

## A PERSONAL STATEMENT ON THE "INERRANCY" OF THE BIBLE

I believe that the Bible presents without error that truth which God intended us to have about Himself and humankind. This implies that harmony ultimately underlies Scripture; enabling us to live with data which at times are diverse. Consequently, I do not go looking for "errors" in the Bible, and I do not think I have ever taught that the Bible is in error.

On the other hand, when contemporary statements of faith stress the "inerrancy" of the Bible, this seems to beg the question, by what criteria do we decide the nature of such inerrancy. (This is over and beyond the fact that "inerrancy" may not always be the correct adjective by which to qualify the varied genres of Biblical literature: poetry, drama, apocalypse, etc.). How much accommodation do we believe the Holy Spirit allowed the human authors? Do we allow for literary conventions of the times in which Scripture was written? Must inerrancy rest upon our concept of objective reality in such matters as reporting historical events and discourses, strict [next line needs to be here]

chronological sequences, numerical exactness, etc. (Granted, often ancient and modern, concepts might be expected to overlap.) Also, does "without error" allow an author's basic intention (and behind that, the Divine Author's intention) to serve as the final arbiter of what is important and infallible? In other words, I would say that there are times when it seems that inexactitudes must be subordinated to the greater concern of what the message of the text really intends to convey. Such a message is undoubtedly the purpose of inspiration (II Tim. 3:16f.). I will give three illustrations which may help to clarify my opinions.

1. As we all know, there are divergences in the Gospels when giving similar data. I do not feel compelled to try to make the order of events and all other details necessarily coincide at every point, though I naturally do look for harmony, as well as allow that the Evangelists sometimes present their data differently for a theological emphasis, or perhaps for some other reason that eludes us. In other words, for me "inerrancy" does not mean that strict harmonization must always be the answer in solving what appear to be discrepancies.
2. A clear instance where it seems to me that we must allow for inexactness, concerns the difference in Jewish tradition that is reflected between Acts 7:6 and Gal. 3:17. In Acts the duration of Israel's stay in Egypt is 400 years, while according to Galatians 430 years passed from Abraham to the giving of the Law. J. B. Lightfoot observes that the Acts chronology not only reflects the Hebrew text of Gen. 15:13, but is also found in Philo and Josephus. He further says that on the other hand, the Galatians chronology is supported by the LXX of Exod. 12:40f., the Samaritan Pent., the Targum of Pseudo-Jonathan, and Josephus, the latter adopting both chronologies in different places. It seems obvious that no matter how the differences are to be reconciled as far as transmission of the OT is concerned, the NT reflects both traditions which are at odds. I see no grounds for assuming that the original text of either Acts or Galatians was essentially otherwise at this point. (If we must make such an assumption in order to have harmony in the originals documents of Acts and Galatians, then we surely undercut grounds which are rightfully ours for assuming the basic reliability of the NT text elsewhere as we now have it!) Lightfoot passes off the problem with these words; "The difficulties which attend both systems of chronology need not be considered here, as they do not affect St. Paul's argument and cannot have entered his thoughts." In the Tyndale Commentary on Galatians, R. A. Cole simply says that whether it be one or four centuries, "there is no gainsaying the point" that the Torah came later. What I am saying is that my concept of inerrancy is broad enough

to encompass such phenomena. However, some with a stricter interpretation of "inerrancy" would conceivably be forced to view the issues differently, which for me would tend toward artificiality in dealing with a problem like the above.

3. Another kind of Biblical text that seems difficult to appreciate properly if we adopt a too rigid inerrantist position is one that speaks of the End of the age being imminent. For example, Matt. 10:23 and Mk. 14:62 particularly speak of an imminent Parousia which hardly anticipates 20 centuries or more first intervening (cf. Rev. 1:1,3). My own understanding of Biblical eschatology allows for a real tension between a given historical situation and the recurring theme of an imminent Eschaton in the Bible. But if I am pressed too far to confess what some would seem to mean by "inerrancy," I may be forced to say that certain Biblical authors were mistaken in their eschatology. But I do not believe this is a necessary way to resolve the tension.

In my opinion the integrity of the Bible must be judged (or better, recognized) on the basis of criteria that are most in harmony with its purpose. Accordingly, I would say that we need to beware of deciding a priori how God chose to inspire His Word and then rigidly forcing all data into our preconceived understanding. In conjunction with the teachings on inspiration found in the Bible, it is wiser to let the Biblical text inform as to how God did in fact inspire it. I think that the essay by E. F. Harrison, "The Phenomena of Scripture," published in 1958 in Carl F. H. Henry's volume Revelation and the Bible, catches the spirit of my own attitudes toward the issues of Biblical inerrancy and also my attitudes toward those who would take a different approach in this controversial matter. More recent articles basically reflecting my inclinations are found in Inerrancy and Common Sense, ed. Roger Nicole and J. Ramsey Michaels 'c. 1980): "Inerrancy or Verbal Inspiration?" by Michaels and "Hermeneutics and Common Sense" by Gordon D. Fee.

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