

Biblical Inerrancy—Part 4

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The last article began a discussion of what inerrancy does not require. We will conclude that discussion now.

For similar reasons, inerrancy does not require strict grammatic, semantic, numeric, or historic precision, e.g., September 14, 15, or 16 is still, properly, the middle of the month.

Inerrancy does not exclude the use of non-literal, figurative language (e.g., allegory, personification, hyperbole) or various literary genre (apocalyptic, drama, poetry, parable); indeed to exclude these would rob Scripture of much of its richness and universal appeal.

Inerrancy does not demand verbatim exactness when the New Testament quotes the Old. A New Testament author has the right to give the basic idea or summarize for purpose of brevity. Only if a New Testament quotation denied or contradicted an Old Testament Scripture would there be an error—but this never occurs.

In a similar fashion, inerrancy does not demand that any given biblical event or account be exhaustively reported. As Dr. Charles Ryrie points out: “[T]he inerrancy of the Bible means simply that the Bible tells the truth. Truth can and does include approximations, free quotations, language of appearances, and different accounts of the same event as long as those do not contradict.”⁸

To illustrate, say a boxer named Joe Frazier is in a brawl in a bar. Two policemen are called to the scene and they restore order. “Joe” was the larger and stronger of the two officers so he was the one who bravely entered the fray and ended the fight. He also was the one who talked to Frazier afterwards. The other policeman took care of peripheral matters like talking to witnesses and never spoke with Frazier.

Recalling the incident to a friend three weeks later Frazier says, “Yeah, I would have won that fight but this cop came in and broke it up.”

Is his statement an error because he failed to mention the presence of the second policeman? Obviously not. A newspaper account of the event read: “Two policemen end noted brawl in local bar.” (What if the “other” policeman was actually a woman and it was really an English pub?) Is this an error? Again, no. Let’s say we had both statements in the same newspaper story. Would we assume one statement was in error or that the reporter was lying? No, of course not, because we could see from the context both statements were true.

In a similar fashion, it is good to remember that looking back at biblical events we do not always have access to the entire context or story—only the summarized reporting. Why should we assume there is an error or contradiction without the information necessary to prove there really is one?

We have now properly defined inerrancy and noted what the doctrine does and does not involve. In the following material we will briefly address the subject of the process by which we received an inerrant Bible.

Inerrancy and Inspiration

In the clearest of terms the Bible declares it is the inspired Word of God: “All Scripture is God-breathed [*theopneustos*]...” (2 Tim. 3:16). In what sense is the Bible inspired? Biblical inspiration is 1) verbal (extending to the very words, not just the ideas, of Scripture),

2) plenary (extending equally to every part of Scripture), and 3) what is termed perspicuous—sufficiently clear for the average person to understand it and be spiritually nourished without recourse to scholarly or technical insight.

Non-biblical theories of inspiration include 1) verbal dictation, which undercuts the uniquely *human* input in recording Scripture, 2) limited or partial inspiration, which undercuts the *authority* of Scripture (and the basis for any objective hermeneutic), and 3) merely human inspiration which undercuts the very concept of revealed Scripture, since it is not *divine* inspiration to begin with. If the Bible is no more than human “religious genius” it could hardly be accorded greater authority than other works of human inspiration or religious genius.

Biblically speaking, the mere fact of verbal, plenary, divine inspiration virtually demands belief in inerrancy. To separate inspiration from inerrancy is to “separate” God from His attributes.* For example, is it credible to believe that a *holy* God who identifies Himself as “the God of truth” would inspire error? Or that an *omnipotent* God would not safeguard His own words from corruption during the process of inspiring human agents? Is it reasonable to believe that a just, merciful and loving God engages in limited inspiration and then leaves it to His sinful and imperfect children to attempt to discover where the truth is—knowing in advance the hopelessness of the task, and the subjectivity and unbelief it would foster? What would be the point of inspiration?

The only logical option is to maintain that whatever God speaks is truth and only truth, for, as Scripture declares, God “does not lie” (Titus 1:2) because “it is impossible for God to lie” (Heb. 6:18). As Dr. Lindsell observes;

The very nature of inspiration renders the Bible infallible, which means that it cannot deceive us. It is inerrant in that it is not false, mistaken, or defective.... Inspiration involved infallibility from start to finish. God the Holy Spirit by nature cannot lie or be the author of untruth. If the Scripture is inspired at all it must be infallible. If any part of it is not infallible, then that part cannot be inspired. If inspiration allows for the possibility of error, then inspiration ceases to be inspiration.⁹

Again, if the process of inspiration cannot be trusted, of what value is inspiration? Inspiration has no value, let alone credibility, if “all it does is guarantee us the Bible has in it both truth and error.”¹⁰ Defective or deceptive inspiration could certainly be expected in something like New Age channeling and other forms of spiritism, but to ascribe it to an infinitely perfect God is hardly worthy of His perfection.

If we assume the truth of a limited inspiration, or limited inerrancy view, shouldn't we begin correcting Scripture accordingly so that its teachings are consistent with the “facts” as we know them? To cite an example of one Scripture that surely would need revision, consider 2 Timothy 3:16:

Most all Scripture is (partially) God-breathed and profitable (usually) for teaching (except where wrong) rebuking (assuming you are certain you have the authority) correcting (when you find the inerrant parts) and training in righteousness (unless it concerns sexist and culturally prejudiced moralizing) so that the man of God may (possibly) be thoroughly equipped (?) for every good (?) work. (2 Timothy 3:16)

If the Bible is merely a humanly inspired document, then it should be treated as such, for it would just as certainly be subject to human correction as it would contain human

*See our *The Facts On the King James Only Controversy*.

error. However, if it is truly inspired by God, then it must *not* be assumed errant without sufficient evidence, lest we impugn the character and majesty of the infinite God who so graciously gave it to us. It is after all, *His* word. The notion of an infinite God speaking through men is far, far different than the notion of men speaking by themselves. As E. J. Young states in *Thy Word is Truth*:

If the Bible is the Word of God we certainly may not approach it believing that we are capable of subjecting it to the test of our own unaided reason. If we think that we can employ theories and hypotheses which conflict with the express statements of the Bible, we deceive only ourselves, and the reason why we deceive ourselves is that we are thus setting up the human mind above God.... Nor in our study, may we advance theories which conflict with what the Bible itself says. How then must we approach the Bible? There is only one way; it is the way of humility. We are coming unto the message which the Creator of heaven and earth has given. Ours must be the receptive attitude. We are to pattern all our thought upon what God has said. We shall never understand the Bible aright until we accept it for what it claims to be, the infallible Word of the ever-living and true God.¹¹

Inspiration guarantees the truth of what is stated but it does not mean everything inspired is necessarily of equal importance. To cite an obvious example, the theological content of Romans chs. 3-8 is more important to us than the census data of the Israeli tribes recorded in Leviticus chapters 1-4. Both are equally inspired and neither is unimportant (it was crucial to the Israelis) but both are not equally important for us today spiritually. All Scripture is truth but some of its truth is more central (e.g., the atonement) and some is more peripheral (e.g., the number of men slain in a given war):

...inspiration means that the record of what is said and done is correct. It does not mean that everything that God did and said is recorded. It does not mean that everything recorded is of equal importance, but every part of it is necessary to the purpose of the record, and no part is unimportant. One part is no more inspired than any other part.¹²

Again, no Scripture is unimportant, however mundane. As any good quality commentary will show, some of the greatest treasures can be found in Leviticus, what some consider one of the most “boring” books in the Bible. It should also be remembered that even when a particular Scripture’s commandments are not directed to a later generation (e.g., Old Testament sacrificial regulations) they will nevertheless still possess 1) special spiritual *significance* to them (e.g., in indicating God’s holiness and foreshadowing the atonement) or 2) necessary practical *instruction* for them: “For everything that was written in the past was written to teach us...” (Rom. 15:4). (See Heb. 6:13-18, citing Gen. 12, 15, 17, 22 and 1 Cor. 9:8-10 citing Deut. 25:4 and Rom. 4:23; Mt. 23:31-32; 1 Cor. 10:11; Heb. 10:15.)¹³

In conclusion, we have seen a number of things from these articles. First, inerrancy is a genuinely important topic in the church today and in light of church history, it represents one among several truly watershed issues. Thus, the debate that exists should not be surprising (Eph. 6:12). Second, we have properly defined inerrancy and indicated what it does and does not involve. Third, we have shown the importance of the relationship of biblical inspiration to the doctrine of inerrancy.

FOOTNOTES

8. Charles Ryrie, *What You Should Know About Inerrancy* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1980), p. 30

9. Lindsell, *The Battle for the Bible*, p. 31.

10. Harold Lindsell, *The Bible in the Balance* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1979), p. 31.

11. Edward J. Young, *Thy Word Is Truth* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1970), pp. 206-207.

12. Lindsell, *The Bible in the Balance*, p. 133.

13. Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., "Legitimate Hermeneutics" in Geisler (ed.), *Inerrancy*, pp. 140-141, cf. pp. 460 n. 46.

14. Taken from *The Historic Faith of the Church*, p. 67.