

Misconceptions About the Bible's Inspiration

Used by permission of the **Brethren Revival Fellowship (BRF)**, published in **BRF Witness, July/August, 1979, Volume 14, Number 4**

There is much variety within the Church of the Brethren. The core reason for the differences is related to the question of the inspiration and the authority of the core reason for the differences is related to the question of the inspiration and the authority of the Scriptures. This question ultimately determines one's whole theology.

Some say the epistles of Paul cannot be reconciled with the teachings of Christ. Others have difficulties with the first eleven chapters of Genesis. Still others say it is impossible to harmonize the New Testament concept of God with the Old Testament accounts of bloodshed. Some of us believe that the entire Bible is trustworthy — a reliable guide for doctrine and for practice — and in the original documents, inerrant in all its parts.

The basic issue concerns the term “inspiration” as it, is applied to the contents of the Bible. There are two broad points of view:

(1) Some Christians believe that the Spirit of God “inspired” the writers of the Bible by providing inner guidance of a general and overall nature. In this view, the Spirit led the writers to express truths without necessarily controlling the details of the stories they told. This allows room for the possibility that some human errors crept into the wording of the Scripture, despite their overall divine inspiration.

(2) The other point of view, held by many believers, is that the Scriptures are unique and different from all other literature in that they are verbally inspired by God so that in all their words they are the Word of God. The writers of the Bible were not simply guided by the Spirit; they were so completely controlled, that in every passage of the Old and New Testaments in the original manuscripts, they wrote the words that the Spirit wanted them to write.

The first 1800 years of church history reveal that Christians generally maintained a faithfulness to the doctrine of biblical inerrancy (the second view, summarized in the

previous paragraph). Only during the past 175 years, have there been serious attempts to dethrone this doctrine. Even the more liberal Interpreter's Bible admits that during the earlier centuries, most Christians accepted without any question, the doctrine of the inerrancy of Scripture writings (See "The Bible: Its Significance and Authority," Herbert H. Farmer, Volume 1, page 16). In the fourth century the church divided on the subject of the Trinity; in the sixteenth century the doctrine of justification held the spotlight; today the integrity of the Bible is the great theological divide. The authority and inspiration of the Bible is a central point of concern in the church today.

There are some commonly-held misconceptions about the view of inspiration which says that the Bible is a book without error. We want to note a few of the misconceptions.

1. MECHANICAL DICTATION Verbal inspiration (the accuracy of each word) does not mean that every writer was merely a mechanical machine through which God was dictating the words. Each writer was an individual with differing experiences and backgrounds and styles of writing. But all of the Bible was God-breathed in such a way that He guarded and guided every word so that the message was what God wanted it to be. We do not say that the writers of Scripture were machines holding pens, and, like typesetters in a printing office, did not understand what they were doing. Very few persons have ever accepted the mechanical dictation theory of inspiration.

Sometimes God spoke to the writers in dreams and visions, sometimes by an audible voice, and sometimes by angels. At other times we are not told how the Word of God came to the writers. But whatever means God employed in speaking to men, it never obliterated their own personalities. Each writer used his own literary style, and each writer emphasized his theme — "works" for James; "faith" for Paul; "love" for John— each one giving his part of God's complete revelation. God made use of the personalities, backgrounds, temperaments, and experiences of the biblical writers — and yet God spoke through them, preserving the human writers from error. The Bible is a human book, but the "humanity" of the Word does not exist in isolation from its controlling divinity.

We believe that in some marvelous manner the Holy Spirit made use of the reason, the memory, the intellect, the style of thought, and the peculiar mental temperament of each writer of the Scriptures. But how and in what manner this was done, no one can explain, just as no one can explain the union of two natures (God and man) in the person of our Lord Jesus Christ. We only know that there is both a divine and human element in the Bible, and that while the men who wrote it were really and truly men,

the book that they wrote and handed down to us is really and truly the word of God. We know the result, but we do not understand the process. The result is that the Bible is the written Word of God, but we can no more explain the process than we can explain how the water became wine at Cana, or how five loaves fed five thousand men, or how a mere word raised Lazarus from the dead.

We do not presume to explain miracles, and thus no one pretends to explain fully the miraculous gift of inspiration. The position many Brethren hold is that while the Bible writers were not “machines” (as some sneeringly say), still they only wrote what God taught them to write. The Holy Spirit put into their minds thoughts and ideas, and then guided their pens in writing them. It is blind prejudice to equate “verbal inspiration” with “mechanical dictation,” and to say that God simply dictated to the writers what was to be recorded, and thus suppressed the human element altogether.

2. LITERAL INTERPRETATION Verbal inspiration does not mean that there are no symbols and figures of speech in the Bible. Literal interpretation is simply taking the Bible to mean exactly what it says — that is, taking it at face value whenever it is at all possible to do so. Literal interpretation means that the reader uses the most direct, simple, and ordinary meaning of the words — unless it is obvious from the context that the words are to be used in a figurative sense.

Although the historic view of the Bible holds the Scriptures to be true in all parts, this does not mean that every word of the Bible is literally true. Every word of the Bible is true only in its context. Isolated from its setting, it may be altogether untrue. For example, the larger part of the Book of Job consists of a dialogue between Job and his three “comforters.” Some of what Job’s comforters say about suffering is not true. God says to them: “You have not spoken of Me what is right, as My servant Job has” (Job 42:7 NASB). It is true that Job’s comforters said what they did, but not everything they said is right and true.

Again, much of Scripture is deliberately presented in a figurative manner. Isaiah talks about “the trees clapping their hands,” and Jesus mentions “a beam of lumber” in the eye of one who judges. But usually it is not any more difficult to distinguish between figures of speech and actual literal statements in the Bible — than it is to do this in the daily newspaper. The statement in a newspaper which says, “Two people were killed in an automobile accident on North Main Street” — is clearly to be taken literally. But the statement in the sports section of the newspaper which describes a ball game, and says, “He shot home from third in the last half of the ninth, with the winning run under his arm, and the crowd went mad” — is obviously figurative. A ball-player doesn’t

“shoot” home, nor does he carry runs under his 5/8 arm, and the crowd merely became excited — it didn’t go insane. And so it is with the Scriptures. We know that when the Bible says that James was a “pillar” in the church, he was not a post supporting the roof of a building! The best way to understand the Bible is to take the literal sense, unless the context or the laws of grammar indicate otherwise.

Generally a figurative term can be readily understood, but if the divine interpretation is not given, the symbolism may remain an unsolved mystery. In such cases, we should simply acknowledge that we do not know what it means, and avoid guessing at meanings.

3. CONTINUING REVELATION Some are saying that there is “continuing revelation” in our day. They say, “God is not a static God. We can rightly expect him to reveal new truth today, especially through church bodies that meet in conventions and get the mind of the various brotherhoods.” They hold that God gives new revelation today.

It was not the intention of our forefathers (when they decided not to adopt a formal creed, and spoke about “being open to new light”) — that the “new light” would be receiving revelation beyond what God gave in the Bible, or that the new light was to receive understandings that contradicted the Scriptures. For our Anabaptist ancestors it was new light that would break forth out of God’s holy Word! It was new insight, new illumination, new perspective — out of the Scripture, not apart from Scripture. We have no creed but the New Testament. But we do have a creed. The New Testament is our creed, and as we receive it by faith, and meditate upon it, new light continues to burst upon us.

In **John 16:12-15** we have recorded the concluding teaching that Jesus gave His disciples about the Holy Spirit. It is our Lord’s pre-authentication of the New Testament Scriptures. One of the Holy Spirit’s functions, Jesus said to the apostles, would be this: “He will guide you into all the truth” (John 16:13a NASB). The Holy Spirit would use the apostles (“you”) as the vehicles of the new revelation. The promise in John 16:13 was made to the apostles, not to all men in general in every generation. The controlling guidance will be “into all the truth.”

The Scriptures are the unique, definitive revelation of God, given through a special body of human beings. The twenty-seven New Testament books were all written within sixty or seventy years of the Crucifixion, and to add to those books is something no one has successfully done because the Scriptures stand as a completed unit from Genesis to Revelation. Genesis tells about the commencement of the heavens and earth; Revelation

tells about their consummation. Genesis tells about the entrance of sin and the curse; Revelation tells about the end of sin and the curse. In Genesis sorrow begins; in Revelation sorrow ends. And one could go on with contrasts. To add to the Scriptures would be a useless attempt to complete what is already completed, and would bring endless confusion and contradiction, as well as the judgment of God (**Revelation 22:18-19**).

4. PARTICULAR TRANSLATIONS An inerrant view of the Bible does not mean that every word in every translation, every version, or every paraphrase—is the exact word of God. We do not say that every word of the King James Version is inspired of God. We believe that the Bible is free from error “in the original autographs.” But the question is sometimes asked, “Of what value is such a claim, if the original manuscripts have perished?”

It is true that none of the original manuscripts has survived. In 302 A.D., the Emperor Diocletian ordered the wholesale destruction of the sacred scriptures, and it may be then that the manuscripts disappeared. Their being lost has probably been due to a deliberate providence of God in order to prevent human beings from giving superstitious reverence to pieces of paper.

Nevertheless, we know something of the scrupulous care with which the scribes copied the Hebrew and Greek texts. Furthermore, there are many copies of the original text available to us. By comparing the ancient copies with early translations (and with biblical quotations found in the writings of the church fathers), textual experts have been able to establish an authentic text.

Although the original documents cannot be found, the correct text can be recovered with accuracy from many sources. The Histories of Tacitus are known to us only through two manuscript copies which come from about a thousand years after he wrote. There are only ten copies of Caesar’s Gallic Wars, and only twenty copies of Livy’s History of Rome — but over five thousand manuscript copies of the New Testament are available, copies which began to be produced less than fifty years after the New Testament itself was written. The Bible is the best documented and the most accurately copied book that has ever existed.

Consider this modern parallel: On January 1, 1863, President Lincoln set his name and seal to the proclamation which set four million slaves free. It was written on four pages of ordinary paper in the President’s own handwriting. It was Mr. Lincoln’s Emancipation Proclamation. That document perished in the great Chicago fire of 1871.

Suppose some slave owner should now seize a former slave of his and challenge him to produce Mr. Lincoln's charter of liberty, and tell him that if he did not produce the original, he would hold him still in slavery. What could the ex-slave have done? He could not produce the original, for it was destroyed by fire. But although he could not produce the original document, he could recover and produce the original text. How? By finding copies of the original in public instruments — newspapers of the period, translations of it in French, German, and other languages, by quotations from it in speeches, periodicals, and books. By comparing and combining all these, he could establish to the satisfaction of a court of law, the original message which gave him liberty.

So it is with the Scriptures. There are hundreds of New Testament manuscripts that take us back to the early centuries, and it is possible to recover the entire New Testament from these sources.

A perfect translation of the Bible is not available. The words in one language do not have exactly the same color and meaning as the parallel words in another language. The beauty and stately dignity and reverence of language used in the King James Version are unequaled in other translations, but there are virtues and faults in each of the translations. Yet with few exceptions, the truth of the Gospel message is clear.

The theological discussions that center around the reliability of the Scriptures may seem hard to follow, but the issues themselves are not difficult to understand. The basic question that must be answered is this: "Is the Bible trustworthy?" There are only three basic answers:

(1) Some will say that the Bible is not trustworthy at all. It is an ancient book, so scientifically outdated, and so irrelevant to modern man's needs, that it must be rejected altogether.

(2) Others reply that the Bible is truthful in all its parts, and is totally trustworthy. Because God breathed out the account and because the Holy Spirit superintended the whole operation — the Bible is without error. The Bible is God's revelation to man. It is infallible and inerrant.

(3) Still others speak of the Bible as containing some truth and some error. It is neither completely true nor completely false. To some, the salvation statements are reliable,

but the facts (science, history, chronology) are not reliable. To others, the sayings of Jesus are reliable, but the words of Paul and Peter are sometimes their own opinions.

There are many viewpoints that fall within the range of the third position, but the conclusion is always the same — the Bible is only partly trustworthy. The real question those who hold any form of the third position must answer, is: “Who decides what is error and what is truth?”

It is the conviction of the Brethren Revival Fellowship committee that the Bible is without error in the original autographs. The doctrine of biblical inerrancy is derived from the attitude of Scripture toward itself, from the testimony of Jesus regarding the Scriptures, from the evidences uncovered by archaeologists, from the unity of the Bible in spite of its diversity, and from the manifestation of God’s power through the Scriptures to change human lives.

We affirm the words spoken by Bro. Galen B. Boyer (recorded in the June 5, 1920 Gospel Messenger):

“After all, when people want solid reliable information, they turn to the Scriptures. They do not go to the professors in the colleges and preachers in the pulpits who the first eleven chapters of Genesis to be a myth, who cannot accept the Pentateuch, who sneer at the story of Jonah, who assign to the Book of Isaiah at least two authors, who reject the virgin birth of Christ, who reason away his Deity, and do not look for Christ’s return. The honest inquirers do not go to the books which point out the errors of the Scriptures (errors which do not exist in the Bible at all, but only in the minds of the critics). No, no! Light and truth came from God through Jesus Christ....by way of the Scriptures, and under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit.”

We urge that all of us in the Church of the Brethren stand with our faithful forefathers in declaring our confidence in the total trustworthiness of the Scriptures, and that in the spirit of obedience to the Lord of the Church, we submit ourselves unreservedly to the authority of His Word.

Reprinted, with permission, from MESSENGER, June, 1979