

Reformation Fellowship Notes • Spring 2014
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A Case for Biblical Inerrancy
Handout #5

I. Conclusion from our study of Jesus' view of Scripture: Jesus believed in the total inerrancy of the "Scripture."

- A. As we see in Jesus' argument in John 10 (and confirmed by many other examples of Jesus' reference to Scripture), Jesus ALWAYS took the position that what the Scripture asserts can never be gainsaid. If the Scripture says it, then we know that it is true.
 - 1. This position only makes sense if he believes the Scripture has total absolute authority—that is, if he believes that it is inerrant.
 - a) Under any other view of Scripture, Jesus would have to do significantly more than simply cite Scripture with, "It is written..."
 - 2. Jesus NEVER gives any indication whatsoever that he believes it possible that a Scriptural assertion could be false.
- B. What is the "Scripture" to which Jesus grants such authority?
 - 1. The "Scripture" accepted as such by Jesus' contemporaries was what we know as the Protestant Old Testament.
 - a) To my knowledge, there is no significant controversy with respect to this.
- C. Therefore, because of Jesus' messianic authority, it is incumbent upon me to grant the same authority to the Protestant Old Testament that Jesus did—namely, absolute authority.

II. Argument for accepting the New Testament as Scripture

- A. The apostles were appointed by Jesus to be his authoritative spokesmen after he left.
 - 1. If one comes to a clear and accurate understanding of the "upper room discourse" in the gospel of John, it becomes evident what role the apostles were to play and how Jesus expected them to be "equipped" to play that role:
 - a) Namely, they were given the responsibility to accurately articulate the teaching of Jesus to their contemporaries; to proclaim the gospel with the accuracy and authority of Jesus himself.
 - b) And, they would be able to do that, Jesus maintains, because God's *Parakletos* (the Spirit of God who is the Spirit of Truth) would grant them the memory and understanding that they needed in order to fulfill their responsibilities as spokesmen for Jesus.
 - 2. Historically speaking, the New Testament is a record of the apostles' articulation of the gospel and its implications.

- a) Therefore, the New Testament writings reflect the authority of the apostles themselves who, in turn, reflect the authority of Jesus himself.
3. Therefore, the New Testament writings have the same authority as the teaching of the apostles which has the same authority as the teaching of Jesus himself.
- B. The nature and relationship of the authority of Jesus, the apostles, and the New Testament:
 1. Messianic authority.
 - a) Personal authority.
 - b) Absolute authority.
 2. Apostolic authority.
 - a) NOT personal authority.
 - (1) Rather, it is the authority of their inspired understanding.
 - (2) The locus of their authority is in the mutually agreed upon group memory and understanding of what Jesus taught.
 - b) Apostolic authority is the absolute authority of their mutually shared understanding; it is the absolute authority of their consensus with regard to what Jesus taught.
 - (1) The apostles do not have absolute authority as individuals.
 - (2) The apostles do not have absolute authority in everything that they say.

III. What about the canon of the Bible?

- A. Contrary to popular perception, the canon was not formed by the Church.
 1. The canon was established informally and organically by the first generation of Jesus-followers during the lifetime of one or more of the apostles.
- B. The Old Testament canon is fixed by whatever it is that Jesus' accepted as Scripture during his life among us.
 1. This is not particularly controversial.
- C. The New Testament canon cannot be established on the basis of Jesus' direct testimony and practice. However, it is nonetheless based on Jesus' authority.
 1. With the encouragement of the apostles (whom Jesus explicitly appointed and authorized to proclaim, teach, and articulate his teaching—his message, gospel, and worldview—to mankind), the earliest believers organically collected a set of writings that they knew to represent the teaching, perspectives, judgments, and wisdom of the apostles. Such writings were classed as "Scripture" by the earliest believers and even explicitly called such on one occasion by an apostle himself.
 - a) Historically speaking, it is VERY REMARKABLE that the first generation of Jewish Jesus-believers would grant "Scriptural" authority to writings that were not already classed in that category by history and tradition. What

- possible impetus could cause them to do so other than the personal authority they granted to Jesus and the apostles?
- b) There is no record of any apostolic warning to the earliest believers that they NOT grant the same authority to apostolic writings as they grant to the Jewish Scriptures.
 - (1) This is a very odd omission if the apostles did not themselves believe that their writings could deservedly be classed as "Scripture."
 - (a) Hence, it would seem to follow that the apostles themselves believed that the set of writings classed as "Scripture" should be expanded to include those writings that faithfully recorded the gospel that they taught and/or that helpfully reflected the implications of that gospel.
 - c) Arguably, the apostle Peter explicitly classifies the writings of Paul as Scripture (2 Peter 3:14–16) .
 - d) Hence, it follows that there exists a set of writings that was organically formed during the lifetime of (and with the encouragement of) one or more of the apostles and that that collection of writings constitutes a set of writings that the apostles themselves would agree should rightly be classed as Scripture.
 - 2. It follows that this set of writings organically collected by the earliest generation of believers ought to be granted absolute authority in the same way that Jesus granted absolute authority to the Jewish Scriptures.
 - a) Very likely, this collection of writings is what Protestants call the New Testament. If it is different from that, then there is some other collection of apostolic writings that deserves to be granted absolute authority and considered inerrant.
 - D. In principle, we need to be willing to question the inclusion of any of the books in the Protestant New Testament.
 - 1. Personally, at this point in my study of the New Testament, I see no reason or basis for rejecting any book in the Protestant New Testament.
 - 2. However, as a matter of principle, I must be prepared to do so if there is a valid basis or reason for so doing.
 - E. In principle, we could consider the possibility that some book not included in the Protestant New Testament ought to be included.
 - 1. Personally, at this point, I see no reason or basis for considering any extra-canonical book as Scripture.
 - 2. However, as a matter of principle, I must be prepared to do so if a valid basis or reason for so doing should emerge.

IV. Conclusion of the above considerations: If we call the Jewish Scriptures accepted by the Jews of Jesus' day the Original Scriptures, and if we call the writings embraced as Scripture by the earliest generation of Jesus-believers the New Scriptures, then...

- A. If I believe that Jesus is who he claimed to be (the Messiah), then it follows that I must grant absolute authority to (and attribute total inerrancy to) that collection of writings that I have labeled the Original Scriptures.
 - 1. Very likely, this collection of writings is what Protestants call the Old Testament. If it is different from that, then it is another collection of writings that deserves to be granted absolute authority as the Original Scriptures.
- B. If I believe that Jesus is who he claimed to be (the Messiah) and that the apostles were who they claimed to be (authoritative spokesmen for the Messiah himself), then it follows that I must grant absolute authority to (and attribute total inerrancy to) that collection of writings that I have labeled the New Scriptures.
 - 1. Very likely, this collection of writings is what Protestants call the New Testament. If it is different from that, then it is another collection of writings that deserves to be granted absolute authority as the New Scriptures.

V. What about the text of the Bible?

- A. We do not possess the totally inerrant, absolutely authoritative Scripture given to us by God.
 - 1. We possess "imperfect" copies of the totally inerrant, absolutely authoritative Scripture given to us by God.
 - a) Speaking with respect to the New Testament (because that is something I have experience with), those "imperfect" copies are not very imperfect. They are really very, very good. Namely, they are 98% accurate (to pull a number out of a hat).
 - 2. The "imperfection" of our copies does not render the total inerrancy and absolute authority of Scripture irrelevant and of no value.

VI. What if I were to find a *bona fide* error in the Bible?

- A. Discovery of a *bona fide* error would imply one of the following:
 - 1. That I am mistaken in my conclusion that I have discovered a "*bona fide*" error.
 - 2. That I am mistaken in my conclusions about what Jesus' view of the nature of Scriptural authority was.
 - 3. That I am mistaken in my concept of *messianic* authority.
 - 4. That I am mistaken in my belief that Jesus was the *Messiah*.
- B. In other words, a *bona fide* error in the Bible would be a significant challenge to my beliefs and worldview.
 - 1. Intellectual integrity would demand that I alter one or more of my views about Jesus and his role.

2. Fear of being wrong in my beliefs about Jesus is no reason to reject his view of Scripture.
 - a) That is, I should not reject the doctrine of the total inerrancy of Scripture because then I would be in the position that the discovery of one single error in the Bible would call into question my beliefs about Jesus.
 - b) That is exactly the position that I should be willing to find myself in. I must not fear being wrong. If Jesus is who I think he is and the Bible is what I think he believed it was, then both of them will be vindicated. There is no cause to be afraid. If they are not vindicated, then I want to change my beliefs about Jesus.

VII. What would constitute an error in the Bible?

- A. The concept of "error" that is meaningful with respect to the issue of the Bible's absolute authority is this: If what a biblical author intends to assert about reality in a statement contained in the Bible does not correspond to what reality actually is, then his statement constitutes an error in the Bible.
 1. What is to be evaluated is the understanding of the biblical author, not the text *per se*.
 2. The text is a sign to a human author's understanding. It has no meaning in and of itself, apart from what the human author intended by his text.
 3. Therefore, it is utterly irrelevant that the way I am inclined to construe a text might make it in error. The claim is not that my interpretation of the Bible is inerrant. The claim is that the Bible itself is inerrant. That is, what the Bible was actually intended to say is inerrant.
- B. Other "imperfections" in the text are not meaningfully considered "errors" for the purposes of biblical authority.
 1. An imprecise claim is not an errant claim.
 2. An inelegant claim is not an errant claim.
 3. An ambiguous claim is not an errant claim.
 4. A misleading claim is not an errant claim.
 5. A grammatically or morphologically unconventional use of language is not an error.

VIII. Reasons why people see errors that are not actually there.

- A. They are making a judgment based on an English translation of the text rather than on the text in its original language.
 1. Matthew 9:18-19, 23-26 // Mark 5:22-23, 35-43 // Luke 8:41-42, 49-56 > Do we have a contradiction because Matthew says the man's daughter has died while Mark and Luke say she is simply dying?
 - a) In some English translations, perhaps, but not in the Greek text:

- (1) Matthew: ὅτι ἡ θυγάτηρ μου ἄρτι ἐτελεύτησεν
 - (a) NOT, "because my daughter has just died";
 - (b) RATHER, "because my daughter has now reached the end," or "because my daughter is now at the end."
 - (2) Mark: ὅτι τὸ θυγάτριόν μου ἐσχάτως ἔχει
 - (a) "My little daughter is at the point of death."
 - (b) Or RATHER, "My little daughter is at her last moments."
 - (3) Luke: καὶ αὐτὴ ἀπέθνησκειν
 - (a) "and she was dying";
 - (b) or RATHER, "she was in the process of dying."
- B. They are judging only a *prima facie* meaning of the text and are not considering a more accurate, all-things-considered interpretation of the text.
1. Matthew 8:5-13 // Luke 7:1-10:
 - a) Is Matthew's account in error because it misleads us into thinking Jesus had a face-to-face conversation with the Centurion?
 - b) NO! All things considered, Matthew does not say that Jesus spoke with the Centurion face to face. We hastily assumed that.
 - (1) Being written in such a way that I am misled into false assumptions does not constitute an "error" in the text. I have no basis for knowing that Matthew did not accurately understand the situation. Because of Luke's account, I only know that I came to have an inaccurate understanding of the situation when I made an unwarranted assumption about exactly what Matthew meant.
- C. Their interpretation of the text is based on a misjudgment with respect to whether it was intended literally or figuratively.
1. Sun travelling across the sky.
- D. The judgment is a judgment that the cultural assumption of the biblical author is in error, not that the verbal intent of the author is in error.
1. There is a difference between (i) my verbal intent in an assertion I make and what exactly is implied by my verbal intent, and (ii) the personal beliefs that I hold when I make an assertion.
 - a) I can believe that X is true (when in fact X is false) and at the same time make an assertion with regard to X that does not commit me to asserting that X is actually true.
 - (1) Example: What if I assert that God will completely annihilate the present created order and will recreate an entirely new created order rather than "refurbish" this created order? Am I necessarily committing myself to the claim that God will create the new created order *ex nihilo*? No, I am

- not committing myself to that claim, even though I am inclined to believe it. That is, I am inclined to believe that God will create the new created order *ex nihilo*. However, it is not part of my verbal intent to commit myself to and advocate for such a belief, even though I am inclined to believe it myself.
2. There are various assertions in the Old Testament (by David, for example, in the Psalms) that would suggest that he believes the sun is actually moving across the sky (rather than that the earth is rotating).
 - a) In those instances where David speaks in this way, is it part of David's verbal intent to commit himself to and advocate for a pre-Copernican astronomy? It seems highly likely that David does personally accept a pre-Copernican astronomy in this sense. However, while he personally believes that the sun is actually moving across the sky, is it part of his verbal intent to advocate for such a belief.
 - (1) Would David accuse us of misunderstanding what he had asserted if we rejected a pre-Copernican view of the movement of the sun?
 - E. Their conclusion that the Bible is in error is based on a mistake that they make with respect to what the biblical assertion does or does not imply.
 1. Joshua 10:12-14 // 2 Kings 20:8-11:
 - a) These passages in the O.T. that describe the sun standing still in the sky (or moving backward in the sky) are only a potential error if they imply that the sun stopped moving (= that the earth stopped rotating).
 - b) But what if it is false to infer from these passages that the author was saying that the sun stopped moving in the sky (that is, that the earth stopped rotating)? Then there is no significant problem posed by these passages.
 - (1) What if the sun stood still is rather a way of saying that light persisted longer than it was normal for it to persist (e.g., because of the light from a super nova).
 - F. Their judgment that the Bible is in error is nothing more than the critic's preference for his view over that of the biblical author. He does not know that the Bible is wrong; he simply prefers to think that the Bible is wrong.
 1. In the description of historical events, for example, preferring to find a description implausible because it does not conform to his personal expectations about what can and cannot occur in a historical event.
 2. In the moral teaching of the Bible, for example, preferring a different set of moral values and judgments to those actually embodied in the biblical teaching.