

INERRANCY, INFALLIBILITY, AND THE AUTHORITY AND INSPIRATION OF SCRIPTURE

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I have been asked to reflect briefly on some terms often used in discussions of the authority and inspiration of Scripture. Specifically, the question posed to me is: what is the difference between notions of the “inerrancy” of Scripture, and of the “infallibility” of Scripture, as descriptors of its inspiration and authority?

First, it is important to note the difference between the terms *inspiration* and *authority* as they pertain to Scripture. *Inspiration* generally describes the way God’s Spirit acts in and through Scriptures to bear what the Confession of 1967 calls “unique and authoritative witness to Jesus Christ” (*The Book of Confessions*, 9.27). By contrast, *authority* refers to the place Scripture holds in guiding our belief and practice as Christians. Generally speaking, most Christians would agree that God’s Spirit speaks through the witness of Scripture, and most would agree that Scripture is the unparalleled authority in guiding our belief and practice. That this is generally true does not mean, however, that there is agreement on the *way* Scripture is either inspired or authoritative.

Inerrant means, literally, “without error.” In its strictest sense, *inerrancy* means that Scripture is without error in fact or detail. Those who claim that Scripture is inerrant can admit no statement of Scripture to contain errors of fact, whether or not the facts in question are scientific, historical, or theological. While in the past, many inerrantists held the “dictation theory” (that Scripture was “dictated” by God, so that the choice of words of a biblical book is divine rather than human), the position of most modern interpretations of inerrancy is *plenary verbal inspiration*. This position, perhaps most classically articulated by A.A. Hodge in the mid-19th century, holds that the words of Scripture are inspired in the heart and mind of the writer, but not directly dictated by God into the ear of the writer. Thus, the individual personalities of the writers are visible in their words, but the words are nonetheless the vehicle of God’s Spirit and under God’s control.

Inerrantist views of Scripture, including plenary verbal inspiration, maintain that the locus of the Spirit’s activity in Scripture is in the words themselves, and thus every word is inspired (hence the label, *plenary verbal inspiration* – literally, “all words inspired”). But this position carries an inherent problem visible when one compares multiple ancient manuscripts of the same biblical text. There are literally thousands of places in which different manuscripts preserve different readings (called “variant readings”), leading inevitably to the question, “Which reading is inspired?” Inerrantists have usually answered this question by appealing to the original—or “autograph”—manuscripts, arguing that they alone are inspired. But no such originals exist; all we have are later copies, all of which contain variant readings. We are thus left with no ultimately “inspired” text, by the standards of a thoroughgoing view of inerrancy.

Inerrancy, however, is not the only way to understand the inspiration of Scripture. Indeed, it is neither the oldest nor the most inherently Presbyterian and Reformed way of looking at Scripture’s inspiration. Reformed thinkers as early as John Calvin regarded with suspicion the possibility that merely reading the words of Scripture is sufficient to bring about a change in human hearts. Rather, they insist, the illumination by God’s Spirit is the essential element in understanding

God's truth expressed in Scripture and being transformed according to it. Here is what Calvin has to say in the 1539 edition of the *Institutes*:

And this bare and external proof of the Word of God should have been amply sufficient to engender faith, did not our blindness and perversity prevent it. But our mind has such an inclination to vanity that it can never cleave fast to the truth of God; and it has such a dullness that it is always blind to the light of God's truth. Accordingly, without the illumination of the Holy Spirit, the Word can do nothing (John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, III.ii.33).

The Westminster Confession of Faith (1649) preserves the same understanding in its own approach to the inspiration of Scripture:

We may be moved and induced by the testimony of the Church to an high and reverent esteem for the Holy Scripture; and the heavenliness of the matter, the efficacy of the doctrine, the majesty of the style, the consent of all the parts, the scope of the whole (which is to give all glory to God), the full discovery it makes of the only way of man's salvation, the many other incomparable excellencies, and the entire perfection thereof, are arguments whereby it doth abundantly evidence itself to be the Word of God; yet, notwithstanding, our full persuasion and assurance of the infallible truth and divine authority thereof, is from the inward work of the Holy Spirit, bearing witness by and with the Word in our hearts (*The Book of Confessions*, 6.005).

For both Calvin and Westminster, God's Spirit works not in the words of Scripture, but in the heart and mind of the writers and the reader as they struggle together with God's intent for human life. The locus of the work of God's Spirit is in us, rather than in words on a page.

This view of the relationship between the activity of God's Spirit and the words of Scripture allows for a greater degree of freedom with regard to critical study of Scripture. The classical disciplines of text criticism (the process of deciding which of two or more variant readings is more likely to be reliable), historical criticism (the discussion of the literary, cultural, and historical circumstances out of which a text arises and their impact on its meaning), and literary criticism (the analysis of the way a text works as a genre of literature or a piece of rhetoric) all become viable and even important tools for understanding how God's Spirit communicates to us through the language of the Bible. Additionally, the application of these and other interpretive disciplines is not a process best done in scholarly isolation, but rather in the community of God's people, so that God's Spirit speaks through *our* minds and hearts, rather than merely mine or yours alone.

This latter view of Scripture and our approach to its message is captured well for Presbyterians in the Confession of 1967:

The one sufficient revelation of God is Jesus Christ, the Word of God incarnate, to whom the Holy Spirit bears unique and authoritative witness through the Holy Scriptures, which are received and obeyed as the word of God written. The Scriptures are not a witness among others, but the witness without parallel. The church has received the books of the Old and New Testaments as prophetic and apostolic testimony in which it hears the word of God and by which its faith and obedience are nourished and regulated.

The New Testament is the recorded testimony of apostles to the coming of the Messiah, Jesus of Nazareth, and the sending of the Holy Spirit to the Church. The Old Testament bears witness to God's faithfulness in his covenant with Israel and points the way to the fulfillment of his purpose in Christ. The Old Testament is indispensable to understanding the New, and is not itself fully understood without the New.

The Bible is to be interpreted in the light of its witness to God's work of reconciliation in Christ. The Scriptures, given under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, are nevertheless the words of

men, conditioned by the language, thought forms, and literary fashions of the places and times at which they were written. They reflect views of life, history, and the cosmos which were then current. The church, therefore, has an obligation to approach the Scriptures with literary and historical understanding. As God has spoken his word in diverse cultural situations, the church is confident that he will continue to speak through the Scriptures in a changing world and in every form of human culture (*The Book of Confessions*, 9.27-9.29).

It is worth noting that the “unique and authoritative witness to Jesus Christ” is not the words of Scriptures themselves but the Holy Spirit, who bears that witness “through” the Scriptures. As such, the words of Scripture are not the locus of God’s inspiration, but the stage on which the drama of that inspiration is played out. This accords well with Calvin’s metaphor of the Scriptures as a kind of lens through which we see God:

“...Just as old or bleary-eyed men and those with weak vision, if you thrust before them a most beautiful volume, even if they recognize it to be some sort of writing, yet can scarcely construe two words, but with the aid of spectacles, will begin to read it distinctly; so Scripture, gathering up the otherwise confused knowledge of God in our minds, having dispersed our dullness, clearly shows us the true God (*Institutes of the Christian Religion*, I.vi.i).

The emphasis in this view of Scripture is not on the words themselves, but on the God to whom the Spirit points in and through Scripture.

But what of Scripture’s authority for us in matters of faith and practice? Here we take up the second of the terms mentioned at the outset of this discussion: *infallibility*.

Infallibility is not the same as inerrancy. Where inerrancy makes a (problematic) claim about the way God’s Spirit works in and through Scripture, infallibility speaks of the impact of Scripture on the governance of our individual and corporate lives. Infallibility means, literally, that Scripture does not fail in its purpose, which is to communicate God’s Word in Jesus Christ to God’s people, through the illuminating work of God’s Spirit.

Prior to the creation in 1983 of the current Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), the ordination questions asked of deacons, ruling elders, and ministers in the Presbyterian Church in the United States (PCUS) included the question of whether the candidate regarded the Scriptures as “the only infallible rule of faith and practice.” So to affirm indicates that we understand Scripture never to fail us or to lead us astray in deciding questions of what we believe or how we should live. Although this question was replaced in 1985 with a different affirmation (see below), there is still significant value in it, and many Presbyterians continue to describe the authority of Scripture in this way. While the interpretive disciplines we apply to Scripture may lead us to differing readings of particular passages, the notion of Scripture’s infallibility in faith and practice keeps it central in our ethical and moral thinking.

Presbyterians who are candidates to become deacons, ruling elders, or teaching elders are required to affirm the following:

Do you accept the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments to be, by the Holy Spirit, the unique and authoritative witness to Jesus Christ in the Church universal, and God’s Word to you? (*Book of Order*, W-4.4003b).

This question, drawn from the language of C'67, reflects a broad understanding of both Scripture's inspiration and its authority in the life of the Church. We understand Scripture as the unique witness to Christ and God's Word by virtue of the action of God's Spirit. While this does not preclude a position of plenary verbal inspiration, it does suggest that the locus of the Spirit's work is in the understanding of the reader/candidate as he or she approaches Scripture. And it makes the claim that the witness to Jesus Christ in Scripture is "unique and authoritative." That Scripture is the "unique" witness means that no witness to Christ exists on a level with Scripture, and that as the Church seeks an understanding of Christ, it must attend to this "unique" witness in Scripture. That Scripture is the "authoritative" witness to Jesus Christ means that it must be taken with utmost seriousness as the final voice (although not the *only* voice) in addressing questions of faith and practice.