

THEOLOGICAL METHOD AND INERRANCY:  
A REPLY TO PROFESSOR HOLMES

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I. *The Position of Professor Holmes*

In an address to the national meeting of the Evangelical Society held in Toronto, Canada, 1967, Professor Arthur Holmes of Wheaton College suggested that the doctrine of Biblical inerrancy is neither *deduced* from the doctrine of inspiration, nor is it the result of an *inductive* study of the phenomena, but rather, it is a second-order theological principle *adduced* to round out the first-order Biblical doctrine of inspiration. In his own words:

"I am not convinced that, in its usual extension to all historical details, scientific allusions and literary references inerrancy is either explicitly taught in Scripture or is *deduced* therefrom without a fallacy of equivocation. Nor do I see it as the result of *inductive* study of the phenomena—the induction is too incomplete. . . . Rather I see inerrancy as a second-order theological construct that is *adduced* for systematic reasons. . . . But inerrancy as we usually construct the concept, is something further [than inspiration], something which I do not find logically entailed in the statement "Scripture speaks the truth," at least not in a form sufficiently precise to 'fit' all the facts. Rather inerrancy is adduced because of the high level of expectation created by the Biblical doctrine, and the attractiveness of rounding out the doctrine with this further extrapolation" (pp. 5, 6).\*

Dr. Holmes rejects the deductive method of system building in theology for four reasons:

"If deduction were the logic of theology, (1) we would have to formalize in deductive fashion every moment of theological thought, (2) we would have to ignore the historical narrative except for illustrative purposes and work only with logically universal propositions, (3) we would have to reduce all Biblical analogy and metaphor and symbol and poetry and connotation to logically universal as well as universal form, (4) we would have to regard all events in redemptive history and the consequent application of grace as *logically necessary* rather than contingent on the will of God. This I cannot do" (p. 2).

Likewise, Professor Holmes denies the validity of the inductive method, both of the Aristotelian and of the Baconian forms. The former he considers insufficient because it involves "the intuitive abstraction of universal principles from familiar classified data, and as such it pre-

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supposes the Aristotelian view of man and nature. . . . To use Aristotelian induction intact would tie theology to Aristotle, and this," writes Professor Holmes, "I am not prepared to do" (p. 3).

Further, Francis Bacon's method of "experimental identification of causes. . . . Is obviously not what theology is doing." According to Dr. Holmes, the usual theological method is "a loose approximation to Aristotle's quest for generalized concepts based on an inspection of empirical [Biblical] data" (p. 6). This procedure, however, he rejects because: (1) a complete induction is impossible and hence our theological concepts would lack finality, and (2) theological method is more than a collection and collation of proof texts that unambiguously dictate their own meaning. "Theology seems to me," he says, "to involve hermeneutical assumptions and pre-understandings, the selection of materials, the choice of some preferred materials in interpreting others, the adoption of guiding hypotheses, the use of models, the gradual hesitating construction of conceptual maps" (p. 3).

As Dr. Holmes admits, "this is neither deduction nor induction. The logic of theological language is different from that of mathematics or early modern science" (p. 3). It is in fact consciously borrowed from contemporary science which ". . . is not really inductive either—nor is it some easy combination of induction and deduction" (p. 4). Rather, it is a "language game" which adduces models and constructs which aid in system building. "I suspect," says Professor Holmes, "that such is the case with the conception of Biblical inerrancy" (p. 5).

## *II. A Critique of Professor Holmes' Position*

The main lines of our evaluation of "adduction" as the theological method of establishing inerrancy will include: (1) an examination of the grounds upon which induction and deduction are rejected, (2) an appraisal of the method of "adduction" itself, and (3) a suggested alternative method.

To begin with, we must express a preliminary dissatisfaction with what is at least a very unfortunate description of the "adductive" method. For to define the doctrine of Biblical inerrancy, which rests at the very foundation of a consistent evangelical theology, as an "extrapolation," "a model," "a word game," or a "second-order theological construct," which is neither formally taught in Scripture nor logically entailed in the doctrine of inspiration is somewhat less than satisfactory. Whether or not this description is merely unfortunate or is really inadequate remains to be discussed. *Prima facie* it should do more than raise an evangelical eyebrow.

Now for an examination of the grounds upon which Professor Holmes rejects the inductive and deductive methods. The form of the inductive method normally employed in systematic theology is dismissed

on the grounds that a perfect induction is not possible and a limited induction is insufficient.<sup>1</sup> But this is scarcely an adequate reason for refusing it, for on that same basis one could deny the validity of many first-order Biblical doctrines. In fact, granting as any reasonable evangelical position must, that the Biblical revelation is self-consistent, it would follow that a perfect induction is not necessary to establish a Biblical doctrine. Definite doctrines can be established on the basis of a sound exegesis of several definite passages of Scripture. The Virgin Birth, for example, is founded on an incontrovertible interpretation of two clear passages of Scripture (Matthew 1:18 f; Luke 1:26). The Deity of Christ can be established on a handful of passages (John 1:1; 8:58; 10:30; Hebrews 1:8, etc.), even though there are many more passages to support it (cf. Mark 2:7; John 5:22 f; Revelation 1:8; Colossians 1:16).<sup>2</sup> Of course the broader the induction, the more perfect is our understanding of a given doctrine. But this is not to say that a doctrine cannot be firmly based on a limited induction.

Prescinding for the moment from the question as to whether or not the Bible formally teaches its own inerrancy, we may safely conclude that if it did, the fact that there were only a few clear passages on the subject or that one had not examined all the phenomena of Scripture (although this is possible to do) would not be justifiable grounds for rejecting the doctrine. Once the doctrine is clearly established, the internal consistency of divine truth guarantees in advance that no correct interpretation of any other passage of Scripture will contradict it.

The second objection Professor Holmes offers against induction is that it involves "hermeneutical assumption," "postulates," and "guiding hypotheses," which have a preferred position in the interpretation of other data—and none of these are inductively derived. Rather, they are "adduced" to round out the theological system. That is, since no Biblical texts unambiguously dictate their own meaning, it is necessary to adduce some models or patterns to map out the overall meaning.

Now granting that Professor Holmes does not wish to deny the perspicuity of Scripture nor replace the Roman Catholic teaching magisterium with a kind of Protestant preferred-model system of interpretation, then it is difficult to see the validity of this objection to induction. Certainly Dr. Holmes does not wish to suggest that there is no factual or textural basis which demands that the data be interpreted in a given way. And whereas the data of Scripture do not always unambiguously dictate their own specific meaning, nevertheless they do usually set well defined limits within which definite teachings can be clearly enunciated. Furthermore, we must understand that Dr. Holmes does not wish to

1. Actually a perfect induction is not intrinsically impossible with regard to a finite set of data, such as there is in the Bible.
2. All Scripture quotations are taken from the Revised Standard Version unless otherwise noted.

suggest that the choice of models and conceptual maps is to be based purely on what he calls "personal involvement," or "conviction," for this would be to launch a rudderless ship of hermeneutics on the uncharted sea of subjectivity.

But, on the contrary, if there is some common basis for meaning and interpretation that arises out of the data of Scripture itself; if the Bible delineates some of its own paradigm principles or master models; if it in general maps out its own course of meaning, then the reasons offered for rejecting the inductive method are less than convincing. In fact, it is difficult to see how one could even know how to recognize and arrange the differing metaphors and models of Scripture unless he possessed a kind of supra-model of common meaning that transcends them. That is, unless the Scriptures themselves provide a definite basis for determining their own meaning, then there is no objective way of deciding which are the master-models to be used in preference to others. In everyday language, the Bible "speaks for itself." And when it comes to preferential models, the answer is equally perspicacious: in the Bible the main things are the plain things and the plain things are the main things. Fortunately, the Bible is not addressed to philosophers but to the common man!

As for Dr. Holmes' objections to a strictly deductive method, one may readily agree with them if deduction is limited to a logically rigid disregard for fact, particularly if the premises from which the deductions are made are themselves not sufficiently founded in fact. For certainly the claims of Scripture must be understood in the light of the character or phenomena of Scripture itself. Obviously what the Bible says about itself must be understood in the light of what the Bible shows itself to be.<sup>3</sup>

However, it is difficult to see what objections an evangelical could raise against deducing the doctrine of the Trinity from the two firmly grounded scriptural truths that God is *one* (Deut. 6:4; Mark 12:29) and yet that there are *three* distinct centers of consciousness which are called God (Matthew 3:16, 17; Acts 5:3, 5; John 14:26, etc.). Of course, a careful scrutiny of all of Scripture will cast more light on this doctrine which, nevertheless, can be deduced from two truths which themselves may be founded on only a limited induction.

Now to speak more precisely about the nature of the logical method that is involved in establishing the doctrine of inerrancy. Granting, as we shall, that the Scriptures do not clearly and formally teach their own inerrancy, we need not conclude that inerrancy is not logically entailed in the doctrine of inspiration which *is* formally taught in Scripture. For, if, as inspiration guarantees, whatever the Bibles teaches is true, and if the Bible does teach historical and factual matters, then it logically follows that whatever the Bible teaches about historical and factual matters

3. For a more complete discussion of this point see Norman L. Geisler and William Nix, *A General Introduction to the Bible*, Moody Press, 1968 (Fall), ch. 4.

is true. And that is what is meant by inerrancy, viz., that the Bible is without error in whatever it teaches.

As to the first of these premises, no evangelical need be in doubt. For Jesus said, "Thy word is true" (John 17:17). The Scriptures clearly claim to be the word of God (cf. II Timothy 3:16; II Peter 1:20,21) and "...it is impossible that God should prove false" (Hebrews 6:18). Whatever else the doctrine of inspiration may imply, it certainly means that whatever the Bible teaches is true.

Concerning the second premise—that the Bible sometimes teaches or at least directly and logically implies historical and factual material—this is beyond reasonable doubt. For example, it was Jesus of *Nazareth* who was born in the city of *Bethlehem* under *Herod* the king and in the days of *Caesar Augustus* (cf. Matthew 2; Luke 2). The claim of these Scriptures is that these are specific historical places and persons. Any view which attempts to completely separate matters of "life and godliness" (II Peter 1:3) or deed and doctrine (II Timothy 3:17) from matters of fact and history overlooks two basic facts: (1) Many times it is impossible to deny the historical truth of a passage without simultaneously destroying its spiritual truth. For example, what can the Virgin Birth mean if Mary had committed adultery. If it is not a biological fact, then it is a theological fiction too. What could the crucifixion mean if there were no nails and a wooden cross. It is senseless to speak of a resurrection unless Joseph's tomb was permanently vacated by Jesus of Nazareth (cf. I Corinthians 15:17). It must be clear to any unprejudiced observer that many of the truths of Scripture directly imply some physical, observable, and verifiable facts about our time-space universe. (2) Secondly, since not all Biblical teachings directly involve truths of a historical or factual nature, one's confidence in the doctrines that cannot be historically or factually verified is necessarily related to those that can be. To borrow the words from Jesus, "If I have told you earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you heavenly things?" (John 3:12). Plainly put, if we don't believe Jesus when He said, "Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the whale," (Matt. 12:40) then how can we believe Him when He said, "Before Abraham was, I am" (John 5:58) or "I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father but by me" (John 14:6)? In other words, not only are some historical and spiritual truths inseparably connected, but in the cases where they are not, they are logically (and/or psychologically) connected by the proposition: if the historical and factual truths of the Bible cannot be trusted as inerrant, then neither can the truths which are not directly connected to historical or factual matters. It would be specious to argue that the Scriptures are inerrant on truths which can't be verified, if they are errant on matters which can be tested. If the Scriptures are not inerrant when they teach matters of fact and history, which can be objectively tested, then how can one believe in the inerrancy of Scripture in matters of faith and theology?

In brief, there are two reasons for contending that the truth of the Bible extends beyond purely moral and spiritual matters: (1) Exegetically, some Biblical doctrines are inseparably connected to fact and history, and (2) Logically, it is less than convincing to argue that the Bible should be trusted in the case of affirmations which are objectively unverifiable if it can be proven to be errant on statements which can be verified in this fashion.

The conclusion follows naturally. Inerrancy is logically entailed with inspiration. For inspiration (or more properly, divine authority) guarantees that the Bible is true in whatever it teaches, and the teaching of the Bible sometimes clearly entails factual and historical material. Hence, there appears to be no reason to weaken the methodological basis of the doctrine of inerrancy by resorting to any kind of "adduction" or extrapolation. Inerrancy can be derived from inspiration by a clear process of deduction.

Of course to say that the Scriptures are inerrant in whatever they teach is not to imply that everything *contained* in the Bible is being *taught* by the Bible. The Scriptures sometimes illustrate the truth being taught by something which in itself is not necessarily correct. For example, Jesus once *illustrated* the persistence of prayer by a story in which God was represented by an unjust judge (Luke 18). But the point of the parable is not the justice of God but importunity in prayer, and it is only the point being taught that is inerrant. Also, merely because something is *quoted* in the Bible does not make it true, for Satan (Genesis 3:4) and others (cf. John 8:48) are quoted as having said things which are clearly untrue.

The task of the interpreter is to determine whether the passage is approving or merely reporting what is said. What it is approving, it is teaching, and that is without error. Admittedly, it is not always easy to discover where to draw the line between what the Bible is reporting without approving, as anyone knows who has attempted to apply this principle to the discourses of Job's friends or to the apparent skepticism of the man "under the sun" in Ecclesiastes. However, in these cases the problem is an exegetical one and not a theological one. The theological principle is clear: Whatever the Bible is teaching is true and without error. It must be left to exegesis to determine precisely what the passage is teaching. In other words, there is no question that the passage is true; the question is what is the truth of the passage.

Finally, it appears to me that it is both unnecessary and undesirable to relegate the doctrine of inerrancy to a "second-order theological construct," which is extrapolated in order to round out our theological system. It is unnecessary because inerrancy is logically implied in inspiration, as has been argued above. It is undesirable because this is a capitulation to contemporary methodology which unduly weakens the basis of this crucial doctrine. For there can be no real certainty of a

conclusion or principle which is arrived at by means of an extrapolation or "adduction." It seems to me that inerrancy is a first-order theological truth not unlike the doctrine of Christ's sinlessness. That Christ was without sin is based on: (1) an inductive examination of several Biblical texts (cf. II Corinthians 5:21; Hebrews 4:15; I Peter 1:19; 2:22), (2) from which it can be deduced that this truth will not be contradicted by anything taught in the rest of Scripture, (3) and yet which truth must be understood in the light of how Christ actually behaved. For example, whatever understanding one may have of what is meant by the fact that Christ "knew no sin" (II Corinthians 5:21), it must be inclusive of a person who could get angry, call down the judgment of God on religious hypocrisy, curse a fig tree, and even drown a herd of swine—for all of these Christ did and yet He did them "apart from sinning" (Hebrews 4:15). Likewise, even though it is known in advance (on the basis of some clear texts) that whatever the Bible teaches is true and therefore without error, nevertheless, precisely what is meant by this inerrancy must be inclusive of the phenomena of Scripture itself. So in the cases of both Christ and the Bible the antecedent claim to be "without sin (or error)" must be understood in the light of the consequent character or performance of each.

Now let us briefly summarize the issue before us. Traditionally, there have been two suggested bases for inerrancy: (1) It is a doctrine clearly and formally taught in Scripture; (2) Although inerrancy is not clearly and formally taught in Scripture, nevertheless it is logically implied in the doctrine of inspiration (or authority), which is clearly and formally taught in Scripture. In contrast to these two bases for the doctrine of inerrancy, Professor Holmes would offer a third alternative, namely, (3) that inerrancy is neither founded on a purely inductive examination of the Bible nor is it a deductive conclusion from another truth found in the Scriptures, but, rather, it is the result of an "adduction" or extrapolation from the text.

At this point it is perhaps not inappropriate to mention that while Professor Holmes warned theologians against the danger of borrowing their method from other sciences (p. 2), nevertheless, he has admittedly borrowed his "adductive" method from the contemporary philosophy of science (p. 4). However, the important question is not where one obtains his method but whether or not the method is appropriate and sufficient for his discipline. And as to this point, the method of deducing the doctrine of inerrancy from the divine authority of Scripture seems to be quite appropriate, and it is certainly more sufficient. For if the Bible is the Word of God written, then of course it is not in error in anything that it teaches. Nor is it necessary, as Professor Holmes suggests, to modify this conclusion by "a thousand qualifications." In fact, there is only one inherent qualification to the doctrine of inerrancy, viz., the Scriptures are without error only in what they *teach* or in what is clearly implied therein, as opposed to what they may contain, allude to,

or use to illustrate what they teach. It is true that there will no doubt be a further amplification and clarification of the precise meaning of inerrancy by the study of the phenomena of Scripture. However, when what the Bible says about itself is understood in the full light of what the Bible shows itself to be, there will be no contradiction but rather a further clarification of what is really meant by "speaking the truth without error." And if there is an apparent conflict between the claim of inerrancy and the facts of Scripture, then we must reexamine the meaning of both, always remembering that "... it is impossible that God should prove false" (Hebrews 6:18).