

What Does the Word Say?  
Session 34: The infallibility of the Bible: Part I  
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**Marc Roby:** We are resuming our study of systematic theology today by beginning to examine the doctrine of the infallibility of the Bible. Dr. Spencer, I suspect that this doctrine is unfamiliar to most of our listeners, why is this topic important?

Dr. Spencer: It is important because true Christianity stands or falls with the truthfulness of the Bible. By “true Christianity” I mean a Christianity that has the power to save a person from eternal hell and bring him into the very presence of God in eternal heaven. That’s why I often refer to “biblical Christianity”, by which I simply mean the true Christian religion as revealed by God, in distinction from all man-made variations and imposters. The bottom line is that, if the Bible is not completely and totally the very Word of God, and therefore completely infallible, our faith is built on the shifting sand of subjectivism and is bound to unravel one doctrine at a time, which is precisely what we see happening in the church today.

**Marc Roby:** That is a very strong statement and I look forward to seeing how you back it up. Where shall we begin?

Dr. Spencer: Let’s begin, as usual, by looking at the what the Bible itself says. In 2 Timothy 3:16-17 the apostle Paul wrote that “All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.”<sup>1</sup>

The Greek word translated as “God-breathed” by the NIV is θεόπνευστος, which literally means breathed out by God, which is how the English Standard Version renders it. The King James Version says that “All scripture is given by inspiration of God”, which is why you hear people say that the Bible is inspired by God.

**Marc Roby:** By which they *don’t* mean that God gave the person the idea or encouragement to write, which is what we usually do mean by the word inspire.

Dr. Spencer: That’s right. We can talk about some actor or musician giving an inspired performance, but that is an entirely different usage of the word. That’s why I don’t like to say the Scriptures are inspired by God, it is too easily misunderstood. The NIV and ESV translations are better here. The Greek says that all Scripture is breathed out by God. The idea is that the Bible, while written by human authors, is uniquely the very words of God himself. We discussed this in Session 27 when we examined the authority of the Bible, and the authority of the Bible is inextricably linked to its infallibility. But, the bottom line is that the Bible is completely infallible because God is infallible and he is the author of the Bible.

**Marc Roby:** It would be good to define precisely what you mean when you say that the Bible is infallible.

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Dr. Spencer: The word infallible means not capable of being in error, so it is a stronger statement than saying the Bible is inerrant, which is, of course, also true. When I say that the Bible is infallible, I mean that because it is the very words of God, who himself is the perfect, all-knowing, sovereign creator of all things and who cannot lie, the Bible, in its original manuscripts, is incapable of being in error.

**Marc Roby: These original manuscripts are called the autographs, but we don't have them in our possession, so how can the doctrine of infallibility be important if it only applies to the autographs?**

Dr. Spencer: As we noted back in Session 7, there is a science called textual criticism, which allows us to reconstruct what the autographs said based on the copies we have available. This science is used on other ancient documents as well. We covered this topic in some detail in Session 7, and I am only going to summarize the argument here. But it necessarily begins by examining the copies we have of the original documents, because if these were not complete, or if they were corrupted too badly, textual criticism would yield a very uncertain or incomplete result. In the case of the Bible however, we have very good and complete copies.

The Old Testament has been preserved almost perfectly through the millennia, which we know because the Dead Sea Scrolls, which were found in 1947, gave us copies of much of the Old Testament from before the time of Christ and they agree to an astonishing degree with the next oldest extant copy we have, which is from about 1000 AD. With regard to the New Testament, it is by leaps and bounds the best attested book from antiquity, bar none, as even non-Christian scholars will admit.

**Marc Roby: Alright, so we have really good copies of the original documents. What then is this science of textual criticism?**

Dr. Spencer: Let me repeat what I said in Session 7 about it because it is critically important to our present discussion. E.J. Young, in his book *Thy Word is Truth*, provides a marvelous example of how textual criticism can work.<sup>2</sup> He says to consider a schoolteacher who writes a letter to the President of the United States. To her great joy, she receives a personal reply. It is a treasure which she shares with her pupils by dictating the letter to them. And, after collecting the assignment, which gives her 30 imperfect copies of the letter, she loses the original. The question is, can she reconstruct it from the 30 imperfect copies? And the answer is, of course, yes. With a very high degree of certainty she can reconstruct the original letter. The different copies will contain spelling errors, missing or added words and so on, but these errors will be different in the different copies, so by comparing the 30 copies she can surely correct these errors and arrive at a very good copy of the original.

There is, of course, more to it, but that gives you a good idea. When this technique is applied to the Bible, we're able to reconstruct with very high confidence what the autographs said. And, unlike most ancient documents, we don't have to fill in holes where there is material missing.

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<sup>2</sup> E.J. Young, *Thy Word is Truth*, the Banner of Truth Trust, 2012, pg. 57

When you combine our many different manuscripts, we have reliable, complete copies of the entire Old and New Testaments.

**Marc Roby: Alright, so we have very good copies, in the original languages, of the autographs. But, what about the translations that most of us read?**

Dr. Spencer: Well, first let me note that the New Testament quotes from the Septuagint, which is a Greek translation of the Old Testament that was in use at the time of Christ, so clearly translations, in and of themselves, are not a problem. Also, as you would expect, some of them are better than others. Translation is never exact and it isn't neutral either. The particular theological biases of the translator can significantly affect the final result. That is why we should read different translations to find out what the differences are and then also examine the theological biases of the translators. You should also look in good commentaries that go back to the original language and discuss the reasons for various choices made during the translation process.

**Marc Roby: That sounds like a lot of work. How can a layperson, with limited time and knowledge, be sure that he or she is getting to the right answer?**

Dr. Spencer: First of all, pray. Then you trust God to guide you. And, hopefully, if you have found a good church, led by pious and learned men, you can ask for their help. We use the 1984 New International Version, or NIV, Bible in our church, but it is no longer readily available and the newer versions of the NIV have been corrupted by liberal theology, so if you are looking to purchase a new English-language Bible, I would recommend the English Standard Version, or ESV. The New King James Version is also good. The old King James is still good too, but most modern readers find the English in it a bit difficult to understand.

Finally, it is very important to note that the basic message of salvation is so clearly taught in the Scriptures, that even a poor translation is sufficient to bring you to a saving knowledge of Jesus Christ. You may get some confusion on secondary points, but the basic message is there.

**Marc Roby: And, if a person is born again, then he is guaranteed to have the Holy Spirit to guide him as he seeks to learn God's truth more completely.**

Dr. Spencer: That's right. If you have been born again, you are never truly alone in your search for God's truth. That doesn't mean that you don't have to put forth the effort and be careful, but God will guide you. And, if you are reading your Bible, God will also use that to help you recognize whether or not you are in a good church. We have a mutual friend who was saved and started attending a Jehovah's Witness church – which is definitely *not* a true Christian church. But, he was reading the Bible and discovered for himself, guided by the Holy Spirit, that that church did not truly stand on the Word of God, so he left and found a good church.

**Marc Roby: Alright, you've established that the Bible claims to be the very words of God, which makes it infallible, and you've argued that the copies we possess in our own language are extremely good representations of what the original documents said, so now let me get back to your opening statement. You said that if we give up on the infallibility of the Bible, our faith will unravel one doctrine at a time. Can you defend that statement?**

Dr. Spencer: Sure. If the Bible had errors in it, how would we determine where they are? The only answer is that we would have to look to human reason and scholarship to see if what the Bible says is true. That may sound like a plausible approach, but if you think about it for a bit you can see that it is fatally flawed.

First of all, it means our ultimate standard for truth is human reason, but every rational person admits that human reason is fallible and human knowledge is limited, so our conclusions are necessarily conditional and subject to later revision.

**Marc Roby: Can you give us an example of what you mean?**

Dr. Spencer: Sure. Prior to the 1990's many scholars taught that king David was a purely mythical character. But, as we noted in Session 19, the discovery of the Tell Dan Stele and other evidence now makes it clear that King David was a real person in history.

If we subject the Bible to our current understanding of history and science, our ultimate authority is really human reason, not the Word of God. And that is shifting sand. It really leaves us with subjectivism because we have to decide which parts of the Bible to believe and which not to believe. As I just noted, while it may sound reasonable to do that for historical issues, such as the question of whether or not King David was a real, historical figure, that really is not a solid foundation.

In addition, it is clearly not a reasonable approach when it comes to what the Bible tells us about God and how to be saved. On what basis are we going to decide which statements are true and which are not? If the Bible cannot be relied upon completely, we are left with our own subjective ideas about God and salvation.

**Marc Roby: Perhaps another example would be useful.**

Dr. Spencer: Consider the fundamental question of God's nature. The Bible tells us that there is one God, but that he exists in three persons. On what basis, outside of the Bible, can someone say whether that teaching is true or not? There are many other doctrines that are similar. Where, besides the Bible, can we look to see whether an eternal heaven or hell exists? What about how we can escape the punishment of hell? These things are only revealed to us in the Bible. If it isn't infallible, then we can't possibly know that what it teaches us about these most important issues is right.

**Marc Roby: I see your point.**

Dr. Spencer: There is a lot of confusion in the modern church world because so many people have given up on the infallibility of the Bible. As a result, people question whether there really is an eternal heaven, or an eternal hell, or whether Jesus Christ truly rose from the dead, or even whether or not Jesus Christ is truly God, or was born of a virgin.

Let's examine just one common example. Many people who claim to be Bible believing Christians will say that they don't believe in eternal hell. And the argument they give will virtually always be something like this; God is love and it wouldn't be loving for God to punish people for all eternity, so I can't believe that God would do that.

**Marc Roby: I've heard similar arguments.**

Dr. Spencer: Even if the argument is far more sophisticated than I've made it sound, it still boils down to human theorizing about what God would or would not do. But, if we believe the Bible to truly be God's infallible Word, then the question can only be answered by looking at the Bible; and when you do that, the answer is quite clear.

The infallibility of the Bible is of central importance because it establishes the only firm foundation for our faith. Once we have come to the realization that Word of God is infallible, then all speculation and human philosophizing go away and the only question we need to ask on any issue we are interested in, is "What does the Word of God say?"

**Marc Roby: And hence the title and subject of this podcast.**

Dr. Spencer: Precisely. But, I really want to emphasize how important this issue is and establish clearly in our listener's minds that, if they are Christians, the Word of God is not only their absolute authority, it is also infallible. The book I quoted from earlier, *Thy Word is Truth*, by the great Old Testament scholar E.J. Young, was written precisely because he saw this issue as central to our faith.

**Marc Roby: And that book was written in 1957!**

Dr. Spencer: Absolutely, and the problem is much worse now. Young states his purpose in writing the book clearly on page 7; he wrote that his purpose was "To acquaint the intelligent layman with the Biblical doctrine of inspiration and to convince him of its importance".<sup>3</sup> I'm going to be using his book quite a bit in our discussion on this topic and I highly recommend it to our listeners, it's still readily available in print from many sources.

**Marc Roby: The debate over this topic also led, in 1978, to a large number of biblical scholars producing the Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy.**

Dr. Spencer: That's right, and I think the opening paragraph of that statement would be good to read. It says, "The authority of Scripture is a key issue for the Christian Church in this and every age. Those who profess faith in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior are called to show the reality of their discipleship by humbly and faithfully obeying God's written Word. To stray from Scripture in faith or conduct is disloyalty to our Master. Recognition of the total truth and trustworthiness of Holy Scripture is essential to a full grasp and adequate confession of its authority."<sup>4</sup>

**Marc Roby: That is a wonderful statement, and a good place to end for today. I'd like to remind our listeners that they can email their questions and comments to [info@whatdoesthewordsay.org](mailto:info@whatdoesthewordsay.org).**

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid, pg. 7

<sup>4</sup> Available from <http://defendinginerrancy.com/chicago-statements/> and also from <http://www.alliancenet.org/the-chicago-statement-on-biblical-inerrancy>