

Reconsidering "Limited Inerrancy"

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Surprisingly enough the discussion of Biblical inerrancy swirls around us with almost the same ferocity as in the 1880s and the 1930s. The stance was taken then, namely by B. B. Warfield and J. Gresham Machen, that the traditional view of Biblical inerrancy should not be compromised by the promulgation of a limited view of inspiration. Well fought issues do not die easily and such is the case with the interrelationship between Scriptural inerrancy and its inspiration. The difficulties faced by Warfield and Machen in defending a strict view of inerrancy are still with us, if not more intensely, and thus the proponents of some kind of limited inspiration are still with us. The debate, however, has often been clouded by imprecisions and generalities. Thus, my purpose is to unpack some of commonly used terms in this controversy leading to a more careful definition of the alternatives.

When heresy charges were brought against Charles A. Briggs concerning, among other matters, his view of limited inerrancy, Henry P. Smith came to his defense.¹ As an OT scholar who accepted some of the results of the critical historical method, Smith defined the issue as thus: "Whether the Biblical writers were also divinely guided to remove from previous existing literary material every error of fact, *no matter how indifferent in its bearing on faith and morals*, and whether in giving their own observation and experience they were so far lifted above universal liability to error that they never *made a mistake*, even in the sphere of secular science or history." In this manner Smith carried the question of inspiration one step beyond that of the immediate recordings of the Biblical writers. In some matters, namely those concerned with faith and morals, the authors gave evidence of being directly inspired, but on other matters the written text gave evidence of being dependent upon secondary sources, oral traditions, redactions, and scribal errors. In other words, inspiration was limited to the unmediated parts of Scripture and for that reason the Bible could be declared to be "the only infallible rule of *faith and practice*."²

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¹The best discussion of the entire controversy is found in Lefferts A. Loetscher, *The Broadening Church* (Philadelphia: U of Pa. Press, 1957). Henry P. Smith's full defense of the charges of heresy brought against him are recorded in *Inspiration and Inerrancy* (1893).

²The primary source of the limiting phrase, "the only infallible rule of faith and practice," is the Westminster Confession of Faith—Ch. I, art. 2; Larger Catechism, Q. 3. But probably even more important in its passage into the American tradition is its precise wording in the ordination questions of the Presbyterian Church in U.S.A. (Form of Government, XIX, 4).

Henry Smith was bound to lock horns with Benjamin Warfield. The latter took Smith to task on several fronts.³ If we were willing to agree with Smith, Warfield argued, then we would find ourselves in the dangerous position of an unbiblical separation between spiritual and secular matters. The consequences would be unfortunate for three reasons: (1) the objective basis of salvation history would be undermined, (2) we would lose confidence concerning the weightier matters if the veracity of the Biblical writers was doubted concerning the smaller details, (3) Scripture gives no evidence that its inspiration is limited in any way.

As we look at this lively debate from hindsight, we notice that Smith weakened his position seriously by adopting the limiting formula that Scripture is infallible only in matters of faith and practice. It would have been far better if Smith had spoken of a "limited inerrancy" rather than a "limited inspiration";⁴ and in speaking of limited inerrancy to have avoided any terminology that suggested a separation between faith and history. In 1884 John H. Newman had already charted a sounder course. Insisting upon the full inspiration of Scripture, yet finding unacceptable the doctrine of full Biblical inerrancy, Newman concluded that inerrancy was in effect extending to what was or was not material to God's purpose.⁵ Rather than reducing Scripture to a single uniform level, Newman, as so many before him, sought a solution that would sustain the Bible's authority while accounting for the wide variety of linguistic and literary forms.

So long as divine inspiration is limited to matters of faith and morals and nothing besides, the criticisms raised by Warfield will have validity and force. But when the question is shifted from isolating spiritual and ethical matters to determining what the Biblical authors *intended* to teach as necessary for salvation, then a different set of arguments come into play. Salvation is not robbed of its objective base because history and gospel are not artificially separated.⁶ We can agree with Geisler that "many times it is impossible to deny the historical truth of a passage without simultaneously destroying its spiritual value."⁷ But at the same time we are free from reducing everything to a single level of infallibility. Since we are not judging inerrancy according to subject matter but according to *purpose*, we are permitted to weigh the importance of the historicity of Adam and Eve as opposed to the geographical location of the Garden of Eden.

³Benjamin B. Warfield, *Limited Inspiration* ("Biblical and Theological Studies"; Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1961 [1894]).

⁴Smith, *op. cit.*, committed the common *fallacy* of assuming that a narrowing of Biblical inerrancy means a parallel narrowing of Biblical inspiration (see below). Thus we have an explanation why Smith came up with clever interpretations of how the Biblical writers were inspired while Scripture as a whole was not.

⁵See his short treatise entitled, "On the Inspiration of Scripture," which appeared as a pamphlet, then as an article in *The Nineteenth Century* (Feb., 1884).

⁶Carl E. Braaten, *History and Hermeneutics* ("New Directions in Theology Today," Vol. II; Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1966), pp. 26ff., 37ff. Here he reviews the objections to accepting a divorce between history and kerygma, *Historie* and *Geschichte*, etc.

⁷Norman L. Geisler, "Theological Method and Inerrancy: A Reply to Prof. Homes," *Bulletin of the Evangelical Theological Society*, XI (1968), 143.

The perennial difficulty with limited inerrancy is that it requires a hermeneutical principle to distinguish between what is necessary for salvation and what is incidental. Notwithstanding the tangled history of Church division over just this question, we must trust that we *are* able to make precisely this distinction. For if we cannot determine which doctrines and affirmations are necessary for salvation, then we are left sadly bewildered about what we should teach our children and what we say to the dying person, what we preach to our congregations and how to charge our missionaries.

We have reason to believe the Council Fathers of Vatican II, acutely aware of the question of inerrancy,⁸ framed its final draft in terms of a limited form of inerrancy without adopting a position of limited inspiration.

Therefore, since everything asserted by the inspired authors or sacred writers must be held to be asserted by the Holy Spirit, it follows that the books of Scripture must be acknowledged as teaching firmly, faithfully, and without error *that truth which God wanted put into the sacred writings for the sake of our salvation*. Therefore 'all Scripture is inspired by God and useful for teaching....' (Italics mine.) (*Dei Verbum*, art. 11.)

Choosing to avoid altogether such negative terms as "immune from all error," "inerrancy," or "an infallible Bible," the Council spoke positively and specifically to that truth God wished to put there for our salvation. Inerrancy is no longer seen as an automatic effect resulting solely from the fact that the Church decided to canonize certain books. Not denying nor necessarily affirming that other kinds of truth are found in Scripture, whether historical or scientific, inerrancy is claimed only as it is the vehicle of a particular purpose. It should also be noted that Daniel Fuller in his defense of a limited form of inerrancy steered clear of the more traditional Westminster formula and chose to make his stand on "those statements that are able to make men wise unto salvation."⁹

II

It has been the standard assumption that any restriction of inerrancy logically entails a corresponding limitation of Biblical inspiration; namely, that some parts of Scripture are inspired while others are not, or that some are more inspired than others. Norman Geisler, following the usual evangelical position, asserts that "if the Bible does teach historical and factual matters, then it logically follows that whatever the Bible teaches

⁸A discussion of the debate of the final wording of *Dei Verbum* is found in Bruce Vawter, *Biblical Inspiration* ("Theological Resources"; Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1972), pp. 143-148.

⁹Daniel P. Fuller, "Warfield's View of Faith and History," *Bulletin of the Evangelical Theological Society*, XI (1968), 75-83. Fuller, however, then proceeds to weaken his position when he says the doctrinal verses refer only to revealed knowledge (pp. 80-81). The term "revealed knowledge" is unfortunate because it again tends to unnecessarily restrict the scope of inerrancy. Fuller's distinction implies that Scripture contains both revelatory and non-revelatory material; the latter we are to assume is not inspired? Finally I find very weak his exegetical explanation that the author of the doctrinal verses had in mind such an artificial separation.

about historical and factual matters is true."¹⁰ Yet Geisler, being aware that while everything contained in Scripture is inspired not everything is necessarily what God teaches,* qualifies his previous statement by adding that the interpreter is obligated to determine whether a passage is approving or merely reporting what is said. In other words, exegesis has a legitimate role when it distinguishes between what Scripture *intends* to teach as revelation and what it merely reports or transmits. Thus to the usual statement, "Whatever the Bible teaches is true and without error," I would only wish to add that the Scriptures are true and without error in what they *intend* to teach.¹¹ Is there a Biblical student among us who would deny that sound exegesis requires us to interpret each passage in light of its intended purpose?

In theory Geisler acknowledges this qualification of inerrancy when he begins by saying, "... in those cases where historical and spiritual truths are not inseparable." But he then rules it out when he continues, "they are logically (and/or psychologically) connected by the proposition: if the historical and factual truths of the Bible cannot be trusted as inerrant, then neither can the truths which are not directly connected to historical or factual matters."¹² But if logic and psychological feelings are all that support total inerrancy, then what about the honest Christian who reasons and feels just the opposite. Should he following Geisler's assumptions conclude that since he cannot find Scripture entirely accurate concerning incidental factual matters, he should find untrustworthy what Scripture teaches concerning essential matters? It is unfortunately true that the conservative position would like to constrain all Christians into this "either-or" box. One of the tragedies of Christianity is that both liberals and evangelicals have tended to exclude persons who hold different opinions about inerrancy, but affirm the inspiration and final authority of Scripture.

Undoubtedly the main reason why most evangelicals hesitate to limit inerrancy in principle is the nagging fear that the whole doctrine of inspiration will collapse.¹³ If, as the consensus seems to be, the Scriptures do not explicitly or formally teach their own inerrancy, and inerrancy is only "logically entailed" in the doctrinal verses, then the sole question left

¹⁰Geisler, *op. cit.*, p. 142.

*For example, what Satan said to Jesus in the wilderness temptation or what Job's friends said to him in rebuttal.

¹¹I certainly do not wish to imply that the change is a minor one. The interpreter is thereby obligated to go beyond the immediate literal meaning. He must begin to ask questions about the original meaning. The task is by no means simple as Jay G. Williams points out—"Exegesis-Eisegesis: Is There a Difference?," *Theology Today*, XXX (October, 1973), 218-227. It is interesting to note that in J. I. Packer's classic, "*Fundamentalism*" and the Word of God (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1970), he argues for precisely this kind of limited inerrancy (see pp. 96-98).

¹²Geisler, *op. cit.*, p. 143.

¹³A close reading of the defense of inerrancy reveals that the doctrine is maintained "in principle" while in actuality it has been compromised by making a variety of restricted concessions. One can note, for example, the number of qualifying exceptions to a strict doctrine of inerrancy made by Clark Pinnock in *Biblical Revelation* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1971).

is whether this is the only logical deduction.¹⁴ The other equally logical and viable conclusion is that Scripture is inspired throughout but inerrancy is limited to those matters necessary for our salvation. The scope of Biblical inspiration is much broader and varied than the scope of Biblical inerrancy. The latter is bounded as a result of the author's specific purpose in writing what he did. There were obviously times when one purpose took precedence over another; and in some instances a scientific historical description had to take second place to a literary existential description in order to teach a truth about God.¹⁵ In other words inerrancy is a particular case of inspiration, but inerrancy is neither the end nor the sole consequence of inspiration. Plenary inspiration and limited inerrancy, when seen in this manner, are not logically inconsistent as many would assert. In holding this position we are able to proclaim just as strongly as the most vehement conservative that inspiration guarantees that the Bible is true in whatever it intends to teach.

I have tenaciously avoided the term "limited inspiration" for the same reason I would avoid the problematic assertion that there are degrees of inspiration. The Spirit of God engulfed the totality of Scripture in such a way that discussion of degrees or levels of inspiration is downright misleading. Yet it is legitimate to say with the Reformers that while Scripture is equally inspired, it is not equally profitable. Everything in Scripture was necessary for God's plan of salvation, but as that plan progressed and reached its culmination in Christ, some subjects, historical events, descriptions became less essential. The Holiness Code is no less inspired than the Gospel of John, but if we had to choose between them we would have no difficulty deciding which is more important. The traditional monolithic conception of inspiration, almost invariably identified with plenary inspiration, simply cannot do justice to the Biblical phenomena. The rich variety of style, language, grammar, literary forms, author's intention, method of construction, leaves little doubt that all were inspired, but inspired differently. From the initial beginnings of oral traditions to the final compositions, God's holy spirit worked in an almost unthinkable diversity of ways. We can be thankful for this because mankind would be much the poorer if God spoke to us in a monolithic manner.

III

My third point of clarification, which is the most complex, concerns

¹⁴I am only following Geisler's train of thought here, because the acceptance of full Biblical inerrancy is not dependent solely upon how we interpret the doctrinal verses but upon an equal emphasis upon the historical-factual evidence Scripture presents. In the debate between Fuller and Pinnock, *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society*, XVI (Spring, 1973), 67-69, I tend to side with Fuller, because Pinnock leaves the impression, just as Warfield did, of being indecisive about giving equal weight to the inductive method as it is employed by the critical historical method.

¹⁵Whether it be Matthew's composition of the Sermon on the Mount, or the story of the Tower of Babel, or the treatment of Jesus' feeding the multitude in John 6, we find other motives than pure historical ones at work. Redaction history has gone a long way in demonstrating that harmonization, even where it is possible, is not always the answer because it submerges the different literary means and ends of the individual writers. The very use of symbolic and mythological language means historical concerns were bracketed in order to teach a different kind of divine truth.

the imprecise way we use the word "inerrancy." When we speak of Scripture as being the inerrant word of God, several distinct levels of meaning might be implied.

(1) In its strictest and most rigid sense, inerrancy becomes identified and circumscribed by such qualifiers as immutable, absolute, infallible. The Biblical writers not only sufficiently stated what God intended but stated so perfectly what He willed that no further development is possible. The words of the authors are none other than the words of God, thus no other words, regardless of time, can better express God's revelation of himself. Even if verbal dictation carries with it negative connotations, it is consistent with this understanding of inerrancy.

(2) The meaning to which most evangelicals subscribe is a middle position based upon a view of verbal inspiration. Being inspired and superintended by the Holy Spirit, the authors of Scripture were so guided as to write those words necessary to sufficiently (but not necessarily definitively) express the truth God willed. As I understand this interpretation of inerrancy and verbal inspiration, it does not decidedly rule out the possibility of further clarification by the Christian community.¹⁶

(3) Proponents of the third understanding of inerrancy would probably prefer a different word like "indefectibility."¹⁷ Inspiration and inerrancy do not turn on the individual words of Scripture but on the total reliability of the unified truth presented by the Bible. The absoluteness of Christian belief is not dependent upon unalterable concepts and immutable propositions but upon a continuity of development that guards against the dissolution of Christian commitment. Inspiration is not limited to the past but plays an essential role in the ongoing process of guaranteeing the essential integrity of Christianity.¹⁸

It is important to notice that all three definitions affirm the divine origin of the Bible, the truthfulness and trustworthiness of Scripture, the revelation of God in concepts and principles, and the intrinsic relationship between words and ideas. The latter is the most crucial and divisive. The debate is no longer whether the experience of faith can be separated from its verbal formulation, but the consequence of the fact of their inseparability. The defenders of the first definition of inerrancy are in the difficult position of demonstrating how the Biblical writers, who were limited by the development of language and human conceptualization at their particular time, could so perfectly express God's truths that no latter

¹⁶Evangelicals have not clearly committed themselves on this important question. Are they willing to adopt the conservative Roman Catholic position which states that revealed truths can change accidentally (in precision of expression), while remaining substantially unchanged. Thus development from the implicit to the explicit is allowed.

¹⁷Although this position has long been held by liberal Protestants, it is fast becoming identified with a number of prominent Roman Catholic scholars, such as Hans Küng, Edward Schillebeeckx, Karl R hner, Leslie Dewart, Gregory Baum, John McKenzie, and Avery Dulles (differences obviously exist between them).

¹⁸The idea of inerrancy as a process of continuity is well described by Paul de Vooght's statement: "Infallibility does not consist in a power to express irreformable formulas, but in a power to reformulate throughout the centuries a number (a very limited number at that) of essential Christian truths." See *The Infallibility Debate*, ed. John J. Kirvan (New York: Paulist Press, 1971), p. 33, n. 20.

development or refinement is possible. To argue that the gift of inspiration permitted the writers to transcend their own cultural milieu in thought *and* expression must be supported by evidence that their vocabulary, grammar, literary forms, and conceptualization betray an advance era.

Since the second definition of inerrancy insists upon the immutability of only "primary words" and "basic concepts,"¹⁹ the burden of evidence is not nearly as heavy. A degree of development is tolerated if not expected, both within the Biblical witness and after its finalization as the Canon. What must be tested, therefore, is the complete adequacy of the basic truths and their verbal formulation.²⁰ Certainly a position of Biblical sufficiency and Biblical trustworthiness is much more defensible than total Biblical immutability.

The third definition of inerrancy carries with it another set of difficulties. Suffice it to say that since inspiration is understood as a continuing process, whether within the Universal Church or the individual interpreter, the problem is not how to account for development but how to maintain Scriptural authority within that development. For those of us who have felt the admission of any form of development would destroy the objective basis for judging heresy, we have much to learn from Roman Catholic scholars who are struggling with this question from another angle. I mention just two recent publications: Bruce Vawter, *Biblical Resources* (Westminster, 1972); and Jan Hendrik Walgrave, *Unfolding Revelation: The Nature of Doctrinal Development* (Westminster, 1972).

As way of summary, *three* distinct arguments have been made. Past attempts to define the scope of inerrancy have unnecessarily circumscribed the question. Biblical inerrancy is not a quality unique to certain kinds of subject matter, such as faith and morals. Scripture is inerrant in whatever it intends to teach as essential for our salvation; whether it includes historical, scientific, biographical, and theological materials. Undoubtedly not everything in Scripture is necessary for our salvation, and those which are cannot be determined by assumption or *a priori*, but by their *context* and by the author's *principal* purpose.

Secondly, we argued that plenary inspiration and inerrancy are not synonymous or inseparable. Unequivocally the doctrinal verses teach the inspiration of Scripture as a whole. But to impose upon all Christians the deduction that plenary inspiration automatically guarantees total inerrancy is unwarranted. The gift of inspiration was granted not to insure the infallibility of every word and thought, though it did accomplish this in particular instances, but to secure a written Word that would forever be the singular instrument by which man learns and is confronted by God's will.

¹⁹Walter Kunneth, *The Theology of the Resurrection*, trans. James W. Leitch (St. Louis: Concordia, 1965), p. 56. Cf. pp. 67-68.

²⁰The testing must take place in a twofold sense: (1) tested against internal criticism, namely, the development of God's revelation within Scripture must in no way contradict what has gone before it but adds to and supplements it; (2) tested against the development of language so it can be said that human history has added nothing that contradicts nor substantially improves upon the original Biblical formulations, as for example the concept and wording of incarnation or resurrection.

Thirdly, we attempted to point out that inerrancy means different things to different people. The consequence being that each writer must take more care to define the meaning he has in mind. Even more importantly he must state clearly where he stands on the question of development. Roman Catholics are recognizing the necessity to reconcile the doctrine of infallibility with the actuality of human development. Evangelicals have the choice either to continue to react defensively or to advance positively a modified yet firm concept of inerrancy.