

VIII — SCRIPTURE AND INERRANCY

The Nature of God's Word

God desires to be known and has taken great pleasure in revealing himself to us. He lovingly speaks to us in a symphony of voices (Ps 19:1-2; Heb 1:1), but ultimately and supremely he has spoken to us by his Son (Heb 1:2). As the Son of God, Jesus is the Living Word (John 1:1-18), the full revelation of the Father (Heb 1:3; Col 1:15, 2:9; John 14:9). All of Scripture points to Jesus (John 5:39-40) and is summed up in him (Luke 24:27; 2 Cor 1:20). Indeed, a primary purpose of the written Word of God is to reveal the Living Word of God, and to bring people to salvation through faith in Christ (2 Tim 3:15). While some caricature evangelicals as guilty of worshipping a book, we recognize that the intent of Scripture is to lead us to worship the triune God.

Nevertheless, our Lord Jesus directs us back to the Bible, declaring that its very words “proceed from the mouth of God” and provide vital spiritual sustenance (Matt 4:4). Therefore, along with Christ and the apostles, we consider the Bible to be “God-breathed” (2 Tim 3:16). The Spirit of God so directed the human authors of the sixty-six books of the Old and New Testaments, so that these books and only these books are the written Word of God (2 Pet 1:20-21). Since all Scripture ultimately comes from the mouth of God who cannot lie (Heb 6:18), it is incapable of speaking untruthfully. This is what inerrancy means — the Bible is without error in all that it affirms. It is never unintentionally mistaken nor intentionally deceitful about anything it teaches as true. Being inerrant, the Bible is also infallible — utterly and unfailingly reliable in its ability to convey God's intended message to us. Furthermore, God not only guided the human authors so that their inspired words are his enduring Word (1 Pet 1:25), he has also providentially overseen the entire process by which Scripture was preserved, transmitted, and translated. While we no longer have access to the original inerrant documents, God — in his gracious sovereignty — has ensured the availability of many reliable translations in several languages. These are based on an abundance of manuscripts in the original languages that faithfully convey what was first written. Therefore, we can have full confidence in the truthfulness of the Bible we read today.

The Final Authority of Scripture

Scripture's inerrancy is not limited to matters pertaining to Christian faith and practice. Rather, the Bible speaks truthfully in every category of human knowledge it touches upon, including history and the sciences. Since God's knowledge goes far beyond ours (Isa 55:8-9; Rom 11:33), he graciously accommodates his self-revelation to the limited understanding of the Bible's human authors — without compromising truth in the process. For example, the Bible regularly employs anthropomorphisms¹ (Exod 33:21-23; Ps 34:15), and sometimes describes the universe in terms of ancient cosmologies² (1 Sam 2:8; Ps 104:5). As human knowledge in every realm continues to increase, it will never contradict God's Word, properly interpreted. Even as scientific advances continue apace, we affirm that Sacred Scripture will always accord with what God has written in his “book” of nature, when each is rightly read. For, God ultimately is the source of all truth. Of course, God still communicates with us by his Spirit in various ways. He may speak to us internally through our private impressions, our consciences, and personal experiences. He may also speak to us providentially, as we learn wisdom from the experiences of others in the church and the world. Additionally, he may speak directly via revelatory gifts (1 Cor 12:8-11). But the written Word of God sits in judgment over every purported revelation, possessing unique and incontrovertible authority.

¹ Anthropomorphism = attributing human appearance or characteristics to God

² Cosmology = beliefs regarding the origin and structure of the universe

The Matter of Biblical Interpretation

Our confidence in the Bible ultimately comes from the same Holy Spirit who originally guided its composition (2 Pet 1:21; John 14:26, 16:13). As the final guarantor of Scripture, the Spirit who dwells within Christ's church and each Christian continues to bear witness to its veracity. Beyond assuring us that what we read is indeed the Word of God, the Spirit still speaks to us afresh through the Word today (Rev 3:22). While the truths of Scripture are set forth in readily understandable human speech, it is, nonetheless, a divine book whose deepest meaning must be disclosed by the Spirit of God (1 Cor 2:12-14).

It is our responsibility, however, to discern the meaning of any Bible passage by engaging in proper biblical interpretation. It takes hermeneutical skill and careful exegesis to determine what Scripture affirms. God was pleased to speak through a variety of human authors, and the modern interpreter should seek out the original sense of each author as much as possible, being sensitive to context, language, grammar, figures of speech, and literary genres evident in the text. We must correctly handle the word of truth (2 Tim 2:15) so that we do not distort the meaning of Scripture. And yet, even when we are confident that we have discovered the intended message of a biblical text, only the Bible itself is inerrant and infallible; our human interpretations are not.

Biblical assertions can be inerrantly true without being exact. The human authors of Scripture sometimes describe things merely as they appear. They, for example, speak of the sunrise and sunset just as we do today. They sometimes use hyperbole and round numbers and — on occasion — irregular grammar and spellings. They report (without supporting) false statements,³ choose to highlight different things in parallel accounts, and feel free to quote loosely in certain citations. Like modern historians, they sometimes organize their narratives thematically rather than observing a strict chronology. Nevertheless, all that they have written is trustworthy. To conclude that a Bible writer is in error for not being precise — in a mathematical, scientific, or literary sense — is to impose an unreasonable standard on the Bible. We must not fault ancient writers for failing to express themselves like moderns. If our contemporary standards of precision were neither the aim of the biblical authors nor the expectation of their original readers, we should not put such a burden on the text.

Bible passages also vary in their degree of interpretive difficulty. Even the Apostle Peter admitted that the Scriptures contain some things that are “hard to understand” (2 Pet 3:15-16). In these cases, it is especially necessary that Scripture should be used to interpret Scripture, with difficult or unclear passages read in light of those more easily grasped. Moreover, when we come to texts that appear to have inconsistencies, or that seem contradictory to other passages, an a priori⁴ commitment to inerrancy compels us to conclude that these “problem” texts must be trustworthy regardless of our present ability to harmonize them. For, it is reasonable to conclude that all the diverse parts of “God-breathed” Scripture do somehow cohere in a unified, wholly consistent message. Thus, we approach any passages that remain difficult to interpret, and any containing alleged errors and discrepancies as yet unresolved, with the conviction that these cannot undermine the clear and absolute truth claims of the Bible. God's Word is not opaque in its essential message. He has seen to it that the main truths of Scripture are plain. Therefore, we can be confident that this very accessible message from our Creator and Redeemer, preserved in the Bible, will remain true and relevant from one generation to the next.

Our Obligation to Biblical Inerrancy

In the final analysis, we come back to Jesus. We embrace biblical inerrancy primarily because it was our Lord himself who declared, “Scripture cannot be broken” (John 10:35). Jesus, the Head of the Church, had absolute confidence in Scripture, so we must not nullify or set aside any of its words. Therefore, with living faith, the Missionary Church honors Christ's lordship by holding, along with him, that the Bible is without error in all that it affirms.

We are convinced that rejecting biblical inerrancy has serious consequences, especially the erosion of confidence in the truthfulness and trustworthiness of the Bible. We must steadfastly resist any tendency to relativize its message or to allow it to be superseded by the fashionable wisdom of the age. The loss of an inerrant Bible would make the church even more vulnerable to false teachers inside and outside its ranks who undercut biblical truth, formulate new truths,

³ For example, Genesis 3:4 — “You will not certainly die,” the serpent said to the woman.

⁴ a priori = knowable prior to actual observation and experience

preach “another Jesus” (2 Cor 11:4), or proclaim “another gospel” (Gal 1:6-9) supposedly more palatable to today’s world.

The Missionary Church urges its people to match our high view of Scripture by placing an equally high value on studying, savoring, trusting, and obeying all that it teaches. These sacred words “are not just idle words for you — they are your life” (Deut 32:47). “They are more precious than gold, than much pure gold; they are sweeter than honey, than honey from the honeycomb. By them your servant is warned; in keeping them is great reward” (Ps 19:10-11). The Scriptures, then, should be preached in their fullness within our churches and out in the world. They should be read devotionally in our homes. They should sit in judgment on both our beliefs and our behaviors. They should be loved for their sweetness, honored for their wisdom, and obeyed for God’s glory. May each of us testify with the psalmist: “I delight in your decrees; I will not neglect your word” (Ps 119:16).

— Adopted by the 2023 General
Conference