

The Inerrancy of Scripture

The other day I saw a bumper sticker that read LIVE AND LET LIVE. This typifies the mood of our times. Unfortunately this mindset has led many to believe that everything is relative. Truth is what is true for you. If your belief makes you happy and gives you satisfaction, you have it made.

For Christians this mindset is unacceptable. We believe in absolutes. We base our faith on the inerrant Scriptures. What we believe shapes our mind and our life. We must know what we believe. Years ago the key doctrines of the Christian faith were known and discussed. Doctrines bound the believers together. In our experience-oriented age, many Christians minimize doctrine. I am discounting neither experience nor emotions. Our faith must be alive. Yet I am more convinced than ever the church must teach doctrine. If church members no longer know what Scriptures teach, they become prone to fall for every wind of doctrine. Statistics show that eighty percent of the cultists come from Christian churches.

Why doctrine?

We are commanded to study the Scriptures (2Tim.3:13-17), and to discern truth from error (1 John 4:1-6). Jude said, "Contend for the faith that was once and for all entrusted to the saints" (Jude 3). And this is what the church has done throughout the ages. The first three or four centuries were spent in contending for the truth. Heresies were combated. The church fathers rightly saw that if the key doctrines of Scriptures were lost, the gospel would be lost. And the Reformers were of the same conviction. Bruce Tucker observed: "A thorough knowledge of the truth will help protect us from the false. As we understand truth and obey it, it will conform us more to Christ's image and help us develop a sound Christian life."

In recent years special attention to the inerrancy of Scripture is given by evangelicals and scholars in Reformed circles. Is the Bible infallible and inerrant? Or should we agree with Robert Bratcher, translator of the American Bible Society's *Good News For Modern Man*, who wrote, "Only willful ignorance or intellectual dishonesty can account for the claim that the Bible is inerrant and infallible. No truth-loving, God-respecting, Christ-honoring believer should be guilty of such heresy. To invest the Bible with the qualities of inerrancy and infallibility is to idolize it, to transform it into a false god." This liberal thinking does not only contradict the testimony of Scripture itself but also the conviction of the church fathers and the Reformers. Bratcher and others who would subscribe to "limited" or "partial" inerrancy are not only guilty of error but rob the pulpit of its message. How can any preacher proclaim "thus says the Lord" if he can't rely on the Bible? The Gospel has advanced only when preachers were convinced that God had spoken through His word and that the very words in Scripture came from Him. A convincing illustration is the life and ministry of the Canadian evangelical Presbyterian Dr. Jonathan Goforth (1859-1936), who went in 1896 to China as a missionary. His first place of service was the city of Chefoo, in Shantung, a province adjoining North Honan. He also travelled hundreds of miles by mule-cart telling the Gospel story to those who never heard it before.

Goforth was a man of prayer and had the Bible as his constant companion. He was greatly used by God to gather many into the Church. Here is Goforth's own account of one day in 1896, "Today has been the best of all days. Never in Canada or here have I before realized such power of the Holy Spirit. We say but little about the idols, but hold up Christ crucified. God's time to favour the people of this city and surrounding villages has come. Oh that we may walk humbly before Him, for we have never seen His power on this wise before." Goforth trusted that the Holy Spirit used the Scripture to convict sinners. In his booklet, *My Spirit* he notes, "The Author of the Bible is greatly dishonored these days by the doubt cast upon His Word. It must, indeed, be a cause of intense grief to Him that the Book, which alone testifies of the Lord Jesus should be so lightly esteemed by man. Unless the Bible is to us in very truth the Word of God, our prayers can be naught but sheer mockery. There never has been a revival except where there have been Christian men and women thoroughly believing in and whole-heartedly pleading the promises of God."

In his essay *The Preacher and God's Word* Dr. James Montgomery Boice laments the decline in preaching. He says that attention of a great majority of ministers has been shifted from expository preaching to counseling, liturgies, small group dynamics, and other concerns. And Boice believes that the current crisis in preaching is due to "a loss of confidence in the existence of a sure Word from God." Decline in preaching and decline in the belief in the Bible as God's authoritative, infallible and inerrant Word go together.

R.B. Kuiper noted, "The principle that Christian preaching is proclamation of the Word must obviously be determinative of the content of the sermon." If the commitment to inerrancy is lacking, how can a minister preach in such a way that the meaning of a Bible passage is proclaimed entirely and exactly as it was intended by God? He has then no sure message from the Lord. The apostle Paul asked: "If the trumpet does not sound a clear call, who will get ready for battle?" (1Cor.14:8). When the sharp edges are removed from the Sword of the Lord (Hebr.4:12) no battle can be won. Nothing is sadder for the church than this loss of authority. A report of a panel discussion involving a rabbi, a priest and a Protestant minister illustrates this problem. The rabbi stood up and said, "I speak according to the law of Moses." The priest said, "I speak according to the tradition of the Church." But the minister said, "It seems to me." If you have no authority you cannot preach. You can only give human opinions.

Since so much is said about inerrancy we must carefully define it. Paul D. Feinberg explains it "as the claim that when all facts are known, the scriptures in their original autographs and properly interpreted will be shown to be without error in all that they affirm to the degree of precision intended, whether that affirmation relates to doctrine, history, science, geography, geology etc." The Bible is the inspired Word of God in entirety, without exception. This divine inspiration must be understood to extend to words. That's why we speak of verbal inspiration. The Bible is without error because it is inspired by our God who cannot lie or contradict Himself. It is without mistakes not only in matters of salvation but also when it speaks about the creation of the world, history and moral norms.

May God raise up men, who being convinced of the inerrancy of God's Word, will diligently study it. They will never say, "as it seems to me," but will courageously preach the Gospel. Only this preaching will keep the Church vibrant.

The belief in the inerrancy of Scripture has become characterized as ultra-conservative, as biblidolatriy (the worship of the Bible rather than God) and even as a new development. Some claim that those who hold to inerrancy have departed from the historic understanding of the nature and authority of Scripture. But this is unadulterated nonsense! Biblical inerrancy has always been the view of the church throughout its history. Anyone who tries to argue that inerrancy is a novel doctrine has little knowledge of historical theology. Inerrancy was the position of every branch of the Christian church until the middle of the last century. Dr. Carl F. Henry was right when, in an interview in *Eternity magazine*, he said about inerrancy. "It was Jesus view, and that of the apostles, and of the church fathers, and of the Roman Catholic Church down to Vatican II. The recent effort to detach the Reformers from that view, and to place them on the side of scriptural errancy is unpersuasive."

The witness of history shows that those who deny inerrancy have introduced a novel doctrine. Inerrancy was assumed in each period of the church's history. The early church fathers believed in an errant Bible. Clement of Rome (died 102) said "Look carefully into the Scriptures which are the true utterances of the Holy Spirit." He believed the Scriptures to be the inspired word of God and free from error. St. Augustine (354-430) did not only believe in an inerrant Bible, he also argued that a departure from this belief will lead to a flood tide of unbelief. In one of his letters to Jerome, he said, "For it seems to me that most disastrous consequences must follow upon our believing that anything false is found in the sacred books." The two great Reformers, Luther and Calvin, believed the Bible was true in all its parts. Luther testified, "But everyone, indeed, knows that at times they (the fathers) have erred as men will; therefore I am ready to trust them only when they prove their opinions from Scripture, which has never erred." What can be said of Luther can also be said of Calvin. At various places in his writings, he refers to Scripture as "the inerring standard, the pure word of God." And he says, "We owe to the Scripture the same reverence, which we owe to God, because it has proceeded from Him alone."

The church fathers and the Reformers accepted the words of the Bible as the very words of God spoken through the prophets and apostles. The belief in the inerrancy of Scripture has been taught by the Church from its very beginning. The Bible is "not partly true and partly false," as Gresham Machen put it, "but all true, the blessed, holy Word of God."

Do we claim more for the Bible when we call it inerrant than it claims for itself? Not at all! Nothing is more clearly taught in scripture than its inspiration and consequent inerrancy. One of the best books I read on this subject is L.Gaussen's *Theopneustia, The Plenary Inspiration of The Holy Scriptures deduced from Internal Evidence, and the Testimonies of Nature, History and Science*. Gaussen points to the many passages in the Old Testament that assert that the words of the prophets were the word of God (Ex.4:30; Deut.18:21,22). He refers to such affirmations as "The Lord has spoken", "The mouth of the Lord has spoken," "The word of the Lord came to --saying" (Josh.24:2; Isa. 8:11; Jer.7:1; 11:1; 21:1; 26:1; 27:1; 30:1,4; 50:1; 51:12; Amos 3:1). The Gospel writers recognized the authority of the prophets. They often wrote, "All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the Prophet" (Matt.1:22; cf.2:5,15, 23:13:35, 21:4; 27:9). All of Scripture is called "the Word of God" (Isaiah 1:2). The apostle Paul does not hesitate to

speak of the Old Testament writings as the "Oracles of God" (Rom.3:2). Gausson remarks about the latter, "Was there a word that could more absolutely express a verbal and complete inspiration?" An oft quoted passage for proof of inerrancy is 2 Tim.3:16."All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness." The phrase God-breathed, which literally means God-"spirited", affirms that the living God of Truth is the author of Scripture. This statement by Paul admits no exception. The apostle Peter also clearly establishes the full inspiration and inerrancy of Scripture. "Prophecy never had its origin in the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit" (2 Pet. 1:21). Every word of Scripture comes from God. The apostles even place each other's writing in the same rank with the Old Testament prophets (2 Pet.3:15,16). Our Lord clearly assumed the inerrancy of the Old Testament, even in the realms of history and science. He said that God Himself had spoken the words of Genesis 2:24, with reference to the literal, historical Adam and Eve. He accepted the story of Jonah as literal fact (Matth.12: 40). Our Lord regarded the Old Testament Scriptures as completely reliable and trustworthy.

The inerrancy of scripture is the historic Christian position. Since the Scripture is God's very own Word, it is not enough to skim through a few verses in daily Bible reading, we must systematically study it. But even studying is not sufficient by itself, we must submit ourselves to it and live according to its light (Ps.119:105).

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