

THE FRIDAY NIGHT SCHOOL OF THEOLOGY

THE INFALLIBILITY OF THE BIBLE

INTRODUCTION

- A.** An assumption in historic Protestant Evangelicalism has been that the Bible is the word of God.
- 1.** The emergence of neo-orthodoxy earlier in this century side-stepped the issue, claiming:
- a.** The Bible 'contains' the word of God.
 - b.** The problem: no-one knew for sure which part of the Bible was meant.
 - (1)** There was a feeling that God 'spoke' through the Bible.
 - (2)** But the question 'which part of the Bible actually is the word of God?' could never be answered.
 - c.** Neo-orthodoxy (def.): 'new' orthodoxy, championed by men such as Karl Barth and Emil Brunner.
 - (1)** It came so close to orthodoxy at times that some felt it was sufficiently 'sound'.
 - (2)** But it allowed for the critical appraisal of the Bible, so that one was free to be selective with the Scriptures (e.g. Brunner did not believe in Christ's virgin birth).
- 2.** There have been a number of people who are in the historic Protestant Evangelical tradition who do not want to be neo-orthodox, but who nonetheless will not affirm the infallibility of the Bible.
- a.** Historical Protestant Evangelicalism:
 - (1)** Protestant, as opposed to being Roman Catholic.
 - (2)** Evangelical, as opposed to being liberal, believing that Jesus is the God-man; we are saved by his substitutionary death on the cross; he rose physically from the dead; people need to be saved by personal faith in Christ.
 - (3)** Historic, as opposed to less known bodies of believers; e.g., Church of England, Baptist, Presbyterian, Methodist and reformed church.
 - b.** Some people from some of these churches are apparently reluctant to say that the Bible is infallible.

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3. See Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology* (IVP). I have used a lot of his material in what follows below.

- B.** Biblical infallibility (def.): the belief that the books of the Old and New Testament as originally written were without error in what they affirm.
 1. Scripture in the original manuscripts does not affirm anything that is contrary to God.
 2. The Bible always tells the truth, and it always tells the truth concerning everything it talks about.
 - a. This does not mean that the Bible tells us every fact there is to know.
 - b. It affirms that what it does say about any subject is true.
 3. All the words in the Bible are God's words.
 - a. To disbelieve or disobey any word in Scripture is to disbelieve or disobey God.
 - b. All words in Scripture are completely true and without error in any part.
 4. 'Inerrancy means that when all facts are known, the Scriptures in their original autographs and properly integrated will be shown to be totally true in everything they affirm, whether that has to do with doctrine or morality or with the social, physical or life sciences.' Michael Eaton.
 5. Note: infallibility and inerrancy are interchangeable terms.

- C.** Why is this study important?
 1. The Bible is God's integrity put on the line.
 - a. God has magnified his word above all his name. Ps. 138:2 (AV).
 - b. If the Bible is not completely truthful, neither is God.
 2. The foundation of the Christian faith is at stake.
 - a. If the Bible is not true, how do we know Christianity is true?
 - b. The only source for the truthfulness of the Christian faith is the Bible; all we believe about Jesus Christ stands or falls in proportion to the reliability of Scripture.

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3. With esteemed men in the ministry distancing themselves from the infallibility of the Bible, many sincere Christians are likely to be confused, if not disillusioned.
4. Every Christian has a right to know what biblical infallibility is.
5. We all want to know if the infallibility of the Bible can be honestly defended.

I WHAT THE BIBLE CLAIMS FOR ITSELF

A. In the Old Testament.

1. That God cannot lie or speak falsely. 'O Sovereign Lord, you are God! Your words are trustworthy, and you have promised these good things to your servant.' 2 Samuel 7:28.
2. That his word is true and without error in any part.
 - a. 'God is not a man, that he should lie, nor a son of man, that he should change his mind. Does he speak and then not act? Does he promise and not fulfil?' Numbers 23:19.
 - b. 'And the words of the Lord are flawless, like silver refined in a furnace of clay, purified seven times.' Psalm 12:6.
 - c. 'Your word, O Lord, is eternal; it stands firm in the heavens.' Psalm 119:89.
 - d. 'Every word of God is flawless; he is a shield to those who take refuge in him.' Proverbs 30:5.

B. In the New Testament.

1. That God cannot lie.
 - a. 'A faith and knowledge resting on the hope of eternal life, which God, who does not lie, promised before the beginning of time.' Titus 1:2.
 - b. 'God did this so that, by two unchangeable things in which it is impossible for God to lie, we who have fled to take hold of the hope offered to us may be greatly encouraged.' Hebrews 6:18.
2. His word is fully reliable. 'Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away.' Matthew 24:35.
3. His word is the ultimate standard of truth. 'Sanctify them by the truth; your word is truth.' John 17:17.
 - a. That the Old Testament is God's word.

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- (1) 'All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness.' 2 Tim. 3:16.
 - (2) 'Above all, you must understand that no prophecy of Scripture came about by the prophet's own interpretation. For prophecy never had its origin in the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit.' 2 Peter 1:20-21.
 - b. That the New Testament is God's word.
 - (1) 'He writes the same way in all his letters, speaking in them of these matters. His letters contain some things that are hard to understand, which ignorant and unstable people distort, as they do the other Scriptures, to their own destruction.' 2 Peter 3:16.
 - (2) 'If anybody thinks he is a prophet or spiritually gifted, let him acknowledge that what I am writing to you is the Lord's command.' 1 Cor. 14:37.
 - c. Note: when Paul said he spoke a personal word as a 'concession, not a command' (1 Cor. 7:6) he proves all else he said was under the Lord's command. 1 Cor. 7:10. Cf. 1 Cor. 7:12,25.
4. In 1 Timothy 5:18 Paul quotes Jesus' words as found in Luke 10:7 and calls them 'Scripture'.
- C.** How God speaks.
1. 'Thus says the Lord' is a phrase which appears hundreds of times.
 - a. When prophets say this they are claiming to be messengers from the true God.
 - b. They are claiming that their words are absolutely authoritative words of God.
 - (1) When a prophet spoke in God's name, every word he spoke had to be from God.
 - (2) Otherwise he would be a false prophet. Num. 22:18; Deut. 18:20; Jer. 1:9; 14:14; 23:16-22; 29:31-32; Ezek. 2:7; 13:1-16.
 2. God is often said to speak 'through' a prophet. 1 Kings 14:18; 16:12; 2 Kings 9:36; 14:25; Jer. 37:2; Zech. 7:7,12.
 - a. Thus what a prophet says in God's name, God says. Cf. 1 Kings 13:26 with v.21; 1 Kings 21:19 with 2 Kings 9:25-26; Hag. 1:12.

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- b.** Words that prophets spoke can equally be referred to as words God himself spoke.
 - c.** To believe or disobey anything a prophet says is to believe or disobey God himself. Deut. 18:19; I Sam. 10:8; 13:13-14; 15:3,19,23; I Kings 20:35,36.
 - 3.** Paul affirms that all of the Old Testament writings are *theopneustos*, 'breathed out by God.' II Tim. 3:16.
 - a.** God used human agents to write them down.
 - b.** Peter spoke along the same line (II Pet. 1:20-26), but:
 - (1)** He did not intend to deny completely human volition or personality.
 - (2)** He meant that the ultimate source was not a man's decision about what he wanted to write but rather the Holy Spirit's activity in the prophet's life.

II CLARIFICATION REGARDING BIBLICAL INERRANCY

- A.** The Bible can be inerrant and still speak in the ordinary language of everyday speech.
 - 1.** This is true in 'scientific' or 'historic' descriptions of facts or events.
 - a.** The Bible speaks of the sun rising and the rain falling because this is what happens from the speaker's perspective.
 - b.** These are perfectly true descriptions of the natural phenomena which the writer observes.
 - 2.** This is true with measuring or counting.
 - a.** If it is said that 8,000 died it would be false to say 16,000 died.
 - b.** It is not false if in fact 7,823 or 8,242 died.
- B.** The Bible can be inerrant and still include loose or free quotations.
 - 1.** As Michael Eaton says, there is hardly a single exact quotation of an Old Testament verse in the New Testament.
 - 2.** Written Greek in New Testament times had no quotation marks.
 - 3.** As long as the content was not false, the meaning was conveyed and true to the context.

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- C.** One can believe in inerrancy and have unusual or uncommon grammatical constructions in the Bible.
 - 1. This sometimes includes failures to follow the commonly accepted 'rules' of grammatical expression (such as the use of a plural verb where grammatical rules require a singular verb).
 - 2. They do not affect the truthfulness of the statements; a statement can be ungrammatical but entirely true.
 - 3. The issue: truthfulness in speech.

- D.** There might be errors of translation.
 - 1. No translator is infallible.
 - a. They are at best interpretations of the original language.
 - b. Some (e.g. The Living Bible) are paraphrases.
 - 2. The Authorised Version is probably the most literal translation; but it does not take into account more recent discoveries of ancient copies.
 - a. There might be errors of copyists.
 - b. The Bible was copied by hand before the invention of the printing press.

III CHALLENGES TO BIBLICAL INFALLIBILITY

- A.** The Bible is only authoritative for 'faith and practice'.
 - 1. This premiss seeks to avoid biblical claims for what may be 'scientific' or 'historical'.
 - 2. Response: *all* of Scripture is 'God-breathed'. II Tim. 3:16.
 - a. The Bible does not make any restriction on the kinds of subjects to which it speaks truthfully.
 - b. Every one of God's words in Scripture was deemed by him to be important for us; God does not say anything unintentionally.

- B.** The term 'inerrancy' is a poor term.
 - 1. It is said that this term 'inerrancy' is too precise, is not even a biblical word; therefore it is an inappropriate term.

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2. Response: the term 'inerrancy' is easily defined and is not used to denote a kind of absolute scientific precision.
 - a. Inerrancy simply means total truthfulness in language.
 - b. Note: the words 'trinity' and 'incarnation' are not biblical terms either.

- C. Since we have no inerrant manuscripts, talk about an inerrant Bible is misleading.
 1. Since no original copies of the biblical documents survive, why place importance on a doctrine that applies to documents no-one has?
 2. Response: in over ninety-nine percent of the words of the Bible we *know* what the original manuscript said.
 - a. In the small percentage of cases where there is significant uncertainty about what the original text said, the general sense of the sentence is usually quite clear from the context.
 - b. Our present manuscripts are for most purposes the same as the original manuscripts, and the doctrine of inerrancy therefore directly concerns our present manuscripts as well.
 3. It is extremely important to affirm the inerrancy of the original documents, for the subsequent copies were made by men with no claim or guarantee by God that these copies would be perfect.
 - a. Therefore the original manuscripts are those to which the claims to be God's very words apply.
 - b. Thus any mistakes in the copies are but the mistakes of *men*.

- D. Inerrancy overemphasises the divine aspect of Scripture and neglects the human aspect.
 1. It is claimed that the human aspect is downplayed.
 2. Response: it is agreed that Scripture has both a human and divine aspect, but those who make this objection almost invariably say that the human aspect of Scripture must include some errors in Scripture.
 - a. God overruled the writing of Scripture so that it does not include error.
 - b. After all, human beings can make statements all the time that are completely true.

- E. 'There are some clear errors in the Bible,' it is said.

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1. This is presumably why those who deny biblical infallibility stick to their guns.
2. Response: those who make this claim usually have little or no idea where the specific errors are, but believe there are errors because others have told them so.
 - a. When there is a specific problem raised, a close inspection will show there to be no error at all.
 - b. It is surprising how often it turns out that a careful reading merely of the English text in question will bring to light one or more possible solutions to the difficulty.
 - c. There are many Bible scholars today who will say that they do not presently know of any problem texts for which there is no satisfactory solution. See W Grudem, *op. cit.*, p.99.

IV THE CONSEQUENCES OF DENYING BIBLICAL INFALLIBILITY

- A.** A serious moral problem confronts us: may we imitate God and intentionally lie in small matters also?
 1. We are told to be imitators of God. Eph. 5:1.
 2. A denial of inerrancy that nonetheless claims that Scripture is God-breathed implies that God intentionally spoke falsely to us in some things.
- B.** We begin to wonder if we can really trust God in anything he says.
 1. Since we become convinced that God has not always told the truth in some matters (even minor) in Scripture, we then realise that God is capable of speaking falsely to us.
 2. This will have a determined effect on our ability to take God at his word.
 - a. Why should we trust him completely?
 - b. Why obey him in the rest of Scripture?
- C.** We essentially make our own human minds a higher standard of truth than God's word itself.
 1. We use our minds to pass judgment on some sections of God's word and pronounce them to be in error.

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2. This is saying in effect that we know truth more certainly and accurately than God's word does (or than God does), at least in some cases.
 3. Note: this is the root of all intellectual sin.
- D.** We must also say that the Bible is wrong not only in minor details but in some of its doctrine as well.
1. A denial of inerrancy means that we say that the Bible's teaching about the nature of Scripture and about the truthfulness and reliability of God's words is also false.
 2. These are not minor details but are major doctrinal concerns in Scripture.

V HOW DO WE COME TO BELIEVE THE ABOVE IN OUR HEART OF HEARTS?

A. There are two ways by which we come to believe that the Bible is the word of God.

1. The objective witness.
 - a. There are at least four ways this can be explained:
 - (1) What the Bible says about itself.
 - (2) Archaeological confirmation.
 - (3) The testimony of people who have been blessed by the Bible.
 - (4) Deductive reasoning, as we have attempted to do in this lesson.
 - b. But these will fail at the end of the day unless there is a further witness.
 - (1) What the Bible says about itself is in a sense circular reasoning (def.): using as evidence for its conclusions the very thing that it is trying to prove. Note: Anyone either implicitly or explicitly uses some kind of circular argument when defending one's ultimate authority for belief.
 - (2) Archaeological confirmations are limited at best.
 - (3) Testimonies have limited appeal.
 - (4) After the clearest possible reasoning, 'a man convinced against his will is of the same opinion still'.
2. The internal witness of the Holy Spirit.
 - a. At the end of the day this alone will persuade and hold us firmly in our conviction that the Bible is God's word.

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- b. The same Holy Spirit who wrote the Bible is in us and testifies to its total reliability.
- B.** The inner testimony of the Holy Spirit is stronger than all the 'proofs'.
1. We must seek our conviction in a higher place than human reason, judgment, testimonies or conjectures.
 2. It is in 'the secret testimony of the Holy Spirit.' John Calvin, *Institutes*, I:vii:4.
 - a. Faith is the principal work of the Holy Spirit. Eph. 1:3; II Thess. 2:13.
 - b. The Spirit is our inner teacher. I John 2:27.
 - (1) 'Faith is a firm and certain knowledge of God's kindness toward us, founded upon the truth of the freely given promise in Christ, both revealed to our minds and sealed upon our hearts by the Holy Spirit.' Calvin, op. cit., III:ii:7.
 - (2) This faith is so strong that, in Luther's words, we could stake our life upon it a thousand times.
 3. This has been called the analogy of faith. Rom. 12:6. (Gr. *analogia*: 'proportion'.) This is two things:
 - a. Comparing Scripture with Scripture. II Tim. 2:15.
 - b. Keeping in step with the Spirit. Gal. 5:25.
 - (1) The best way of discovering the Bible's reliability is to get to know it and trust it.
 - (2) It proves itself as you go along.

CONCLUSION

- A.** Those who really want to believe in the infallibility of the Bible and get to the bottom of the problem discover its total trustworthiness.
1. There are about five places in the gospels where the gospels are difficult to harmonise but under careful scrutiny the problems turn out to be no problems at all.
 2. The most difficult problem in the Old Testament used to be how to understand the dates of the kings.
 - a. Most scholars nowadays agree that there is amazing accuracy in the chronology of the kings.

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- b.** The explanation turned out to be: at different times and in different places Israel and Judah used different systems of dating; when the systems were discovered all the problems disappeared overnight.
- B.** The most powerful and faithful testimony: the inner witness of the Holy Spirit.
 - 1.** The Bible proves itself as you go along.
 - 2.** You will very swiftly get to the point of knowing that it is true in what it claims for itself.
 - a.** The Holy Spirit will not deceive you.
 - b.** Neither will the Bible.