

PARTIAL OMNISCIENCE: OBSERVATIONS ON LIMITED INERRANCY

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"Mr. Jones, who teaches at my school, is omniscient," says Johnny. "What, you mean he knows everything?" "Well, not exactly everything; but he does have an absolutely perfect knowledge of everything he's intended to teach, that is, third grade multiplication tables."

Did somebody fudge in this dialogue? Theoretically, Johnny may be entitled to redefine the adjective *omniscient*, so that it connotes a merely partial omniscience. But since, in practice, the word normally signifies an incommunicable divine attribute of knowledge—of knowledge without deficiency of any sort—we suspect that Johnny's assertion is a bit misleading. Similarly, if inerrancy, as applied to the Bible, has normally been understood to signify its "never wandering into false teaching"¹ anywhere at all, did then Richard J. Coleman's article in the last issue of this *Journal* (17:4, pp. 207-214) perhaps fudge in its advocacy of a "limited inerrancy"? Interaction with its proposals can lead to the following observations.

I. We should all appreciate Coleman's antipathy toward H. P. Smith's view of "limited inspiration" and the writer's plea for the fully inspired Scripture (pp. 208, 211)—provided, of course, that one's definition of inspiration includes its divinely guaranteed truthfulness.² We can all appreciate his criticism of Daniel P. Fuller's attempt to limit inerrancy within Scripture to "revealed matters" and what Coleman sees as an artificial separation by Fuller of these passages from the supposedly non-revelatory materials of holy writ (p. 209, note 9). His disapproval of former Presbyterian U.S.A. attempts to limit Biblical authority to certain kinds of subject matter, i.e., to faith and morals (p. 213; cf. note 2), separated from history (p. 208), is similarly refreshing. Finally his clarification of the various ways in which inerrancy is currently being defined, or redefined, is helpful (cf. p. 212),³ together with the

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¹Kenneth S. Kantzer's definition; cf. *Bul. E.T.S.*, 10 (1967), 4.

²J. B. Payne, *Theology of the Older Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1962), p. 512. But this is precisely the provision which, as Coleman points out, modern Roman Catholicism (and he himself) refuses to accept, when it combines a belief in total inspiration with an assured truthfulness that extends only to what "God wanted put into the sacred writings for the sake of our salvation," Vatican II, *Dei Verbum*, art. II.

³Though his description of the strict view of inerrancy lapses into caricature, when he refuses to recognize the distinction between limited and yet absolute truth and complete, i.e. undevelopable truth. The fact that "the words of the Biblical authors are none other than the words of God," and as truthful as if God Himself spoke them, need by no means imply that no other words could ever express God's revelation better or more fully (p. 212).

bibliographical detail with which his footnotes abound.

II. Yet at certain points, particularly in its criticisms of Norman L. Geisler,⁴ one observes that this article in favor of "Reconsidering 'Limited Inerrancy,'" seems to becloud issues rather than clarify them. It uses Geisler's acknowledgment, that the Bible does not teach everything it transmits, as a springboard for positing only a partial inerrancy (pp. 210-211). But Geisler's acknowledgment concerns speeches which the Biblical writers themselves abhor, such as words of Satan tempting Jesus (Mt. 4:9) or of Sapphira lying to Peter (Acts 5:8), while the article's conclusion, drawn from it, concerns so-called "incidental factual matters," but ones which the Biblical writers positively assert, such as the two animals being present at the triumphal entry (Mt. 21:2-7) or the mustard plant's having the smallest seeds that were sown in the soil of Palestine (Mk. 4:31). Sound exegesis of the former passages hardly justifies a questioning of the latter. The article under discussion also misuses Geisler's acknowledgment that "historical and spiritual truths are not inseparable"—that is, that there might not have to be a historically accurate Bible, or even an inspired Bible of any kind, for Jesus to save men⁵—and his recognition that inerrancy is "logically entailed" in Biblical revelation. Both of these it uses as a basis for postulating a Biblical authority that is "limited to those matters necessary for our salvation" (p. 211). But when Coleman's article claims that inerrancy is "only" logically or psychologically entailed, it fails to deal with what Geisler means by logic, namely, the force of the evidence that Jesus and the apostles did in fact teach the Bible's total historical reliability,⁶ whether, in the abstract, they *had* to teach this or not.

III. One's primary observation, however, concerns a gap in the article's own logic. For it shifts almost unconsciously from the basic evangelical position of accepting "what Scripture intends to teach" (p. 210)⁷ to the more limited position of accepting only "what the Biblical authors intended to teach as necessary for salvation" (p. 208). And it never really defends this shift. It does argue that it is possible to distinguish "which doctrines and affirmations are necessary for salvation" (p. 209). True enough; but does an ability to make such a distinction justify one's disregard of those other doctrines which are not thus necessary?⁸ It

⁴In *Bul. E.T.S.*, 11 (1968), 139-146.

⁵Payne, "Apeitheo: Current Resistance to Biblical Inerrancy," *Bul. E.T.S.*, 10 (1967), 8.

⁶Geisler, *op. cit.*, p. 143; cf. F. C. Grant's widely quoted conclusion that in the New Testament "it is everywhere taken for granted that Scripture is trustworthy, infallible, and inerrant," *Introduction to New Testament Thought* (Nashville: Abingdon-Cokesbury, 1950), p. 75.

⁷Cf. p. 211: "Inspiration guarantees that the Bible is true in whatever it intends to teach."

⁸Similarly, that we are able to "decide which (things in Scripture) are more important" (p. 211) provides no brief for dismissing the less important, or of castigating the retention of them in our belief as entailing a monolithic concept of truth. Instead, it should be clear that the theory that the Bible consists partly of truth to be believed and partly of error to be disbelieved is not New Testament teaching; it has been imposed on Scripture from without.

argues that the primary goal of Scripture is to make us wise unto salvation. True enough (John 20:31, II Tim. 3:15); but does this then deny the reality of other goals that are found in Scripture, such as making us wise about apocalyptic future history (Rev. 1:1)? Or about that which is now past history (Dan. 2:28)? Or about any history, together with what we can learn from its factuality (Gen. 8:21, 39:9)? Or about things in general, "to make you know the certainty of the words of truth" (Prov. 22:21)? It may be well and good to deny inerrancy in respect to "what was not material to God's purpose" (p. 208), but then what is one's basis for determining God's purpose or for deciding what constitutes His words? Is it human judgment about the trustworthiness of the phenomena of Scripture as sifted by the historico-critical method (p. 211, note 14); or is it Christ's judgment, as portrayed on the E.T.S. seal, that the Scripture cannot be broken" (John 10:35)? All its initial protestation to the contrary notwithstanding, the article seems to have ended up with a renewed separation between faith and history (at least, certain parts of the Bible's history) and a renewed enthronement of reason over faith (at least, over the NT's doctrine of the truthfulness of the OT). So would it not have been more straightforward for Coleman simply to have affirmed the errancy of Scripture, rather than to "reconsider limited inerrancy," thereby having to redefine the term inerrancy into the exact opposite of its normal meaning?

"But whatever ought to have been done," some will say, "what are we going to do now? Like it or not, men who doubt that the Bible 'never wanders into false teaching' are today affirming Biblical inerrancy [—perhaps because of some vested interest in the term, such as the Roman Catholics, who have been committed to it by the dogmas of past popes]. What are the alternatives?" Three possibilities appear. (1) Everybody could give up inerrancy in fact: then no one would have to keep using this (confessedly embarrassing) term in theory; and it could be relegated to the history books, like *massebah* or *taurobolium*. The catch to this approach is that as long as people keep believing that Jesus lives, His words about the unbreakable Scripture keep living too. (2) Those who are committed to inerrancy could so refine and amplify the term that it would continue to identify only those who believe all that the Bible has to say. For example, a doctrinal basis that has been advanced for the proposed North American Presbyterian and Reformed Council reads like this:

[that the member churches] be committed to the total inerrancy of the autographs of Scripture, both in their central teaching on the saving revelation of God in Jesus Christ, and in all their other affirmations, whether on history, on cosmology, or on their own literary origins.⁹

Perhaps the E.T.S. should tighten up its present, simple, doctrinal affirmation? It now reads: "The Bible alone, and the Bible in its entirety, is the Word of God written and therefore inerrant in the autographs." It might add, "—that is, it contains no falsehood, except in the case of quoted

⁹Such wording reflects the troubles that have arisen in recent years within the Reformed Ecumenical Synod, with the proven insufficiency of its more general assertion of Biblical authority.

assertions which are opposed by the immediate context, such as the words of Sapphira in Acts 5:8"; or it might read something like the Council statement quoted above, so as to insure that the membership remain true to the entirety of the Bible. But is this necessary and/or desirable? (3) We can carry on as we do now, but making increasingly clear by unremitting research, interaction, and publication what true ("unlimited") inerrancy is and must be. Biblical Christianity has always suffered from parasitic movements that would usurp its terminology and enter into its heritage; and today's believers can never finally avoid this, however much they may refine or sharpen their doctrinal bases. Furthermore, the implications of inerrancy are so clear that most negatively-minded critics react to it with undisguised hostility,¹⁰ witness the deletion of inerrancy from the recently revised doctrinal statement of Fuller Theological Seminary.¹¹ Johnny may talk for a while about his partially omniscient Mr. Jones, but he won't fool many and will soon probably give up the term himself as an impossible fudging—just like limited inerrancy.

¹⁰Payne, *Bul. E.T.S.*, 10 (1967), 4.

¹¹See *Christianity Today*, May 7, 1971.