

Topic 10: The problem of four Gospels and the inerrancy of the Bible

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A survey of the four Gospels in parallel clearly indicates that there are inconsistencies in the four accounts. If the Bible is said to be inerrant (literally correct), then how can we explain the discrepancies between the four Gospels? For example, in the story about healing the centurion's servant, Matthew wrote that the centurion came to Jesus, but Luke said that the centurion sent some elders of Jews to see Jesus, and later sent his friends when Jesus was not far from his house. In the parable of the "wicked" servant, Luke wrote that the wealthy man gave the same amount of minas to each of the ten servants. In Matthew it was done differently. To one he gave five bags of gold, to another two bags, and to another one bag, depending on the servant's ability. In Luke the wealthy man is a man of noble birth. He went to a distant country to be appointed King. Matthew didn't talk about these.

Further, very often the New Testament authors used the Old Testament without strictly following the original meaning of the Old Testament. For example, in Matthew 12, Jesus cited the story of Jonah to imply that He is the Messiah that will judge the world. Originally, the story of Jonah conveys a message of hope. The people of Nineveh repented and evaded the judgment of God, and so they experienced divine mercy. However, Jesus turned this upside down by converting the notion of hope and mercy to a sharp warning. Because the listeners fail to read the sign from God, it would result in condemnation from the people of Nineveh and the Queen of the South.

The thesis of James Dunn

Evangelical theologian James Dunn (1982) argued against the Biblical inerrancy thesis advocated by Hodge and Warfield (Princeton theology), and also the International Council on Biblical Inerrancy (ICBI). According to Dunn, viewing Biblical inerrancy as truth (absolute accuracy) in a literal sense is indefensible. Although the Bible is inspired, this is a leap from inspiration to inerrancy. The inerrancy thesis is not a result of exegetical analysis. Rather, it is a dogmatic deduction based on the premise that

God is a God of truth, and thus it is concluded that the Bible must be truthful. This position, in Dunn's view, is a form of legalism and bibliolatry.

Instead of following the legalistic dogmas, Dunn suggested *using the Scripture to interpret the Scripture*. He found that the New Testament authors and Jesus didn't interpret the Bible literally. Neither did they stick to the original intention of the Old Testament authors. In history the Christian Church has been operating with *a canon within the canon*. In other words, how the Scripture is understood is tied to how we use parts of the Bible to interpret other parts of the text. In this sense, the true meaning of the lively Word of God results from a dynamic interaction between the situation and the Scripture.

The evidence supporting the argument

Dunn started his analysis by counter-arguing the common evidence that is said to be in support of inerrancy. The verses cited by supporters of inerrancy includes 2 Timothy 3:16, 2 Peter 1:20-21, John 10:35, and Matthew 5:18. After a careful exegesis, Dunn found that none of them explicitly states that the Bible is inerrant. At most those passages indicate that the Scripture is inspired by God.

Further, Dunn demonstrated how the Bible uses itself by citing several examples. For instance, in Luke 4:18 Jesus quoted Isaiah 61:1, but omitted the last phrase "the day of vengeance of our God" because his focus was on "proclaiming the year of the Lord's favor." In Matthew 5 Jesus contrasted His new teachings with the sayings in the Old Testament. Obviously Jesus did not follow the Scripture word for word. By the same token, Paul and the early church also treated parts of the Old Testament rules and rituals as obsolete. Simply put, *historical relativity* is prevalent in how the Scripture uses the Scripture.

Did Jesus override the Old Testament?

Some of the verses cited by Dunn do not seem to support the point that Jesus overrode the Old Testament. Take the purity rule as an example. At most we can say that Jesus intended to restore the true spirit of this tradition. The original intent of the purification rules is to make access to God easier,

not close it off. However, the Pharisees turned it to the opposite direction. Jesus did not try to abolish the tradition; he intended to restore the true essence of the laws. This attitude is in alignment with his six anti-theses in the Sermon of the Mount. Thus, the opponents could easily turn the table around by citing the Bible to support the inerrancy thesis.

Indeed this is the approach used by Bush (2007) to defend his inerrancy position. Interestingly enough, in his argument Bush also illustrated how Jesus used the Scripture. In Luke 2:46-47 Satan quoted the Bible to tempt Jesus, but Jesus responded to Satan “with a classical illustration of the evangelical principle (draw directly from the doctrine of inerrancy) that the Scripture must be harmonious with itself” (p.33). Jesus rebuked Satan’s misinterpretation and gave his correct one. Hence, Jesus reinterpreted the Old Testament in the right way instead of denying the truthfulness of the Old Testament. In a similar vein, Bush argued that the sacrifice ritual in the Old Testament is not obsolete. “God then, now, and always requires a blood sacrifice for the remission of sins. God does not change” (p.36). But it was fulfilled by the crucifixion of Jesus (Hebrews 8-10). Moreover, Bush argued that inerrancy is not legalism. Rather, Christians who hold this view submit to the true meaning of the Word, just like what Jesus did.

What other theologians say?

In addition, Dunn confined the discussion of inerrancy thesis on the terms of Princeton theology and ICBI only, but he omitted the fact that there is a wide spectrum in this school of thought (functional inerrancy, trajectory inerrancy, limited inerrancy...etc.) (Codd, 2009). Indeed, limited inerrancy may not be at odds with Dunn’s position. In the view of limited inerrancy, the Bible is error-free in its core message about salvation and other central doctrines, but the Bible authors were limited by their own historical and scientific knowledge (Erickson, 2005).

Carl Henry’s *God, Revelation, and Authority* is considered a seminal work regarding the essence of the Bible (1982), but it is not on the radar screen of Dunn. It is not surprising because Dunn is a British

theologian. Also, he did not mention that absolute or literal inerrancy is a recent phenomenon, especially a recent American phenomenon. Marsden (1980) argued that the fundamentalist position of inerrancy is strongly influenced by Common Sense philosophy and Baconian inductive science, in which truth is regarded as corresponding facts in the objective reality. In 1987 Christian historian Mark Noll delivered a lecture in ICBI and the lecture title is very humorous: "A brief history of inerrancy, mostly in America." In the lecture Noll pointed out that while the Britons attempted to cope with the skeptical spirit emanated from the Enlightenment, their American counterparts reacted with conservatism; they defended the complete truthfulness of the Bible.

Dunn's position is not entirely new. Indeed this is in alignment with "Spirit-hermeneutics" of Pentecostals (Pinnock, 2009). According to Pinnock, the Word of God is not static in the sense that one single truth embedded in a Biblical passage can be well-applied to all situations. Pinnock wrote, "The truth is that a word that was good for people in one situation may become destructive for people at other times." (p.161). Rather, we should let the Holy Spirit guide us to understand the Word in different situations so that "it sets texts free to function as the word of God in new ways" (p.160). In conclusion, if inerrancy entails historical accuracy, then this position, as Dunn said, is indefensible.

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