognizable appearance. You could have taken a picture of him. Still he was also God Almighty and without sin.

Somewhat comparably, just as the Holy Spirit came upon the virgin Mary so that she conceived the human Son of God in her womb, so also did the Holy Spirit come upon the brain cells of Moses, David, the prophets, the evangelists, Paul and the other biblical writers, so that they brought forth from their minds those books which constitute our Bible. Their writings bear the marks of human personality. They differ in style. Yet the ultimate source is divine, and the touch of the human does not stamp them with error any more than the womb of Mary imparted sin to the Savior.

A third objection to inerrancy is based on the fact that *inerrancy is claimed only for the original autographs*, not the copies that have been made from them on which our contemporary translations are based. Since no one living has ever seen the autographs and we are therefore unable either to verify or falsify the claim, is it not epistemological nonsense to appeal to them? "So what if there is an inerrant original?" someone might argue. "Since we don't have it, the appeal to an inerrant Bible is meaningless."

But is it? It would be if two things were true: (1) if the number of apparent errors remained constant as one moved back through the copies toward the original writing and (2) if believers in infallibility appealed to an original that differed substantially from the best manuscript copies in existence. But neither is the case. On the contrary,

the number of textual errors steadily diminishes as one moves back in the direction of the lost autographs, reasonably encouraging the supposition that could we entirely fill in the interval between the originals and our earliest texts and fragments (some New Testament papyri going back to the first century itself), all apparent errors would disappear. . . . The conservative evangelical only appeals to the missing autographs over against existent best texts in those limited and specific instances (such as the recording of numerals) where independent evidence shows a very high probability of transcriptional errors from the very outset.¹⁶

The believer in infallibility handles textual problems in the same way that a secular scholar handles problems relating to any ancient document. However, due to the extraordinary number and variety of the biblical manu-

¹⁶Montgomery, *God's Inerrant Word*, p. 36.

scripts, there is no reason to doubt that today's text is identical to the original text in all but a few places. And these few problem areas are clearly known to commentators.

A fourth major objection to the doctrine of inerrancy concerns the proper *function of language as a vehicle of truth*. Some scholars imply that truth transcends language so that the truth of Scripture is to be found in the thoughts of Scripture rather than in its words. But does that make sense? "To accept the inspiration of the thoughts and not the words of the biblical writers runs counter not only to the Scriptural claims, but is intrinsically meaningless," as Pinnock observes. "What is an inspired thought expressed in uninspired language?"¹⁷ If the Bible is inspired at all, it must be inspired verbally. And verbal inspiration means infallibility.

To be sure, there are parts of Scripture where the choice of a word may make very little difference in recording a fact or doctrine. The wording of some verses can be changed, as translators regularly do to convey the proper meaning to a particular culture. But there are other places where the words are crucial, and a doctrine will inevitably suffer if we fail to take them seriously. Certainly, if we are to have an authoritative Bible, we must also have a verbally inspired and therefore an infallible Bible, a Bible that is infallible at the point in question and at other points as well. This view agrees with the Bible's own teaching and with the nature of language.

The Question of Errors

Finally, there are those who would follow the argument so far, and even agree with it in places, but who, nevertheless, feel that certain "errors" have been disclosed by the "assured results" of biblical scholarship. Are there errors that have really been proven to exist? There are difficulties in places. No one questions that. But has scholarship actually demonstrated that the books of the Bible are fallible and therefore written only by men after all?

There was a time not long ago when claims such as these were made by many influential people and were made quite openly. In past years almost every biblical theologian and scholar spoke of so-called certain results or assured findings that were imagined to have laid the orthodox conception of the Bible to rest forever. Today, however, as anyone who has had the opportunity to delve deeply into such questions knows, these phrases no longer occur with such frequency. In fact, they hardly occur at all. Why? Simply because, as a result of a continuing march of biblical and archaeological in-

¹⁷Pinnock, *Biblical Infallibility*, p. 8.

vestigations, many so-called assured results have blown up in the faces of those who propounded them.

In 2 Kings 15:29 there is a reference to a king of Assyria named Tiglath-Pileser. He is spoken of as having conquered the Israelites of the northern kingdom and as having taken many of them into captivity. A generation ago scholars were saying—their books are still in our libraries—that this king never existed and that the account of the fall of Israel to Assyria is something akin to mythology. Now, however, archaeologists have excavated Tiglath-Pileser's capital city and can give his history. They have even found his name pressed into bricks which read: "I, Tiglath-Pileser, king of the west lands, king of the earth, whose kingdom extends to the great sea. . . ." The English reader can find accounts of his battles with Israel in James B. Pritchard's volume *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to The Old Testament*. About the same time, some scholars were denying that Moses could have written the first five books of the Bible on the grounds, which seemed irrefutable enough, that writing had not been invented in his day. Since that time, however, archaeologists have unearthed thousands of tablets and inscriptions written many hundreds of years before Moses and even before Abraham. In fact, they now know of six different written languages from or before Moses' period.

In more recent days many could be found who denied that the historical books of the New Testament were written close enough to the events they relate to be reliable. The synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark and Luke) in particular were dated late; and John, which seemed to have the greatest measure of Greek flavoring, was pushed back well into the second or, by some scholars, into the third Christian century. In time, however, a piece of papyrus was uncovered in Egypt which required scholars to date the fourth Gospel no later than the year A.D. 125 and presumably much before that time.

The results of scholarship, far from discrediting the Bible, actually increasingly validate its claims. They do not prove infallibility—no amount of data alone can do that—but they do lead in the direction of reliability. They reveal nothing incompatible with the highest view of Scripture. In fact, as *Time* magazine acknowledged in a 1974 cover story on the Bible,

The breadth, sophistication and diversity of all this biblical investigation are impressive, but it begs a question: Has it made the Bible more credible or less? Literalists who feel the ground move when a verse is challenged would have to say that credibility has suffered. Doubt has been sown, faith is in jeopardy. But believers who expect something else from the

Bible may well conclude that its credibility has been enhanced. After more than two centuries of facing the heaviest scientific guns that could be brought to bear, the Bible has survived—and is perhaps the better for the siege. Even on the critics' own terms—historical fact—the Scriptures seem more acceptable now than they did when the rationalists began the attack.¹⁸

The Christian need never fear to stand on the Word of God, recognizing its full authority as the Lord Jesus Christ himself did. At times there will be critical theories that run against it. The arguments may seem unanswerable, so much so that the one who tries to stand against them may be dismissed as an obscurantist. The wise of this world will say, "You can believe that if you want to, but the results of scientific criticism teach us better." Such things have happened before and will happen again. But Christians who will stand on Scripture will find even within their lifetime that, as the so-called assured results begin to crumble around the scholars, the view of the Bible held by the Lord Jesus Christ, the historical view of the church, will prevail.

A number of years ago a former leader of the Church of England, Bishop Ryle of Liverpool, wrote, "Give me the plenary, verbal theory of biblical inspiration with all its difficulties, rather than the doubt. I accept the difficulties and humbly wait for their solution. But while I wait, I am standing on the rock."

¹⁸"The Bible: The Believers Gain," *Time*, 30 December 1974, p. 41.