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Biblical Inerrancy: An Alternative View

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One of the central problems faced by all religions is that of authority. The answers to this problem have been many and varied, but the great historical religions of Judaism, Islam and Christianity have tended to adopt some form of objective, external frame of reference as the final arbiter. This is by no means true without exception and there have been and continue to be many groups within each of these religions who hold to some form of 'inner' authority (for the Christian usually defined in relation to the Holy Spirit). For a variety of reasons, however, some theological and some historical, the conservative Protestant tradition within Christianity has looked to an external source of religious authority, less arbitrary than either the fiat of an institution or the promptings of an inner light. The Bible provided this final, externally 'given' authority.

It was, perhaps, inevitable that, because the Bible has this supreme position, there should be a tendency to protect its status and buttress its authority by 'building a hedge about the Law', as did the Pharisees of old. Because the authority residing in Scripture has this unchanging and unchangeable character, then the biblical text must needs be established as equally immutable on the one hand and entirely trustworthy on the other, by virtue of its God-given nature. Thus the conservative view of the verbal inspiration of the Bible came to be formulated. In fairness, it should be added that this view was also held by many Christians who, nonetheless, looked to the institutional church for final authority. From a general view of biblical inspiration which accepted Scripture's reliability as an historical record and as the authoritative source of guiding principles for the life of the church, there came an insistence that the Bible is verbally inspired by God in every word and without any form of error in every detail. Thus the 'hedge' was built with a series of terms such as 'inerrant' and 'plenary inspiration' added to the concept of a literal verbal inspiration.

This short paper addresses itself to the important question of how

far this 'fundamentalist' view of Scripture can be maintained. The problem will be approached from the standpoint of the biblical witness itself and from a general theological viewpoint. It should be appreciated that limitations of space make it impossible to develop the discussion to the extent the author would prefer. Consequently, at the risk of some (perhaps inevitable) misunderstanding the arguments developed will be considerably compressed. Firstly, however, one or two general remarks should be made.

Behind the biblical record as it exists today there lies a variety of oral traditions which were eventually collated, edited and set down in writing. These written documents themselves underwent a further process of editing and revision until they reached forms that were relatively fixed, by which stage documents were being copied rather than edited. Even at this stage there might be significant variations between the texts of divergent or parallel traditions. Such statements may seem self-evident, but claims for verbal inspiration and inerrancy sometimes fail to take this long process of development into account. The attempts to overcome the more obvious problems by the use of escape clauses, for example 'as originally given', found in various evangelical statements of faith are not really successful. At what point in the long chain of oral and written tradition, of interpretation and reinterpretation, does the single point of 'originally given' occur? The matter could be pursued at length.

The other general observation that should be made is that Scripture should be set firmly within the broad cultural milieu in which it developed. The Bible is a product of its times and it is a serious misunderstanding and misuse of the biblical record to attempt, for example, to harmonize the early chapters of Genesis with each new scientific theory in cosmology or anthropology. These chapters provide important and valuable spiritual insights and underline essential truths about man's relationship with God, but they are not a literal description of how God made the world and its inhabitants. Attempts to force the record of the Bible into conformity with current knowledge in the interests of a preconceived concept of 'inerrancy' or 'infallibility' are distortions of the meaning of Scripture and make nonsense of its primary purpose.

The Biblical Witness

The purpose of Scripture is stated expressly at 2 Tim. 3:16 and as this verse is frequently used as a proof text in support of verbal inspiration it is necessary to devote some attention to it. Firstly, it is important to

note that the key word in this verse is not 'inspired' (*theopneustos*), but 'profitable' (*ophelimos*). The emphasis lies on the purpose of Scripture (here specifically the Old Testament) which, as the record of God's saving acts, is above all 'for teaching, for refuting error, for guiding people's lives and teaching them to be holy' (Jer. Bible). Scripture, however, is not merely a record of history, it is not merely a source book for ethics or theological principles, it is an essential part of the process of the revelation of God's salvation. It is set apart from secular books because of this unique quality that God has, as it were, breathed his life into it, and because that process of inspiration continues for the reader today through the Holy Spirit, Scripture comes as a living word pointing to the fullness of God's Word in Christ. This verse then, has nothing to say about verbal inspiration as generally understood today.

The other passage which is frequently used to support the concepts of verbal inspiration and inerrancy is 2 Pet. 1:21. The verse forms part of a paragraph which emphasizes the value of the prophetic word and concludes with the statement that when 'men spoke for God it was the Holy Spirit that moved them' (Jer. Bible). The writer is saying no more, however, than that the message of the prophet is a proclamation of the Word of God, he speaks with God's authority, he is empowered by God's Spirit. Such inspiration in the proclamation of the Word of God is equally needed in the church today. The verse underlines the importance of the prophetic oracle as a word from God, but it says nothing about the oral tradition, the process of interpretation and re-interpretation that continued until the oral message was eventually written down. Once again there is an underlining of Scripture as the vehicle of God's Word, but there is no hint that the writer was thinking of a fixed verbal inspiration in the written documents.

Finally, mention should be made of the way in which the early church used the text of Scripture, as witnessed to by the New Testament writings. One thing is clearly evident: the apostles and other members of that infant community showed none of the reverence for an exact text so often evidenced by conservative Christians today. For the early church, the Old Testament was part of an ongoing tradition, recording and interpreting the acts of God in his world. In the light of the coming of Christ it was to be given a new interpretation to meet the needs of the new community — it was written for their learning as the repository of a nation's experience of God and its awareness of how he had dealt with them in his promises, his punishments and his principles for life. Because it was part of a living tradition, the early Christians felt free to utilize variant versions which best suited their purpose in interpreting the new act of God in Christ. Thus James, for example, according to Luke's account in the Acts, utilized the LXX

reading of Amos 9:12 instead of the very different Massoretic Text in order to provide a biblical prophecy of the coming together of Jew and Gentile on an equal footing in the church (Acts 15:13ff.). Other examples are plentiful, demonstrating that a theory of verbal inerrancy was not universally held in the early Christian church.

The Theological Perspective

There are two dangers inherent in theories of verbal inspiration and inerrancy. In the first place there is the very real danger of turning the dynamic revelation of God's activity into a static, almost fossilized verbal record. Reverence for the written word at the expense of the vital spirit that underlies it is lethal, for the letter kills, be it the Law from Sinai or the Bible, transformed into a rigid and systematized authoritarian code. More importantly, however, there is the greater danger of putting the Bible above the Living Word, Christ himself. There is a very real tendency to make Christ's authority derivative, secondary to that of the Bible. Christ virtually becomes important because he is the theme of a supernatural book in which resides the primary authority, because it is the verbally inspired and inerrant Word of God.

Such an approach to the Bible, which begins from a stated premise about inerrancy, infallibility or inspiration, inevitably shuts up Christ in a box: the vehicle of revelation becomes more important than the message it conveys. Not only so, but insistence upon these dogmatic assertions leads almost inevitably to a rigorous application of the words of the Bible in a literalistic manner to situations far distant from the cultural and religious background to which they applied originally.¹ The result is a hard, legalistic and authoritarian religion far divorced from the spirit of the New Testament. Not only has the Bible become fossilized, but so also has the community.

The Bible can only be effective in its witness as it is set free from the restrictions, the 'hedge', that well-meaning persons have placed about it. It forms part of a living tradition as God works in the minds of his people leading them to see what he has done and what he is doing. Scripture is thus dynamic, even fluid, in its essence. At every stage, from oral tradition through written record to fresh interpretation, God's Spirit has been active. Indeed, his inspiration is as real (and necessary) for the church's proclamation as it was for an Amos or for a Paul. The Spirit works in the congregation in the ministry of word and sacrament. Through his work what was a Word of God to an Israelite under siege or a first century Christian in perplexity becomes a Word of God to his church today.

The Bible thus stands within an ongoing process by which God's Word is brought to his world through his Spirit, who is none other than the continuing presence of that Word which was the fulness of God's self-revelation. The Bible does not stand apart from the ongoing tradition of interpretation, it is part of it, bringing men into the sphere of God's continuing activity, not merely recording his past acts. As part of that tradition, it is a human book with human imperfections. Those imperfections were not magically removed when men recorded their apprehension of the Word of God to them, any more than they are removed today in the proclamation of that same Word which brings the Living Word, the Bible's centre of gravity, to meet men in the way. It is to this supreme task that the church should be directing its energies, rather than tearing itself apart on the rocks of legalistic dogma and sterile scholastic obscurantism.

NOTES

1. An example familiar to the CBRF background would be the literalistic approach to the dress and ministry of women in the church. *