

Shall We Call The Bible Inerrant?

by Harold Hazelip

P. T. Forsyth wrote that the question of authority in its religious form is "the last as well as the first issue of life." And Soren Kierkegaard turned to doctrinal use the homey observation that one cannot sew without a knot in his thread.

Neo-orthodox thinkers have popularized the view that revelation is entirely personal and subjective. According to this position, there can be no simple identification of revelation with the contents of the Bible.

William Temple argued that "there is no such thing as revealed truth. There are truths of revelation . . . but they are not themselves directly revealed" (*Nature, Man and God*, pp. 317, 322). J. I. Packer, a British Evangelical, replied that "The Word of God consists of revealed truths God reveals himself to men both by exercising power for them and by teaching truth to them" (*"Fundamentalism" and the Word of God*, p. 92).

A NUMBER OF EVANGELICAL WRITERS NO LONGER HOLD THE BIBLE TO BE INERRANT

More recently, the Evangelical community in America has experienced turmoil occasioned by discussions of the nature and meaning of inspiration. A number of Evangelical writers have moved from an inerrancy stance to a view of limited inerrancy (cf. Harold Lindsell, *The Battle for the Bible*; Stephen T. Davis, *The Debate About the Bible: Inerrancy Versus Infallibility*).

What are the data for deciding on the validity of the word "inerrant" as applied to the Bible? We may conveniently set forth the outlines of this evidence as Biblical, historical, doctrinal and practical.

Biblical View of Inspiration

It would be unacceptable to claim something for the Bible which it does not claim for itself. Scripture nowhere uses Hebrew or Greek words which would directly translate as "inerrant" nor does this word appear in English versions. While the same observation may be made concerning the term "personal encounter," this reminds us that the word "inerrant" is our attempt to set forth succinctly what the Bible claims for itself. F. C. Grant, who was not an advocate of inerrancy, wrote, "Everywhere (in the Bible) it is taken for granted that what is written in scripture is the work of divine inspiration, and is therefore trustworthy, infallible, and inerrant" (*An Introduction to New Testament Thought*, p. 75).

A classic statement of the Biblical view of its own inspiration was written by B. B. Warfield in *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*. Warfield examined many passages but hinged his argument on three texts.

1. *II Timothy 3:16*: "All scripture is inspired by God . . ." In this passage and its immediate context Paul affirms that every scripture is "God breathed." The result is that what

scripture says, God says.

**PAUL'S VIEW OF THE OLD TESTAMENT
IS ONE OF COMPLETE TRUST . . . HE COULD
TURN AN ARGUMENT ON ONE WORD**

Paul's view of the Old Testament is one of complete trust. He often personifies scripture as God speaking: "For the scripture says to Pharaoh . . ." (Romans 9:17). God promised what the scripture has promised (Acts 12:32-35); scriptures are "oracles of God" (Romans 3:2). Paul could turn an argument on one word in the text: "It does not say, 'and to offsprings,' referring to many; but, referring to one, 'And to your offspring,' which is Christ" (Galatians 3:16). He told Felix that he believed "everything laid down in the law or written in the prophets" (Acts 24:14).
2. *II Peter 1:20,21*: Paul gave us a positive view of scripture production—"All scripture is inspired." Peter states his point negatively: "It was not through any human whim that men prophesied of old . . ." (NEB). Scripture was not produced "out of the prophet's own head." Men "spoke from God" as they were "moved" or "borne" by the Holy Spirit.

One may see Peter's viewpoint in operation on Pentecost: "Brethren, the scripture had to be fulfilled, which the Holy Spirit spoke beforehand by the mouth of David, concerning Judas . . ." (Acts 1:16). The prophet's words are the Spirit's words.

3. *John 10:34-36*: "Jesus answered them, Is it not written in your law, 'I said, you are gods'? If he called them gods to whom the word of God came (and scripture cannot be broken), do you say of him whom the Father consecrated and sent into the world, 'You are blaspheming,' because I said, 'I am the son of God'?" Jesus' response to the charge of blasphemy centered on the presence of one word in the text. His words, "scripture cannot be broken," must be of concern to us in the formulation of our own view of scripture.

Jesus' view is consistent: ". . . not an iota, not a dot, will pass from the law until all is accomplished" (Matthew 5:18). "The Son of man goes as it is written of him" (Mark 14:21). "Do you think that I cannot appeal to my Father, and he will at once send me more than twelve legions of angels? But how then should the scriptures be fulfilled, that it must be so?" (Matthew 26:53, 54).

**WHAT IS SAID BY GOD IS ATTRIBUTED
TO SCRIPTURE, AND WHAT IS
SAID IN
SCRIPTURE IS ATTRIBUTED TO GOD**

Warfield also surveys two classes of scripture passages: (1) passages in which the scriptures are spoken of as if they were God (Galatians 3:8—Genesis 1:3; Romans 9:17—Exodus 9:16); (2) passages in which God is spoken of as if he were the scriptures (Hebrews 3:7—Psalm 95:7; Acts 4:24,25—Psalm 2:1; Hebrews 1:6—Deuteronomy 2:43; Psalm 104:4; Psalm 45:7; Psalm 122:26). In the first group, "scripture says" means "God, as recorded in scripture, says." In

the second group, the Old Testament words are spoken by others but are attributed to God since the text of scripture was habitually identified with the utterances of God.

Historical Views of the Bible

The earliest creedal statements following the New Testament period—Apostles' Creed, Nicene—do not mention scripture. It was not until the Reformation era that creedal statements began to assert the nature of the Bible over against ecclesiastical authority. Areas of disagreement between reformers and counter-reformers included (1) whether all revealed truth was in scripture alone, (2) whether scripture could be interpreted privately or only officially, and (3) whether certain books, should be recognized as scripture. But the inerrancy of scripture seems to have been accepted by both sides.

A revolt against this view occurred in the nineteenth century as the "modernist-fundamentalist" controversy developed. In the Missouri Christian Lectureship of 1883, Isaac Errett argued that the Bible is "a trustworthy communication of the will of God in all that pertains to salvation," but that it is "subject to the limitations growing out of the imperfections of human language." J. W. McGarvey argued for "an infallible original to which we can be perpetually making nearer and nearer approaches (through textual criticism).

Doctrinal Implications

It is urged today that a rejection of inerrancy "involves primarily a mental readjustment. Nothing basic is lost" (Dewey Beegle, *The Inspiration of Scripture*, p. 187). Inerrancy is not only said to be untenable, it is also described as bibliolatry. Beegle cites superstitious persons in the medieval period who carried copies of the Bible on their shoulders to ward off evil spirits or calamity. Defenders of inerrancy have sometimes claimed too much; John-Andrew Quenstedt (17th century) affirmed inerrancy for the Masoretic vowel points accompanying the Hebrew text.

**IF WE CANNOT TRUST THE BIBLE IN ITS
VIEW OF ITSELF, CAN WE TRUST IT IN ANY
OF ITS OTHER TEACHINGS?**

But abuses do not set aside the basic doctrinal problem: If we cannot trust the Bible in its view of itself, can we trust the Bible in any of its other teachings? If the Biblical doctrine of inspiration is in error, how are we to be sure that the Biblical doctrine of creation, redemption, eschatology, etc. can be trusted?

Liberal scholars have often urged that inerrancy is a docetic view of scripture. Ancient docetism held that Jesus only appeared to have real flesh. Their point is that if scripture was written by human beings, it must contain error. The conservative response has been that "as our Lord, though truly man, was truly free from sin, so Scripture, though a truly human product is truly free from error" (Packer, *Fundamentalism*, p. 83).

Practical Considerations

The most forceful attacks against inerrancy are based upon practical problems:

(1) No original autographs of the Bible have survived. The earliest manuscripts we have are copies which contain scribal errors, so that an inerrant text is not available today.

(2) Even if there were a perfect text, it would be written in Hebrew, Aramaic and Greek. The complexities of translation are obvious in the growing number of English versions.

(3) Even if we had a perfect text rendered in a perfect translation, it would have to be explained by imperfect interpreters.

**THERE ARE DIFFICULTIES IN THE DOCTRINE
OF INERRANCY, AND
IT IS NOT WISE TO IGNORE THEM**

The Roman Catholic church has responded to these problems by (1) stabilizing the text in an official edition-the Vulgate; (2) preventing translation of this version long after its Latin had become a dead language; and (3) making the teaching office of the church the infallible interpreter of a static text.

Others today meet the same problems by (1) clinging to one version as the only trustworthy text of scripture; (2) refusing to translate archaisms into modern English since this might appear to be tampering with the text; and (3) denying the necessity of Biblical interpretation or insisting upon traditional interpretations.

It is not wise to ignore difficulties in the Biblical text. Nor does it help to exaggerate those difficulties or to ignore the responses to them through the centuries. More than a century ago John Haley compiled approximately one thousand such difficulties and proposed solutions (*An Examination of the Alleged Discrepancies of the Bible*, reprint 1951). J. W. Montgomery recently argued that "The alleged factual errors and internal contradictions in Scripture which are currently cited to demonstrate the impossibly archaic nature of the inerrancy view are themselves impossibly archaic in a high proportion of instances" ("Inspiration and Inerrancy: A New Departure," *Bulletin of the Evangelical Theological Society*, VIII, Spring 1965, p. 49).

**THE DOCTRINE OF AN ERRANT BIBLE
RESULTS IN MAXIMAL REVISIONS OF
THE TEXT, NOT MINIMAL**

Attempts to separate doctrine from facts in the Bible (e.g., the view that the Bible is inerrant doctrinally but errant historically, scientifically, etc.) are frustrating to the average reader and equally impossible for the expert. The Bible simply does not make these distinctions, and when they are accepted, maximal revisions of the text seem to follow instead of minimal revisions.

Conclusion

If we are to take the Biblical view of the Bible itself, our attitude toward the scriptures will be one of total trust, whether stated negatively with the word "inerrancy," or positively with some equivalent designation. Either the Bible is all-sufficient and inerrant in every subject it touches upon, or it is insufficient in all of the subjects it touches upon.

This conclusion has far-reaching implications. The Bible affirms the virgin birth and the resurrection of Jesus. The Bible forbids the practice of homosexuality. The Bible must also be taken seriously when it requires immersion into Christ's death (Romans 6:4) or when it describes the simple organization of Christ's church (Philippians 1:1). Later revelations are not permissible. The Bible is our only entirely trustworthy guide (II Timothy 3:16,17) .