



## Biblical inerrancy as a practical issue today

The question of inerrancy has generated more debate in recent times than any other topic related to the doctrine of Scripture. Rather than giving an account of the issues, the present article resumes some of the main lines of the doctrine.

The subject will be handled in two parts:

- I. Inerrancy as a form of biblical authority;
- II. Inerrancy in its relation to Christian truth in general.

### I. Inerrancy as a form of Biblical authority

All schools of modern theology claim to uphold some kind of biblical authority. However, only evangelical Christianity (as well as some traditional forms of Roman Catholicism) claims that this authority finds expression in the inerrancy of Scripture and that Scripture itself witnesses to the fact. For this reason, inerrancy is very important for evangelicals and is the object of attacks and misconceptions by its detractors.

#### 1. **A definition**

Although inerrancy is not the only form of biblical authority, it is that form of authority expressed particularly in the propositional (informational) aspect of Scripture.<sup>1</sup> The doctrine of inerrancy claims that the information of Scripture has authority because it is correct.

- a) As such, inerrancy is the result of the divine inspiration of the statements of Scripture, which give a true record of God's revelation to his people, culminating in Jesus Christ. The authority attached to inerrancy belongs to God.
- b) Inerrancy is freedom from error arising from mistake or deceit. It is practically synonymous with infallibility, although the latter has many shades of meaning. In theory a distinction can be made between the two. Infallibility indicates that error cannot exist in Scripture (the realm of the possible), whereas inerrancy means error does not exist in Scripture (the realm of the actual).

This distinction explains why some evangelicals<sup>2</sup> are prepared to speak about the infallibility or trustworthiness of Scripture without raising the issue of inerrancy.

#### 2. **Why not just speak about the truth of Scripture?**

- a) Inerrancy is a word which many people find offensive. For this reason it has been suggested it is preferable simply to speak of the 'truth' of Scripture.
- b) However, to stop at this point might imply a concession to modern relativism — the idea that knowledge is restricted to situations and that nothing is true in itself. Modern views of truth could accept the truth of Scripture in some respects, without considering its truth to be unchanging. This is different from what evangelicals mean when they speak about the truth of Scripture, namely that the message of the Bible correctly presents the truth concerning God and man and that this truth has a permanent character.
- c) Granted this, what does 'inerrant' add to 'true' when we use it in connection with the Bible? We could say that inerrancy is the guarantee which accompanies Scripture and certifies that it is working truth.<sup>3</sup> Scripture is true just as a radio I buy is in perfect order; its inerrancy is the divine guarantee provided with it. Inerrancy indicates two things with regard to God's Word:

1. God is the maker of Scripture;
2. Scripture carries a mark of its nature which invites our confidence.

### **3. What about alleged errors in Scripture?**

- a) An error is a mistake of judgment which comes between an observed fact and what is stated about it. To err is to travel in the wrong direction. To use our illustration again, we say there is an error of manufacture in our radio if it does not work in the way the maker claims.
- b) In the case of Scripture, inerrancy implies that it is free from error in general, not only in matters of detail, but also in its broader affirmations. This would include freedom from internal contradiction, from misleading us about the nature of God, man and salvation, but also absence of contradiction with respect to truths known from sources other than the Bible. In practice, just as a radio functions in the way the maker claims, so Scripture accomplishes what *it* claims.
- c) A further definition regarding alleged error could be: we cannot criticise the maker of our radio if it does not get FM, when the machine is not designed to. In the same way, Scripture does not err if it does not meet our requirements of precision in every case. Error depends on context. I might tell my wife I have 50 francs when going shopping, when I only have 47.50. This is not an error. It would be if I told a cashier at the bank the same thing. In some cases, too much precision hinders communication, in others it is obligatory.
- d) The general purpose of Scripture is to motivate faith in God and Christ (John 20:31) and its language is adapted to this aim. However, its purpose cannot be reduced to this alone, as if Scripture could not give information on history or the natural world. The contexts must determine how Scripture carries out its own purpose.

### **4. Does Scripture really teach its own inerrancy?**

Most theologians today would reply negatively to this question. James Barr, who denies that evangelicals can make a case for the inerrancy of the Bible, is typical. Much evidence could be mustered with regard to this question. Some selective lines of approach could be:

- a) In the Old Testament the people of God and the Word of God come into existence at the same time and define each other (Deuteronomy 27:9-11);
- b) The written word of the Law is identified by the same attributes as God himself (Psalm 119:7, 9-11, 86, 129, 130, 137, 142; Isaiah 55:10 ff);
- c) Jesus in his ministry attests the history of the Old Testament as being true; fulfils the Old Testament prophecies; affirms that his people are identified by receiving his word as truth (John 17:6, 16-19); uses the Old Testament to interpret his resurrection (Luke 24:25, 44);
- d) The Apostles attest the truth of their teaching (e.g. Galatians 1; Ephesians 3:2-5).

If Scripture nowhere affirms 'Scripture is inerrant', the attitude of Jesus and the writers of the Bible both with regard to the writings of others and their own writing, is totally inconsistent with this fact. It would also be inexplicable had they not thought Scripture to be inerrant.

### **5. How the inerrancy of the Bible works**

We cannot accuse the Bible of error if it does not answer all the questions we wish to ask. If it does not indicate how to drive a motorcar or use a computer, that does not imply its insufficiency. Nor can our standards be imposed on it. It must be taken at its own face value. This issue can be approached on two levels:

- a) As to detail: we should seek to reconcile the apparent contradictions we find in the Bible, for example in the genealogies of Jesus, the different gospel accounts of the purification of the Temple, or the Old Testament chronologies. Different ways of resolving these difficulties are available: we cannot rule out that apparent discrepancies in parallel passages are related to the differing sensibilities or purposes of their authors, that we do not always have all the details to explain everything, that often the solution is found in a more careful reading of the text, or that a problem may even be related to a sinful lack of understanding.

Sometimes we may have to wait years for the solution of a particular problem or perhaps accept that no solution seems to be forthcoming. This was the case until quite recently with respect to the problem of the chronologies of the post-resurrection appearances in the Synoptics and John. Both Luther and Calvin were aware of the difficulty but neither of them was willing to give way to the thought that Scripture was in error.

- b) In a broad sense, inerrancy concerns the propositions of the Bible concerning the 'big issues'. Perhaps, as evangelicals, we have been too restrictive in limiting the debate about inerrancy to points of detail. The Bible says God is love, God created out of nothing, man fell into sin at a precise moment, Jesus did miracles, he rose from the dead, he indwells believers by his Spirit and will return in glory. Are these true? If we believe them to be inerrant propositions it is only because of our confidence in the witness of the Bible, for they are not rationally demonstrable. They belong to faith, not sight. However, they are not irrational. Within a Christian framework they are totally reasonable.
- c) Inerrancy relates to the contrast between the Christian world-view and other worldviews. Ultimately it refers not to isolated facts but to the harmony between differing aspects of reality, which are what they are in relation to God, their author. The inerrancy of Scripture expresses our relation to God and the fact that we see in it a description of God as Creator and Saviour which corresponds to our needs and reality. In this respect it is a case of choosing the radio, a reliable make and not a brand X.

## **6. A question of spiritual intelligence**

When the question of the inerrancy of Scripture is raised, we are not only asking about the Bible as norm, or its historical-cultural situation, but also about ourselves. Do we know how to use the radio? Are we Bible-compatible?

To know how to use the Bible, spiritual wisdom is necessary. Our intelligence needs to be spiritually 'programmed' for us to receive the truth of Scripture. Would this be why so many people cannot get past the first 'error' they think they find in Scripture? Could it not be that God has given Scripture its complicated, enigmatic form, precisely to remind us that the message of Scripture must be spiritually, not naturally, discerned?<sup>4</sup>

Ephesians 4:17 ff presents a striking contrast between the gentiles, whose thinking is futile, who are ignorant and hard in heart and those who, knowing Christ, have a new attitude of mind and a new nature created by God in righteousness and truth.

In this respect, the goal of the inerrancy of Scripture is the reproduction in our lives of the harmony found in the Bible. By God's Spirit the truth of Scripture penetrates our lives and transforms them into the image of Christ.

To put it another way: when we listen to the radio, we can hum the tune we hear; when Scripture's truth penetrates our lives we begin to follow the rhythm of God's music.

## **II. Inerrancy in its relation to christian truth in general**

Many attacks, often emotional, have been levelled at the doctrine of inerrancy in recent times. It has been accused of being rationalistic, of replacing a living experience of God with a dead letter, or of maintaining an anachronistic idea of a supernatural written revelation. Most of these criticisms centre on the idea that the infallibility of Scripture replaces the ultimate authority of the living personal God by the authority of an abstract and impersonal code. Modern theology considers the personal authority of God and the authority of a written revelation to be mutually exclusive.

However, the doctrine of inerrancy is not a piece of antiquated rationalism; it fits hand-in-glove the nature of the Christian faith itself. Moreover, Christian faith cannot really function properly without it.

### **1. *Belief in inerrancy does not contradict the nature of faith***

It has often been stated that belief in inerrancy cannot be tallied with the full range of facts presented by the Bible.<sup>5</sup> If all the evidence of Scripture is considered, some of the facts 'present

problems'. So to claim the inerrancy of Scripture requires an act of 'blind faith', the sort of faith which lacks adequate backing. Certain teachings of Scripture have to be assumed *a priori* as applying to all of Scripture. For this reason, from the time of Warfield's opponents to the present, some evangelicals have defended a theory of limited inerrancy, reserving the truth of Scripture to its central teaching.<sup>6</sup>

However, what is the nature of faith and how does it work in a Christian setting?

- a) The criticism above could be levelled against any Christian teaching. All Christian doctrine has some problems which remain apparently contradictory. All of it is paradoxical. Can we reconcile the divinity and humanity of Christ, divine predestination and human freedom, God's love and justice or faith as a gift of God and a human exercise?

We cannot wait for 'all the evidence' before believing. We shall never get it. What we believe about any major teaching of Scripture is founded on its most clear statements and then applied to the rest, which consist of secondary factors.

- b) The same is true for inerrancy. We believe it not because we have all the evidence, but because some Scriptures clearly teach it and those which are problematic are of a secondary nature. In other words, we believe all Scripture was produced through the work of the Spirit and is profitable and edifying, even if we may not find much which is *immediately* edifying in the chronological problems of Chronicles.
- c) Moreover, Christian faith is hearing God's voice and believing it, even though some of the facts may seem against it. The 'phenomena' of our century *seem* to be against believing in God's control of history. Faith is trusting in God *in spite of* some evidence apparently to the contrary. Hebrews 11 is all about this. If Abram had relied on the visible facts, would he have ever left Ur?

The Christian approach is to hear what God says about something and then look at the other facts from this standpoint, not to look at the facts from our standpoint to find out whether what God says might be true. What God says is one of the facts of the situation, but because of the divine witness, it is the primary fact. For this reason, the approach we have suggested is not 'imposing' an *a priori* on a situation.

Conclusion: we accept inerrancy in the same way as we accept other Christian doctrine. This leads us from the consideration of faith to that of knowledge.

## **2. Inerrancy is implied in a Christian way of knowing**

'Inerrantists' would claim that the doctrine is based on the witness of Scripture — *Sola Scriptura* — and that it is implied in the nature of the divine witness. In other words, inerrancy is proved as a consequence of other biblical teachings. Critics accuse this approach of being *deductive* and claim that the true method must be *inductive*, not starting with teaching, but looking at the range of facts to conclude whether or not there are errors in the Bible.

A deductive argument runs like this:

1. God cannot lie (Numbers 23:1; Titus 1:2);
  2. God is not ignorant (Psalm 13ff; Hebrews 4:13);
  3. Scripture is his word (2 Timothy 3:16);
  4. Therefore Scripture is true.
- a) A recent example of a criticism of the deductive approach is J. Dunn's attack on Warfield's doctrine of inerrancy. Dunn argues that none of the major biblical passages Warfield appeals to teaches inerrancy; it is 'assumed' as a dogmatic deduction drawn from the concept of God. He adds that in the New Testament the Old Testament Scriptures are used selectively and often in a way as to modify their original meaning. So he concludes that, for the New Testament authors 'the authoritative word of God was *not* Scripture, *tout simple*; nor was it their own immediate perception of the will of God. The authoritative word of God was

heard through *the interaction of both*.<sup>7</sup> Therefore inerrancy is not a necessary condition of the authority of Scripture.

- b) How has Dunn reached his conclusion? He finds changed meanings in Scripture, proposes this shows that the word itself is not the authority and infers that Scripture is not inerrant. But surely, changed meanings in themselves cannot prove that Scripture is at fault. Why does Dunn assume it to be the case? In fact, it appears Dunn's own argument hides an assumption: that God could inspire a Scripture with errors. This must be an assumption, as Scripture nowhere teaches that God did inspire his Word in an errant way. The results of Dunn's argument is in fact to change the whole meaning of biblical *inspiration*.
- c) What can we conclude from this about a Christian way of knowing?

First of all, our presuppositions influence our way of looking at things, even if we do not recognize it. Proper suppositions for understanding the Bible are those which are provided by the Bible.

Secondly, the fault of the inductive approach, as illustrated by Dunn, is the following: it is not the biblical facts themselves which condition statements about Scripture, *but a human evaluation of some biblical facts*. The reader who affirms 'the biblical author was mistaken', supplants the self-witness of Scripture with a human idea. This is different from the witness of Scripture, which in the case of inerrancy is provided by Psalm 12 *'the words of the Lord are pure words'* or Jesus' *'Scripture cannot be broken'*.

For this reason, Klaas Runia's rather harsh judgment that the inductive method, followed strictly, makes unbelief the point of departure, is worth considering.<sup>8</sup>

This is vital for a Christian view of knowledge. In any area, we cannot start with an idea foreign to revelation and end up proving biblical truth. We cannot conjure up creation from the eternity of matter, human nature from an evolutionary process, the divinity of Christ from his humanity or biblical conversion from a psychology of personality-change. In all issues, and with all questions, the witness of Scripture is the starting-point.

Inerrancy is a case in point of how Christian knowledge functions. Without it, could there be Christian knowledge about anything?

### **3. Inerrancy is compatible with the character of God**

It is often said in evangelical circles that truth is a person, Jesus Christ. The Liberal and Neo-Orthodox dilute this even more: Truth is a person and not a text. Faith refers to the living God, or to the living Christ, not to a dead letter. A French Neo-Orthodox theologian summed it up: *'there are no biblical norms to apply, only the living Christ to follow'*.

However, biblical inerrancy is totally compatible with a personal God, for three reasons:

- a) Jesus himself never made any quality distinction between his own origin and the origin of Scripture. His attitude reveals their complementarity rather than a contrast between 'personal truth' and 'impersonal text'.<sup>9</sup> Christ fulfils Scripture; he declares his word to be judge at the last day. He has come from the Father, bringing the words of the Father. As he knows the Father, his word makes the Father known. In John 17 he says, *'sanctify them through your word; your word is truth'* and not *'sanctify them through me'*.
- b) If Scripture is an imperfect and unreliable human witness to God's revelation, how can we know what the intention of Christ was? If there is no divine revelation, there is no knowledge of divine salvation either. On the contrary, personal contact between God and man disappears altogether, as we have no way of having a personal knowledge of Christ apart from an authoritative Scripture. If the witness to Christ is merely human, what can it truly tell us about the *Divinity of Christ*?
- c) Modern theology has a different view of God from evangelicalism. It believes God to be transcendent but not immanent. God's otherness excludes the possibility of really knowing him. For an evangelical, God is truly known, because his transcendence implies his

immanence. God is infinite, the only living and true God, but also personal, self-revealing and communicating.

Once again the inerrancy of Scripture can be seen to be implied in our view of God and Christ, and without it, we can have no real knowledge of God. No Scripture, no Christ. This leads to the next point concerning the nature of salvation.

#### **4. *Inerrancy and the nature of salvation***

The Bible is not a book about a book, but a book about God and his salvation.<sup>10</sup> Salvation therefore includes God's words. The witness to this fact is as broad as the Bible itself. As Warfield said, trying to avoid this is like trying to avoid an avalanche by dodging every separate rock. Salvation is deliverance from sin and from the bondage of unbelief, from myths. A very clear biblical example is in 2 Peter 1. There is nothing contradictory about God speaking on the mount of transfiguration and in the prophetic witness. Both point to the divine revelation of salvation.

In addition, obedience to the spoken or written word is a necessary condition of discipleship. Jesus insists on this repeatedly.

Biblical salvation supposes true knowledge, substantial assurance, intelligent obedience and discipleship. For each of these the inerrancy of Scripture is necessary. Where a belief in inerrancy weakens, Christian salvation is replaced by universalism, God's law by human laws, the church militant by the church sociological and evangelism by activism.

#### **5. *Inerrancy and the humanity of man***

It is often said that belief in inerrancy produces an impersonal Christianity. Man loses his liberty to a written code. To err is human and true humanity requires freedom. Humanity becomes closely associated with the fragility of fallibility. So the argument runs.

When modern theologians, whether it be Barth, Ming or Barr, speak about the humanity of Scripture, they do so in terms of its errors, temporal limitations or cultural restrictions. However, this is a totally abstract view of humanity, which cannot be defined by such limitations.

How then does the inerrancy of Scripture imply man's true humanity? Man was made by God to know the truth, rejoice in God's plan for all of history and to appreciate the diversity of cultural development. Man's fall is the root of error and a truncated view of humanity. God's renewal of humanity implies that man will be restored to the truth and will praise Christ as the head in whom the fulness of reality has its centre.

The inerrancy of the prophetic words of Scripture is therefore of eschatological significance. It is a specific case, related to God's giving his truth in revelation, which shows what God can do to transform man's nature. The doctrine of inerrancy is an intimation of the fact that in Christ the human race will be restored to truth. Our humanity will be new humanity. As an aspect of the Holy Spirit's work in man, inerrancy points in the present to a final state of truth and fellowship with God. To put this idea negatively: is it possible to imagine a new creation in which doctrinal error would be present? Will there be mechanistic evolutions in heaven, Pelagian, antinomians or, above all, sinners?

Inerrancy is a sign and seal of what God's future work will be it implies true humanity. How necessary it is for us to know that there will be true humanity in the future! What a stimulus for hope in Christ inerrancy is!

The humanity of Scripture in the fullest sense lies in the fact that by his Word God is making us truly human, because it reveals and seals to us the new humanity, Jesus Christ.

### **Conclusion**

These considerations should be sufficient to show that biblical inerrancy is not genetically foreign to the nature of Christian faith, but of a piece with it.

Like faith itself, the truth of Scripture must touch all aspects of life, in order that God's grace might reach them all.

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<sup>1</sup> Although some forms of fundamentalism may reduce the authority of the Bible to inerrancy, a broader view would maintain that other forms of biblical authority include commands, wisdom, poetry, etc.

<sup>2</sup> C. Pinnock, J. Rogers and I. H. Marshall might be cases in point.

<sup>3</sup> Paul Helm uses the idea of 'guarantee' in connection with the notion of biblical infallibility in *The Divine Revelation*, 1982, pp. 56-60.

<sup>4</sup> Suggested by John Frame of Westminster Seminary, to whom I am indebted at several points.

<sup>5</sup> Dewey Beegle is a good example.

<sup>6</sup> G. C. Berkouwer speaks of the scope of Scripture in this way.

<sup>7</sup> J Dunn, The authority of Scripture according to Scripture in *The Churchman* 1982: pp. 2, 3, italics the author's.

<sup>8</sup> K. Runia, *Karl Barth's Doctrine of Holy Scripture*, 1962, p. 112. Runia considers the only correct method to be the deductive one which begins with the witness of Scripture.

<sup>9</sup> This is not to say incarnation and incription are confused — a point strenuously argued by Warfield and Packer and misunderstood by Barr.

<sup>10</sup> An expression of John Frame's.