

necessity of constant grounding of our convictions, of our devotion and of our conduct in the Word of God.

It was Jesus who said, 'Ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free' (John 8:32). The truth is the perfect law of liberty and God's Word is truth. It might seem to us that law and liberty are incoherent. For law binds and liberty makes free. But if we know anything of God's way we know that the free men of Christ Jesus are the bond-servants of Christ. The liberty wherewith Christ makes his people free is the freedom that is constituted by and consists in bondservice to God's Word.

In all our study and application of the Word of God, we must appreciate a divinely-fixed co-ordination. It is that of the Word of God and the Spirit of God. 'Where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty.' God has not left us to our own resources in the study of his Word. There is the never-failing promise and the ever-present ministry of the Holy Spirit. He is the author of the Word and it is his peculiar prerogative to illumine the Scripture and to seal its truth upon our hearts. These are the two pillars of faith and life—the whole organism of Scripture revelation and the promise of the Spirit to guide us into all the truth. The Spirit honours and seals his own Word, and the Word assures us that 'if ye then, being evil, know how to give good gifts unto your children, how much more shall the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to them that ask him?'

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### The Infallibility of Scripture<sup>1</sup>

SCRIPTURE as the Word of God has many attributes. But no one of these is more precious to the believer than infallibility. This attribute assures him of its stability and it imparts to him that certitude by which alone he can be steadfast in the faith once for all delivered to the saints. The doctrine of infallibility rests upon proper grounds and only as we examine these grounds can we properly understand its meaning and assess its significance.

#### THE WARRANT

When we say that Scripture is infallible, on what ground or by what authority do we make this confession? When we ask the question, we should realize how momentous is the confession. In this world in which sin and misery abound, in which error is rampant, in which it is so difficult to discover the truth about any complex situation, that there should be an entity in the form of a collection of documents of which we predicate infallibility is a fact with staggering implications. And so, when we ask the question of warrant, we are asking a question of the greatest moment. The authority must be as ultimate as the proposition is stupendous.

We say Scripture is infallible not because we can prove it to be infallible. The impossibility of proof lies on the face of Scripture. For example, how could we prove that the first chapter of Genesis is substantially true, not to speak of its being infallible? This chapter deals

<sup>1</sup> An address given to students belonging to The Inter-Varsity Fellowship (now Universities and Colleges Christian Fellowship), probably c. 1960.

with the origin of created realities, and what collateral or independent evidence do we possess regarding the action by which created entities began to be? We must not depreciate science. But science has to deal with existing realities, not with that which was antecedent to created existence. Or again, if we think of the third chapter of Genesis, who can prove that the events there recorded are true, or that it provides us with an infallible account of what is alleged to have occurred?

It is, of course, necessary to take account of what is our province and duty. It is our obligation to defend Scripture against allegations of error and contradiction. We can often show from the data of Scripture that the Scripture is consistent with itself. And we can also show that its representations are not contradicted by data derived from other authentic sources of information. Oftentimes, though we may not be able to demonstrate the harmony of Scripture, we are able to show that there is no necessary contradiction. There is ample place and scope for this type of defence in order to meet on the basis of all the data provided for us the charges which doubt and unbelief bring against Scripture.

But the main point of interest now is that when we thus defend the Scripture we do not thereby prove its infallibility. We are indeed vindicating the authenticity of Scripture, authenticity without which it would be futile to maintain its infallibility. But we do not thereby prove its infallibility. For one thing there are areas of Scripture, and these the most important, in connection with which we are not able to engage even in the aforementioned type of defence or vindication. How could we prove that when Christ died upon the cross he expiated the sins of a countless number of lost men? How are we to prove that Christ after his ascension entered into the holy places at the right hand of the Majesty in the heavens? It can be demonstrated that the Scripture so teaches but not that these things are true.

Thus, on the question of warrant for the proposition that Scripture is infallible, what are we to say? The only ground is the witness of Scripture to itself, to its own origin, character, and authority.

This may seem an illegitimate way of supporting the proposition at issue. Are we not begging the question? We are seeking for the ground of the proposition that Scripture is infallible. And then we say: we believe this because the Scripture says so, which, in turn, assumes that

we are to accept the verdict of Scripture. If we accept this verdict, we imply that its verdict is true, and not only so, but *infallibly true* if the verdict is to support the declaration that Scripture is infallible. This is the situation and we must frankly confess it to be so. It can be no otherwise in the situation that belongs to us in God's providential grace.

#### THE UNIQUENESS OF SCRIPTURE

Let us try to assess the situation in which we are placed. Apart from the Scriptures and the knowledge derived from them, we today would be in complete darkness respecting the content of our Christian faith. We must not deceive ourselves as to the darkness and confusion that would be ours if there were no Bible. We depend upon the message of Scripture for every tenet of our faith, for every ray of redemptive light that illumines our minds, and for every ray of hope against the issues of time and eternity. Christianity for us today without the Bible is something inconceivable.

We are not presuming to limit God. He could have brought the revelation of his redemptive will by other means than that of Scripture. But the issue now is not what God could have done if he had so pleased. The issue is what he has done. It is the *de facto* situation of God's providential ordering. And the upshot is that Scripture occupies an absolutely unique position. The case is not simply that Scripture is indispensable. Much else besides Scripture is indispensable in our actual situation. There is the witness of the church, there is the Christian tradition, and there is the mass of Christian literature. The fact is that Scripture as an entity, as a phenomenon, if you will, is absolutely unique. We are deceiving ourselves and refusing to face reality if we think that we can maintain even the most attenuated Christian belief or hope without presupposing and acknowledging that absolute uniqueness belonging to Scripture as a collection of written documents. It is this absolute uniqueness that must be taken into account when we speak of accepting its verdict.

It may be objected: does not the foregoing position impinge upon what is central in our faith? Is not Christ, the Son of God incarnate, crucified, risen, exalted, and coming again the Christian faith? Might it

not even be objected that this emphasis gives to Scripture the place of God?

Of course, the Scripture is not God and to give Scripture the place of God would be idolatry. Of course, Christ is Christianity and saving relation to him as Lord and Saviour is the only hope of lost men.

But the absolute uniqueness of Scripture is not impaired. Scripture is unique, not because it takes the place of God, nor the place of Christ, but because of its relationship to God, to Christ, and to the Holy Spirit. It is unique because it is the only way whereby we come into relationship to God in the redemptive revelation of his grace, and the only way whereby Christ in the uniqueness that belongs to him as the Son of God incarnate, as the crucified, risen, and ascended Redeemer, comes within the orbit of our knowledge, faith, experience, and hope. We have no encounter with God, with Christ, and with the Holy Spirit in terms of saving and redeeming grace apart from Scripture. It is the only revelation to us of God's redemptive will. That is its uniqueness.

Here then is the conclusion proceeding from its uniqueness, its incomparable singularity in the situation that is ours in God's providence. If we do not accept its verdict respecting its own character or quality, we have no warrant to accept its verdict respecting anything else. If its witness respecting itself is not authentic, then by what warrant may we accept its witness on other matters? By reason of what Scripture is and means in the whole compass of Christian faith and hope we are shut up to what Scripture teaches respecting its origin, character, and authority.

#### THE WITNESS OF SCRIPTURE

What is this witness? Certain passages are of particular relevance. Paul says, 'All scripture is God-breathed' (2 Tim. 3:16), and Peter, 'For prophecy was not brought of old time by the will of man, but as borne by the Holy Spirit men spoke from God' (2 Pet. 1:21). In both passages it is the divine authorship and the character resulting therefrom that are emphasized. Scripture is in view in both passages. Even in 2 Pet. 1:21 this is apparent from the preceding verse which defines 'prophecy' as 'prophecy of scripture', or, as we might say, inscripturated prophecy. These two texts have closer relationship to one another than we might

be disposed to think. For in the usage of Scripture the Word of God, the breath of God, and the Spirit of God are closely related. And when Paul says 'all scripture is God-breathed', he is saying nothing less than that all Scripture is God's speech, God's voice invested with all the authority and power belonging to his utterance. Peter explains how what is given through the agency of men can be God's speech—'as borne by the Holy Spirit men spoke from God'.

We think also of the words of our Lord: 'Till heaven and earth pass one jot or one tittle shall in no wise pass from the law, till all be fulfilled' (Matt. 5:18); 'the scripture cannot be broken' (John 10:35). In both passages it is the inviolability of Scripture that is asserted.

There are not only these express passages. There is a mass of witness derived from appeal to Scripture in ways that imply its finality, its divine authority, and its equivalence to God's word or speech. For our Lord, 'Scripture says' is equivalent to 'God says'. And Paul, when referring to the body of Scripture committed to Israel, can speak of it as 'the oracles of God' (Rom. 3:2).

Here then we have the verdict of Scripture. To avow any lower estimate is to impugn the witness of our Lord himself and that is to assail the dependability and veracity of him who is the truth (John 14:6). And it is also to impugn the reliability of the Holy Spirit who is also the truth as well as the Spirit of truth (1 John 5:6; John 16:13). If we reject the witness of both to the character of that upon which we must rely for our knowledge of the whole content of faith and hope, then we have no foundation of veracity on which to rest. It was the foundation of all faith, confidence, and certitude that the apostle appealed to when he said, 'Let God be true, but every man a liar' (Rom. 3:4). It is significant that he forthwith corroborated this truth by appeal to Scripture.

#### THE CONTEXT OF THIS WITNESS

The doctrine of the infallibility of Scripture is derived from the witness of Scripture. It is equally necessary to bear in mind that this witness is to be understood in the context of Scripture as a whole. Any doctrine severed from the total structure of revelation is out of focus. It is necessary to insist on this for two reasons.

First, it is possible to give formal confession to the infallibility of Scripture and yet belie this confession in dealing with it. The dogma of infallibility implies that Scripture is itself the revelatory Word of God, that it is the living and authoritative voice or speech of God. Unless we are arrested by that Word and summoned by it into his presence, unless we bow in reverence before that Word and accord to it the finality that belongs to it as God's oracular utterance, then our confession is only formal.

Second, unless we assess infallibility in the light of the data with which Scripture provides us, we shall be liable to judge infallibility by criteria to which Scripture does not conform. This is one of the most effective ways of undermining biblical infallibility.

The inspiration of Scripture involves verbal inspiration. If it did not carry with it the inspiration of the words, it would not be inspiration at all. Words are the media of communication. It is nothing less than verbal inspiration that Paul affirms when he says in 1 Corinthians 2:13, 'combining spiritual things with spiritual'. He is speaking of truths taught by the Spirit, as the preceding clauses indicate. But when we say 'words' we mean words in relationship, in grammatical and syntactical relationship, first of all, then in the broader contextual relationship, and last of all in relation to the whole content and structure of revelation as deposited in Scripture. They are words with the meaning which Scripture, interpreted in the light of Scripture, determines. They are Spirit-inspired words in the sense in which they were intended by the Holy Spirit. This is to say that the sense and intent of Scripture is Scripture and not the meaning we may arbitrarily impose upon it.

When the Scripture uses anthropomorphic terms with reference to God and his actions, we must interpret accordingly and not predicate of God the limitations which belong to us men. When Scripture conveys truth to us by the mode of apocalyptic vision, we cannot find the truth signified in the details of the vision literalised. If Scripture uses the language of common usage and experience or observation, we are not to accuse it of error because it does not use the language of a particular science, language which few could understand and which becomes obsolete with the passing phases of scientific advancement. The

Scripture does not make itself ridiculous by conforming to what pedants might require.

There are numerous considerations that must be taken into account derived from the study of Scripture data. And it is a capital mistake to think that the criteria of infallibility are those that must conform to our preconceived notions or to our arbitrarily adopted norms.

#### CONCLUSION

The doctrine of infallibility is not peripheral. What is at stake is the character of the witness which the Scripture provides for the whole compass of our faith. It is concerned with the nature of the only revelation which we possess respecting God's will for our salvation, the only revelation by which we are brought into saving encounter with him who is God manifest in the flesh, the only revelation by which we may be introduced into that fellowship which is eternal life, and the only revelation by which we may be guided in that pilgrimage to the city which hath the foundations, whose builder and maker is God. In a word the interests involved are those of faith, love, and hope.