

b. Authority

(1) Biblical Inerrancy Defined

We have been talking about the doctrine of the inspiration of Scripture. Last time I presented a model for the inspiration of Scripture which enables us to affirm that scriptural inspiration is plenary, verbal, and confluent. The key to this was God's so-called middle knowledge. That is to say, God knows what every person would freely do if he were placed in any circumstances in which God might create him. So by choosing a certain set of circumstances and placing people (like Paul or Luke or John) in those circumstances, God knew exactly what they would write. Then he appropriates this human writing to become his Word to us. It is via that human speech that God speaks to us as his inspired Word.

Today we proceed to the next point, which is the authority of Scripture. If God has appropriated these human writings like the Gospels and the epistles of the New Testament to be his Word to us, then that means that God's Word carries the authority of God Himself. It is God's communication to us. Therefore, it speaks to us with divine authority. That entails that what God says to us is true.

In Scripture God communicates to us what he wants us to believe and think about these matters that are important to him and that he wants to communicate to us. One of the implications of this is the inerrancy of the Bible. How shall we define biblical inerrancy? Clearly, biblical inerrancy cannot mean that every statement in the Bible is true because the Bible records false statements, for example, by Job's counselors. Or it reports speech by people like

Pontius Pilate who even mocks the truth. So we cannot say that biblical inerrancy simply means that everything the Bible says is true, much less literally true in view of the poetry and the hyperbole and metaphor that Scripture often involves. So how should we understand the doctrine of biblical inerrancy?

Those who defend this doctrine say that the Bible is truthful in everything that it *teaches* (II Tim 3.16). So the inerrancy of the Bible doesn't extend to those statements in the Bible that are not part of the teaching that God wants to communicate to us. God has appropriated human speech as his Word to us, and there are things he wants to affirm or teach or communicate to us through these writings. The claim of biblical inerrancy is that the Bible is truthful in all that it teaches.

This understanding of biblical inerrancy comes to expression in the so-called Chicago Statement on biblical inerrancy. This was a statement issued by a council of evangelical theologians who got together in 1978 with a view toward enunciating exactly what biblical inerrancy is committed to. Let me highlight a couple of points from the Chicago Statement.

In their short statement, the second paragraph reads:

Holy Scripture, being God's own Word, written by men prepared and superintended by His Spirit [notice that is exactly what the model of inspiration that I laid out affirms – the Bible is God's Word written by men who were prepared and superintended by God], 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.

Then in the fourth paragraph, the statement goes on to say:

Being wholly and verbally God-given [it is plenary and verbal in its inspiration], Scripture is without error or fault in all its teaching, no less in what it states about God's acts in creation, about the events of world history, and about its own literary origins under God, than in its witness to God's saving grace in individual lives.

In these paragraphs we have a number of expressions with respect to what biblical inerrancy concerns. The first one says, "All matters upon which Scripture touches." That isn't defined; It is not entirely clear what it means by saying Scripture "touches" upon these things. But then it goes on to say more clearly "in all things Scripture affirms." Then in that fourth paragraph, it is without error "in all that it teaches." So biblical inerrancy, I think, ought to be defined in terms of the intention of Scripture or of the scriptural authors as to what they want to affirm or assert or teach.

In the explication that the Statement gives of Infallibility, Inerrancy, and Interpretation, they distinguish between infallibility and inerrancy in the following way:

Infallible signifies the quality of neither misleading nor being misled and so safeguards in categorical terms the truth that Holy Scripture is a sure, safe, and reliable rule and guide in all matters.

So Scripture is infallible in the sense it is reliable – it can be trusted. It won't mislead you. Then they go on to say,

Similarly, inerrant signifies the quality of being free from all falsehood or mistake and so safeguards the truth that Holy Scripture is entirely true and trustworthy in all its assertions.

That is to say, true in the things that it asserts, or as we've seen earlier, the things that it teaches. Inerrancy means Scripture is entirely true and trustworthy in what it asserts or teaches.

They recognize that there may be things in Scripture that are not part of the assertions of Scripture or a part of the teachings of Scripture. They go on to say,

So history must be treated as history, poetry as poetry,

[That is important – poetry is not to be treated as history. Poetry is often non-literal and so isn't making literal assertions]

hyperbole and metaphor as hyperbole and metaphor,

[It would be a literary mistake to interpret passages that are hyperbolic or metaphorical as though they were making literal assertions]

generalization and approximation as what they are, and so forth.

[There again, the point is you don't press the Scriptures for a precision or specificity that is alien to the author's intent when they mean to be speaking in generalities or approximate numbers or figures.]

Differences between literary conventions in Bible times and in ours must also be observed: since, for instance, non-chronological narration and imprecise citation were conventional and acceptable and violated no expectations in

those days. We must not regard these things as faults when we find them in Bible writers.

The point there is that in certain literary genres in the ancient world the author could be free to rearrange chronologically the events and to tell them in different order. His narrative shouldn't be treated as though it were a modern day police report or historical account because it fits with the conventions that were at play in the ancient world. So it doesn't count as an error.

Similarly, the statement talks about imprecise citation. Sometimes the New Testament authors will cite Old Testament passages by paraphrasing them or perhaps citing them out of the Greek version of the Old Testament rather than the original Hebrew. Again, that was acceptable by the conventions of the day. Remember that when the New Testament was written they didn't even have the device of quotation marks and so often didn't distinguish between direct and indirect speech. So citation of another source could be imprecise, and it would be unfair to say that these are errors in the Bible when things are not cited precisely.

It goes on to say,

When total precision of a particular kind was not expected nor aimed at, it is no error not to have achieved it. Scripture is inerrant, not in the sense of being absolutely precise by modern standards, but in the sense of making good its claims and achieving that measure of focused truth at which its authors aimed.

So it must be read according to the literary conventions and types and purposes of its original authors.

I think you can see that even in this statement on inerrancy, which is a very conservative statement adopted widely by evangelical churches, it is still a very nuanced understanding of what is meant by inerrancy and allows for a good deal of elements in Scripture that would not be literally true if pressed for precision.

The Scripture then, according to the doctrine of inerrancy, in virtue of being God's Word to us, is authoritative and therefore truthful in all that it teaches or means to affirm. As the Chicago Statement makes clear, this will imply that the Scriptures may exhibit things which modern readers might call errors but wouldn't be errors at that time.

One illustration of this would be chronology. Remember the statement said that often events could be in different chronological order. That is true in the Gospels. The Gospels are closest to the genre – or literary type – called ancient biography, the so-called “lives” of famous Greeks and Romans. When you look at the conventions for ancient biography, the purpose wasn't to tell a chronological narrative of the hero from cradle to the grave but rather to tell anecdotes about the hero that would illustrate his salient character qualities so that we can understand him.

Similarly, in the Gospels the authors will feel free to tell the events in different order. One of the most obvious examples of this is: the cleansing of the temple by Jesus. You'll remember the story when he makes a whip, he goes into the temple, and overturns the tables of the money changers and drives out those who were selling the animals. In Matthew, Mark, and Luke that cleansing of the temple takes place in the final week of Jesus' life during Passion Week when he is staying in Bethany and comes in to the temple and

cleanses the temple just a couple days prior to his arrest and crucifixion. But if you read the Gospel of John, John has the story of the cleansing of the temple very early in Jesus' ministry. Right at the beginning he goes into Jerusalem and does this. I once believed, as a younger Christian, that Jesus cleansed the temple twice. The way I harmonized this apparent inconsistency was to say that early in his ministry there was a cleansing of the temple, and then later on in his ministry, in the final week of his life, he did it again. But we don't have to have recourse to any such artificial harmonization, which really doesn't do justice to the fact that the story is told in the same terms. It is the same story. It is not a second incident. Rather, we can simply say that the evangelists didn't aim always to tell a chronology – in the same order – and therefore could move the events about as suited their literary purpose.

Even more nuanced and subtle is the claim that Scripture is inerrant in what it *teaches* because then one has to ask oneself the question: what is the teaching in this passage? What does this passage mean to teach us? Everybody recognizes this distinction between what the Bible simply says and what it means to teach. To turn to a non-controversial example first, Mark 4:30ff – the Parable of the Mustard Seed that Jesus gives. Jesus says,

With what can we compare the kingdom of God, or what parable shall we use for it? The Kingdom of God is like a grain of mustard seed which, when sown upon the ground, is the smallest of all the seeds on Earth. Yet when it is grown, it grows up to be the greatest of all shrubs, and puts forth large

branches, so that the birds of the air can make nests in its shade.

This, I think, is a good example of hyperbole on Jesus' part. He is not trying to teach botany. Everybody recognizes that this isn't a botanical lesson on the size of seeds. So if there are seeds smaller than the mustard seed, that is not an error in the Bible. It is not an error on Jesus' part when he says this is the smallest of seeds and it grows up to be the greatest of shrubs. That is to miss the point of the passage which is a point about the Kingdom of God and its marvelous growth from its insignificant beginnings to the great Kingdom that it will be when it fills all the Earth. We need to recognize that Scripture is inerrant not in all that it says but in all that it means to teach. This will require us to interpret the Scripture and discern, what is the Scripture teaching?

That is enormously significant. To turn to more controversial examples, many theologians or biblical scholars think that the authors of Scripture presuppose a sort of three-decker cosmology. We live on the middle layer here on Earth and heaven is up there above the clouds and hell (or *Sheol*) is down there in the Earth. There are passages in the Scripture that seem to suggest this. Jesus ascends into heaven, right? Even today we talk in that way. Nobody says, "He went down to heaven." Right? That just seems totally inappropriate. We talk about somebody going up to heaven. Even today when we talk this way, nobody thinks that heaven is in outer space (at least no evangelical Christian does; Mormons maybe do). As evangelicals we don't think that hell is in the center of the Earth down there in the molten core of the Earth.

If the writers of Scripture do presuppose this sort of three-decker cosmology on occasion, I think one can say that they don't teach it. They are not teaching a three-decker cosmology or any sort of cosmology, even if that is what they might believe.

Or, to give another example, remember when we talked about the Second Coming of Christ. We dealt with the question of the delay of the *parousia* or the delay of the Second Coming. Some scholars believe that people like Paul and other early Christians expected the return of Christ within their own lifetime. I don't know if that is true or not. I think that depends on how you interpret what Paul says when he says, for example in 1 Corinthians 15, "Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up to meet them in the clouds." Did he mean just we Christians in general who are left, or was he talking about his contemporary generation – that we, we here who are left, will be taken up to be with them in the clouds to meet Christ. It is not clear to me whether Paul was speaking about his contemporaries or just in more general terms. But in any case, I am confident that Paul never *taught* that the Second Coming of Christ would come in his own lifetime. Even if he believed it himself and hoped that that would happen, you will not find anywhere in his epistles where he teaches that Christ is going to return within his lifetime.

Another example – again a very controversial one: do you remember when we talked about in the doctrine of creation the existence of the historical Adam? Was there actually, biologically, literally, a human pair somewhere in prehistory from whom the entire human race is descended? Among evangelicals, this has become a flash point of controversy today. Some scholars are

saying even if people like Jesus and Paul thought that there was a literal Adam and Eve and so spoke in that way, still they don't *teach* that there was an original Adam and Eve. Their references to Adam and Eve are simply to the literary figures of the stories found in Genesis 2-3. Others will say, no, no, wait a minute, they did teach this – Romans 5, Acts 17 – the historicity of Adam is part of what Scripture means to teach. This is a good example of a case where there is a great deal of controversy over what the Scripture means to teach. Does it teach that there was this original, literal human pair, or is that just something that is incidental to Scriptural teaching?

I share these examples simply to give you a sense of the flexibility of an adequate doctrine of biblical inerrancy. This is not a wooden sort of doctrine that is imposed upon the text, but rather it is a nuanced and subtle doctrine that requires us to interpret and understand the original text and to ask ourselves, “What do the biblical authors really mean to affirm or teach here?”

What we will do the next time we meet is to look at difficulties with the doctrine of biblical inerrancy. This is a doctrine that faces significant challenges primarily of two types. We will talk about what those challenges are before offering some defense of why we ought to believe in the doctrine of biblical inerrancy.