

## (2) Difficulties with Biblical Inerrancy

The last time We saw that inerrancy is properly defined in terms, not simply of what the Bible says, but in terms of what the Bible teaches, and that the Bible therefore (in virtue of being God's Word) is inerrant in all that it teaches.

This doctrine confronts difficulties of various sorts. These are principally three – there are two listed on the outline but I am going to add a third category that has since come to more significance in my mind.

### (a) Inconsistencies

1. *Simple inconsistencies within Scripture.* These are cases where the Scriptures seem to contradict themselves. A good example of this in the New Testament is the accounts of the death of Judas Iscariot. In Matthew 27:5 we read what happens to Judas after he had betrayed Jesus: “And throwing down the pieces of silver in the temple, he departed; and he went and hanged himself.” So Judas committed suicide by hanging according to Matthew. But now when you turn over to the account that Luke gives in Acts 1 you find a different story. In Acts 1:18-19 Luke adds this parenthetical comment:

(Now this man bought a field with the reward of his wickedness; and falling headlong he burst open in the middle and all his bowels gushed out. And it became known to all the inhabitants of Jerusalem, so that the field was called in their language Akeldama, that is, Field of Blood.)

Here we have a different account of the death of Judas where Judas uses the money to buy a field and then falls and has a fatal injury. This would be simply one example of apparent inconsistencies in the Bible that would challenge the doctrine that the Bible is inerrant.

(b) Factual mistakes.

2. *Factual mistakes*. These would not be inconsistencies within Scripture, but rather mistakes that other external sources would be inconsistent with. For example, in Luke 2:2 he talks about a man named Quirinius who he identifies as the governor of Syria during the time of the census that took Mary and Joseph to Bethlehem. He says in Luke 2:2, “This was the first enrollment, when Quirinius was governor of Syria.” This contradicts what we know about Syrian leaders in extra-biblical material. Quirinius was, in fact, a governor of Syria, but it wasn’t until some years later that Quirinius governed Syria. Luke seems to have gotten the date wrong. This would be an example of what we might call a factual mistake in Scripture.

(c) Ethical errors.

3. Recently, I’ve been impressed with the number of non-Christians who reject Scripture because of what we might call *ethical errors*. That is to say, they reject the moral teachings of Scripture as being mistaken. Sometimes, non-theists will incorrectly use these objections as an argument against the truth of Christianity or even against the truth of theism. But clearly if there are mistakes in the Bible of an ethical nature, that doesn’t mean that atheism is true. I don’t know of any atheist philosopher who

would use as his argument that God does not exist that there is some mistake of ethical teaching in the Bible. Similarly, it doesn't show that Jesus Christ wasn't the Son of God who died for your sins and was raised from the dead. Rather, what these would challenge – and this is why we are considering them here – is the biblical doctrine of inerrancy. The claim would be that this shows that these passages in Scripture are not, in fact, inspired by God, or that the Bible isn't inerrant, even if it is inspired by God, because it contains these ethical errors.

What am I thinking of here? Perhaps the most famous example is the slaughter of the Canaanites in the Old Testament where God is represented as commanding the Israeli armies to go into Canaan and to kill everybody, not only the men but also the women and even the little children. Very many people will say such a command could not possibly have been given by a good and loving God. This is inconsistent with the nature of God, and so these stories of the conquest of Canaan are either legends about the founding of Israel that never really happened or, if the events actually happened, the Israelites, carried away by their nationalistic fervor, thought that God had commanded them to do this when in fact he had not. In either case, I think you can see that what this objection properly challenges would be the doctrine of biblical inerrancy. It would say that these stories are not true.

Similarly, in the Old Testament, the institution of slavery or the subjugation of women is troubling to many people. Now, in fact, slavery in the Old Testament is not at all like slavery that existed in the American antebellum South that we are familiar with. In fact in ancient Israel slavery was really a kind of anti-poverty program.

Since they didn't have government welfare programs, a man could keep his family together and preserve his dignity by selling himself into slavery until he worked off his debts and then would be freed. So slavery was actually a kind of anti-poverty program that had the advantages of self-respect, hard work, and keeping the family together. But if you point that out, detractors will say nevertheless that the way slaves are treated, like the way women are treated in the Old Testament, indicates that they are not thought to be equal in moral value to men. The penalties for crimes that injured slaves are less than the penalties of those same crimes when they are done against a free man. Or a woman will have to offer certain sacrifices or make certain observances that are greater than if a man needed to do so. So these indicate a lower view of the personhood of slaves and women that we find very troubling because we believe in the equal intrinsic value of all human beings.

This objection concerns not just the Old Testament. One of the major objections to Biblical ethics by people in our contemporary culture is the Bible's prohibition of homosexual activity. For many people, this is just deeply wrong; to say that persons who have a homosexual disposition that they did not choose and cannot get rid of cannot live happy and fulfilling lives but must be celibate for the rest of their existence is immoral. Among non-believers, the Bible's prohibitions of homosexual activity are often regarded as teachings that could not genuinely be from God. These must represent ethical mistakes in the Bible.

Jesus himself isn't exempted from these objections. For example, Jesus' teachings on divorce and remarriage go down very hard today. Look at what Jesus says in Mark 10:11: "And he said to

them, ‘Whoever divorces his wife and marries another, commits adultery against her; and if she divorces her husband and marries another, she commits adultery.’” Here Jesus prohibits divorce and also remarriage. This command is widely ignored in the Christian church today. It is not just non-Christians that find this hard to swallow. Very widely in the church there are Christian believers who once were married who have suffered a divorce but now have found someone else whom they believe God has for them, and they remarry. Sometimes, at least, those second marriages are much happier and work out better. So it might be claimed this is an ethical mistake on Jesus’ part.

I think you can see that these ethical errors, as well as factual mistakes and inconsistencies, would all be reasons, not for denying the existence of God or the person and work of Christ, but they would be reasons for calling into question biblical inerrancy. These would be seen as human mistakes that have worked their way into Scripture. So while Scripture is inspired by God, while it is God’s Word, nevertheless it does contain these sorts of mistakes.

### (3) Defense of Biblical Inerrancy

I think we have to admit that anyone reading the Bible would not arrive at a doctrine of inerrancy inductively. He wouldn’t read the Scriptures and, finding no mistakes, conclude that therefore the Bible is inerrant. He would, on the basis of difficulties like these and others, probably say it has mistakes or errors in it. But I think the doctrine of biblical inerrancy is not based on inductive reasoning. Rather, it is a deductive argument based upon the attitude of Jesus to the Hebrew Scriptures – what we today call the Old Testament. When you look at Jesus’ attitude toward the

Hebrew Scriptures, he called them the Word of God, and he treated them as completely authoritative and trustworthy and true. On the basis of Jesus' attitude toward the Scriptures we, as his disciples, also embrace that teaching. This argument might be summarized in the following way. There are two parts to this.

The first part is:

1. Whatever God teaches is true. (This is because God is a perfect being; he is the greatest conceivable being and therefore omniscient. God is not a deceiver, and so if he teaches you to believe something, that which he teaches you is true.)
2. Historical, prophetic, and other evidences show that Jesus is God. (This is where you would introduce your typical apologetic arguments and Christian evidences for the person of Christ.)
3. Therefore, whatever Jesus teaches is true. (If Jesus is God, and whatever God teaches is true, then what Jesus teaches us to believe is true.)

The second part of the argument then picks up as its first premise the conclusion of the first argument:

1. Whatever Jesus teaches is true.

Then the crucial premise:

2. Jesus taught that the Scriptures are the inerrant Word of God. (Here one would simply look at how Jesus regarded the Old Testament. If you are interested in exploring this in greater detail, let me recommend the book by John Wenham

called *Christ and the Bible* where he does an extensive study of Jesus' attitude toward the Hebrew Scriptures.)

3. Therefore, the Scriptures are the inerrant word of God.

So the belief in biblical inerrancy is not something arrived at inductively. It is a deductive inference based upon the person and the teachings of Jesus Christ. Jesus regarded the Hebrew Scriptures as the inerrant Word of God, and he is our teacher, therefore we should follow him in his teaching.

John 10:34-36 gives a nice summary of Jesus' attitude toward the Hebrew Scriptures. Here Jesus is disputing with his Jewish opponents.

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'?"

Here Jesus quotes from Psalms 82:6. He refers to it as the Word of God. His argument is based upon a single word – the word "gods" – which is found in that passage. And he says Scripture cannot be broken. The sense seems to be here that it is reliable and can't be just annulled or set aside.

What that means is that we believe in a doctrine of biblical inerrancy on the basis of Christ's attitude toward the Old Testament. It has been said, I think quite rightly, that we don't believe in Christ because we believe in the Bible. Rather, we believe in the Bible because we believe in Christ. It's because we

believe in Jesus and his divinity and Lordship that we believe what he taught about the Old Testament.

#### (4) Approach to Biblical Difficulties

(a) How should we approach biblical inconsistencies when we do encounter them? Obviously, we should first of all try to resolve the difficulty. We ought to try to see if there isn't some solution. Here crucial to the question will be the one just raised, namely, the literary genre of the literature we are dealing with as well as the techniques that were employed by ancient writers in, for example, the writing of history.

For example, Michael Licona has argued that when you compare the Gospels to the *Lives* of Greek and Romans composed by Plutarch, an ancient historian, many of the same techniques that ancient historians like Plutarch used in writing ancient *Lives* are also employed by the evangelists. Yet, they weren't errors or mistakes because these were accepted as part of that sort of writing. Now whether or not Mike is correct in that comparison I think that it is indisputable that the Gospel writers do employ such techniques. For example, he mentions such techniques as compression, where a narrative would be compacted. Sometimes this is called telescoping. You think of a telescope when it is extended, but then you can collapse that telescope and it all folds up into just one short segment. I think you see something like that, for example, in the Easter narratives in the Gospel of Luke. If you read the Easter story in Luke, it looks as though it all happens on the same day. Luke doesn't even have evening and the next day come before he gets to the ascension. Yet, when you turn the page and you read the first chapter of the book of Acts, you find that



Jesus appeared to his disciples over forty days before the ascension. So Luke himself knows that this didn't all happen on Easter Sunday – it was spread out over a period of weeks. But he telescopes it down. The person who is reading this in an unsympathetic way without understanding these literary devices might think Luke has erred here when Luke himself knows that the events happened over a long period of time.

Other techniques include displacement – I mentioned earlier the story of the cleansing of the temple in the Synoptics being during the passion week but in John early on. Or transferal of sayings from one person to another. Or simplification of a narrative. Or spotlighting certain persons. All of these are legitimate techniques that the Evangelists used.

On top of these techniques, you have the flexibility of oral tradition and editorial redaction by an author for clarity's sake, or paraphrasing. You will remember that in that day they didn't even have such things as quotation marks! So these red letter editions of the Gospels are utterly misleading in thinking that these are the very words uttered by Jesus. What we are reading, even in the Greek, is a translation of Aramaic that Jesus spoke. So these aren't the very words of Jesus, especially, as I say, they didn't distinguish between direct speech and indirect speech. Very often they will blur into each other.

So in dealing with these sorts of inconsistencies, I think first of all we need to understand the type of literature we are dealing with and then the techniques that ancient authors used in writing. A lot of these difficulties will simply vanish when we do that. They turn out not to be errors at all.

Or, on top of that, we might try harmonization. This shouldn't be despised. I think sometimes harmonizations are proposed to deal with passages better dealt with by literary techniques like compression, displacement, simplification, etc. There you do get artificial and implausible harmonizations. But that doesn't mean that harmonization can never work. Sometimes life is complicated and, in fact, harmonization may hold.

One very striking example was given by the former Dean of the seminary at which I taught – Dr. Kenneth Kantzer. He told the story of how he received a phone call one day from his brother that their mother had been hit by a bus in downtown Chicago and was being rushed to the hospital. Sometime later Dr. Kantzer received a call from the hospital reporting that his mother had been killed immediately in an automobile crash. He thought, “What is this?” The brother was there. He knew what happened. Yet this was an official report from the hospital. But how could you reconcile these? They later found out that his mother had, in fact, been hit by a bus when she was crossing the street in downtown Chicago. She was picked up by the ambulance and was being rushed to the hospital when the ambulance was involved in an automobile collision, and she was immediately killed. So both stories turned out to be true! Yet, as Dr. Kantzer said, “If I were to propose this as a harmonization for dealing with some biblical inconsistency, I would be laughed out of the room.” It shows that sometimes life can be complicated. In fact, there may be a harmonization such as in the case of the death of Judas that was mentioned. It's all right to say, “We don't know.”

In some cases, we may simply have to say that we don't know how two accounts are to be reconciled, but we simply hold the truth in tension and hope that perhaps with further information we would know how these accounts are to be reconciled with each other.

Finally, in dealing with these inconsistencies, we have to remember that inerrancy concerns what the Bible teaches. That doesn't mean there can't be elements in Scripture that are not accurate but they are not part of the teaching of Scripture.

So those would be ways of dealing with inconsistencies. Whether or not that will be fully successful remains to be seen. I am suggesting that these are simply ways for how you would then approach these sorts of difficulties.