
The Inerrancy of Scripture

This statement on the inerrancy of Scripture was adopted by the General Presbytery of the Assemblies of God in May of 1970.

We believe the Bible is the Word of God written; it is the revelation of the truths of God conveyed by inspiration through His servants to us. As such, it is infallible and without error.

Implications Of Statement

1. We refer to original autographs. While the science of textual criticism assures us of a trustworthy text, inerrancy can be claimed only for the original writings (Jeremiah 36:2 [KJV/NIV]).
2. We conceive the Bible to be in actuality the very Word of God. The divine Author prompted the original thought in the mind of the writers (Amos 3:8 [KJV/NIV]); He then guided their choice of words to express such thoughts (Exodus 4:12,15 [KJV/NIV]); and, lastly, He illumines the mind of the reader of such words in a way that the reader potentially may comprehend the same truth as was originally in the mind of the writer (1 Corinthians 2:12; Ephesians 1:17,18 [KJV/NIV]). Thus, both thought and language are revelatory and inspired.
3. We understand inspiration to mean that special act of the Holy Spirit by which He guided the writers of the Scriptures. Such superintendency made full allowance for the divergent backgrounds, abilities, and personalities of the writers, and applies to all they wrote as it is found in the canon of Scripture.
4. We define inerrancy as meaning "exempt from error" and infallibility as a near synonym meaning "incapable of error, certain". If there is any difference in the shade of meaning between the two terms, inerrancy emphasizes the truthfulness of Scripture, while infallibility emphasizes the trustworthiness of Scripture. Such inerrancy and infallibility apply to all of Scripture and include both revelational inerrancy and factual inerrancy. It is truth (2 Samuel 7:28; Psalm 119:43,160; John 17:17,19; Colossians 1:5 [KJV/NIV]).

Historical Considerations

While discussion on the doctrine of inerrancy is primarily a phenomena of recent years, a survey of church history suggests that the church has long held to a high view of inspiration, with the doctrine of inerrancy implicit in that view.

During the Patristic Period, the Scriptures were considered to be the unique work of the Holy Spirit carrying forth a divine message. To the church fathers, inspiration extended even to the phraseology of the Bible. Thus, Clement of Alexandria underscores Christ's words in Matthew 5:18 [KJV/NIV] by saying that not a jot or tittle shall pass away because the Lord had spoken it (Protepticus, IX, 82, 1). Gregory Nazianzus suggests that the smallest lines in the Scriptures are due to the care of the Holy Spirit, and that we must be careful to consider every slightest shade of meaning (Orat., 2, 105). Justin Martyr distinguished between human and divine inspiration and spoke of the divine word that moved the writers of Scripture (Apology I, Ch. 36). Iranaeus thought of the Scriptures as "beyond all falsehood" (Apology, Ch. 18). There can be little doubt that the early fathers had a very high view of inspiration, and that this view extended to the minutia of Scripture.

During the medieval or scholastic period, the Bible became a mere source book for disputations instead of the living Word of God. As might be expected, the period was unproductive in respect to definitive statements on inspiration. Much more attention was given to the status of the Bible in its relationship to other authorities within the church. Although Abelard and Aquinas emphasized the human element in the transmission of God's revelation, there is no evidence to suggest that a less high doctrine of inspiration was necessitated by the mood of the Middle Ages.

The reformers, in a search for authority, readily accepted the doctrine of inspiration and, by implication, the doctrine of inerrancy. Zwingli appealed consistently to the Old Testament and New Testament in his defense of pure Christian doctrine. Calvin described the Scriptures as the "only record in which God has been pleased to consign His truth to perpetual remembrance, until we have a perfect conviction that God is its Author" (Institutes, I, 7, 2, 4). Luther argued for a high view of inspiration, once the question of canonicity was settled, and thought of the Scriptures as being above error. While the reformers did not devote a decisive part of their theology to the subject of inspiration, it is conclusive that they accepted the full authority of the Scriptures.

The age of rationalism leveled its attack against the application of inspiration to the minutia of the Bible. In the spirit of the Renaissance, linguistic and textual studies flourished. The rationalistic approach suggested that if errors could be demonstrated to exist in the text of Scripture, the whole doctrine of inspiration would crumble. This kind of thinking ignited a rash of claims that the Bible was full of errors, its critics hoping thereby to destroy the whole doctrine of inspiration.

Unfortunately, orthodoxy countered with the same appeal to rationalization. They argued that since the Bible is without error, it is thereby inspired. This does not mean that we should accept a lower view of inspiration, nor that we should reject the doctrine of inerrancy; it only suggests that our appeal must arise from the claims of Scripture alone. The Scriptures are inerrant because they are inspired of God—not inspired because they are inerrant. The first approach is biblical and leads to a correct view of inspiration and errancy; the second approach is rationalistic and opens the door to human speculations.

Exegetical Considerations

The starting point for a correct understanding of the doctrine of inerrancy is the self-witness of the Bible. The Bible clearly claims for itself divine authority and full inspiration, and implicit therein is the doctrine of inerrancy.

Jesus Christ, both a credible witness and messenger from God, vouches for the inspiration of the details of the Scriptures. In Matthew 5:18 [KJV/NIV], Jesus said, "Till heaven and earth pass, one jot or one tittle shall in no wise pass from the law, till all be fulfilled." Whether we take this reference literally, that the jot represents the smallest Hebrew letter and the tittle the minor stroke that distinguishes one letter from another, or figuratively, that the jot and tittle represent the particles of Scripture, the force is the same. Jesus thought of the Scriptures as being consequential even in their slightest detail. If Jesus did not believe in full inspiration and the quality of inerrancy, the force of His argument is lost.

Christ's insistence on the essential nature of every part of Scripture is further seen in John 10:34,35 [KJV/NIV]. Here Jesus points to a brief statement from the Psalms and argues that neither it nor the other parts of the Law can be broken. If Jesus had thought of the Scriptures as being only partially inspired and subject to errors of detail, He certainly would not have spoken as He did.

In Matthew 22:32 [KJV/NIV] the validity of Christ's statement rests on the essential nature of scriptural detail, namely, the present tense of the verb to be, "I am". In questioning the Pharisees in Matthew 22:43-45 [KJV/NIV], the force of the dialogue rests on the use of one word, Lord. In Galatians 3:16 [KJV/NIV], the apostle Paul depends on a distinguishing of singulars and plurals for the force of his argument. Examples of minutia, involving tenses, particular words, and singulars and plurals, are meaningful only in light of a fully inspired Scripture that is infallible even in its detail.

One of the most forceful statements on the full inspiration of the Scriptures is found in 2 Timothy 3:16 [KJV/NIV]. This passage teaches that every or all Scripture is "God-breathed", or literally "breathed out" of God. Whether one translates the opening words of this verse "every Scripture inspired of God" or "all Scripture is inspired of God", the meaning is the same. What is true of one Scripture is true of all or every Scripture; that is, they are uniquely the product of God.

One last passage deserves consideration. Second Peter 1:21 [KJV/NIV] states that the Old Testament writers spoke "as they were moved by the Holy Ghost." In its context this verse suggests the uniqueness of Scriptures when compared to humanly inspired statements. The men who wrote the Scriptures were moved, or carried along, by the Holy Ghost. The uniform witness of the Scriptures themselves is clear: God spoke the concept (revelation) to the mind of the writer; the Holy Spirit guided the transmission (inspiration) of that concept into the objective form of words; and, through the continual guidance of the Holy Spirit (illumination), we receive the original revelation as we read the Scriptures.

In addition to the above passages, mention should be made of the numerous claims of the Scriptures to be in reality "God's Word". The Old Testament is abundant with such phrases as "and God said", "Thus saith the Lord", and "The Word of the Lord came". In other passages, Scripture is equated directly with divine authorship: "It says", "It is written", and "The Scripture says". This shows that God's voice, spoken to the prophets, is equated with the Scriptures, which were written by divine inspiration.

Objections to the Doctrine Of Inerrancy

1. Since we do not have the original autographs, any doctrine of inerrancy is without value.

The answer is twofold. First, the science of textual criticism has assured us, by the estimates of competent scholars, that our present texts (Greek and Hebrew) are without errors of significance. The text we work with is therefore trustworthy and deserving of the most careful and detailed study.

Second, to reject the doctrine of inerrancy transfers the question of truth from the objective into the realm of the subjective. Who is to decide what part of the Scripture is true and what part of it is false? What part is trustworthy and what part is untrustworthy? The Scriptures' claim to divine authority is lost when we subject them to the rationalistic, subjective appraisals of men.

2. The doctrine of inerrancy necessitates a doctrine of inspiration that eliminates human personality in the composition of the Scriptures.

We hold that God, by the superintendency of the Holy Spirit, so prepared the authors of His Word that they were able to write precisely what He intended to have written. The total personality of each author was utilized by the Holy Spirit in the conveyance of the divine message, thus allowing for variety and individuality, yet not destroying the message God desired to entrust to man (2 Peter 1:21 [KJV/NIV]).

3. The Bible contains errors in matters of science, history, morality, reasoning, quotations, etc., so as to render it untrustworthy.

First, while this is a popular claim, it is difficult to substantiate. Both science and time tend to vindicate the Scriptures.

Second, the Bible does not claim to be a textbook on nonreligious topics. Yet, when it does speak in these areas, its statements, though incomplete and expressed in popular terminology, are never in error.

Third, the Bible must be studied against the background of its day. Matters of culture, language, and literary procedure must be carefully considered. If the Scriptures are approached with an attitude of sincerity and intelligent inquiry, they will prove to possess the quality of infallibility.

4. A high view of inspiration does not necessitate the doctrine of inerrancy.

An appeal must be made in three directions. As has been seen, the testimony of history is convincing. The church generally has held to a high view of inspiration, holding to the inseparability of inspiration and inerrancy.

Second, a study of the Scriptures demonstrates the correlation between inspiration and inerrancy. It is difficult to imagine that the Bible writers thought of the Scriptures as being anything other than infallible and without error.

Finally, we appeal to logic. Since God is himself free from error, which is the clear testimony of the Scriptures (Psalms 31:5; 100:5; John 7:28; 8:26; Romans 3:4; 2 Corinthians 1:18; 1 John 4:6; 5:20; Revelation 6:10 [KJV/NIV]), and since He has chosen man as the vehicle through which He would disclose His truth, it is wholly consistent that He should conduct the process of providing Scripture so as to avoid all error, and wholly inconsistent if any minute part of it should be in error.