

DIFFICULTIES WITH INERRANCY

ROBERT L. SAUCY, Th.D.

It is not our present purpose to attempt to discuss in detail the whole gamut of problems connected with the inspiration of Scripture, but rather to examine briefly some of the major objections, methods, and thoughts behind these.

The charges against the inerrancy of the Scriptures can be broadly categorized under two heads: Historical-Critical and Theological. Which of these is prior and which dependent on the other is perhaps open to question, but both have an affinity in their esteem of human opinion.

Difficulties arise from the area of the Historical-Critical, not because these areas have uncovered any new demonstrable facts contradictory to the words of Scripture, but because they come from what has been termed a revolutionary historical approach to the Bible.¹ The essence of this new approach is the application of a naturalistic historical development methodology to the contents of the word of God. The Bible is approached as any other book and scrutinized with the tools of modern and often spiritually uncommitted scholarship. The biblical writers are historically enmeshed into their fallible human environment in varying degrees both as to form and content of their message. Thus a supernatural inspiration is denied and the doctrine destroyed with charges of error.

The radical conclusions of this method are not accepted by all advocates of an errant Bible today, but much of the erroneous methodology is. We refer to the plea for an inductive examination of the phenomena of Scripture.² Most certainly, inductive methodology must not be discarded in ascertaining the doctrine of inspiration, but it must include a thorough induction of the Bible's own relevant data on the subject. The modern advocates of errancy claim adherence to this principle as Beegle affirms, "A truly Biblical formulation of inspiration must give equal weight to the teaching and to the facts of Scripture."³ But one looks in vain through his recent study of the subject for a thorough inductive study of the Scriptural doctrine or of a reckoning with the exegetical studies of those who have made such studies. The problem with the modern inductive approach is just this: it imposes the contemporary scientific method of natural man upon the word of God and makes it the standard of truth and error. The Bible is approached from outside of the faith as any

1. Alan Richardson, "The Rise of Modern Biblical Scholarship," in *The Cambridge History of the Bible*, ed. S. L. Greenslade (Cambridge: At the University Press, 1963), pp. 294-98.
2. W. Sanday, *Inspiration* (London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1911), p. 391; Dewey Beegle, *The Inspiration of Scripture* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1963), pp. 11-14
3. Beegle, *op. cit.*, p. 14

human book, and the critical methods of humanistic unbelief are made the judge of all biblical data. Whatever does not square with contemporary knowledge is wrong.⁴

It is not only the acceptance of the a prioris of unbelief that leads to difficulties with inerrancy, but also the imposition of modern technical thought patterns upon the general nontechnical statements of Scripture. As genuine critical scholarship reveals the ancient methodologies of biblical times, many of these difficulties disappear.⁵ The data of the Bible must be judged by its own standards.

Unless one is willing to accept the radical naturalistic historical development a priori, modern scholarship on a factual basis has revealed few if any difficulties that have not been known for centuries and answered effectively in various ways. On the contrary new research is gradually decreasing biblical difficulties and giving stronger support to the belief that the difficulties yet remaining are due not to error, but to lack of knowledge.

It appears then that the empirical problems raised today are done so only to buttress other deeper objections of theology and philosophy. This is quite evident when for example, Thielicke answers the question of biblical inerrancy negatively without mention of any historical data and makes a point of doing so.⁶ From theology it is charged that an inerrant inspiration denies the humanity of the word of God and is in fact guilty of Docetism.⁷ It denies the "gracious condescension of God into our history."⁸

In order to more fully justify this charge, the doctrine of verbal inspiration is often grotesquely caricatured into some theory of mechanical dictation. "Because he [God] thus enters into a history with us," Thielicke says, "he moves the hearts of his servants and is not content merely to guide their pen or goose quill for them."⁹ Such a statement by itself might be ignored as jesting hyperbole, but he goes on to dogmatize:

This is actually the way in which the advocates of the doctrine of verbal inspiration conceived it to have happened. What this was, expressed in modern terms, was a fantastic idea of heavenly cybernetics in which God was the guide of a process of automatic writing.¹⁰

4. For full discussion see B. B. Warfield, "The Real Problem of Inspiration," in *The Inspiration and Authority of the Bible* (Philadelphia: The Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1948); Theodore Engelder, *Scripture Cannot Be Broken* (St. Louis, Mo.: Concordia Publishing House, 1944), pp. 30-78.
5. Cf. Edwin Thiele, *The Mysterious Numbers of the Hebrew Kings* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951)
6. Helmut Thielicke, *Between Heaven and Earth* (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1965), pp. 1-13
7. *Ibid.*, p. 9; Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, I, 2, 509-10
8. Thielicke, *op. cit.*, p. 13.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 6
10. *Ibid.*

Thielicke is not alone in the charge of dictation. Beegle states unequivocally that "the doctrine of inerrancy leads eventually into the mechanical or dictation theory of inspiration."¹¹ In the light of clear statements on inspiration to the contrary¹², it is difficult to dissuade oneself of the opinion that these are exaggerated attempts to discredit an inerrant inspiration in favor of a lower view.

The demand that genuine humanity involves fallibility, not only is based on an unbiblical dualism which denies the sovereign control of God over the free actions of His creatures, but also has serious ramifications concerning the person of the God-man. Admitting the mystery of both the Incarnation and the process of inspiration, it is difficult to see how, if humanity necessitates fallibility, that the Lord Himself could be free from such fallibility. Humanity and error do coincide in daily experience, but inspiration sees humanity not by itself, but under the operation of the Spirit (2 Pet. 1:21).

One of the most effective means in terms of jarring the average believer from dogmatizing on inerrancy is the false comparison of the written word with the living Word. Brunner says, "The vessel 'speech' could no longer contain the content of this new form of divine revelation." "...When we say that Jesus is the real Word of God we alter the simple meaning of the notion 'word', since a person is different from a spoken word."¹³ There is a vast qualitative difference made between subjective personal I-Thou revelation from an encounter with the living Word and the impersonal rational it-truth of a doctrinaire revelation.¹⁴ Such a view has for its basis again the false metaphysical dualism which denies God entry into history, for such an entry into objective historical revelation is said to imprison God and deny His Sovereign freedom.¹⁵ Actually the opposite is true. His sovereignty is denied when He cannot enter history and still be Lord of it.

No advocate of an inerrant inspiration seeks to minimize the Living Word in favor of a written word. However, the exaltation of a personal encounter with Christ at the expense of the derogation of the written word to "sterile intellectualism"¹⁶ is neither logical or biblical. A person may make himself known in ways other than speech; however, the usual and most fruitful method of making personal acquaintance is through rational conceptual speech. And when one comes to know a person, his speech does not then have less importance, but more. The words of Jesus far from barring the way, led to His person. "Lord, to whom shall we go?"

11. Beegle, *op. cit.*, p. 84
12. Cf. E. J. Young, *Thy Word is Truth* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1957), pp. 65-109; B. B. Warfield, *op. cit.*, pp. 131-166.
13. Emil Brunner, *The Christian Doctrine of God* (London: Lutterworth Press, 1955), p. 27.
14. Beegle, *op. cit.*, p. 144-46.
15. See Klaas Runia, *Karl Barth's Doctrine of Holy Scripture* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1962).
16. Brunner, *op. cit.*, p. 28.

Peter said, "Thou hast the words of eternal life" (Jn. 6:68). The disciples encountered the person of Christ through infallible historical words. There is no reason to deny the same process today.

Coupled with the exaltation of Christ and a personal relationship to Him is the subtle suggestion that inerrancy is after all a minor issue and actually dangerous to personal faith. Christianity is Christ, He will take care of His word. Thielicke states this forcefully in parable form. The disciples are out with Christ on the sea of Galilee. While Christ sleeps the disciples are "Prowling about the ship, listening to the creaking in the ship's sides and peering from the railings into the water to see whether they can discover some Bult- or frogman down there boring a hole in the ship's side." The fundamentalist, he concludes, is worrying about the ship even though the Lord is in it. He has reversed the true order of interest.¹⁷ With the same reasoning, Barth makes verbal inspiration simply a product of rationalism as opposed to faith.¹⁸

Finally the doctrine of inerrancy is charged with hindering the work of the church, a charge which no Christian relishes. After reminding us that we need to be about the affairs of God's Kingdom proclaiming the gospel, Beegle pictures the doctrine of inerrancy as a "sound barrier" as it were," which "if we can get through...we will be ready to challenge the tremendous moral and spiritual problems that confront us on every side."¹⁹ Unfortunately, this near-sighted concern has a certain neutralizing effect on the maintenance of the doctrine of inerrancy among those oriented toward involvement on a minimal doctrinal basis.

The present controversy over inerrancy as far as we can see has revealed no new factual basis for departing from the orthodox stand. The issue today is much the same as that expressed by Warfield in his day and in fact extends back to the garden of Eden—the Word of God versus the word of man. The scholarly and the scientific have saturated our time in all areas including the Bible. In this milieu it behooves every believer to make certain to whom he is listening.

Talbot Theological Seminary
Anaheim, Calif.

17. Thielicke, *op. cit.*, pp. 33-34.

18. Barth, *op. cit.*, IV, 1, 368.

19. Beegle, *op. cit.*, p. 188.