

The Bible: God's Redemptive Words

Lesson 5: Inerrancy – “Thy Word is Truth’

Intro

- Having affirmed that “all Scripture is God-breathed”, it necessarily follows that all Scripture must be truthful. If it is not, then God Himself becomes either deceitful or mistaken.
- But our holy, just and all-knowing God cannot deceive or make mistakes thus everything He reveals to us in Scripture must be true.
- The word “Inerrant” came to be used in the 20th century to clarify the orthodox belief that the Bible is true in all that it affirms, not merely in matters of doctrine (as some had begun to argue).

What do we mean by saying that the Bible is “Inerrant”?

- As we’ve already covered Bible witnesses to its own Divine authority in **2 Tim 3:16** as well as **2 Peter 1:20-21**.and reminds us that the God who swears this truth to us cannot lie:

Heb 6:17-19

Because God wanted to make the unchanging nature of his purpose very clear to the heirs of what was promised, he confirmed it with an oath. God did this so that, by two unchangeable things in which it is impossible for God to lie, we who have fled to take hold of the hope offered to us may be greatly encouraged. We have this hope as an anchor for the soul, firm and secure.

- Paul affirmed everything written in the OT when he said:

Acts 24:14

But this I confess to you, that according to the Way, which they call a sect, I worship the God of our fathers, believing *everything* laid down by the Law and written in the Prophets...

- This was also the view of the early church. Augustine represents their view well, showing that it was not blind, ignorant faith that they had in Scripture’s truth, but that they were willing to grapple with difficult things in Scripture and still maintain faith in its ultimate truthfulness:

Augustine

I have learned to yield this respect and honour only to the canonical books of Scripture: of these alone do I most firmly believe that the authors were completely free from error. And if in these writings I am perplexed by anything which appears to me opposed to truth, I do not hesitate to suppose that either the manuscript is faulty, or the translator has not caught the meaning of what was said, or I myself have failed to understand it...Concerning which it would be wrong to doubt that they are free from error.¹

- The church in Middle Ages continued to affirm the absolute truthfulness of Scripture, as Thomas Aquinas summarized:

Nevertheless, sacred doctrine makes use of these authorities as extrinsic and probable arguments; but properly uses the authority of the canonical Scriptures as an incontrovertible proof, and the authority of the doctors of the Church as one that may properly be used, yet merely as probable.²

- And the Reformation continued this unbroken trust in the complete truthfulness of Scripture.
- Though Martin Luther is maligned as having a low view of Scripture (a charge that is completely false!) he argued on many occasions for the absolute authority and truthfulness of Scripture:

Luther

In theology one thing only is necessary, that we hear and believe and conclude in our heart: God is truthful, however absurd what He says in His Word may seem to our reason.³

It is impossible that Scripture contradicts itself; it only seems so to foolish, coarse and hardened hypocrites.⁴

I beg and faithfully warn every pious Christian not to stumble at the simplicity of language and the stories that will often meet him there in Scripture. He should not doubt that however simple they may seem, these are the very words, deeds, judgments, and history of the high majesty and wisdom of God; for this is the Scripture which makes fools out of all the wise and prudent and is open only to babes and fools, as Christ says, (Matthew 11:25). Away with your overweening conceit! Think of Scripture as the loftiest and noblest of holy things, as the richest

¹ Augustine, *Letter 82* (to Jerome) in (Nicene and Post Nicene Fathers, 1st Series vol. I) ed. P. Schaff et al, (Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson Publishers, 1994), 350.

² Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, 5 vol. trans. the Dominican Fathers (Westminster, MD: Christian Classics, 1981), *ST 1a.1.8*.

³ Martin Luther, cited in Robert D. Preus, "Luther and Biblical Infallibility," in John D. Hannah, ed. *Inerrancy and the Church* (Chicago: Moody, 1984), 134.

⁴ *Ibid.*

deposit, which will never be mined out, so that you may find the divine wisdom which God places before you in such foolish and ordinary form. He does this in order to quench all pride. Here you will find the swaddling clothes and the manger in which Christ lies, to which the angels directed the shepherds, (Luke 2:12). Swaddling clothes are plain and ordinary, but precious is the treasure, Christ, lying in them."⁵

- And in the years after the reformation these definitions only improved in their clarity:

Westminster Confession of Faith 1.5

We may be moved and induced by the testimony of the Church to an high and reverent esteem of the holy Scripture; and the heavenliness of the matter, the efficacy of the doctrine, the majesty of the style, the consent of all the parts, the scope of the whole (which is to give all glory to God), the full discovery it makes of the only way of man's salvation, the many other incomparable excellencies, and the entire perfection thereof, are arguments whereby it doth abundantly evidence itself to be the Word of God; yet, notwithstanding, our full persuasion and assurance of the infallible truth and divine authority thereof, is from the inward work of the Holy Spirit, bearing witness by and with the Word in our hearts.

- However in the 18th century there began to be a growing doubt about the complete truthfulness of Scripture and by the 20th century (in America) most academic institutions and mainline denominations had outright rejected the idea of Inerrancy.
- Thus in 1978 over 300 pastors and scholars from all over the US assembled to address the need to clarify the doctrine of inerrancy. They produced the Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy and it has provided a standard definitions on this issue ever since:

Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy (1978)

Article 2:

Holy Scripture, being God's own Word, written by men prepared and superintended by His Spirit, is of infallible divine authority in all matters upon which it touches: it is to be believed, as God's instruction, in all that it affirms; obeyed, as God's command, in all that it requires; embraced, as God's pledge, in all that it promises.

- The phrase that the Bible is true "in all that it affirms" is crucial for us to grasp so that we do not make the Bible say things that God did not intend, and then bring accusations of error on the Bible.
- Many of the accusations that people make of errors in the Bible arise in this fashion:

Grammatical errors

- o Many have pointed to what they describe a grammatical errors in the Greek, Hebrew and Aramaic of the Bible. Now if the bible claimed to have been written in perfect grammatical fashion then there would be a problem.

⁵ Ibid., 113, n.24.

- But the Bible instead makes no such claim and the doctrine of inerrancy does not claim this either. Instead it says that the Bible is free from error in what it *affirms*.

Inexact quotations

- When the biblical authors quote other writings or statements, they do so within the cultural standards of their time which did not intend to quote verbatim.
- So if the biblical authors' intent is to give the gist of what was said, then no one can fault them with error for an inexact quotation.
- The Bible does not need to conform to 21st century American standards of journalism in order to qualify as error free.

Incorrect scientific statements

- Since the Bible is not a textbook on all things but intends specifically to address salvation in Christ, we must be careful to understand what the Bible is *intending* to say.
- For instance when Jesus gives His famous mustard seed analogy, what is He intending to authoritatively describe: botany or redemption?

Mar 4:30-32

³⁰ Again he said, "What shall we say the kingdom of God is like, or what parable shall we use to describe it? ¹ It is like a mustard seed, which is the smallest seed you plant in the ground. ³² Yet when planted, it grows and becomes the largest of all garden plants, with such big branches that the birds of the air can perch in its shade."

- Some Christians have gone to absurd lengths to try to find a way to prove that Jesus' was making a scientifically exact statement for fear that the Bible's truthfulness is in jeopardy. But this misses the point of what Jesus was trying to say:

Michael Horton

It is unlikely that in his state of humiliation, in which by his own admission he did not know the day or hour of his return, Jesus had exhaustive knowledge about the world's plant life. Whatever contemporary botanists might identify as the smallest seed, if it were unknown to Jesus' hearers, the analogy would have been pointless. We have to ask what the biblical writers are *affirming*, not what they are *assuming* as part of the background of their own culture and the limitations of their time and place.⁶

⁶ Michael Horton, *The Christian Faith* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011), 180.

- Similarly, Calvin opposed skeptics of his day that charged Moses with errors in his description of the moon in Genesis 1:16:

Calvin

Moses makes two great luminaries; but astronomers prove, by conclusive reasons that the star of Saturn, which on account of its great distance, appears the least of all, is greater than the moon. Here lies the difference; Moses wrote in a popular style things which without instruction, all ordinary persons, endued with common sense, are able to understand; but astronomers investigate with great labor whatever the sagacity of the human mind can comprehend....There is therefore no reason why janglers should deride the unskillfulness of Moses in making the moon the second luminary; for he does not call us up into heaven, he only proposes things which lie open before our eyes. Let the astronomers possess their more exalted knowledge; but, in the meantime, they who perceive by the moon the splendor of night, are convicted by its use of perverse ingratitude unless they acknowledge the beneficence of God.⁷

- So we must be careful how we describe the doctrine of inerrancy so that we are not the ones making the Bible say what it does not intend to affirm.

The difference between Inerrancy and Infallibility

- In the late 20th century some scholars began backing away from traditional inerrancy in favor of what some called “Infallibility.”
- In this, they were saying that the Bible is free from error in what it teaches for faith and practice, but that it does contain historical and scientific errors.
- People who argue for this position will often claim that “inerrancy” is a new doctrine that the church never affirmed historically, and it’s true that the *term* “inerrancy” is fairly new.
- But the reason for this is that, historically, when people affirmed the Infallibility of Scripture it included everything that Scripture teaches, not only matters of faith and practice.
- So the term *Inerrancy* was coined to preserve what had been traditionally taught by the term *Infallibility*.
- While this idea of the Bible only being inerrant in matters of faith and practice seems attractive at first glance, our faith rests on whether specific historical events actually happened or not.

⁷ John Calvin, *Commentary on Genesis*, trans. John King (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1996), 1:16.

- God presents Himself to us as One who is to be believed because He has made promises historically which he keeps.
- If these historical accounts are not reliable, or worse, if they are simply myths (as many evangelicals are now arguing), then they did not happen, and the foundation for our faith (i.e., God's unbreakable promises) falls apart.
- So maintaining the inerrancy of all of Scripture is absolutely crucial.

Inerrancy Only Applies to the Original Autographs

- Nowhere does God promise that all the copyists and translators of His Word would be preserved from error. Thus errors in the translations and copies of the Bible abound.
- So does this (as many argue) render the whole doctrine of Inerrancy useless? Not a single original manuscript of any book in either the OT or the NT survives (and we should not expect to find any of them) So what's the point of defending this if it only applies to the originals which have all been lost?
- First of all we should note that by the standards of modern textual criticism (which seeks to establish the accuracy of our copies of ancient texts) the Bible is by far the best attested ancient text in existence.
- Thus, the highly regarded paleographer and former head of the British museum, Sir Frederic Kenyon, concluded:

The Christian can take the whole Bible in his hand and say without fear or hesitation that he holds in it the true word of God, handed down without essential loss from generation to generation throughout the centuries."⁸

- As Michael Horton explains,

Even if we do not have direct access to these original autographs, we do have criteria widely employed in all fields of textual criticism that give us a good idea of what was originally written... The very fact that textual criticism is an ongoing field yielding ongoing results demonstrates that reconstructing or approximating the content of the original autographs is a viable goal and that, for the most part, it has already achieved this goal.⁹
- But secondly we must recall how the Scriptures themselves deal with this same point.

⁸ Frederick G. Kenyon, *Our Bible and the Ancient Manuscripts*, 4th ed., (Harper, 1951), 23.

⁹ Horton, *The Christian Faith*, 180.

- Christ and the NT writers give us an example by the way they rely on the Septuagint. The Septuagint was the Greek translation of the Hebrew Old Testament, which most 1st century Jews interacted with.
 - This translation we know for a fact was not perfect and contains translational errors.
 - Additionally it was based upon copies because the originals were not available anymore when it was made.
 - **And yet when they quote from it they will often precede it with the phrase “It is written” or “thus saith the Lord” or “As the Lord says”**
- So for the inspired authors of the NT, the fact that what they quoted from was an imperfect translation, based upon copies, did not hinder it from being considered the absolutely authoritative and truthful Word of God to His people.