

THE BOOK - HOW WE GOT IT AND HOW TO GET THE MOST OUT OF IT - Part six

Teaching #1950 - Sunday, February 26th, 2017 - 6 p.m.

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HUMAN WORDS, DIVINE WORDS - WHAT INERRANCY IS AND ISN'T, AND WHY IT MATTERS

2 Peter 1:19-21 - "And we have something more sure, the prophetic word, to which you will do well to pay attention as to a lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts, [20] knowing this first of all, that no prophecy of Scripture comes from someone's own interpretation. [21] For no prophecy was ever produced by the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit."

There are two words frequently used by evangelicals to describe the unique nature of the recorded revelation we have in the Bible. We attribute this uniqueness of the Scriptures to **infallibility** and **inerrancy**. By **infallibility** we mean the Scriptures possess a permanent **authority** that can never be usurped or set aside. As the Lord Jesus Himself said in **John 10:35** - "...Scripture cannot be broken."

That's **infallibility**. It means there is no other authority that can be brought along side the Scriptures. They are eternally binding and irreplaceable. All that they say **will happen** will happen. All that they **promise** will stand fast, however unlikely it may appear in the face of today's circumstance. All that they **command** is binding upon mankind, even when it looks right now as though we can spit in God's face with immunity to punishment.

The fact of Scripture's infallibility isn't just cold doctrine. It's divine life-blood. Our whole world needs to know that God's Word **stands**. It never passes away. It's the most real thing in this world full of trinkets and smoke and mirrors. One day, very soon, all that will matter about your whole existence is how seriously you engaged God's Word in this world.

The second word, **inerrancy**, means the Scriptures, as God originally gave them, are **exempt from any liability to mistake**. They are **truthful** in what they communicate and incapable of **error**. In everything they **intend** to communicate (that wording is very important - take note) the Scriptures make no mistakes. God's written revelation is a **safe** and **reliable** revelation.

It's this second term - **inerrancy** - that is the topic of today's study. What do we mean, and, just as importantly, what do we **not** mean, when we say the Scriptures, as God originally gave them, are **inerrant**?

And before we launch too deeply into this subject I want to deal with two questions Christians (and critics) frequently ask. I find, over and over again, in conversation with people, that there are two issues that are the most troubling. They are a source of concern and consternation when, I think, they should be a source of comfort and confidence. So bear with me as we look at some important background issues to the whole subject of Scriptural inerrancy.

1) **"ISN'T IT TRUE THAT IT WAS CENTURIES BEFORE THE EARLY CHURCH FINALLY RECOGNIZED THE COMPLETE CANON OF THE NEW TESTAMENT?"**

And the answer to that question is an honest **"yes."** The actual history goes something like this. The first **list** of the 27 letters we have in our New Testament comes from the writings of **Irenaeus** in 180 A.D. The first **official affirmation** of the completed canon of the New Testament took place at the **Synod of Hippo** in 393 A.D.

And so the question gets asked, "What was the church doing for the first three centuries of her existence?" And the answer to that question is she was establishing the validity and authenticity of the letters handed down to her.

This is so important. As early as 40 A.D. she encountered **counterfeit gospels and letters** in the writings of **Marcion**. There were people claiming to be apostles. There were other documents and letters - sometimes stating **conflicting doctrines**.

So why didn't God just hand down some books from heaven right away? Why this lingering and sorting of letters for three centuries? Because, then and now, the Holy Spirit was teaching the church to **try** and **sort** and **study**. The Holy Spirit was teaching the church to **prove sound doctrine in the realm of conflicting and competing ideas and world views**.

Consider these words from **F.F. Bruce**, in his great little book, **"The Books and the Parchments"**: **"What's particularly important to notice is that the New Testament canon was not demarcated by the arbitrary decree of any Church Council. When at last a Church Council - the Synod of Hippo in A.D. 393 - listed the**

27 books of the New Testament, it did not confer on them any authority they did not already possess, but simply recorded their previously established canonicity."

In other words, the important point Bruce is making is that, **unlike Roman Catholic theology**, the church didn't **confer** the authority on those 27 ancient texts. It merely **listed** those letters they recognized as **already possessing** divine authority.

There's another truth that emerges out of this point. And it's in particular need of being stated right at this time. The theology of the early church was **pure** and **safer after** the official verification of the canon in 397 A.D. than it was **before** that time. True doctrine was easier to validate because everyone was **keying off the same books and letters**.

And here's why this matters. We have everything from the Da Vinci Code to the fuss over the Gospels of Judas and Thomas telling us that we need to zoom back to earlier letters - writings dating **prior** to the Synod of Hippo and the certifying of the New Testament canon. But this is nonsense. The church has already gone over this ground. The process of the sorting and sifting of earlier documents and **excluding** of those not thought reliable puts us on a more certain foundation for revealed truth. You see the wisdom of the Spirit of God in the **gradual rejection of the false and the verification of the true**. The time lag isn't **bad** news. It's very **good** news.

I said there were **two** issues people find troubling. Here's the second:

2) **"WITH SO MANY MANUSCRIPTS AND MANUSCRIPT FRAGMENTS OF THE NEW TESTAMENT, THERE ARE BOUND TO BE VARIATIONS IN THE TEXT. ISN'T THIS A HUGE PROBLEM FOR THE DOCTRINE OF INERRANCY?"**

First, yes, there are many, many discovered manuscripts and fragments of manuscripts. This in itself deserves just a moment of reflection. Historical documents (and I mean **all** historical documents of **all** kinds) are considered **very** well represented if they have over 5 historic manuscripts to back the original writings.

So, **Caesar's "Gallic Wars"** has about 10 manuscripts, the oldest of which dates 900 years after the events recorded. The **Roman History of Livy** has about 20 manuscripts. The **"Annals of Roman Historian Tacitus"** has 2 manuscripts. The **"History of Thucydides"** has 8 manuscripts. And all these are considered very, very solid historic documents for scholarly study and reference.

Today we have 5700 fragments and manuscripts of the New Testament. And yes, that means there are variations in the wording from one manuscript to the other. But this shouldn't be troubling to any of us. True, the more manuscripts you have, the more variations you may find. But there's another important point to remember. The greater the number of manuscripts you have, the easier it is to recognize and prove the original from the variant.

It's like trying to tell which clock is the accurate one. If you only have **two** it's very hard to know whether it's ten o'clock or eleven o'clock. You may be able to measure by the sun or the length of shadows but it's a tricky business. But if you have three hundred clocks and two hundred and ninety-nine say it's ten o'clock it's very, very likely that the one that says eleven is out of wack. And the plain fact is there are no other historic manuscripts - and I mean absolutely **none - anywhere** - that provide as great a chance at study and correction as the New Testament. Do you think that's an accident?

Again, listen to **F.F. Bruce** in **"The New Testament Documents - Are They Reliable?": "The Variant reading about which any doubt remains among textual critics of the New Testament affect no material question of historic fact or of Christian faith and practice."**

3) **"IS THERE OTHER EVIDENCE, OUTSIDE THE NEW TESTAMENT FROM WHICH WE CAN EXAMINE THE ACCURACY OF THE BIBLICAL TEXT?"**

Yes there is - a great deal. Very recognized historic documents verify the reliability of the New Testament letters. The **Didache**, the **Epistle of Barnabas**, and **Clement's Letter to the Corinthians** all quote extensively from the New Testament just as we have it today. The same is true of the **Letters of Polycarp** and **Ignatius**, all of which were written **before 100 A.D.**

We need to pause and consider the importance of this fact. **F.F. Bruce** says this in **"The New Testament Documents": "....No classical scholar would listen to an argument that the authenticity of Herodotus or Thucydides is in doubt because the earliest manuscripts of their works which are of any use to us are over**

1300 years later than the originals.”

But consider what we've just said. We have reliable outside collaboration of the historic reliability of the New Testament books in other documents which were written - and this is very **important** - only 80 to 100 years after the events the New Testament documents described! Think about it. That means that these other historic writers had already studied and digested fully circulated New Testament documents **before** they wrote their letters. This is very, very early evidence to the credibility of the New Testament you carry with you to church!

4) **“I'VE HEARD PEOPLE GIVE EXAMPLES OF ERRORS THEY FOUND IN THEIR BIBLES. HOW DO YOU EXPLAIN THAT?”**

I want to wrap this up with some principles I live by when I read my Bible. I really don't have time to cover it all, but here goes. Yes, there are things I can't fully explain yet. Yes, there are some questions I have a hard time answering. But beyond that, I've learned that **most** alleged “errors” in the text have a better explanation. We need to be careful in explaining what we **don't** mean by inerrancy as well as what we **do** mean.

When I use the term **inerrant** to describe the original manuscripts of the Bible I mean something very specific. I mean that the Scriptures are free from error in **what they intend to teach**. And the important words in that sentence are the words **intend** and **teach**. Let me explain.

- a) ***If you take my meaning to be something other than I intended that doesn't mean I was in error.*** “I'll pick you up at the Dallas airport on Thursday at 10 a.m.” If I mean Eastern Standard Time and you mean Central Standard Time, then you'll be **early**. But that doesn't mean I was in **error**. It just means you didn't understand what my intentions were in my statement.

If I write you a letter of news or instruction and you are a new, postmodern sort, who believes language is open-ended and can mean whatever the **reader** rather than the **author** meant to say, then you do me a disservice. It's not honoring to the letter I wrote. And you may easily think I didn't know what I was talking about. But this does not put me in error.

- b) ***If you press my words in details beyond what I was trying to teach, that doesn't mean I was in error.*** John Piper gives a great illustration of this. If I say, “Son, go pick up your mother at the town square.” And if my son drives down to the town square and **lifts his mother off the ground**, and then leaves her there and comes home, he has not honored the directions I was giving. **Or**, if he gets out of his car, picks up his mother, and then proceeds to **measure the area of the square and discovers it's not quite a perfect square,** he has not proved me to be a liar. My words are not in error just because he pressed them far beyond what I intended to teach.

- c) ***The Scriptures are not in error when they describe events as they are seen.*** There are so many examples of this, but we'll only take the time to look at one: **Joshua 10:13** - **“And the sun stood still, and the moon stopped, until the nation took vengeance on their enemies. Is this not written in the Book of Jashar? The sun stopped in the midst of heaven and did not hurry to set for about a whole day.”**

I believe in the validity of that miracle. That's not my point at all. The point is, Joshua isn't calling us all to believe a pre-Copernican view of astronomy when he says the sun stood still. We all know that, even though the miracle was real, the sun doesn't move in the first place. The earth moves around the sun. But the Bible isn't in error because it's merely describing what Joshua saw when he looked up into the sky.

- d) ***Idiomatic expressions aren't errors.*** We do this all the time - “That noise scared me to death.” If I had a dollar for every time my mother told me something her four boys did “scared her to death” I could retire today. We all know she didn't die. And that's not what she was **intending** to teach us.

Genesis 22:17 - **“I will surely bless you, and I will surely multiply your offspring as the stars of heaven and as the sand that is on the seashore.....”**

Really? As many as the sands on the seashore? There aren't that many Jews on earth today. There are about 14 million Jews on earth today. That's way less than the sands on the seashore. But that's not an **error**. The prophet **Jeremiah** tells us what God's words in Genesis **mean** - **Jeremiah 33:22** - **“As the host of heaven cannot be numbered and the sands of the sea cannot be measured, so I will multiply the offspring of David my servant, and the Levitical priests who minister to me.”**

There's the meaning. Nobody is going to sit down and **count** three or four of five million Jews. That's the point. You can't **measure** that many people. Especially in a day with no adding machines or computers. There is no error here.

e) ***It is not an error when parallel passages are worded differently around the intention of the author or details are included in one account that are omitted in another.***

Examples abound. Genesis chapter one starts with the cosmos and ends with the creation of man. The second creation account in chapter two starts with man and works back to the cosmos. The second chapter is intentionally describing creation, not **chronologically** but **anthropocentrically** - showing God's intention to work all things around the creation and fall of mankind. This is not an error.

Matthew's account gives a longer version of the Lord's Prayer than does Luke. The Beatitudes vary in length in two of the synoptic writers. Parables vary in the telling to suit the purpose of the occasion. All of this fits in with the idea that inerrancy means the Scriptures are totally accurate and truthful in all that they **intend to teach**.

5) **"YOU KEEP SAYING THE SCRIPTURES ARE INERRANT IN THE ORIGINAL MANUSCRIPTS. BUT WE DON'T EVEN HAVE THE ORIGINAL MANUSCRIPTS. SO WHAT GOOD IS THE DOCTRINE OF INERRANCY?"**

This is a fair question. "You keep saying the original documents are absolutely free from error. But who cares? We don't even **have** those original documents. So how in the world does it matter that they were absolutely inerrant?"

I think it matters a great deal. It matters because it gives us an absolute standard - a genuine historic reality - toward which the whole science of translation leads. And as I've tried to show in this teaching, for all **practical** purposes, we're already there. To the degree that we do the work with the text, as we continue to study and labor honestly with the actual historic manuscripts, we are pouring our labors into the **very words of God**.

We simply have no idea what has gone into these precious Bibles we throw onto chairs and the back seats of our cars. The first **printed** Greek New Testament was produced by **Erasmus** in **1516**. Think about that. **1516!** This was the first **published** New Testament. Before that Bibles weren't **printed**. There were no publishing companies. There were no word processors. For the first 1500 years Bibles weren't **mass printed**. They were painstakingly **copied**.

Take out your Bible and look at it for a minute. You probably have four or five of them. But how did that become possible for you? Here's what went into that text you're carrying with you today. For 1500 years thousands of monks and scholars spent their whole lives - every hour of every day - with quill and crude ink - scratching out what they knew were words too precious not to pass on just because there was no easy way to mass produce them.

Picture some dark chamber where someone you'll never know wept over the words as - in either Greek or Latin - he scratched out - ***"In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. [2] He was in the beginning with God. [3] All things were made through him, and without him was not any thing made that was made. [4] In him was life, and the life was the light of men."*** Truly we all have something more precious than gold to hide in our hearts.