

What Does the Word Say?
Session 35: The infallibility of the Bible: Part II
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Marc Roby: We are resuming our study of systematic theology today by continuing to examine the doctrine of the infallibility of the Bible. In our previous session we argued that this is a critically important doctrine because if the Bible is not infallible, then our faith is, ultimately, based on subjectivism. We closed by quoting from the Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy, which says, in part, that “Recognition of the total truth and trustworthiness of Holy Scripture is essential to a full grasp and adequate confession of its authority.” Dr. Spencer, what do you want to add to that?

Dr. Spencer: I mentioned last time that the authority and infallibility of the Bible are inextricably linked, and you see that point clearly in the sentence you just quoted from the Chicago Statement. Notice that they link a “recognition of the total truth and trustworthiness” of the Bible, in other words our believing that it is infallible, to “a full grasp and adequate confession of its authority.” By adequate confession I think they mean one that is conducive to living a proper Christian life. I would like to begin therefore by more forcefully making the point that the authority and infallibility of the Bible are inextricably linked.

Marc Roby: Please do.

Dr. Spencer: If the Bible is infallible, then it logically follows that it is inerrant, simply meaning that it does not have errors in it.

Marc Roby: Now, when you say it does not contain any errors, I think it is important to note again that you’re talking about the autographs.

Dr. Spencer: Yes, I am. Our copies can obviously contain printing errors, poor translations and even, in a few cases small errors caused by errors in the manuscripts we have available.

Marc Roby: But none of these small errors in any way affect any doctrine of biblical Christianity.

Dr. Spencer: No, they don’t, and that is an important point. In fact, with regard to these small errors, James Boice points out that “due to the extraordinary number and variety of the biblical manuscripts, there is no reason to doubt that today’s text is identical to the original text in all but a few places. And these few problem areas are clearly known to commentators.”¹ Which agrees with what we said last time regarding the number and quality of our existing manuscripts.

Marc Roby: OK, but I think we’ve gotten off topic just a bit. You said that if the Bible is infallible, then it logically follows that it is going to be inerrant. What were you going to say next?

Dr. Spencer: I was going to say that the only alternative to the Bible being inerrant is that it *does*, in fact, contain errors. And, if the Bible contained errors it would logically follow that not everything in it would have authority, because not everything in it would be from God, from whom all authority comes. That would leave us with the horrible problem of deciding for

¹ James Boice, *Foundations of the Christian Faith*, Revised in One Volume, InterVarsity Press, 1986, pp 75-76

ourselves which parts of the Bible have authority and which don't. And you can easily guess what would happen.

Marc Roby: I can think of a number of things.

Dr. Spencer: So can I, but let me give one concrete example to illustrate the seriousness of the problem. Suppose that a man named John was extremely unhappy in his marriage and was convinced that he had done everything possible on his end to work the problems out. Further suppose that his wife had not committed adultery, their problems were just relational. What do you think he would decide about Jesus' statement in Matthew 5:32, where he says, "I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for marital unfaithfulness, causes her to become an adulteress",² which implies that divorcing a wife for any reason other than adultery is sin. Do you think John would conclude that he can't divorce his wife, or would he conclude that statement was some kind of error?

Marc Roby: I'm pretty sure he would conclude that Jesus didn't really say that.

Dr. Spencer: I think you're right. In other words, he might say that the Bible has authority to govern his life, but he would then completely eviscerate that authority by concluding that anything in the Bible that opposes his own view is an error.

Marc Roby: That would be the natural, sinful, human tendency.

Dr. Spencer: In other words, if the *entire* Bible was not the authoritative Word of God, then *none* of it would really have any authority because we would have to decide which parts have authority. And our natural, sinful tendency would be to say that the parts we agree with have authority, and the parts we don't agree with do not have authority. In other words, *I* am the ultimate authority. We see this all the time when people argue that you can be a Christian and divorce your spouse for irreconcilable differences, or be a Christian homosexual, or any number of other examples we could name.

But, that is *not* biblical Christianity and, therefore, it is not a Christianity that will save you from hell. It is no better than any other man-made religion. If I am a true, born-again Christian, then I must accept the *entire* Word of God as his infallible, authoritative word.

Marc Roby: Are you saying that if someone doesn't agree with this doctrine that they are not a true Christian?

Dr. Spencer: I don't think I would go that far. But, I would argue that they do agree with it, even if they are not yet aware of that fact. When a person is first born again and exercises true saving faith, that faith is not mature, and you wouldn't expect that they have had time and opportunity

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to think it all through carefully. And, if they don't receive good sound teaching, it may take a while for them to do so. But, when we believe something to be true, that necessarily requires that we have determined there is sufficient reason to accept it as true. And the Bible is the only source of our knowledge that we are saved by faith in Jesus Christ. So, if a person has truly placed his trust in Jesus Christ and is saved, that means that he has judged the Bible to be trustworthy. And, if he thinks that through carefully, which is what we are trying to help people do now, he will realize that the only consistent position is to believe that the entire Bible is infallible.

Marc Roby: The theologian John Murray makes that point. He even goes so far as to say that one aspect of biblical faith is “our full persuasion and assurance of the infallible truth and divine authority of Scripture as the Word of God.”³ And that this “is inseparable from a state of salvation.”⁴

Dr. Spencer: And I would agree. But I think that is an expression of a mature faith that has been thought through. So, if one of our listeners does not agree with this doctrine, it may be that he is truly saved, but has not yet thought this all through carefully. And, if that is the case, I hope and pray that our discussion of this material will result in his giving this topic careful consideration, because it is the clear teaching of the Bible itself that it is the infallible Word of God as we will demonstrate in later sessions. So, if I find myself disagreeing with it, on this doctrine or any other doctrine, I am the one who needs to change. The problem is with me, not the Bible.

Marc Roby: Of course, that presupposes that we understand the Bible correctly.

Dr. Spencer: Of course it does, and we will talk about that issue more later as well. But for now, I want to move on with making the case for the importance of the doctrine of the infallibility of the Bible. Let me begin by noting that the Westminster Confession of Faith recognized the central importance of the Word of God and that it receives its importance – and we could add its infallibility and authority – from the fact that God is its author.

In Chapter 1, Paragraph 4 of the confession we read that “The authority of the Holy Scripture, for which it ought to be believed, and obeyed, depends not upon the testimony of any man, or Church; but wholly upon God (who is truth itself) the author thereof: and therefore it is to be received, because it is the Word of God.”⁵ When they say it is to be “received”, I think they mean it is to be believed and obeyed. But, they were also indicating that they were simply receiving the revelation from God, not passing judgment on it as being correct.

Marc Roby: Which would, of course, again make man the ultimate authority, not God.

Dr. Spencer: That's right. As we've discussed before, we must use our reason to recognize and understand the Word of God, but not to judge it. The theologian R.C. Sproul, in his *Layman's Guide to the Westminster Confession of Faith* commented on the use of the word receive in this

³ John Murray, *Collected Works*, Vol. II, Banner of Truth Trust, 1977, pg. 241

⁴ Ibid, pg. 254

⁵ From http://www.reformed.org/documents/wcf_with_proofs/index.html

phrase in the confession and wrote that “When the early church settled on the books of the canon, it spoke of *receiving* these books as canonical. The church fathers were humbly recognizing the authority of these books, not presuming to give them authority, when they stated, ‘We receive these apostolic writings as the sacred Scriptures’ ... The authority of Scripture does not depend on the testimony of any man or of the church; its authority depends and rests wholly on God, the supreme author of the Bible. Scripture should be received, not so that it can *become* the Word of God, but because it already *is* the Word of God.”⁶

Marc Roby: That is a very clear statement of the distinction between receiving the Word and judging the Word. I think it is also important to point out that the statement you read is in Chapter 1 of the confession of faith; so the Westminster Confession of faith *begins* with the Word of God.

Dr. Spencer: That is an important point. The confession begins with the Word of God because it is only in the Word of God that we learn what God wants us to believe and how we are to be saved.

Marc Roby: The Westminster Confession was also responding to the Roman Catholic church, which placed the traditions of the church on a par with Scripture.

Dr. Spencer: That’s true. The Council of Trent was an ecumenical council of the Roman Catholic Church and was called in response to the reformation, which most people mark as having begun with Martin Luther nailing his 95 theses to the Wittenberg Church door on October 31, 1517. In the Council of Trent, the Roman Catholic Church officially decreed that it “receives and venerates with an equal affection of piety, and reverence, all the books both of the Old and of the New Testament ... as also the said traditions”⁷, which is referring to the traditions of the church. They go even further and declare that if anyone does not receive the traditions of the church as of equal value with the Bible itself, “let him be anathema.”⁸

Marc Roby: And to be anathema means to be cursed and excommunicated from the church, in other words, to be damned.

Dr. Spencer: That’s right. The Roman Catholic Church has never rescinded the decrees of that council, so if we do not accept the traditions of the church as of equal authority with Scripture, we are, according to the Roman Catholic Church, damned to hell. The problem with that view is that it is giving the church the power to declare something with the same authority as God himself. And the reformers were united in their condemnation of that view. This issue of the

⁶ R.C. Sproul, *Truths We Confess: A Layman’s Guide to the Westminster Confession of Faith*, P&R Publishing Co., 2006, Vol. One, pg. 13

⁷ From: *The canons and decrees of the sacred and ecumenical Council of Trent*, Trans. J. Waterworth (London: Dolman, 1848), The Fourth Session, DECREE CONCERNING THE CANONICAL SCRIPTURES, pg. 18. Available in pdf form from file:///C:/Users/rrspe/Documents/Religion/Books%20&%20Papers/Council%20of%20Trent%20-%20decrees.pdf

⁸ *Ibid*, pg. 19

absolute and sole authority of the Scriptures has been called the formal cause of the reformation, and it is voiced in the famous Latin phrase *sola Scriptura*, which means Scripture alone.⁹

Marc Roby: But, the reformers did not simply throw away all the traditions of the church.

Dr. Spencer: No, they did not. In fact, the reformers embraced those traditions when they were consistent with the teachings of the Bible. R.C. Sproul, in his book *What is Reformed Theology?* Says that “the Reformers embraced the doctrines articulated and formulated by the great ecumenical councils of church history, including the doctrine of the Trinity and of Christ’s person and work formulated at the councils of Nicea in 325 and Chalcedon in 451.”¹⁰ The reformers were returning to the Word of God as the supreme authority and were testing everything according to it.

Marc Roby: That reminds me of what we are told in Acts 17. Paul and Silas had been preaching about Christ in Berea and we are told, in Acts 17:11, that “the Bereans were of more noble character than the Thessalonians, for they received the message with great eagerness and examined the Scriptures every day to see if what Paul said was true.”

Dr. Spencer: That is a great passage to make this point. The Bereans were commended by God himself for testing what the apostle Paul told them by looking in the Word of God. In Paul’s closing comments to the church in Thessalonica he wrote, in 1 Thessalonians 5:20-21, “do not treat prophecies with contempt. Test everything. Hold on to the good.” And, while he doesn’t say it here, it is clear that he would have them test everything by the Word of God, since that is what he labors to do in every one of his letters.

Marc Roby: And so, getting back to the Westminster Confession of Faith, they chose to begin by declaring that the Bible alone has absolute authority.

Dr. Spencer: That’s right. In addition to the passage we read earlier from Chapter 1 Paragraph 4, it might be worthwhile to give one more quote, which clearly shows that what you just said is true, the confession clearly does state that the Bible alone has absolute authority. Chapter 1 concludes with the following statement, in Paragraph 10; “The supreme judge by which all controversies of religion are to be determined, and all decrees of councils, opinions of ancient writers, doctrines of men, and private spirits, are to be examined, and in whose sentence we are to rest, can be no other but the Holy Spirit speaking in the Scripture.”¹¹ When the confession says “in whose sentence we are to rest”, it is using the word “sentence” in the sense of a judicial finding or judgment. In other words, we are to use the Bible as the ultimate authority in judging everything and we are to rest in its judgment.

Marc Roby: Well, I know that we have more to say on this topic, but this seems like a good place to stop for today. I’d like to remind our listeners that they can email their questions and comments to info@whatdoesthewordsay.org. We would love to hear from you.

⁹ R.C. Sproul, *What is Reformed Theology?*, Baker Books, 1997, pg. 30

¹⁰ Ibid, pp 28-29

¹¹ From http://www.reformed.org/documents/wcf_with_proofs/index.html