

# The Error of Inerrancy

## How our view of scripture has divided the Church

### *Historical Foundations*

The 66 books of our Bible had a difficult upbringing to say the least. For the first few hundred years after Jesus there were many different collections of scripture floating around the early church. Some churches recognized the book of James as authoritative while others did not. Nobody could agree on who wrote Hebrews (that debate remains). And what about the Old Testament? Marcion believed that the Old Testament was about the brutal tribal Hebrew God YHWH and the New Testament is about a different and loving God named Jesus. Therefore, Marcion believed we should do away with the Old Testament entirely. In addition, other heretical Gnostic writings abounded. These writings included special revelations about Jesus and his sayings which challenged the accounts of the holy apostles. Views like these caused anarchy and heretical movements that could not be deemed Christian. Therefore, the Church had to organize itself to decide what was scripture and what was not. This was not simple but after many attempts a consensus was made in the 4<sup>th</sup> century. Our current 66 book canon is the result. Thus, the Bible was made for the main purposes of uniting the Church on doctrine. Unfortunately but inevitably this would prove to be somewhat wishful thinking.

Prior to 1081 AD the Church was fundamentally united as one universal (catholic) Church. In 1081 the Roman Catholic Church broke with the Church in Constantinople due to differences over doctrine and politics. Therefore, after 1081 until The Reformation in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, the Church was basically divided into two: Western Roman Catholicism and the Eastern Orthodox.

During the time of the Renaissance the world changed dramatically. Men like Copernicus and Galileo maintained a heliocentric view, that the earth orbited the sun. The Catholic Church believed the Bible taught that the earth was not in motion (Proverbs 8:29, 1Chronicles 16:30, Psalm 24:2, Psalm 93:1) and the notion that it was in motion challenged the Bible's inerrancy and authority as the Word of God. Today it is hard for us to see how this impacted doctrine or theology but then its effects were disturbing and challenging for

the Church's authority on reality. In fact, for these truths the Church censored Galileo and kept him under house arrest until he died.

The protestant Reformation occurred because some believed that the Catholic Church was not behaving scripturally over a host of issues (and it was not). Reformers like Martin Luther, John Calvin, Ulrich Zwingli and even Henry VIII all broke ties to Rome because the Catholic Church was unwilling to be tolerant or compromise with protestant theology and doctrine. At the core of The Reformation movement was the belief in scripture's authority over Church tradition. This is where the Latin phrase *sola scriptura* comes from. Protestant theology raised many questions related to scriptural doctrines of justification by faith, grace and the sacraments. John Calvin and others believed that the inner witness of the Holy Spirit is the key in discerning what is the Word of God and what is not. After all, didn't Jesus talk about his sheep recognizing the voice of the shepherd? The Catholic Church saw all this as rebellion and a slippery slope of anarchy leading to inevitable chaos. But little did anyone know, this wild ride had just begun.....

With the onset of the colonial age and the invention of the printing press the Bible went everywhere and was translated into a myriad of languages. All of these factors contributed to the rise of differing interpretations and traditions from a plurality of cultures and worldviews. Subsequently, many of those traditions in an effort to legitimize themselves stressed the Bible's inerrancy. It is key to understand that this emphasis on inerrancy stemmed from The Reformation's high view of scripture as trumping Church tradition and authority. New protestant sects used inerrancy claims as a way of assuring their interpretation as the authoritative one. Today not much has changed. A common thread found among many evangelical and fundamental Christian traditions is a belief in the authority of their interpretation based upon an inerrant view of scripture. And it is from these lofty platforms that Christians look down their noses at other Christians and divide the body of Christ. The irony between dividing over the Bible when the Bible was created to unite us is conclusive to our misunderstanding of scripture's place. Scripture is not relative but it is elastic.

My goal is not to deconstruct people's faith by challenging the validity of scripture. My goal is to offer a pliable view of scripture and thereby make the Church more tolerant of differing interpretations and therefore more united. I want to propagate unity and Christian community by having a clearer understanding for the book we all love and love to beat each

other up with. I cannot protect people from what the Bible says. That is not anyone's job. The Bible says what it says and I believe that it stands or falls based on its own words. And it does stand because God is able to make it stand. I am not a Christian because I was convinced of scriptures inerrancy or perfection. I am a Christian because Jesus Christ has been revealed to me through the scripture and in my own experiences. And yet God transcends both mediums because he cannot be fully known; at least on this side of eternity. Perhaps we need to honor God enough to understand how he reveals himself through the text, not how we wish he did.

### *Issues in the Text*

Truth be told, there are many conservative people in the Church that believe the Bible does have errors in it. Some of these conservatives believe that the original autographs were perfect in every respect but have been corrupted since then through translation. Why God did not see it fit to either preserve the original copies of the books in the Bible or at least maintain their perfection through the many translations is a mystery nobody can solve. These textual errors that conservatives are willing to recognize have to do with grammar, dates and names. Furthermore, I agree with my sisters and brothers that these matters do not impact doctrinal issues. However, there are errors and problems in the text that challenge doctrine and Christian ethics. These texts cannot be ignored and we must do something with them. Take for example Exodus 21:20-21, *If a man beats his male or female slave with a rod and the slave dies as a direct result, he must be punished, but he is not to be punished if the slave gets up after a day or two, since the slave is his property.* Now in concert with that text someone could tie in Titus 2:9-10, *Be submissive to your master and give satisfaction in every respect.* Or, Colossians 3:22, *Slaves obey your master.* Or, 1 Timothy. 6:1-2, *Let slaves regard their masters as worthy of all honor.* Not too long ago in America, Christian slave owners would tell their slaves that it was a sin to escape or to question the institution of slavery. This was oppression and abuse sanctioned by a chorus of scriptures. These Christian slave owners quoted texts like these to maintain control. I hope you can see how these scriptures did impact Christian doctrine for a long time and hurt many people. But I dare say none of us would believe that these texts used in this way demonstrate the heart and will of God.

And what about some of the books of wisdom and the problems they introduce? In Ecclesiastes we find the writer, who is called "The Teacher," unrepentantly experimenting

with sex and alcohol as a way of finding satisfaction and meaning in life. Furthermore, he doubts the existence of an after life and makes a case against it (Eccl 3:18-21). By the way, if you don't like how evolutionists demean humans by describing them as just animals then steer clear of that scripture too. Or read Proverbs 31:6-7 and discover how getting drunk is ok if you are feeling down and out.

Another issue that impacts doctrine is the contradiction of 1 Chronicles 21 and 2 Samuel 24. 1 Chronicles 21:1, *Satan stood up against Israel, and incited David to count the people of Israel.* 2 Samuel 24:1, *Again the anger of the Lord was kindled against Israel, and he incited David against them saying, "Go count the people of Israel and Judah."* As the story plays out, David is punished severely for his sin against God. There are two problems here. First, the texts contradict each other. Was it God or Satan who enticed David to sin? Second, the text in 2 Samuel is in serious trouble with James 1:13, *Let no one say when he is tempted, 'I am tempted by God,' for God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does He Himself tempt anyone.* The implications here for Church doctrine are huge! The classic excuse made for this dilemma is that God sent Satan to entice David or God *allowed* Satan to entice David. Therefore, God is not responsible. This is a good example of the intellectual gymnastics required to maintain an inerrant view of scripture. But this argument still doesn't change the language of the text and the text is supposed to be authoritative! In addition, the argument is not really a valid excuse. If I hired a hit man to kill someone do you believe I am free of responsibility for their death? Is this really what we are teaching people? God doesn't need Satan to do his dirty work. God is sovereign. He can do whatever he wants. Isaiah 45:7 says, *I form the light, and create darkness: I make peace, and create evil: I the LORD do all these things.* Amos 3:6 says, *Shall a trumpet be blown in the city, and the people not be afraid? shall there be evil in a city, and the LORD hath not done it? How do we reconcile issues like these?*

Jesus even adds to the controversy. In Mark 10, Jesus countermanded the Torah by saying the only excuse for divorce is adultery. The Pharisees pointed out to Jesus that the Mosaic Law says in Deuteronomy 24 that a man may divorce his wife if he just finds something objectionable about her. Jesus countered saying that Moses (not God) allowed arbitrary reasons for divorce in the Law because the people were belligerent. So the question becomes: was Deuteronomy 24 God's Word or Moses' word? Jesus was inferring that Moses did not communicate the ideal or the real will of God in this matter. All this begs another question: if some of the scriptures are not the clearly expressed will of God then how are

they authoritative? And if not, what are they and how do we make these kinds of distinctions today? Is it possible that Paul, like Moses, missed God's ideal will for us sometimes? For example, maybe Paul's instructions about women's roles are based more on his views than God's? I can picture Jesus saying, "Paul did not allow women to teach men spiritual matters because men's hearts were hard, but I say there is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female in the Kingdom of God. A women can be just as gifted as a man to teach."

### *Clarifying and Applying*

I do not believe that God is unjust, unfair or cruel. These are human words and carry variable definitions depending on your understanding of what would be cruel, unjust and unfair. Obviously we all carry some different definitions for these terms. The problem with language is that it inherently limits what one can say. God is not tied down to our languages and the propositions of what we believe about him. The Bible must use human language to communicate what ultimately must be spiritually discerned. To declare the text as inerrant and thereby infer the point that somehow human language is always clear and never contradicts itself is an absurd claim. My point is these claims enhance divisions in the Church and breakdown community more than build it up.

I believe there is an intellectual dishonesty among many Christians to not accept what the Bible is and its full implications. It is a far less than honest reading of the Bible that has divided the body of Christ. True faith, like creating good art, requires courage and honesty. But where is the courage to preach on these marginalized and contradictory texts? Where is the courage to accept differing views and to tolerate? Where is the honesty over these serious complexities in scripture? I see so much fear among so many Christians. Fear of not having all the right answers. Fear of having their faith destroyed by science and relativism. Fear of the Bible not being what they wish it to be. It is this fear that oppresses the truth and creates and maintains divisions among us.

So many people try and define for us what the Bible is, including me. But where does the Bible talk about itself and clearly define for us what it is? 2 Timothy 3:16 says, *All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness.* That word, "inspiration" is pivotal. To be inspired by someone or something means that you are moved or influenced. When an artist becomes inspired it shows up in their work but the inspiration itself does not control the final outcome, the artist does.

Notice what 2 Timothy does not say. It does not say scripture was dictated by God but inspired by God. There is a significant difference in these words. No where in the Bible does it say that the Bible is without contradiction and error! We have superimposed that standard upon the text to meet the criteria of our own agendas. I believe that we find the voice of God and human beings in scripture. The key is discerning which is which. Sometimes the voice of man and God are in harmony with each other, other times not so much.

John 1 describes Jesus as the Word of God: *The Word was made flesh and dwelt among us.* Bibliolatry (the worship of the Bible) is the act of raising the Bible up to the same level of perfection and deity as Jesus himself. But they are not the same thing. Scripture is not a perfect end unto itself but a vehicle, a means to an end. After all, scripture is nothing without a reader and every reader is also an interpreter, and an imperfect interpreter at that. The scriptures reveal the ancient will and acts of God but it takes a human reader in communion with the Spirit of God now to define God's Will. This is no small task and is a serious matter of faith and accountability.

To many all this sounds like post-modern relativism and anarchy. But the point of view I am advocating is not a slippery slope of relativism. Rather, I believe this is firmer ground to stand on than an intellectually dishonest inerrant view of scripture. Never before in history have we been able to see the effects of abstraction and relativism on the human soul like we can now. Many Christians believe the Bible must be inerrant because they are afraid the alternative leads into the abyss of relativism. Relativism (philosophically speaking) is the result of pushing human reasoning into the domain of faith. And faith is the recognition of meaning among that which cannot be rationally known. People get the idea that all religions are equal and there are no moral absolutes because they try and rationally compare one religious faith against another to find meaning and truth. But the paradox is that there is no meaning in relativism. Finding meaning in life or in faith cannot be acquired scientifically or through reason. Finding meaning in life is a spiritual endeavor. To this Tolstoy said,

*If one turns to the division of sciences which attempt to reply to the questions of life - to physiology, psychology, biology, sociology - one encounters an appalling poverty of thought. ....If one turns to the branches of science which are not concerned with the solution of the questions of life, but which reply to their own special scientific questions, one is enraptured by the power of man's mind, but one knows in advance that they give no reply to life's questions.*

The problem is that people have set out to prove the Bible's historical, scientific and textual inerrancy, believing that this will strengthen people's faith in God. But this has backfired because this is not what the text was intended to do. The Bible is not a science text book, a critical analysis on history or an objective formula of how to be spiritual. It is a book about faith which takes faith to understand. This is by definition a subjective matter. I believe God reveals himself through the text to us but this does not happen without difficulty. Just like the name Israel means "one who struggles with God" so we must struggle also.

You may ask how can you cherry pick what you want to believe out the Bible? Or how can you make the Bible less than perfect and yet then believe some of its claims? The answer is simple. I call it faith. I believe some of the claims of scripture while leaving other claims open to discussion. By the way, you do the same thing! You see, I could ask you the same question. How can you select scriptures and interpretations that support your position on a subject while interpretively explaining away other scriptures that challenge your position? I am talking about scriptures that impact positions like: gifts of the Holy Spirit, women's roles, sex, tithing, doctrine of the Trinity, baptism, end times, predestination, free will, alcohol consumption, child discipline, musical instruments in church, environmentalism, politics, racism etc. There is no end of topics we can divide over and have divided over. It is so ironic that we divide over the Bible when the Bible was made to unite us. And I believe this is conclusive to our misunderstanding of scripture's place within our traditions. So what is scripture? What purpose does it serve in our lives? The same purpose it always had of course. God by his Spirit uses the Bible to guide and direct us and reveal his love and purposes. But ultimately it is God's people that must discern what God is saying today from the text just like Jesus did in his day.

Jesus was well known for his bad interpretation of the Word of God. Many religious leaders hated Jesus because he violated their interpretation of scripture. Jesus worked on the Sabbath, approached women, blasphemed by offering forgiveness of sins to anybody and drank with sinners. Jesus challenged the religious status quo's exclusive, rigid and judgmental theology taught from their interpretation of scripture. Notice, the opposition Jesus encountered was not from the secular world but from the religious leaders of his church. The roman government was ready to set him free but the religious leaders demanded his

execution because Jesus violated their traditions and reading of scripture. Humanity has not changed that much in 2000 years. But thank God neither has God.

If the Church is truly like a body then the hand will not experience the world like a foot. The eyes do not perceive things like an ear. But together we can piece together a more clear revelation of God and his will if only we value what another member of the body has to contribute. We are one body with one purpose: to declare Jesus crucified and resurrected as savior and Lord and that the kingdom of God is at hand. To the world this message is foolishness and nonsensical but to those who are being saved it is a powerful living truth. The Bible is not free of errors or controversial contradictions. But just as God is at work redeeming us in spite of our failures and shortcomings; God also uses the very imperfect and very human Biblical text to reveal his will and love. The unity of the Church is pivotal to the health of the Church. Seeing scripture as elastic and imperfect creates an atmosphere of tolerance and unity. The missionaries at the 1910 Edinburgh Conference reported being told this by non-Christians over seas, “You preach about a God of reconciliation but you are not reconciled even among yourselves. Until this happens we do not want to hear from you.” I believe God has done much despite our shortcomings but I believe we have much further to go. In conclusion, lets remember Jesus’ prayer for us in John 17, *The glory which You have given Me I have given to them, that they may be one, just as We are one; I in them and You in Me, that they may be perfected in unity, so that the world may know that You sent Me, and loved them, even as You have loved Me.*

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