



God's Infallible Word

In the second part of the *Age of Reason* Thomas Paine gave following summary of the work which he believed he had accomplished.

"I have now gone through the Bible as a man would go through a wood with an axe, and felled trees. Here they lie and the priests may replant them, but they will never make them grow!"

One reads such words with some amazement. Can one man really believe that he has separated the so-called "chaff" from the "wheat" in the Bible? Attempts have been made; I believe, to reestablish the writings of Thomas Paine, but such attempts have not met with much success. How many people today have ever read anything written by Paine? How many even know of his existence?

Paine was not the first who thought that he could go through the Bible and dispose of what he believed should be disposed of. But his example may serve to remind us of the need for true humility in approaching the Scriptures.

The issue before us

Our concern is with the question of the infallibility of the Bible. If something is infallible, it is free from error. It is absolutely trustworthy and sure. When we apply this term to the Bible we mean that the Bible has an indefectible authority. In all that it says and teaches it possesses absolute authority, for it is the very Word of God. This is simply the position of our Lord Jesus Christ who said of the Scripture that it cannot be broken.

At the outset it is necessary to guard our usage of terms carefully. It is sometimes asserted that evangelical Christians all believe in the infallibility of the Bible but that they believe in it in different ways. Some think that the entire Bible is infallible, true in all of its statements, containing no error. Others believe in a general infallibility of the Bible. In matters of faith and practice the Bible is infallible, they say, but in minor matters of historical detail it is not necessarily infallible. They tell us that we need merely believe that the Bible is generally infallible.

For the sake of clearing the atmosphere we must protest against such loose usage of language. Either the Scriptures are infallible, as the Lord Jesus Christ said they were, or they are not infallible. We may say that there are certain statements in the Bible which in themselves are infallible, and we may say that there are certain utterances which in themselves are not infallible. If we say that, we shall be saying something which is not true to fact, but at least we shall be saying something that makes sense. If we believe that there are statements in the Bible which are not infallible statements, let us cease talking about a general infallibility of the Bible. A Bible that is only generally infallible is a Bible which is not infallible at all.

The question is not whether the Bible is generally infallible, but rather whether the Bible is infallible or not. Those who hold that the Scriptures contain error embrace the position that the Bible is not infallible. They do not believe in the infallibility of the Bible at all, and to say that they believe in the infallibility of the Bible, but not in the orthodox sense, is to becloud the question. If a man thinks that there are errors in the Bible, he simply does not believe in an infallible Bible.

How shall we answer this issue?

We must go to the Bible itself and hear what it has to say. It is the Bible which tells us what we are to believe concerning God and what duty he requires of us. It is the Bible which is to tell us what we are to believe, for example, concerning God, predestination, the Person of Christ, the Atonement, the Resurrection, and every other article of our faith. And it is the Bible which alone can tell us what we are to believe concerning itself. Any doctrine of Scripture that is not taught in the Bible itself is one that must be rejected. Would we know what kind of book the Bible is, we must listen to the Scripture.

The Bible is God's Word; it tells us what we are to believe about God and what duty God has demanded of us. This information we learn from the teaching of the Scriptures. In other words, it is the contents of the Bible which tell us what we are to believe, even concerning the Bible itself. The so-called didactic statements are the teaching of the Bible; they constitute the message which God would have us bear. We must, therefore, first of all, turn to the Scriptures to see what they have to say about themselves, and when once we have ascertained what they have to say concerning themselves, we must be guided by their statements.

2 Timothy 3:16 makes the direct and explicit statement that all Scripture is God-breathed. But what has this to do with infallibility? It might be argued that to assert the infallibility of the Bible on the basis of the statement that all Scripture is God-breathed is to engage in making a deduction, drawing a conclusion, and to go beyond what is explicitly taught in the verse itself. "The passage says that Scripture is God-breathed," so it might be argued; "it does not explicitly state that Scripture is infallible. Possibly Scripture is infallible, but if so, we must ascertain that fact, not by an appeal to this present passage, but rather by a consideration of the phenomena of Scripture. Possibly the phrase 'God-breathed' permits us to deduce that Scripture is infallible; possibly it does not."

There are several remarks which need to be made at this point. The procedure which we have just been discussing assumes that the mind of man is capable of judging, apart from didactic statements, and only upon the basis of the so-called data of Scripture, whether or not there are errors in the Bible. One can for example, compare Matthew 20 with Mark 10 and conclude that because they speak of a different number of blind men at Jericho, therefore the Bible at this point is in error. He has been examining the phenomena of the Bible, and upon the basis of an examination of these phenomena he concludes that there is error in the Bible.

To the present writer it has always been a source of amazement that any man could dare to speak in such a vein. He is surely a bold man indeed who dares to make the positive statement that there are actual errors in the Bible. Not only is he bold; he is reckless. One might be pardoned for questioning whether he had ever studied the many, many instances where archaeology, for example, has shown that so-called "errors" in the Bible were not errors at all. Let us consider a few of these.

Not so long ago, the mention of the Horites in Genesis was considered by men to be a mistake. These men had studied the phenomena of the Bible - they didn't seem to be particularly concerned with the Bible's didactic statements - and as a result of their study of the phenomena of the Scriptures they were sure that here was an error. The Horites didn't exist. Today such an opinion seems laughable; we possibly know more today about some phases of Horite life than we do about some phases of early American history.

Then again, we were once told, the book of Daniel had made a mistake in mentioning Belshazzar. But now the name of Belshazzar has occurred on the cuneiform tablets. And Daniel, it is said, surely made a mistake in mentioning Darius the Mede. Here, if ever, the data of the Bible was in conflict with secular history, and so the data was in error. And yet, during this past year, two excellent Bible-believing scholars have come forth with proposals for a solution of the problem, each of which can command approval. It is now perfectly possible to fit Darius the Mede into the

scheme of history. The Bible had not been in error, but the men who thought that in their unaided strength they could interpret the phenomena of the Bible had been in grievous error.

Again, we read in the Bible that Shalmanezar the king of Assyria came up against Hoshea and apparently took Samaria. But Sargon, the successor of Shalmanezar, claims on his own inscription that he took Samaria. Here the data of the Bible was in conflict with the express claims of the Assyrian monuments. Hence, some were perfectly ready to assert that the data of the Bible showed that the Bible was in error; therefore it could not be infallible. The trouble with all this is that further study has shown that the error was not in the statements of the Bible but that it was made by those who declared that there was here a mistake in the Bible. For, as a matter of fact, the one who took Samaria was not Sargon but Shalmanezar.

All this brings us to the heart of the matter. Anyone who believes that he is competent to make the judgment that there is actual error in the original manuscripts of the Bible is setting himself up in the position of God. He is flying in the face of express statements of the Bible which assert the contrary. Jesus Christ says, *"The Scripture cannot be broken"*; a sinful man says, "The Scripture is broken." This is to elevate the human mind to the position of judge; it means that we substitute the human mind for the Word of God. It is to assume that the human mind knows so much that it can say with assurance that there is actual error in the original manuscripts of the Bible. It is rationalism of the worst kind.

Serious indeed is this charge, but there is no escaping it. If the Bible is the Word of God, He alone can tell us what we are to believe about the Bible. God has so told us; in statement after statement He has spoken to us about His Word. If we think that we can disregard these clear statements and by simply examining the phenomena of the Bible conclude what the true nature of the Bible is, we have simply set our minds up as higher than God Himself. We have fallen into the worst kind of unbelief.

God-Breathed and infallible

Let us now return to II Timothy 3:16. Is it true that we can learn nothing about Scriptural infallibility from this verse? Must we resort to deduction, if we wish to appeal to this verse for support for our belief in the infallibility of the Bible? Those who speak in this vein do not to understand what this passage teaches. Paul declares here that every Scripture is *"God-breathed."* That is a strange word, but it is a remarkable word. It means simply that the Scriptures are the product of the breath of God; they are of divine origin. The same thought has been expressed throughout the Old Testament, not merely once or twice, but over and over again, in the words, *"God said."*

We read, for example, in the preface to the Ten Commandments, *"And God spake all these words saying..."* We read this Scripture each Sabbath in our churches and we read it because we believe that the Ten Commandments were spoken by God. Then, if the proponents of the theory which we are now considering are correct, we make a tremendous "deduction." Every time we read the Ten Commandments we make this "deduction" that inasmuch as God has spoken these commandments, they are therefore true, and are to be believed and obeyed.

But if that is only a deduction, would it then not be better if we simply said to our congregation, "Now, God spoke these words, that is true enough, but we cannot say that these words are true. We shall have to examine the phenomena of Scripture to ascertain whether these commandments are true and infallible. Possibly they are infallible commandments; possibly they are not. It may even be that our examination of the phenomena of the Bible will lead us to conclusions that we fear and prefer not to accept. Possibly it will turn, out, after all, when we have finished studying the data of the Bible, that it is not really wrong to break these commandments. But be of good cheer, let us not be afraid, Let us boldly accept what our studies bring to us."

To talk this way is to talk nonsense, and yet that is the way men interpret II Timothy 3:16. The Scripture is God-breathed, they may say, but we must not deduce from that that Scripture is also infallible. But to say that Scripture is God-breathed is the same as saying that Scripture is spoken by God. What a terrible calumny we utter against the very nature of God when we conclude that

when God has spoken something or breathed forth something, it is not therefore infallible! Let us rather boldly and with all confidence proclaim that God has breathed forth the Scripture and that for this very reason the Scripture must be infallible. To talk of a God-breathed Scripture that is not infallible is to say a meaningless thing. If Scripture is God-breathed, it is also Infallible; the two cannot be separated.

Further reflections

Possibly it may be granted that our interpretation of II Timothy 3:16 is correct. Granted that all Scripture is God-breathed, it may be argued, it does not however, follow that every word of Scripture is God-breathed. The verse simply states that “*all Scripture*” is God-breathed; it does not state that every word thereof is God-breathed. This assertion would hardly seem worthy of refutation; and were it not for the fact that it has actually been employed to defend the position that there is error in the Bible.

“*All Scripture*,” states the Apostle; “*is God-breathed.*” We focus our attention now upon the word translated “*scripture.*” What is the Scripture? In itself the Greek word simply means “a writing,” “the thing written down.” Scripture is writing. Paul had previously (verse 15) designated the Scriptures the “*holy scriptures*” although there he used a different word (literally: the holy letters). But what is the Scripture? It is simply writing composed of individual words. We do not see how writing can be composed of anything else.

If therefore we say that the writing is God-breathed, we are in the very nature of the case saying that the words which go to make up that writing are also God-breathed. How the writing could be God-breathed while the words of that writing are not God-breathed passes our comprehension. If words have any meaning whatsoever, then to state that the Scriptures are God-breathed is to make the assertion that the individual words of the Scriptures are God-breathed. Without the individual words there can be no Scripture.

If we assert that Paul here teaches only the God-breathed character of Scripture but not of every word of Scripture we are flying in the face of the plain Biblical evidence. Furthermore, what we say does not make good sense. Scripture and the words of Scripture are identical. The words go to make up the Scripture. If the words of Scripture are true, the Scripture is true. If the words of Scripture are false, the Scripture itself is false. Scripture and the words of which it is composed cannot be divorced.

How is the Bible infallible?

And that brings us to another consideration. Certainly the Bible is God-breathed, and therefore infallible, it will be acknowledged. “But,” and now another charge is leveled against those of us who hold to the infallibility of the Scriptures, “this infallibility has to do only with matters of faith and morals.” Again we must look at II Timothy 3:16. If we take the first part of this verse, it is said, and then apply it to all matters, we are acting in an unwarranted fashion. The verse itself, so the argument runs, places a limit upon infallibility; it limits that infallibility to the realm of faith and morals. And so another objection to the infallibility of the Bible appears. What can be said concerning it?

What does Paul say? We must examine carefully what the apostle has written. In this remarkable verse Paul makes two statements which apply to all Scripture.

- In the first place he makes the statement that all Scripture is God-breathed.
- He then makes a second statement which is joined to the first by the word “*and*”. He says that all Scripture is *profitable*.

Those are the two statements which Paul makes with respect to all Scripture.

How different this is from what we at times might be tempted to think! We are very prone to say that certain passages of the Bible have nothing to do with faith and ethics; that certain parts of the Bible are not important or necessary. Paul, however, in distinction from the modern practice, asserts that all Scripture (without exception) is *profitable*. Not only therefore is all Scripture God-breathed, but all Scripture is also profitable. The one thing Paul does not wish to say is that Scripture is God-breathed only with respect to the realm of faith and practice. To force such a construction upon this verse is to read one's own ideas into it, and to do exegetical violence to a clear passage of Scripture.

There are many Christians today who seem to think that the doctrine of creation is a comparatively minor matter. Shall we therefore follow them and reject the first chapter of Genesis as irrelevant to faith and conduct? On the other hand, there are Christians who think that the first chapter of Genesis and the doctrine of creation are essential to the Christian faith. Whom shall we believe? A very good friend of mine, a devout Christian, wrote some time ago that the Virgin Birth was of no theological consequence. On the other hand, a Christian like the late J. Gresham Machen has written a large volume on the subject, simply because he believes that the doctrine of the Virgin Birth is very important and significant. To judge from what Karl Barth has written about the Trinity, one might conclude that Barth does not think that the Biblical doctrine of the Trinity is of much significance, for he does not present the Biblical doctrine correctly. On the other hand, think of the grand things that John Calvin has written on the Trinity! Evidently Calvin thought that the doctrine was of the utmost significance. Whom shall we follow, Barth or Calvin?

Of course, an objection is immediately at hand. Those who hold that the Bible is not infallible will say, "This is not what we mean. The Trinity is important; the Virgin Birth is important; the doctrines of Christianity are important. What we have reference to is such things as the numbers of the Old Testament, the parallel passages, the chronology of the kings of Israel and Judah and similar matters. In these minor matters," they would say, "there may be error." Even with this delimitation, however, we have not escaped difficulty. Even here, who is to tell us what is essential to faith and what is not; what is infallible and what is not?

What surprises one who reads the Bible attentively is the manner in which the Bible regards as important and significant matters which a reader might regard as being only of minor consequence. Let us note a few examples. In his first epistle to Timothy (5:17, 18), Paul makes an exhortation to the elders, especially to those who labor in the word and doctrine. To support his exhortation he quotes from the book of Deuteronomy, "*Thou shalt not muzzle the ox that treadeth out the corn*" (Deuteronomy 25:4).

What does this passage in Deuteronomy have to do with our Christian life? Surely, if ever there was a passage that might seem to us to be irrelevant and without weight; it is this one. What can this ancient Hebrew law possibly have to say to us today? Is this not one of the minor matters of the Bible, a matter so insignificant that it really is irrelevant, whether it is infallible or not?

Such is the way in which we might be tempted to reason. Plausible reasoning it might seem to be; plausible indeed, but utterly false. What does Paul do with this passage? He adduces it to support his charge to the elders. And he introduces it with the words, "*For the scripture saith.*" In other words, this passage, which we might have considered insignificant and irrelevant, is said by Paul to be Scripture; and because Scripture has spoken, men must obey. They must even obey this particular Scripture. Indeed, this particular Scripture is so relevant and important that Paul - rather the Holy Spirit - uses it to substantiate the charge made to the elders. The words, "*Thou shalt not muzzle the ox that treadeth out the corn*" are infallible Scripture. Because they are infallible, the elders must obey the charge which Paul makes to them.

And again, we have the conclusive and infallible statement of God, that "*whatsoever things were written aforetime were written for our learning, that we through patience and comfort of the scriptures might have hope*" (Romans 15:4).

I do not understand how a Christian can dare to go contrary to the clear language of this verse. Whatsoever things were written aforetime, we are told, were written for our learning. That is simply

another way of saying that anything that was written aforetime, anything that can be called Scripture, was written for our benefit.

We might state the truth in still another manner. All Scripture written previous to Paul's time was written for our benefit. This verse does not say that only some things were for our good. It does not say that only those Scriptures that had to do with faith and morals are for us. It does not assert that only those Scriptures that are infallible are for our learning. No, it says that whatsoever things were written before - whether we think them relevant or not; whether we consider them significant or not - all that was written before is for our learning. Here is a clear-cut, explicit statement that all the Scripture written before the time of Paul is for doctrine. From whatsoever was written aforetime we are to learn. We are not to pick and choose what sections of those Scriptures appeal to us. No, we are to consider whatsoever things were written aforetime and from these things we are to learn.

The great question with which the Church today must deal is that of the nature and authority of the Word of God. What kind of a book is the Bible? Is it a trustworthy revelation of the one living and Triune God, or is it a book in which error and truth are mixed? Can the Church any longer go to the Bible for her doctrine? She went to the Bible to learn what she was to believe about the Trinity, about the Fall of Man, about Sin and the Redeemer, about Justification by Faith. Can she also go to the Bible and learn from it what she is to believe about the Bible, itself? Is that Bible true and trustworthy or is it not? Is it free from error in the original manuscripts, or are there errors in the autograph? That, and precisely that, is the question that is before us today.

One thing is clear. The position that the Scripture is only generally infallible or infallible only in certain spheres was not the position of J. Gresham Machen. If we adopt this position we part company with Machen. More than that, we part company with Warfield and Badge. And we certainly part company with Bavinck and Abraham Kuyper. And that is serious, for these men whom I have just named are some of the greatest theologians that God has given to his church during this and the past century. But we must go back further, Luther and Calvin would certainly separate from us. They would never have tolerated the idea of a generally infallible Bible. Neither would Augustine nor Paul. If we part from these men in our doctrine of Scripture it is surely serious, for these were great men in the church and Paul was an inspired apostle. It is tragic if we separate from them on this matter. But what is of infinitely greater sadness is to part from Him who is the Way, the Truth, and the Life. There can be no denying the fact that Jesus Christ; the eternal Son of God, believed that the Old Testament Scriptures in their entirety were the infallible Word of God. The evidence for this has been presented many times. Those who claim that the Scriptures are infallible only in the realm of ethics and faith are in disagreement with that Holy One who said, "*The scripture cannot be broken.*"

Before we dare to set our views in opposition to him let us count the cost of what we are doing.

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