

## QUESTION: Biblical Inerrancy

What a blessing to have God reveal Himself to us through the Bible. The Scriptures, inerrant and infallible, are inspired of God and useful for “teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness (2 Tim 3:16).” As John Wesley stated, “If there be any mistakes in the Bible, there may well be a thousand. If there be one falsehood in that book, it did not come from the God of truth.” The teachings of Scripture are so important to humankind that God the Spirit clarifies the truths within the sacred text to the believer. We call this special work of the Spirit illumination. Both the inerrant Word of God and illumination by the Holy Spirit work together to allow the Christian to understand God’s Holy Word and apply its teachings. There are those, however, who believe that illumination eliminates the need for inerrancy. They say, “The reality of the illuminating work of the Holy Spirit makes the doctrine of inerrancy unnecessary.” This understanding is unfounded in Scripture and is the result of both an inaccurate perspective of the truthfulness of Scripture and an improper understanding of the term illumination.

God has provided for us a special relationship by which we can know His word. As Clark Pinnock writes:

“We have the written testimony (1 John 5:13) and the inner witness (v. 7), and they are not to be divorced. To appeal to the Spirit apart from Scripture is sub-Christian fanaticism; to appeal to Scripture apart from a humble dependence on the Spirit is presumption. The Spirit gives us a mind to see and hear His Word.”

The differences between those who hold to the inerrancy of Scripture and those who don’t are of great importance. At the root of these differences is the belief that it is unnecessary for the Bible to be inerrant since the Holy Spirit illuminates the Scriptures. Here we have a misunderstanding of illumination. The Evangelical Dictionary of Theology defines illumination as follows:

“The doctrine of illumination relates to that ministry of the Holy Spirit that helps the believer understand the truth of the Scripture. In relation to the Bible, the doctrine of revelation relates to the unveiling of truth in the material of the Scriptures; inspiration concerns the material by which the Holy Spirit superintended the writing of scripture; and illumination refers to the ministry of the Spirit by which the meaning of Scripture is made clear to the believer.”

Illumination is not the work of the Holy Spirit in the text of Scripture, but in the believer so that they may understand the Word of God. Charles Ryrie adds, “Ultimately it is the Spirit who is the direct connection between the mind of God as revealed in the Scriptures and the mind of the believer seeking to understand the Scriptures.” Again, illumination is not a clarifying of a text that is unclear do to error, but unclear do to the limitations in the mind of the believer.

Scripture teaches that illumination does not occur in the unbeliever (1 Cor 2:14). We also see in Scripture that illumination is promised to Christians (1 Cor 2:9-10). Illumination is taught in the Bible to occur in relation to the maturity of the believer (1 Cor 3:1-3). God’s Word then teaches that illumination is the Holy Spirit working in the believer to understand Scripture. Nowhere is the Bible are we taught that illumination is taking that with error and revealing truth. Illumination is taking that which is inspired of God and making its truths known to a believer that is rendered dysfunctional due to sin.

It is also important to note that the Bible is inerrant. At the center of the conviction in an inerrant, infallible Bible is the testimony of Scripture itself (2 Tim 3:16). Throughout the Bible is the teaching of its authority, and this requires inerrancy (Matt 5:17-20; John 10:34-35). Historically through the testimony of the Church, inerrancy of the Bible has been firmly held. Augustine of Hippo wrote, “I have learned to yield this respect and honor only to the canonical books of Scripture: of these alone do I most firmly believe that the authors were completely free from error.” This belief in the inerrancy of Scriptures has been seen from the biblical writers to Luther, Calvin, B.B. Warfield, and present day Conservative Evangelicals. Epistemologically speaking inerrancy guarantees the incorruptibility of every statement of Scripture. Therefore the contents of Scripture can be objects of knowledge.

The doctrine of illumination and the doctrine of inerrancy are equally significant and inter-relate to one another in the life of the believer. Pinnock writes:

“The Spirit speaks in Scripture. He is responsible for two miracles in regard to it: the miracle of inspiration by which revelation was infallibly recorded, and the miracle of illumination by which the book is understood and believed. The Protestant principle of authority is that a divine objective revelation (the external principle) is accompanied by the interior divine witness (the internal principle).”

Here again, we are to understand that illumination is not the necessary response to error in the Bible, but the work of the Holy Spirit in allowing the believer to understand the truth written in the inerrant, infallible Word of God. The need for illumination is not in the text, but in the limitations of humanity.

Those that say, “The reality of the illuminating work of the Holy Spirit makes the doctrine of inerrancy unnecessary,” do so with great error. They make the statement with a misunderstanding of the inerrancy of Scripture and with an improper understanding of illumination. The teachings of Scripture are so important to humankind that God the Spirit clarifies the truths within the sacred text to the believer. We call this special work of the Spirit illumination. Both the inerrant Word of God and illumination by the Holy Spirit work together to allow the Christian to understand God’s Holy Word and apply its teachings. The reality of the illuminating work of the Holy Spirit does not make the doctrine of inerrancy unnecessary. To the contrary, the illuminating work of the Holy Spirit supports the doctrine of inerrancy. The Spirit reveals truth from truth and not truth from error. The illuminating work of the Spirit is so precious, because it allows the believer to understand and apply God’s inerrant Word.

Pinnock, Clark H. (1971). *Biblical Revelation*. Phillipsburg: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company. (p. 216).

Elwell, Walter A. (1993). *Handbook of Evangelical Theologians*. Grand Rapids: Baker Books. (p. 545).

Pinnock. *Biblical*. (p. 216).