

## **§ 2. Doctrine of Revelation**

### **Lecture 7**

#### **Biblical Inerrancy**

We have been talking about the doctrine of the inspiration of Scripture. Last time I presented a model for the inspiration of Scripture which enables us to affirm that scriptural inspiration is plenary, verbal, and confluent. The key to this was God's so-called middle knowledge. That is to say, God knows what every person would freely do if he were placed in any circumstances in which God might create him. So by choosing a certain set of circumstances and placing people (like Paul or Luke or John) in those circumstances, God knew exactly what they would write. Then he appropriates this human writing to become his Word to us. It is via that human speech that God speaks to us as his inspired Word.

We will proceed to the next point which is the authority of Scripture. If God has appropriated these human writings like the Gospels and the epistles of the New Testament to be his Word to us then that means that God's Word carries the authority of God itself. It is God's communication to us. Therefore, it speaks to us with divine authority.

Therefore, what God says to us is true. God communicates to us what he wants us to believe and think about these matters that are important to him and that he wants to communicate to us. One of the implications of this would be the inerrancy of the Bible. How shall we define biblical inerrancy? Clearly, biblical inerrancy cannot mean that everything the Bible says is true because the Bible records, for example, false statements by Job's counselors that are not accurate. Or it reports speech by people like Pontius Pilate who even mocks the truth. So we cannot say that biblical inerrancy simply means that everything the Bible says is true, much less literally true in view of the poetry and the hyperbole and metaphor that Scripture often involves. So how should we understand the doctrine of biblical inerrancy?

Those who defend this doctrine would say that the Bible is truthful in everything that it affirms or everything that it teaches. So the inerrancy of the Bible doesn't extend to those portions of the Bible that are so to speak incidental to Scripture but are not part of the teaching or the affirmations that God wants to communicate to us. God has appropriated human speech as his Word to us, and there are things he wants to affirm or teach or communicate to us through these writings. The claim of biblical inerrancy is that the Bible is truthful in all that it affirms or teaches.

This understanding of biblical inerrancy comes to expression in the so-called Chicago Statement on biblical inerrancy. This was a statement issued by a council of evangelical

theologians who got together in 1978 with a view toward enunciating exactly what biblical inerrancy is committed to. Let me highlight a couple of points from the Chicago Statement.<sup>1</sup>

In their short statement, the second paragraph reads:

Holy Scripture, being God's own Word, written by men prepared and superintended by His Spirit [notice that is exactly what the model of inspiration that I laid out affirms – the Bible is God's Word written by men who were prepared and superintended by God], is of infallible divine authority in all matters upon which it touches: it is to be believed, as God's instruction, in all that it affirms: obeyed, as God's command, in all that it requires; embraced, as God's pledge, in all that it promises.

Then in the fourth paragraph, the statement goes on to say:

Being wholly and verbally God-given [it is plenary and verbal in its inspiration], Scripture is without error or fault in all its teaching, no less in what it states about God's acts in creation, about the events of world history, and about its own literary origins under God, than in its witness to God's saving grace in individual lives.

In these paragraphs we have a number of expressions with respect to what biblical inerrancy concerns. The first one says, "All matters upon which Scripture touches." That isn't defined as to what it means by saying Scripture "touches" upon these things. It is not entirely clear. But then it goes on to say more clearly "in all things Scripture affirms." Then in that fourth paragraph, it is without error "in all that it teaches." So biblical inerrancy, I think, ought to be defined in terms of the intention of Scripture or of the scriptural authors as to what they want to affirm or assert or teach.

In the explication that the Statement gives of Infallibility, Inerrancy, and Interpretation, they distinguish between infallibility and inerrancy in the following way:

Infallible signifies the quality of neither misleading nor being misled and so safeguards in categorical terms the truth that Holy Scripture is a sure, safe, and reliable rule and guide in all matters.

So Scripture is infallible in the sense it is reliable – it can be trusted. It won't mislead you. Then they go on to say,

Similarly, inerrant signifies the quality of being free from all falsehood or mistake and so safeguards the truth that Holy Scripture is entirely true and trustworthy in all its assertions.

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<sup>1</sup> 4:51

That is to say, in the thing that it asserts, or as we've seen earlier, the things that it teaches. Inerrancy means Scripture is entirely true and trustworthy in what it asserts or teaches.

They recognize that there may be things in Scripture that are not part of the assertions of Scripture or a part of the teachings of Scripture. They go on to say,

So history must be treated as history, poetry as poetry,

*[That is important – poetry is not to be treated as history. Poetry is often non-literal and so isn't making literal assertions]*

hyperbole and metaphor as hyperbole and metaphor,

*[It would be a literary mistake to interpret passages that are hyperbolic or metaphorical as though they were making literal assertions]*

generalization and approximation as what they are, and so forth.

*[There again, the point is you don't press the Scriptures for a precision or specificity that is alien to the author's intent when they mean to be speaking in generalities or approximate numbers or figures.]<sup>2</sup>*

Differences between literary conventions in Bible times and in ours must also be observed: since, for instance, non-chronological narration and imprecise citation were conventional and acceptable and violated no expectations in those days. We must not regard these things as faults when we find them in Bible writers.

The point there is that in certain literary types in the ancient world the author could be free to rearrange chronologically the events and to tell them in different order. This shouldn't be treated as though it were a modern day police report or historical account because it fits with the conventions that were at play in the ancient world. So it doesn't count as an error.

Similarly, they talk about imprecise citation. Sometimes the New Testament authors will cite Old Testament passages by paraphrasing them or perhaps citing them out of the Greek version of the Old Testament rather than the original Hebrew. Again, that was acceptable by the conventions of the day. Remember that when the New Testament was written they didn't even have the device of quotation marks and so often didn't distinguish between direct and indirect speech. So citation of another source could be imprecise, and it would be unfair to say that these are errors in the Bible when things are not cited precisely.

It goes on to say,

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<sup>2</sup> 9:48

When total precision of a particular kind was not expected nor aimed at, it is no error not to have achieved it. Scripture is inerrant, not in the sense of being absolutely precise by modern standards, but in the sense of making good its claims and achieving that measure of focused truth at which its authors aimed.

So it must be read according to the literary conventions and types and purposes of its original authors.

I think you can see that even in this statement on inerrancy, which is a very conservative statement adopted widely by evangelical churches, it is still a very nuanced understanding of what is meant by inerrancy and allows for a good deal of elements in Scripture that would not be literally true if pressed for precision.

The Scripture then, according to the doctrine of inerrancy, in virtue of being God's Word to us, is authoritative and therefore truthful in all that it teaches or means to affirm. As the Chicago Statement makes clear, this will mean that the Scriptures may exhibit things which modern readers might call errors but wouldn't be errors at that time. One illustration of this would be chronology. Remember they said that often things could be in different chronological order. That is true in the Gospels. The Gospels are closest to the genre – or literary type – called ancient biography. The so-called “lives” of famous Greeks and Romans. When you look at the conventions for ancient biography, the purpose wasn't to tell a chronological narrative of the hero from cradle to the grave but rather to tell anecdotes about the hero that would illustrate his salient character qualities so that we can understand him. Similarly, in the Gospels the authors will feel free to tell the events in different order. One of the most obvious examples of this is in Matthew, Mark, and Luke: the cleansing of the temple by Jesus. You'll remember the story when he makes a whip, he goes into the temple, and overturns the tables of the money changers and drives out those who were selling the animals. That cleansing of the temple takes place in the final week of Jesus' life during Passion Week when he is staying in Bethany and comes in to the temple and cleanses the temple just a couple days prior to his arrest and crucifixion. But if you read the Gospel of John, John has the story of the cleansing of the temple very early in Jesus' ministry. Right at the beginning he goes into Jerusalem and does this.<sup>3</sup> I once believed, as a younger Christian, that Jesus cleansed the temple twice. The way I harmonized this apparent inconsistency was to say that early in his ministry there was a cleansing of the temple, and then later on in his ministry, in the final week of his life, he did it again. But we don't have to have recourse to any such artificial harmonization which really doesn't do justice to the fact that the story is told in the same terms. It is the same story. It is not a second incident. Rather, we can simply say that the evangelists didn't aim always to tell a chronology – in the same order – and therefore could move the events about as suited their literary purpose.

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Even more nuanced and subtle is this claim that Scripture is inerrant in what it *teaches* because then one has to ask oneself the question: what is the teaching in this passage? What does this passage mean to teach us? Everybody recognizes this distinction between what the Bible simply says and what it means to teach. To turn to a non-controversial example first, Mark 4:30ff – the Parable of the Mustard Seed that Jesus gives. Jesus says,

With what can we compare the kingdom of God, or what parable shall we use for it? The Kingdom of God is like a grain of mustard seed which, when sown upon the ground, is the smallest of all the seeds on Earth. Yet when it is grown, it grows up to be the greatest of all shrubs, and puts forth large branches, so that the birds of the air can make nests in its shade.

This, I think, is a good example of hyperbole on Jesus' part. He is not trying to teach botany. Everybody recognizes that this isn't a botanical lesson on the size of seeds. So if there are seeds smaller than the mustard seed, which I am told there are, that is not an error in the Bible. It is not an error on Jesus' part when he says this is the smallest of seeds and it grows up to be the greatest of shrubs. That is to miss the point of the passage which is a point about the Kingdom of God and its marvelous growth from its insignificant beginnings to the great Kingdom that it will be when it fills all the Earth. Or when Jesus gives a similar parable about faith – the size of a mustard seed and being able to accomplish great things. Everyone, as I say, needs (and does) recognize that Scripture is inerrant not simply in what it says but in what it means to teach. This will require us to interpret the Scripture and discern what is the Scripture teaching?

That is enormously significant. To turn to more controversial examples, many theologians or biblical scholars think that the authors of Scripture presuppose a sort of three-decker cosmology. We live on the middle layer here on Earth and heaven is up there above the clouds and hell (or *Sheol*) is down there in the Earth. There are passages in the Scripture that seem to suggest this. Jesus ascends into heaven, right? Even today we talk in that way. Nobody says, "He went down to heaven." Right? That just seems totally inappropriate. We talk about somebody went up to heaven. Even today when we don't take this literally, nobody thinks that heaven is in outer space (at least no evangelical Christian does; Mormons maybe do). As evangelicals we don't think that hell is in the center of the Earth down there in the molten core of the Earth.

If the writers of Scripture do presuppose this sort of three-decker cosmology on occasion, I think one can say that they don't teach it. They are not teaching a three-decker cosmology or any sort of cosmology. They are not telling us *Thus sayeth the Lord, the Word of God is that heaven is up there* even if that is what they might think.<sup>4</sup>

Or, to give another example, remember when we talked about the Second Coming of Christ. We dealt with the question of the delay of the *parousia* or the delay of the Second Coming. Some scholars believe that people like Paul and other early Christians expected the return of Christ within their own lifetime. I don't know if that is true or not. I think that depends on how you interpret what Paul says when he says, for example in 1 Corinthians 15, "Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up to meet them in the clouds." Did he mean just we Christians in general who are left, or was he talking about his contemporary generation – that we, us here who are left, will be taken up to be with them in the clouds to meet Christ. It is not clear to me whether Paul was speaking about his contemporaries or just in more general terms. But in any case, I am confident that Paul never taught that the Second Coming of Christ would come in his own lifetime. Even if he believed it himself and hoped that that would happen, you will not find anywhere in his epistles where he teaches that Christ is going to return within his lifetime.

Another example – again a very controversial one: do you remember when we talked about in the doctrine of creation the existence of the historical Adam? Was there actually, biologically, literally, a human pair somewhere in prehistory from whom the entire human race is descended? Among evangelicals, this has become a flash point of controversy today, as we saw. Some scholars are saying even if people like Jesus and Paul thought that there was a literal Adam and Eve and so spoke in that way they don't teach that there was an original Adam and Eve. Others will say, no, no, wait a minute, they did teach this – Romans 5, Acts 17 – this is part of what Scripture affirms, what it means to teach. This would be a good example of where there is a great deal of controversy over what does the Scripture mean to teach. Does it teach that there was this original, literal human pair, or is that just something that is incidental to Scripture which has a different teaching?

I share these examples simply to give you a sense of the flexibility of an adequate doctrine of biblical inerrancy. This is not a wooden sort of doctrine that is imposed upon the text, but rather it is a nuanced and subtle doctrine that requires us to interpret and understand the original text and to ask ourselves, "What do the biblical authors really mean to affirm or teach here?"

### **START DISCUSSION**

*Student:* This kind of goes back to last week. A question was raised with inspiration, but also would relate to inerrancy. If we prepare a sermon or a Bible study or whatever, are we not also inspired? I think God superintended the Scriptures and preserved them to be a standard. So in a sense when we prepare something and we are prayerful about it and so on that we can be inspired, but I guess we would be inspired but not necessarily inerrant.

*Dr. Craig:* This is the way I would put it. I think that inspiration properly defined is not primarily a property of the author. We shouldn't think that inspiration means someone was sort of filled with the Holy Spirit and like, "I'm inspired to become a singer" or something like that. I'm inspired to do this or that. Inspiration is the property of the end product. Remember that is what Warfield emphasized in the earlier lesson that I quoted. It is the end result that is God-breathed and inspired.<sup>5</sup> When I do a sermon or prepare a lesson and I sense the Lord's leading me, the Holy Spirit is "inspiring me," nevertheless the end product isn't inspired because that isn't God-breathed. That is not God's Word. So that doesn't share the property of inspiration in the way that Scripture does. Scripture is uniquely appropriated by God as his Word to us. That serves to distinguish the Scripture and its authority from other human writings.

*Student:* Why has inerrancy and infallibility been such an obstacle to people such as Bart Ehrman for affirming the Gospel?

*Dr. Craig:* This is a very interesting question. Thank you. Many of you have heard of Bart Ehrman. He is an ex-evangelical who is now Professor at the University of North Carolina. I am told by an editor at Oxford University Press that he is the best-selling religious author with Oxford University Press. He is writing popular book after popular book attempting to undermine the deity of Christ, the reliability of Scripture in many different ways. Even the existence of God. He pushes the problem of evil and so forth. I should say he became a Christian at about the age of 15 – about the same age I was when I became a Christian. He then went off to Moody Bible Institute and then he went to Wheaton College – the same school I went to – and studied under Gerald Hawthorne. He took Greek from the same professor that taught me Greek. Our biographies were so similar up to that point. I then went off to the University of Munich to do my doctorate in theology with Pannenberg. Ehrman went to the university of Princeton to do his doctorate in theology. While he was there he was working on a passage in the Gospel of Mark that seemed to be in conflict or inconsistent with other biblical passages in the Old Testament. It had to do with when Abiathar was the high priest. Ehrman was proposing all sorts of harmonizations and ways of getting around this. His professor said to him, *Maybe Mark just made a mistake*. Apparently for Ehrman this was just like the light dawning. He made a mistake. From that point on, he began to think the Scriptures aren't inerrant. The whole house of cards just began to tumble for him. He was then on this slide that eventually led him into agnosticism.

What was the problem here for Ehrman that the admission of a single, trivial error in the Gospels would have such a devastating theological affect? I think this is very, very important. Our system of beliefs as Christians can be compared to a spider's web which radiates out from a central point. These strands of the web represent different doctrines or

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<sup>5</sup> 24:56

affirmations that we as Christians believe. Some of these doctrines are more central to the web of belief. If one of these doctrines were plucked out, the reverberations would be felt throughout the entire web and the web might even collapse. But if one of these peripheral strands were to be removed, there would be little reverberation in one's system of beliefs. It wouldn't have much impact.

What are some of these central doctrines that are at the core of the Christian web of beliefs? How about the existence of God? That is pretty central. If you remove that from the web of beliefs, surely our faith would utterly collapse. Also close and central would be the deity of Christ, I think, which is why those who have denied Christ's deity were condemned as heretics. Christ's death on the cross for our sins would be near to the center. That would be hard to give up.

Less central would be doctrines like the doctrine of original sin, for example.<sup>6</sup> Although that is affirmed by Catholics and Protestants, in Defenders Series 2 we saw that Eastern Orthodox Churches don't affirm the doctrine of original sin, and yet they are still Christians. The system still holds together. So if you were to remove that it would certainly cause some reverberations in the web of belief but it wouldn't collapse in the way it would if you removed one of these central beliefs. Beliefs about the tribulation and the rapture, contrary to what some of our Bible teachers might think, is very peripheral to your web of belief. It is unfortunate that when Christians so focus on things like the rapture and tribulation that that becomes almost central to their web of beliefs. Doctrines about the sacraments and baptism and the real presence in the Lord's supper are also nearer the periphery than the center.

The question is: where does the doctrine of inspiration lie? I think that the doctrine of inspiration lies somewhere out a ways from the center. If the Bible is not God's Word to us and inspired, it would certainly cause great reverberations because now you would have documents that would simply be human historically reliable accounts of the life and teachings of Jesus. Christianity wouldn't collapse. What C. S. Lewis called "mere Christianity" doesn't hinge upon belief in the inspiration of Scripture. That wouldn't show that God doesn't exist. It wouldn't show that Jesus Christ didn't rise from the dead or that he didn't die for your sins. If you gave up the inspiration of Scripture, that would be theologically very significant but it wouldn't cause you to become a non-Christian. Christianity doesn't depend on the inspiration of the Bible.

Even less so would be a corollary of inspiration which is inerrancy. Inerrancy is a derivative or a corollary of inspiration. If the Scripture is inspired then it is authoritative in all that it teaches. But there are lots of Christians who don't believe in biblical inerrancy, and yet they are still Christians. The web doesn't collapse. So I would say that

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<sup>6</sup> 30:01

the doctrine of inspiration is some place out here [*pointing to a diagram on the whiteboard*] and the doctrine of inerrancy is even a little more peripheral.

What was Ehrman's mistake? Ehrman's mistake, like so many Christians, is that for him the belief in inerrancy lay at the very core of his web of beliefs so that when that single, trivial error was exposed to his thinking in the Gospels, his whole system of belief was threatened with collapse. I think that that is just a catastrophic misprioritizing of Christian doctrine. It is not true that biblical inerrancy is a doctrine that lies at the core of your beliefs so that if you gave it up it doesn't mean that you would give up belief in God, in the deity of Christ, in his death on the cross for your sins, even in the inspiration of Scripture.

I think that is the difficulty for Ehrman. I think it is tragic. It didn't have to happen. In the lives of many more scholars, I think often what happens is they begin to discover nuances, for example, in the way that I've described – "Wait a minute. This isn't an error. The Gospels don't need to be chronologically accurate in order to be inerrant." Or "Paul didn't teach that Christ is coming again in his own lifetime even if he believed it. This isn't part of the teaching of Scripture." You see what I mean? But for Ehrman, he had this wooden, brittle understanding of inerrancy that was misplaced in terms of its theological priority. The tragedy is that then it collapsed.

You meet ex-Christians like this all the time. I remember sitting over in the Dogwood Room with a man who came in who was once a strong Christian leader, had now lost his faith, and become an atheist. Someone wanted me to talk with him. So I said sure. I said to him, "OK, lay out for me why do you think God does not exist?" He began talking about Old Testament errors and trivialities, like the number of the horses in Solomon's stable. And I said, "Wait a minute. You are telling me you are an atheist because there are some discrepancies in these Old Testament documents? That doesn't follow logically at all!" It was so difficult in talking to this man because he just couldn't see that in order to believe in the existence of God and the resurrection of Christ, the deity of Christ, you don't have to believe that 2 Kings is right about the number of horses in Solomon's stable.

If any of you have been struggling with this sort of thing, or you know folks – children or grandchildren maybe – who have been, try to help them understand the place of biblical inerrancy in our web of beliefs and also to understand its subtleness. It is not a brittle doctrine. It is a nuanced doctrine that can survive these kinds of shaking experiences.

## **END DISCUSSION**

What we will do the next time we meet is to look at difficulties with the doctrine of biblical inerrancy. This is a doctrine that faces significant challenges primarily of two

types. We will talk about what those challenges are before offering some defense of why we ought to believe in the doctrine of biblical inerrancy.<sup>7</sup>

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