

# Systematic Theology for the Local Church

## #19—Bibliology—Part X<sup>1</sup>

### Inerrancy

Paul Karleen

July 29, 2007

For the upcoming studies in Theology Proper: Become familiar with Sections 13-26 in House's *Charts of Christian Theology and Doctrine*. Also, read Reymond, *A New Systematic Theology of the Christian Faith*, ch. 6, Introduction to the Doctrine of God, ch. 7, the Names and Nature of God, ch. 8, God as Trinity, ch. 9 (except for the sections on Christ and the Holy Spirit), The Trinity in the Creeds, ch. 10, The Eternal Decree of God. Later in the section on Theology Proper we will suggest readings in Wayne House's *Charts on Open Theism and Orthodoxy*.

### Scripture speaks = God speaks—an implicit assertion of inerrancy

Many years ago Benjamin Warfield carried out a careful analysis of the theological ramifications of N.T. writers' or speakers' views of the O.T. in certain quotations found in two groups of N.T. passages:

In one of these classes of passages the Scriptures are spoken of as if they were God; in the other, God is spoken of as if He were the Scriptures; in the two together, God and the Scriptures are brought into such conjunction as to show that in point of directness of authority no distinction was made between them. . . .<sup>2</sup>

In the first type of passage, Scripture is described as speaking, as in Rom. 9:17:

<sup>17</sup> For the Scripture says to Pharaoh: "I raised you up for this very purpose, that I might display my power in you and that my name might be proclaimed in all the earth."

This is a quotation from Ex. 9:16:

<sup>13</sup> Then the LORD said to Moses, . . .<sup>16</sup> But I have raised you up for this very purpose, that I might show you my power and that my name might be proclaimed in all the earth.

Notice that in Exodus God is speaking, but in Rom. 9:17 Paul explicitly says that "The Scripture" spoke. Warfield says about this:

[This act] could be attributed to "Scripture" only as the result of such a habitual identification, in the mind of the writer, of the text of Scripture with God as speaking, that it became natural to use the term "Scripture says," when what was really intended was "God, as recorded in Scripture, said."<sup>3</sup>

The second type of passage is exemplified by Gen. 2:24 as quoted in Mt. 19:4-5 (underlining is mine):

<sup>22</sup> Then the LORD God made a woman from the rib he had taken out of the man, and he brought her to the man. <sup>23</sup> The man said, "This is now bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called 'woman,' for she was taken out of man." <sup>24</sup> For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and they will become one flesh.

<sup>1</sup> Copyright 2007 by Paul S. Karleen. Scripture taken from the HOLY BIBLE, NEW INTERNATIONAL VERSION®. NIV®. Copyright© 1973, 1978, 1984 by International Bible Society. Used by permission of Zondervan. All rights reserved.

<sup>2</sup> Benjamin B. Warfield, "'It says:' 'Scripture Says' 'God Says,'" in *The Inspiration and Authority of the Bible* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1948), 299.

<sup>3</sup> Warfield, 300.

19 When Jesus had finished saying these things, he left Galilee and went into the region of Judea to the other side of the Jordan.<sup>2</sup> Large crowds followed him, and he healed them there.<sup>3</sup> Some Pharisees came to him to test him. They asked, “Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any and every reason?”<sup>4</sup> “Haven’t you read,” he replied, “that at the beginning the Creator ‘made them male and female,’<sup>5</sup> and said, ‘For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh’?<sup>6</sup> So they are no longer two, but one. Therefore what God has joined together, let man not separate.”

Here is Warfield’s conclusion:

It is not God, however, in whose mouth these sayings are placed in the text of the Old Testament: they are the words of others, recorded in the text of Scripture as spoken to or of God. They could be attributed to God only through such habitual identification, in the minds of the writers, of the text of Scripture with the utterances of God that it had become natural to use the term “God says” when what was really intended was “Scripture, the Word of God, says.”

The two sets of passages, together, thus show an absolute identification, in the minds of these writers, of “Scripture,” with the speaking God.<sup>4</sup>

There could not be a higher valuation of ‘Scripture’ than we find in these passages. Scripture carries the accuracy of the voice of God. This view of the Old Testament by the New Testament writers forms a powerful implicit statement of the accuracy—the inerrancy—of the Scriptures.

### **Inerrancy and infallibility**

The historic position of the Christian Church has been that the Scriptures are free from error and correspond at every point to what is true, with God as the reference point. Of course, this a quality claimed only for the originals, not for copies or translations. (See study #18 for a discussion of the character of the copies and translations that we do have.) This doctrine is called *inerrancy*.

If we think more in terms of actual use of the Bible, the term *infallibility* has been used to describe the trustworthiness of Scripture, indicating that it can in no way lead us astray from true doctrine or practice.

These two doctrines are actually two sides of the same coin, since we cannot have one without the other. Because of this, some have suggested that they are essentially synonyms for the purposes of discussion of biblical matters,<sup>5</sup> especially since some evangelicals in recent years have attempted to say that the Bible may be infallible in certain areas that it speaks to, but may not be inerrant.

There was movement among a minority of evangelicals in the last half of the twentieth century attempting to refine doctrinal statements about the nature of inspiration, inerrancy, and infallibility. Some claimed such things as the following: (1) inerrancy should be ascribed only to revelational matters that have to do with salvation or explicit teaching; (2) the express teaching of the Bible concerning its own inerrancy (and inspiration) may not be sufficient to establish the real nature or extent of inerrancy, or conversely, although the Bible may state explicitly that it is inerrant, the actual embedded details may show errors. I would like to introduce at this point the Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy and its history:

---

<sup>4</sup> Warfield, 300.

<sup>5</sup> Harold Lindsell, *The Battle for the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1976), 27.

The “Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy” was produced at an international Summit Conference of evangelical leaders, held at the Hyatt Regency O’Hare in Chicago in the fall of 1978. This congress was sponsored by the International Council on Biblical Inerrancy. The Chicago Statement was signed by nearly 300 noted evangelical scholars, including James Boice, Norman L. Geisler, John Gerstner, Carl F. H. Henry, Kenneth Kantzer, Harold Lindsell, John Warwick Montgomery, Roger Nicole, J. I. Packer, Robert Preus, Earl Radmacher, Francis Schaeffer, R. C. Sproul, and John Wenham.

The Summit Conference was concerned with asserting the biblical picture of inerrancy in the face of claims that the Bible contains or could contain errors. Here are the Statement’s key points concerning inerrancy and infallibility:

Holy Scripture, as the inspired Word of God witnessing authoritatively to Jesus Christ, may properly be called *infallible* and *inerrant*. These negative terms have a special value, for they explicitly safeguard crucial positive truths.

*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.

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.

Here are my similar definitions:

Inerrancy is a term applied to the Bible, although not specifically found in it; it denotes that the Bible, as originally written, possessed no humanly induced deviations from the message God intended to be recorded and that it is true in every respect; 2 Tim. 3:16; 1 Cor. 2:13; 1 Pet. 2:19.

Infallibility: Although some assert that this term has a different meaning from inerrancy, the two terms are, for purposes of biblical study, synonymous; the Bible is infallible because inerrant, and inerrant because infallible.

Both of these doctrines are intimately connected with inspiration. Since inspiration is the process in which God by His superintending work assured that the original writings were exactly what He desired as His word to us, then as a result they are inerrant, and are therefore infallible. If we have God’s word, and it is without error, then, because it is from God and not from us, it must be totally trustworthy for doctrine and practice, that is, infallible. **So inspiration leads to inerrancy, which in turn leads to infallibility.** Each link is vital. In what follows we will assume that inerrancy and infallibility cannot be separated.

How can we demonstrate inerrancy? Perhaps one of the primary sources for establishing the doctrine lies in the character of God and His relation to the Scriptures. As presented in places such as Jn. 3:33 (“The man who has accepted it has certified that God is truthful”), God is incapable of communicating error or deceiving. Any product of His creative activity—especially in the light of 2 Tim. 3:16—must also be inerrant and trustworthy. The universe was in a perfect condition originally. Both it and the copies of Scripture were subsequently corrupted by human beings. God’s initial product was perfect.

Some clarifications are needed here. Some people are all too eager to see “errors” in the Bible, but have overlooked some rather obvious features of Scripture. First, inerrancy does not mean that there will be total verbal correspondence between parallel accounts appearing in different places in the Bible. The fact that Mt., Mk., and Lk. do not agree on a particular incident in the life of Christ does not warrant immediately jumping to the conclusion that one is wrong or both are wrong. Often a plausible explanation—one of many possible

ones—is that the writers are all reporting true details, but are highlighting or picking and choosing according to their specific purposes in writing. An assumption of this kind gives the Bible the benefit of the doubt until apparent errors can be clarified.

The Bible is a genuine book with normal literary features. To opt for error in response to figurative language is an invalid approach. The Bible is not presenting error when Jesus claims He is a door. It should be expected to make effective use of symbols and pictures.

Similarly, we should not expect the Bible to employ a technical and scientific vocabulary, matching the standards of rigorous description of any particular age. And the Bible can hardly be faulted for saying "the sun rises and sets" when we do the same—and know that the sun does no such thing.<sup>6</sup>

Inerrancy does not usually depend on the matter of establishing the Hebrew or Greek text. Those who claim the Bible has errors do not usually point to variant readings as examples of errors.

Article XIII of the Chicago Statement addresses these issues. The term 'phenomena' is used to refer to texts that contain material relevant to the issue of inerrancy, as opposed to specific, direct statements about inerrancy, such as 2 Tim. 3:16.

*WE AFFIRM* the propriety of using inerrancy as a theological term with reference to the complete truthfulness of Scripture.

*WE DENY* that it is proper to evaluate Scripture according to standards of truth and error that are alien to its usage or purpose. We further deny that inerrancy is negated by Biblical phenomena such as a lack of modern technical precision, irregularities of grammar or spelling, observational descriptions of nature, the reporting of falsehoods, the use of hyperbole and round numbers, the topical arrangement of material, variant selections of material in parallel accounts, or the use of free citations.

We affirm that canonical Scripture should always be interpreted on the basis that it is infallible and inerrant. However, in determining what the God-taught writer is asserting in each passage, we must pay the most careful attention to its claims and character as a human production. In inspiration, God utilized the culture and conventions of His penman's milieu, a milieu that God controls in His sovereign providence; it is misinterpretation to imagine otherwise.

So history must be treated as history, poetry as poetry, hyperbole and metaphor as hyperbole and metaphor, generalization and approximation as what they are, and so forth. 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. 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.

The truthfulness of Scripture is not negated by the appearance in it of irregularities of grammar or spelling, phenomenal descriptions of nature, reports of false statements (*e.g.*, the lies of Satan), or seeming discrepancies between one passage and another. It is not right to set the so-called "phenomena" of Scripture against the teaching of Scripture about itself. Apparent inconsistencies should not be ignored. Solution of them, where this can be convincingly achieved, will encourage our

---

<sup>6</sup> On such cautions see Rene Pache, *The Inspiration and Authority of Scripture* (Chicago: Moody, 1969), 123-24.

faith, and where for the present no convincing solution is at hand we shall significantly honor God by trusting His assurance that His Word is true, despite these appearances, and by maintaining our confidence that one day they will be seen to have been illusions.

Inasmuch as all Scripture is the product of a single divine mind, interpretation must stay within the bounds of the analogy of Scripture and eschew hypotheses that would correct one Biblical passage by another, whether in the name of progressive revelation or of the imperfect enlightenment of the inspired writer's mind.

Although Holy Scripture is nowhere culture-bound in the sense that its teaching lacks universal validity, it is sometimes culturally conditioned by the customs and conventional views of a particular period, so that the application of its principles today calls for a different sort of action.

It is important that we think about how we should approach apparent contradictions in the Bible. We should be careful not to set ourselves up as judges of Scripture, thinking that we have the insight and sufficient information to determine conclusively exactly where there are errors. Who decides what is to be called error? Where do we draw the line? How do we keep this from affecting other doctrines? Questions such as this have been raised by Harold Lindsell, among others.<sup>7</sup> Furthermore, isn't God quite able to preserve the Scriptures from error in the process of inspiration? Apparent errors can very well be just that—apparent. We do not have to assume that so-called errors are valid, since we do not possess enough evidence to label them as such.<sup>8</sup> Although it is entirely possible that what the Bible teaches about its own inspiration—and most are agreed that it *teaches* inerrancy—could be contradicted by embedded details elsewhere (a geographical or chronological item or the like), the best course is to hold judgments in abeyance and give the Bible time to be proven correct, through new discoveries, etc. This amounts to a faith position, of course, and involves suspending our judgments, even though there may appear to be problems. Many recent studies by those concerned with upholding inerrancy have shown that features of the Bible that seemed to be erroneous can be easily explained, if there is enough careful study.<sup>9</sup> No one has ever conclusively proven that there is an error in the Bible.

### **The relation between inerrancy and the authority of Scripture**

Inerrancy forms an important area of discussion, for many reasons. It is vitally linked with the issue of inspiration. What we believe about inspiration determines what we believe about inerrancy, and vice versa. Secondly, those who are quite willing to allow for errors in the Bible assert that we can still hold to the full authority of the Bible over us even without inerrancy. The conclusion of Chicago Statement helps us to see the relation between inerrancy and our acknowledgement of the Bible's authority over us:

In our affirmation of the authority of Scripture as involving its total truth, we are consciously standing with Christ and His apostles, indeed with the whole Bible and with the main stream of Church history from the first days until very recently. We are concerned at the casual, inadvertent, and seemingly thoughtless way in which a belief of such far-reaching importance has been given up by so many in our day.

We are conscious too that great and grave confusion results from ceasing to maintain the total truth of the Bible whose authority one professes to acknowledge. The result of taking this step is that the Bible which God gave loses its authority, and what has authority instead is a Bible reduced in content according to the demands of one's critical reasonings and in principle reducible still further once one

---

<sup>7</sup> See *Battle for the Bible*.

<sup>8</sup> See, e.g., Edward J. Young, *Thy Word Is Truth* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1957), 61.

<sup>9</sup> One example is S. Lewis Johnson, Jr. *The Old Testament in the New* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1980); see also study #4 in this series concerning assumptions and interpreting messages.

has started. This means that at bottom independent reason now has authority, as opposed to Scriptural teaching. If this is not seen and if for the time being basic evangelical doctrines are still held, persons denying the full truth of Scripture may claim an evangelical identity while methodologically they have moved away from the evangelical principle of knowledge to an unstable subjectivism, and will find it hard not to move further.

Given a toehold, the depravity of human beings will always lead them to discard the demands of Scripture. None of us by nature looks for an authority from God. Rom. 1 is quite clear on that.

## **Study questions for Inerrancy**

1. Read carefully Gal. 3:8 and Gen. 12:1-3. Who spoke in Gen. 12:1-3? What does Gal. 3:8 do with Gen. 12? What is unusual or striking about Paul's wording? What qualities are ascribed to Scripture? How could Paul be justified in doing this?
2. Study Rom. 9:17 and Ex. 9:16. Who was speaking in the Exodus verse? What would Warfield say about this quotation?
3. Study Heb. 1:6 and Ps. 104:4. Who was speaking in the Hebrews verse? In Psalm 104:4? What would Warfield say about this quotation?
4. Reading the Chicago Statement on Inerrancy will provide a good review of bibliology. Try to be able to comment on or explain the significance of—based on our studies—each of the Articles of Affirmation and Denial, except for the following: 4, 16, 17, 18 and 19

## Running compilation of key definitions

1. Systematic theology: The organized presentation of all that the Bible teaches about God and His works.
2. Exegesis: The actual practice of studying or interpreting a document or other message to determine its meaning.
3. Context: Context in a document or utterance is the surroundings of a portion of a word, a word, or a group of words.
4. Bibliology: The doctrinal study of the nature of the Bible.
5. Biblical authority: The quality inherent in Scripture by virtue of which human beings are completely answerable to its content.
6. Revelation: The information about Himself given by God to human beings.
7. General revelation: God's disclosure of Himself, available directly to everyone, given through means other than dreams, visions, direct words and Christ Himself.
8. Special revelation: The disclosure of information from God that is not available directly to all human beings.
9. Inspiration: A term applied to the Bible denoting that it is the product of God's creative activity, figuratively breathed out from Him (2 Tim. 3:16); applies to the process of recording Scripture, not specifically to the people involved; actually, *expiration* would be a better term to reflect the concept of 2 Tim. 3:16; the result is *inerrancy*.
10. Textual criticism: The science and art of attempting to discover the original text of a literary work for which the original document does not exist. It is especially important for biblical studies, and the foundational endeavor to all subsequent investigation of the Scriptures.
11. Canon: Transliterated from a Greek Word meaning "standard"; as used of the Bible, it refers to books authenticated as possessing divine origin and therefore authoritative; the Jewish canon consists of thirty-nine books, the Protestant of sixty-six and the Catholic of eighty (including apocryphal books).
12. Inerrancy is a term applied to the Bible, although not specifically found in it; it denotes that the Bible, as originally written, possessed no humanly induced deviations from the message God intended to be recorded and that it is true in every respect; 2 Tim. 3:16; 1 Cor. 2:13; 1 Pet. 2:19.
13. Infallibility: Although some assert that this term has a different meaning from inerrancy, the two terms are, for purposes of biblical study, synonymous; the Bible is infallible because inerrant, and inerrant because infallible.