

Sunday, April 1, 2012—Grace Life School of Theology—*Grace History Project*—Lesson 63 The History of the Doctrine of Inerrancy

Introduction

- At the end of Lesson 62 we noted the connection between the Niagara Bible Conference and the early Fundamentalist movement. This can be seen clearly when one considers the statement on the Bible contained in the first point of the 14 Point Niagara Creed.
 - 1. We believe "that all Scripture is given by inspiration of God," by which we understand the whole of the book called the Bible; nor do we take the statement in the sense in which it is sometimes foolishly said that works of human genius are inspired, but in the sense that the Holy Ghost gave the very words of the sacred writings to holy men of old; and that His Divine inspiration is not in different degrees, but extends equally and fully to all parts of these writings, historical, poetical, doctrinal, and prophetic and to the smallest word, and inflection of a word, **provided such word is found in the original manuscripts:** 2 Tim. 3:16, 17; 2 Pet. 1:21; 1 Cor. 2:13; Mark 12:26, 36; 13:11; Acts 1:16; 2:4.
- The insertion of the phrase, "provided such word is found in the original manuscripts," signifies a monumental change in how Christians would view the Bible for years to come, reaching even into our day.
- "Faith in an inerrant Bible as much as an expectation of the second advent of Christ has been the hallmark of the Fundamentalist. . . The history of modern Western civilization has been a history of secularization. Since the Reformation and the rise of science, the external supports of the Christian faith have gradually fallen away." (Sandeen, 103)
- "During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries the power and prestige of the clergy declined drastically; where they performed religious duties they often faced competition from a dissenting minister or could be ignored; and where they still possessed legal powers—as in the conduct of parish and vestry business—they acted as agents of the state and exercised small spiritual authority. In the United States even these limited legal powers were eliminated by the nineteenth century." (Sandeen, 103-104)
- "Behind these institutional changes lay an intellectual revolution characterized by empirical methods and mechanical models which left little room for revelation. As scientific experiments began to produce results of intellectual and economic significance, fears of the unknown and hope for eternity gave way to a new philosophy of human progress. Christianity survived, but few of the traditional bulwarks of Christian faith remained. The church was too divided in doctrine and too shrunken in power to enforce its own teachings. . . According to Newtonian physics, God might well have taken leave of the world, and philosophers such as Hume had established that he had, so far as rational demonstration of his existence was concerned." (Sandeen, 104)
- "Thus by the eighteenth century Christian faith no longer served as the necessary and inescapable cosmology of Western man, and the Christian who hoped to remain faithful to the church found his faith more weakened than supported by contemporary social and intellectual forces. . . For many, empirical investigation and reason provided surer grounds of knowledge than revelation, and much of the Bible's loss of influence occurred

because of the rise of science and not because of direct assaults upon the credibility of Scripture. But attacks did come. They were often, like those of Voltaire, satiric and diffuse, in which case they were painful but seldom fatal to believers.” (Sandeen, 104)

- “By the early nineteenth century the Protestant churchmen of Britain and the United States had been forced into the position of assuming that the Bible was the main bulwark of Christianity and that criticism of the Bible should be treated as the equivalent of blasphemy and infidelity.” (Sandeen, 105-106)
- “Most twentieth-century Fundamentalist and many twentieth-century historians have mistakenly assumed that Protestantism possessed a strong, fully integrated theology of Biblical authority which was attacked by advocates of the higher criticism. As we shall see, no such theology existed before 1850.” (Sandeen, 106)
- “A systematic theology of Biblical authority which defended the common evangelical faith in the infallibility of the Bible had to be created in the midst of the nineteenth-century controversy. The formation of this theology in association with the growth of the millenarian movement determined the character of Fundamentalism.” (Sandeen, 106)
- In other words, there was no formal theological doctrine of inerrancy until the latter half of the 19th century. The goal of this lesson to is trace the historical development of this doctrine.

Pre-Modern History of Inerrancy

- In an essay titled, “The Meaning of Inerrancy,” Paul D. Feinberg admits that the word inerrancy is a relatively young word in the English language. The Latin word, *inerrans* was used by Cicero and Lactantius during the Roman period in reference to fixed or non-wandering stars. The *Oxford English Dictionary* says that it was not until 1837 that the English word inerrant was used in the modern sense of “exempt from error, free from mistake, infallible.” This explains why the word(s) inerrant/inerrancy are not found in the *Webster’s 1828 Dictionary*. Moreover, the noun inerrancy is said to have occurred for the first time in Thomas Hartwell Horne’s formidable four-volume *Introduction to the Critical Study and Knowledge of the Holy Scriptures* (1780-1862). (Geisler, 292)
- Pre-modern theologians and reformers found the Bible’s authority in its author, not in its inerrancy. (Perry) Therefore, there was no formal doctrine of inerrancy until the second half of the 19th century. In his essay, “The View of the Bible Held by the Church: The Early Church Through Luther,” author Robert D. Preus makes the following statement regarding the emergence of the modern doctrine of inerrancy, “Not until the divine origin, authority and veracity of the Scripture were somehow undermined or threatened did these issues receive direct attention from Christian theologians.” (Geisler, 357)
- Until the modern era, Christian thinkers founded the Bible’s trustworthiness not in the doctrine of inerrancy but in the fact that the Bible is the word of God. Consider the following statements:
 - Irenaeus—“We must believe God, who has given us the right understanding, since the Holy Scriptures are perfect, because they are spoken by the Word of God and the Spirit of God.” (Geisler, 360)

- Augustine—“Only to those books which are called canonical have I learned to give honor so that I believe most firmly that no author in these books made any error in writing. I read other authors not with the thought that what they have thought and written is true just because they have manifested holiness and learning.” (Geisler, 365)
- Luther—“You are so to deal with the Scriptures that you bear in mind that God Himself is saying this.”
- Luther—“It is cursed unbelief and the odious flesh which will not permit us to see and know that God speaks to us in Scripture and that it is God’s Word, but tells us that it is the word merely of Isaiah, Paul, or some other man, who has not created heaven and earth.”
- Luther—“Natural reason produces heresy and error. Faith teaches and adheres to the pure truth. He who adheres to the Scriptures will find that they do not lie or deceive.”
- Luther—“Scripture cannot err.” “The Scriptures have never erred.”
- Luther—“Whoever is so bold that he ventures to accuse God of fraud and deception in a single word and does so willfully again and again after he has been warned and instructed once or twice will likewise certainly venture to accuse God of fraud and deception in all of His words.” (all Luther citations are quoted in Geisler, 372-382)
- Calvin—The following is a listing of Calvin’s statements regarding Scripture: “The sure and infallible record,” “The unerring standard,” “The pure Word of God,” “The infallible rule of His Holy Truth,” “Free from every stain or defect,” “Infallible oracles”
- Calvin—“He commanded also that the prophecies be committed to writing and be accounted part of His Word. To these at the same time histories were added, also the labour of the prophets, but composed under the **Holy Spirit’s dictation** . . . Yet they were not to do this except from the Lord, that is, with Christ’s Spirit going before them and in a sense **dictating their words**. . .”
- Calvin—“. . . that the law and the prophecies are not teachings delivered by the will of men, but **dictated by the Holy Ghost**. . . Moses and the prophets did not utter at random what we have from their hand, but, since they spoke by divine impulse, they confidently and fearlessly testified as was actually the case, that it was the mouth of the Lord that spoke. . .” (all Calvin citations are quoted in Geisler, 391-395)
 - It should be noted that Augustine and others used the verbs inspire and dictate interchangeably when describing the Holy Spirit’s role in communicating the form and content of the sacred writings to the human authors of scripture. (Geisler, 364)

- *Westminster Confession Chapter 1 Article V*—“We may be moved and induced by the testimony of the Church to an high and reverent esteem of the Holy Scripture. And the heavenliness of the matter, the efficacy of the doctrine, the majesty of the style, the consent of all the parts, the scope of the whole (which is, to give all glory to God), the full discovery it makes of the only way of man's salvation, the many other incomparable excellencies, and the entire perfection thereof, are arguments whereby it does abundantly evidence itself to be the Word of God: yet notwithstanding, our full persuasion and assurance of the infallible truth and divine authority thereof, is from the inward work of the Holy Spirit bearing witness by and with the Word in our hearts.”
- *Westminster Confession Chapter 1 Article VII*—“The Old Testament in Hebrew (which was the native language of the people of God of old), and the New Testament in Greek (which, at the time of the writing of it, was most generally known to the nations), **being immediately inspired by God, and, by His singular care and providence, kept pure in all ages**, are therefore authentical; so as, in all controversies of religion, the Church is finally to appeal unto them. But, because these original tongues are not known to all the people of God, who have right unto, and interest in the Scriptures, and are commanded, in the fear of God, to read and search them, therefore they are to be translated in to the vulgar language of every nation unto which they come, that, the Word of God dwelling plentifully in all, they may worship Him in an acceptable manner; and, through patience and comfort of the Scriptures, may have hope.”
- All of these men believed the Bible to be inerrant simply because it was the word of God.
- “Prior to the Civil War, Louis Gaussen’s *Theopneusia* was the most quoted defense of verbal inspiration. Originally written in French, Gaussen’s work was quickly translated into English and its main arguments were being widely quoted in the United States by 1842. Gaussen defined inspiration as “that inexplicable power which the Divine Spirit put forth of old on the authors of Holy Scripture” to guide them “even in the employment of the words they used, and to preserve them alike from all error and from all omissions.” This definition of inspiration he defended by reference to the Bible. This did not amount to a circular argument, Gaussen contended, because he was addressing himself to men who already admitted the veracity of the Bible. This is as near as Gaussen ventured to supplying a structured argument in defense of verbal inspiration.” (Sandeen, 113-114)

Early-Modern History of Inerrancy

- The Civil War in the United States in the 1860s and changes in science after Charles Darwin published *The Origin of the Species* in 1859 led many to challenge the idea that the Bible was literally the word of God and factually true in every respect. Arguments about evolution and biblical authority for slavery divided churches and led to a revised view of inerrancy among some factions that claimed only the original manuscripts of the Bible to be without error.
- As a result of the Scientific and Technological Revolutions of the 18th and 19th centuries, various Biblical events (i.e., literal 6 day creation, worldwide flood, Jonah, etc.) were questioned by modern scientists and philosophers. This led to an increasing questioning

of the veracity of Biblical texts and events.

- “The scientific premise that forms the basis for modern historiography and the basis for challenge by skeptics is that only empirically verifiable events can be accepted as true. They contended that since many biblical events could not be verified by external documents or records or empirical data to have happened, then they never happened. Therefore, the accounts were not true and therefore in error.” (Bratcher)
 - Note: This premise is irrational. Consider the age old question: If a tree falls in the woods does it make a sound if no one is around to hear it? The obvious answer is yes, there is a sound. This scientific premise confuses whether something is true with the issue of whether someone was there to witness it.
- The emergence of the rationalistic defense of the Bible in the face of modernity is best seen by looking at the theology being developed and propagated at Princeton Theological Seminary during the latter half of the 19th century. The writings of Charles Hodge and Benjamin B. Warfield are most representative of what has come to be known as Princeton Theology. Charles Hodge began his *Systematic Theology* by defining the right use of reason, attacking its perversion by the deists and refuting its abandonment by the mystics. (Sandeen, 115-116) Warfield, in his discussion of “The Church Doctrine of Inspiration” stated the following:
 - “In the whole history of the church there have been but two movements of thought, tending to a lower conception of inspiration and authority of Scripture. . . . The first of these may be called the Rationalistic view The second of the lowered view of inspiration may be called the Mystical view.” (Warfield)
- Although officially opposed to both Rationalism and Mysticism, the Princeton theologians did not stand equidistant from them on some natural epistemological ground, but as many commentators have noticed, occupied exactly the same stance as their deist rivals. (Sandeen, 116)
- “As is true of the whole Princeton Theology, the Princeton doctrine of inspiration was characterized by a concentration upon external verification to the neglect of the internal—a prejudice extremely serious for those who make such a show of orthodoxy, for the emphasis in the Westminster Confession is, though judiciously balanced, decidedly in favor of internal proofs.” (Sandeen, 118) Consider the following comparison between Hodge and the Westminster Confession.
 - Hodge—“The infallibility and divine authority of the Scriptures are due to the fact that they are the word of God; and they are the word of God because they were given by the inspiration of the Holy Ghost.” (Hodge, 1:153)
 - *Westminster Confession Chapter 1 Article V*—“. . . **our full persuasion and**

assurance of the infallible truth, and divine authority thereof, is from the inward work of the Holy Spirit, bearing witness by and with the word in our hearts.”

- “As comparison of these texts shows, both are agreed that the Scriptures are the authority because they come from God and are the Word of God. The Confession, however, insists that only the witness of the Holy Spirit can convince any man that this is so, whereas Hodge prefers to argue that the Scriptures are the Word of God because they are inspired. Hodge has substituted a doctrine of inspiration for the witness of the Spirit. This crucial distinction was perpetuated by every other Princeton theologian, and, in fact, the later history of this doctrine of the Scriptures becomes the story of the desperate dilemma into which the Princeton professors were thrust by this distinction, and the manner in which they attempted to reconcile the problem.” (Sandeen, 119)
- “We might anticipate Hodge would follow his assertion that the Scriptures are authoritative because inspired with a defense of the doctrine of inspiration, but he did not. Instead he immediately entered into a discussion of the biblical doctrine of inspiration. The nature of inspiration was explained by the Bible itself, he stated. But what if the Bible is not true? That question cannot be addressed to the Christian theologian answered Hodge.” (Sandeen, 119)
 - “It is his business to set forth what the Bible teaches. If the sacred writers assert that they are the organs of God. . . then, if we believe their divine mission, we must believe what they teach as to the nature of the influence under which they spoke.” (Hodge, 1:166)
- According to Sandeen, “This looks very much like letting the witness of the Spirit in by the back door. If one does not already believe the Bible, Hodge’s argument will not convince him. The Princeton position, at this stage of development, resembles that of the millenarian apologists for biblical infallibility . . . the pressure of biblical criticism after 1870 became so strong that later Princeton scholars in reaction to that pressure made important modifications which moved the Princeton Theology still further from the reformed tradition.” (Sandeen, 119-120)
- “For Charles Hodge’s dependence upon previously acquired biblical reverence, B.B. Warfield substituted the externally verified credibility of the apostles as teachers of doctrine. . . He found it useful to point out that one could not accept the apostolic doctrine concerning the resurrection, for instance, and reject the apostolic (i.e., the Princeton) doctrine of inspiration. . .As Warfield drew out the implications of the Princeton position, the veracity of the biblical authors, their skill as historians, their accuracy as scientists— all these fell within the compass of ‘whatever evidence’ and were to be used to defend the credibility of the apostles as teachers of doctrine. Thus Warfield subtly shifted the ground on which Charles Hodge had established the proof of the doctrine of inspiration and made Princeton’s dependence upon external authority complete.” (Sandeen, 120-121)

- “The Scriptures were authoritative because inspired. The nature of this inspiration was described by the Scriptures themselves and must be accepted because of the creditability of the apostles as teachers of doctrine. Ultimately the creditability of the apostles depended on the establishment of their general trust worthiness. . . As doubts began to arise in the minds of many Christians concerning the accuracy of the biblical history, geography, or science, these Princeton theologians refused to retreat from the ramparts of an externally verified Bible to what they felt was the quagmire of inner light.” (Sandeem, 121)
- Regarding the related doctrine of inerrancy, early Princeton scholars believe that the Scriptures taught their own inerrancy. Hodge stated the following regarding the possibility of errors in the Scriptures:
 - “The errors in matters of fact which skeptics search out bear no portion to the whole. No sane man would deny that the Parthenon was built of marble, even if here and there a speck of sandstone should be detected in its structure. Not less unreasonable is to deny the inspiration of such a book as the Bible, because one sacred writer says that on a given occasion twenty-four thousand, and another says twenty-three thousand, men were slain. Surely a Christian may be allowed to tread such objections under his feet.” (Hodge, 1:170)
- Thus for Hodge one can clearly see that his belief in the inspiration of the Bible was not dependent upon inerrancy.
- A.A. Hodge and B.B. Warfield expressed a new view on inerrancy in the April 1881 edition of the *Presbyterian Review*. A.A. Hodge in his half of the article stated,
 - “. . . all the affirmations of Scripture of all kinds, whether of spiritual doctrine or duty, or of physical or historical fact, or of psychological or philosophical principle, are without any error. . .” (Hodge and Warfield)
- Warfield in the strongest statement in the article wrote:
 - “A proved error in Scripture contradicts not only our doctrine, but the Scripture claims, and, therefore, its inspiration in making those claims.” (Hodge and Warfield)
- “Princeton in this article took its stand upon the absolute inerrancy of the Bible and, in a sense, seemed to risk the whole Christian faith upon one proved error. . . The Princeton position on the inerrancy of the Scriptures, seemingly heroic in its defense of truth, thus appears less risky when analyzed in terms of its apologetic intentions. In a discussion of the first distinct emphasis of the Princeton doctrine of the Scriptures, belief in the inspiration of the “original autographs,” we can see an even stronger defense against the possibility of one “proven error.” (Sandeem, 127)

- The expression “original autograph(s)(ic)” is found six times in the 1881 “Inerrancy” article by A.A. Hodge and B.B. Warfield. (Hodge and Warfield)
- “Verbal and inerrant inspiration was claimed not for the Bible as we now find it, but for the books of the Bible as they came from the hands of the authors—the original autographs. This emphasis upon the original manuscripts is another example of the way in which the Princeton doctrine of the Scriptures was refined and tightened in the face of growing critical opposition. A.A. Hodge said nothing of the original autographs in the first (1860) edition of his *Outlines of Theology*, but saw fit to introduce it into the 1879 edition. The collaborative article of A.A. Hodge and B.B. Warfield in the *Princeton Review* (1881) elevated the concept to an especially prominent place in the Princeton doctrine of inspiration. That this concept of the original autographs had been recently added to their apologetic was never mentioned by Warfield and Hodge.” (Sandeen, 127-128)
- “This new emphasis was introduced just at the time that the number of biblical errors or discrepancies turned up by the critics was growing too large to be ignored. One could no longer dismiss them as had Charles Hodge—as flecks of sandstone in the Parthenon marble. Hodge and Warfield retreated. In the first place, they stated that their theory of inspiration did not cover the *preservation* of the accuracy of the biblical manuscripts; inerrancy was claimed for the manuscripts only as they came from the hands of their authors. Copyists’ errors could not invalidate the inerrancy of the Bible. Even this much hedging on the part of the Princeton professors has been widely criticized. As we have seen, the Princeton theology of inspiration served to define and describe the way in which God had provided an inerrant source of knowledge concerning Christianity. But what possible good can a nineteenth-century Christian derive from a Bible which although once inerrant is now riddled with mistakes through the carelessness of copyists? The Princeton claim to an inerrant Bible was maintained only by resource to lost and completely useless original autographs. Once again the completely scholastic, theoretical nature of the Princeton mind is illustrated. And once again Princeton is caught propagating a dogma which is flatly contradicted by the Westminster Confession. In that creed the Scriptures are declared to be authentic not only at the mount of their description but now: **“being immediately inspired by God, and, by His singular care and providence, kept pure in all ages, are therefore authentic.”**” (Sandeen, 128)
- “Since in order to prove the Bible in error became necessary to find the original manuscripts . . . inerrancy could never be denied. The original manuscripts had been lost, and therefore the critic might just as well turn this attention to Homer or the Koran for all the effect his work would have upon the followers of the Princeton orthodoxy. . . the Princeton professors’ insistence that they were doing nothing new, while creating a unique apologetic which flew in the face of the standards they were claiming to protect, cannot be judged as a historically honest or laudable program.

- “What kind of relationship existed between the Princeton Theology and the millenarian movement? It ought to be noticed that the effect of the Princeton doctrine of the Scriptures and the millenarian literalistic method of interpreting the Scriptures was very much the same. Both Princeton and the millenarians had staked their entire conception of Christianity upon a particular view of the Bible based ultimately upon eighteenth-century standards of rationality.” (Sandeen, 130-131)
- Defenders of an inerrant Bible assumed that the Bible was true as a starting point; however, their defense took shape as a logical syllogism that worked backward toward the rationalists. Since the Bible is true as an assumption, and since only verifiable historical events can be true (thus accepting the premise of the rationalists), then the Bible must contain only actual and verifiable historical events and can contain no error. Thus inerrancy as a very rationalistic response to the rationalists was born. (Bratcher)

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