Marc Roby: We are resuming our study of systematic theology today by continuing to examine the doctrine of the infallibility of the Bible. We have established that the Bible itself claims to be the very "words of God" [1] to use the apostle Paul's expression from Romans 3:2. Dr. Spencer, we ended last time by beginning to answer the question raised by the existence of some errors in the Bibles we have in our possession, and you pointed out that inerrancy does not require perfect grammar, or unreasonable precision, nor does it prevent the Bible from using normal modes of human expression like hyperbole or phenomenological expressions.

Dr. Spencer: Except I didn't use the words hyperbole or phenomenological, so let me define those in case our listeners don't recall what they mean. Hyperbole is simply exaggeration used for effect, rather than any attempt to deceive. If I read in the newspaper that the whole town of Davis showed up for some event, I recognize it as hyperbole. I don't truly expect that every single person in town showed up.

Phenomenological expressions are expressions that indicate how something appears to us, they are not meant to be descriptions of what is truly going on. So, for example, when we talk about the sun rising or setting, or the earth standing still, we all understand those expressions and don't accuse the speaker of being scientifically illiterate.

Marc Roby: Very well. What else do you want to say about supposed errors in the Bible?

Dr. Spencer: I think it will be worth our while to examine what the 19th-centuray theologian Charles Hodge said about them. In his *Systematic Theology*, he wrote that "The objection under consideration, namely, that the Bible contains errors, divides itself into two. The first, that the sacred writers contradict themselves, or one the other. The second, that the Bible teaches what is inconsistent with the facts of history or science."[2]

Let's discuss the supposed contradictions first.

Marc Roby: OK, what does Hodge say about those?

Dr. Spencer: He makes four points. First, he says that the apparent discrepancies, although numerous, are for the most part trivial. An example might be the question about whether there were one or two demon-possessed men who came to Jesus when he arrived in the region of the Gadarenes. In Matthew 8:28 it says there were two, but in the parallel accounts in Mark 5 and Luke 8 it says there was one. Some people think this is an error, but that is simply not true. There were, obviously, two demon-possessed men, but for some reason, Mark and Luke only mention one. Perhaps he was notorious and the other was unknown, we don't know. But, whatever the reason, Mark and Luke don't mention the other one. That can hardly be called an error however;

---

[1] All scripture quotations, unless otherwise indicated, are taken from the Holy Bible, New International Version®, NIV® (1984 version). Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984, 2011 by Biblica, Inc.™ Used by permission of Zondervan. All rights reserved worldwide. www.zondervan.com The "NIV" and "New International Version" are trademarks registered in the United States Patent and Trademark Office by Biblica, Inc.™.

[2] Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, Eerdmans, 1997, Vol. 1, pg. 169

as has been pointed out by many, where there are two demon-possessed men, there certainly is one. So, there is a rather easy way to deal with the difference.

Marc Roby: Some have also claimed there is another error in these stories because Matthew refers, as you just did, to the "region of the Gadarenes", whereas Mark and Luke both refer to "the region of the Gerasenes". How would answer that charge?

Dr. Spencer: First of all, Gadara and Gerasa were both prominent cities in the region to the east of the Sea of Galilee and it is likely that the area was sometimes called the region of the Gadarenes and at other times the region of the Gerasenes. This is somewhat similar to the fact that some people will refer to the town of Sunnyvale, California as being in the San Jose area, while others will refer to it as being near San Francisco, or in the south Bay Area. There are different ways of referring to the same general area. In addition, not all of the Greek manuscripts we have agree on the name used. It seems perfectly reasonable then that both names might have been used in the original documents and later copyists changed the name to try and make things uniform. We can't know for certain of course, but this most definitely is not evidence of an error in the autographs, and is another example of the kind of trivial errors noted by Hodge.

Marc Roby: Alright, that sounds reasonable. You said Hodge makes four points, what is the second?

Dr. Spencer: His second point is that the great majority of these supposed contradictions are only apparent, and disappear after careful examination, as we've just seen with the story of the demon-possessed men. His third point is that many of these supposed contradictions can reasonably be ascribed to errors made by transcribers, which we also just noted in regard to the name of the region in which Jesus drove demons out of a man.

Marc Roby: And what was Hodge's fourth point?

Dr. Spencer: I'd like to just quote him on this one, because I think he makes the point beautifully. He wrote that "The marvel and the miracle is that there are so few [apparent contradictions] of any real importance. Considering that the different books of the Bible were written not only by different authors, but by men of all degrees of culture, living in the course of fifteen hundred or two thousand years, it is altogether unaccountable that they should agree perfectly, on any other hypothesis than that the writers were under the guidance of the Spirit of God. In this respect, as in all others, the Bible stands alone. It is enough to impress any mind with awe, when it contemplates the Sacred Scriptures filled with the highest truths, speaking with authority in the name of God, and so miraculously free from the soiling touch of human fingers. The errors in matters of fact which skeptics search out bear no proportion to the whole."[3]

Marc Roby: That is a powerful statement. After nearly 2,000 years of searching for errors, you would think that the Bible's critics would have come up with some better objections.

---

[3] Ibid, pp 169-170

Dr. Spencer: In fact, if the Bible were just a book written by men, without being miraculously guided by the Holy Spirit, I'm quite certain they would have come up with a number of very serious errors and contradictions. The fact that they haven't is, as Hodge politely put it, unaccountable.

Nevertheless, we do have to concede that there are some problems that don't lend themselves to quick, easy answers. In the book we've been using, *Thy Word is Truth*, E.J. Young writes that "In our doctrine of inspiration we are faced with certain perplexities, and they are real. Let us grant that freely. Nevertheless, they seem almost trifling when compared with the tremendous problems which face those who do not accept the Scriptural doctrine. Those who do not receive the Biblical witness to itself must explain the Bible. How did it come to be? Whence came the heavenly doctrine that is found within its pages? What is its origin?"[4]

Marc Roby: I really like the fact that he turns the question around on the skeptics and points out that they have far more serious questions to deal with!

Dr. Spencer: I like that too. Whenever someone attacks Christianity, we should not feel defensive in any way. People sometimes seem to think that we should have the answer to every possible question. But, that is simply unrealistic and irrational. Why are we supposed to know everything? God hasn't revealed everything to us, and I'm quite confident we wouldn't be able to understand it all even if he did, so it doesn't bother me at all that I can't answer every question that might be asked.

Marc Roby: I want to return to the concession that you made though, that there are problems that don't lend themselves to quick, easy answers. Can you give any examples of this?

Dr. Spencer: Sure, in his book Young gives the example of Matthew 27:9-10, where we read "Then what was spoken by Jeremiah the prophet was fulfilled: 'They took the thirty silver coins, the price set on him by the people of Israel, and they used them to buy the potter's field, as the Lord commanded me.'" And he notes that the quotation is actually from Zechariah 11:13. So, we must ask, was Matthew in error when he ascribed it to Jeremiah? He was, after all, a fallible human being, maybe he just got mixed up and remembered incorrectly which prophet made the statement.

Marc Roby: That would seem to be an impossibility if he was "carried along by the Holy Spirit" as 2 Peter 1:21 tells us and if the promise Jesus made to his apostles in John 16:13, that when "the Spirit of truth, comes, he will guide you into all truth" was true.

Dr. Spencer: You're right, it is impossible. This may not seem very important to someone if they haven't thought it through carefully, but if you conclude that Matthew made an error in ascribing this Old Testament quote to Jeremiah, then the doctrine of infallibility goes out the window and we are left with the insurmountable problem of having to decide which things in the Bible to believe. In other words, we are back to subjectivism.

---

[4] E.J. Young, *Thy Word is Truth*, the Banner of Truth Trust, 2012, pg. 59

Marc Roby: So how do we handle this problem?

Dr. Spencer: Young discusses this question at some length and I'm not going into all that he says, but I will note that there have been several attempts to explain the reference. I'll briefly mention one as an example. In the Babylonian Talmud Jeremiah is placed at the head of the prophets, and this tradition may be much older than the Talmud, which is from hundreds of years after Christ, so it is possible that Jeremiah's name may have been used to refer to the entire section of the Hebrew Bible that contains Zechariah.

Now, I must say that I don't find that explanation very satisfying, and it is less problematic than the other possibilities Young presents. At the end of the discussion it is clear that none of the proposed solutions are satisfying to Young either because he says that he "inclines" toward the view that there was a copyist's error early on and he gives an idea of what might have happened.[5] I'll let the interested listener consult Young directly for the details. But, whatever the solution, Young is correct when he states that "One thing, however, is clear. There is no warrant for the assertion that Matthew has made a mistake."[6]

Marc Roby: That is a difficult passage to explain, but I also agree with Young's conclusion that we have no warrant for saying that Matthew made a mistake. This example reminds me of an objection that is sometimes raised to the doctrine of infallibility though. How can an infallible book be written by fallible men? Doesn't their fallibility guarantee that there are errors, even if only in detailed matters having to do with history or geography, or maybe even getting an Old Testament quote wrong? There are people who would say that such errors are not that important, it is only the larger truths in the Bible that are important. How would you respond to that?

Dr. Spencer: As we have attempted to make clear a few times, you can't pick and choose. If the authors of the Bible were wrong about details of history or geography, then how can we possibly know that we can trust them on more important issues? Errors of any kind would make it clear that the Bible had not been written under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. If it is only a fallible human record of what Jesus did and said, then we have no solid basis for our faith.

This is a very important point because it is a common view in the modern church. And it goes back to the 19th century. Young quotes from something written by the 19th-century Scottish theologian A.B. Bruce, where he criticized those who try to find ways to harmonize the gospels in the sense of trying to explain apparent contradictions. He wrote, "To the harmonists busy at their petty task we are inclined to say, Sirs, we would see Jesus. … To paint the image of the Great Master successfully, one must be set free from slavish solicitude about harmonistic problems, and feel at liberty to handle the materials with a fearless breadth of treatment."[7]

Marc Roby: I don't like the idea of treating any part of the word of God in a so-called fearless way!

---

[5] Ibid, pg. 172
[6] Ibid, pg. 173
[7] Ibid, pg. 127

Dr. Spencer: Neither do I, but Young's response to this view is very important. He wrote that "One wonders how it is possible for a man so completely to miss the point. … Dr. Bruce would cry, 'Sirs, we would see Jesus'. Very good, but how is Jesus to be seen? Are we to find Him in a record that is filled with blemishes?"[8]

Young's point is precisely the one we have been laboring to make. If the Bible is not the infallible word of God, we have no objective basis for knowing Jesus Christ. And if we don't know Jesus Christ, we are not saved, we are still subject to the wrath of God.

Marc Roby: That is a terrifying thought. But, before we finish for today, I want to tie up one loose end. You said that Hodge divided the supposed errors in the Bible into two groups. We've dealt briefly with the supposed contradictions. You said that the second group is that the Bible teaches what is inconsistent with the facts of history or science. What do you want to say about that?

Dr. Spencer: Nothing. We handled that issue at great length when we discussed external evidence that corroborates the Bible in Sessions 7 through 11.

Marc Roby: That was quick! Are we done discussing the infallibility of the Bible?

Dr. Spencer: I think we are, at least for now.

Marc Roby: Well then, that wraps up this session. I'd like to remind our listeners that we encourage them to email their questions and comments to info@whatdoesthewordsay.org.

Transcript corrected: 7/8/25

[8] Ibid, pg. 127