

Inspired, Infallible & Inerrant

B Y G R E G A L B R E C H T

At some point in the past you may have fallen for some theological pied piper who lured you down a sawdust trail with selected biblical passages, lining them up as proof texts to say what the piper wanted them to mean.

During this 2015 “Year of the Bible” we are providing deeper insight for our readers and listeners to better understand and interpret the Bible—so as to avoid biblical wild goose chases

and theological snipe hunts. We value the Bible, but our absolute priority is Jesus. We believe Jesus is the heart and core of what the Bible is about.

We have a “high” view of Scripture, but most of all, we have the highest view of Jesus. Jesus is both the author and the subject of the written revelation we have—he is the Alpha and Omega. Jesus, we believe, should be the beginning of our discussion about the Bible and he should be the end.

In response to some of what we have already said and written during this year so far, many readers and listeners have asked about these two passages in particular—Psalm 12:6, and 2 Timothy 3:16:

INSPIRED: FILLED WITH AN ANIMATING OR EXALTING INFLUENCE. OUTSTANDING OR BRILLIANT IN A WAY OR TO A DEGREE SUGGESTIVE OF DIVINE INSPIRATION.

INFALLIBLE: INCAPABLE OF ERROR, NOT LIABLE TO MISLEAD, DECEIVE OR DISAPPOINT.

INERRANT: FREE FROM ERROR, EXEMPT FROM ERROR.

examples) that differ and contradict one another. If someone insists that “every word” of the Bible rather than the Christ-centered message of the Bible is to be understood as “flawless” then how can we explain contradictory references?

Indeed, what is the Bible? Is this book of ink and paper holy, infallible and inerrant as God is? Surely God did not intend that this written revelation, as you and I read it during these early years of the 21st century, be enshrined as unimpeachable and faultless.

If God intended to produce an infallible and inerrant literary document, surely he would not have used so many fallible humans in the writing, editing, preservation, translation, production and printing (not to mention interpretation) of the Bible!

Some will insist that since God is infallible, so too must his word (meaning the Bible) be infallible. But there is much

Back to the flawless “words” in Psalm 12:6. The teaching here has more to do with the flawless *promises* of God than they do specific flawless words (originally in Hebrew and later translated into English). “Flawless” in Psalm 12:6 has to do with God’s honesty and trustworthiness, as opposed to the lies and deception of “those who malign” the weak and needy (vs. 5).

Once we understand the background and intent of Psalm 12:6 we realize it would be a mistake to assume this passage is a direct reference to the paper and ink book we call the Bible today.

2 Timothy 3:16 “All Scripture is God-breathed...” If portions of the Bible contain observable, no-doubt-about-it errors, then terms like “inerrant” or “infallible” do not accurately describe the nature of the 66 individual books we call the Bible.

But what about “God-breathed”? Traditionally, 2 Timothy 3:16 was translated to speak of Scripture as “inspired”—not “God-breathed.” A majority of scholars agree that “God-breathed” is a translation

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Psalm 12:6 “...the words of the LORD are flawless...” Is every word printed in the Bible the word of the LORD, and in what sense might we understand the Bible as flawless? The Bible recounts the reigns of kings or the numbers of people killed in battles (among many other

that God creates and produces that is not infallible—including you and me!

Since Jesus is the Word of God (John 1) we must ask how anyone might presume to refer to the Bible as the “word of God,” thus sharing the deity of the Eternal Word (Jesus) with a book?

favored by more modern interpreters, seemingly by theologians in an attempt to bolster their teaching on a Reformation doctrine called “sola scriptura” (which CWR/PTM articles have discussed elsewhere).

Older translations favor the word “inspired.” The

Authorized King James of 1611 translates 2 Timothy 3:16 as, “All scripture is given by inspiration of God...”

In fact, even some modern translations, such as The New English Translation (1970) which is highly regarded, says “Every inspired scripture has its use for teaching...”

And here’s the rub on the way this passage is often “used.” Many insist that all

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cheek, yet many of the “God-breathed” folks forget about that teaching when it comes to patriotic flag-waving when their nation “under God” goes to war. Suddenly, God is with their nation more than he is with other nations of the world—the *whole* world that God also loves (according to John 3:16).

Other of the “God-breathed” folks stipulate and insist on parts of the Mosaic Law as being “in force” for New Testament Christians—ten-percent tithing (for the word *tithing* has a specific meaning) for example.

So, in effect, many of the “God-breathed” folks are in reality only defending interpretations that are in line with the biblical interpretation they propound and proclaim, while studiously avoiding or bending passages that trouble them.

Fallible Translations

The undeniable reality of biblical fallibility confronts the *bibliolatry* practiced by some within Christendom (and insisted on de facto by some denominational theologies and faith statements). The notion of biblical infallibility and

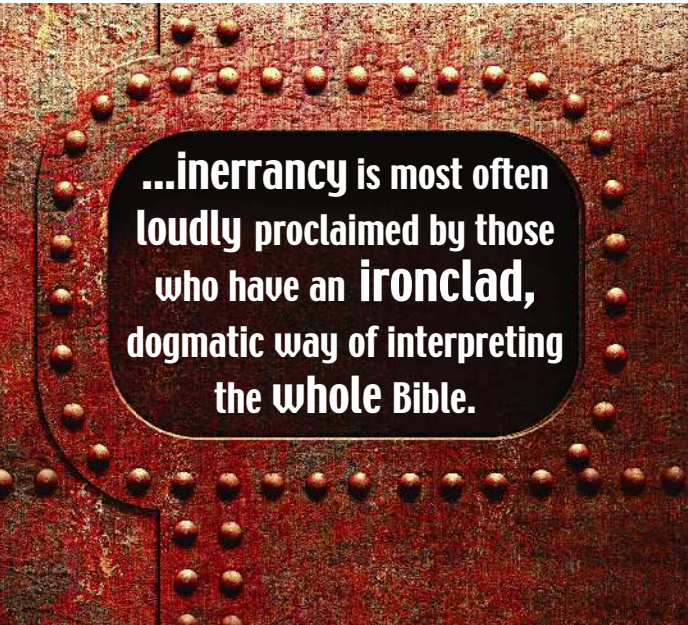
inerrancy is most often loudly proclaimed by those who have an **ironclad, dogmatic way of interpreting the whole Bible**. Thus, in their world, **their views and perspectives are in fact, inerrant and infallible**, and all other perspectives about the Bible are not “God breathed”—like their views and perspectives.

For example, many read the Bible with the primary assumption that every historical event and teaching literally happened exactly as the biblical text says. They have little room for poetry, metaphor or symbol unless there is absolutely no other way to understand that portion of Scripture.

Insisting on reading the Bible “literally” is probably the least effective spiritual way of understanding the Bible. Our capacity to understand if something actually happened is informed and biased by the era in which we live, the culture that surrounds us and the religious precepts and customs we have been taught.

We intuitively know that when Jesus said we must cut off our hand or poke out our eye, he did not mean it literally, but symbolically. But our intuition does not always get us safely past erroneous teachings that are derived from literalisms insisted on by some religious authorities.

Religious dogma and unbending, concrete notions of



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Scripture is God-breathed until they come to a passage challenging their cherished denominational views.

For example, Paul says in Galatians 3:28 that we are all one in Christ, including male and female. But ask women how Paul’s “God-breathed” passage has worked out for them as the rubber has hit the road of practice and teaching in many churches who believe all Scripture to be “God breathed.”

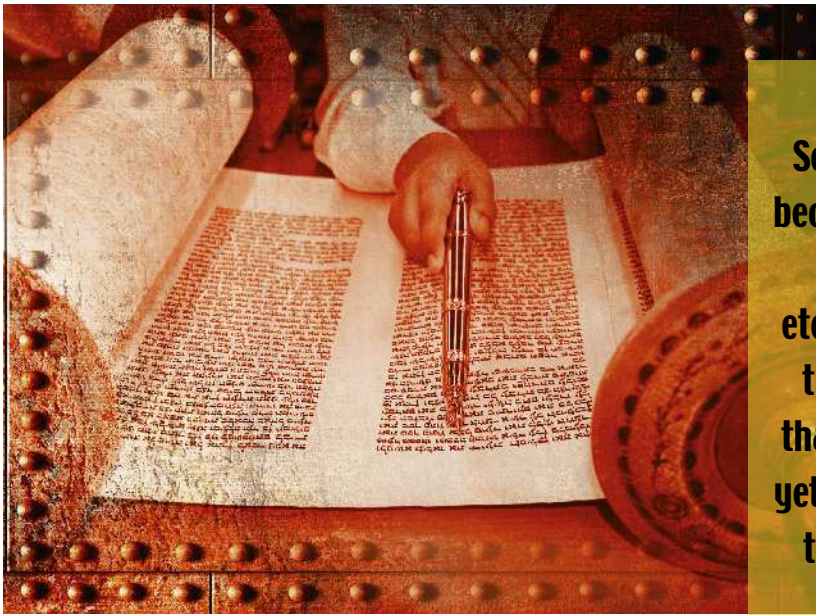
Jesus says to love our enemies, to turn the other

doctrine have even influenced the translation of the Bibles you and I read. Here are two examples of how the Bible that we know is fallible given the bias and prejudice of translators:

1) Translators who worked on the 1611 King James Authorized version believed that the practice of baptism was the sprinkling or pouring of water, normally on an infant. When they came to the task of translating the New Testament Greek word *baptizo*, they could see that it carries the sense of immersion. They did not translate *baptizo* as immersion, for to do so would have done violence to their beliefs. And of course, we can't have the Bible disagreeing with our religion, can we? They transliterated the word so that religion was free to interpret the English word "baptism" as they wished.

The obvious lesson: translators of the Bible have been influenced by their theological background. We can applaud and be thankful for the tireless work of translators—but we must face the evidence that their beliefs influenced their translations.

2) When translators came to the word *ekklesia*, they recognized that the word itself had to do with an assembly of people, but they reasoned that a religious assembly had more to do with what they knew, as Christians, some 1500 years later. So, again they overlaid their translation with their



“You study the Scriptures diligently because you think that in them you have eternal life. These are the very Scriptures that testify about me, yet you refuse to come to me to have life” (John 5:39-40).

cultural and religious realities—with their institutions, doctrinal dogmas and actual buildings. Thus, they translated *ekklesia* as “church” rather than “assembly.”

But when they came to the word *ekklesia* as it appears in Acts 19:32, they realized it really would not do to have “the church” rioting, in confusion and shouting “Great is Artemis of the Ephesians.” In this instance, they reverted to the actual meaning of *ekklesia*

as punctuation. But some manuscripts were written in *scriptio-continua* (Latin for continuous script). When a manuscript was written in *scriptio-continua* there were no spaces between words and punctuation. It doesn't take much thought to realize that interpretation inevitably took place as spaces were created and punctuation added.

Theoretically, one copyist might separate the sentence

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as an assembly of people (regardless of the reason or motivation for assembling). When translators translated *ekklesia* as “church,” did they do so inerrantly?

When you and I read the translation of the Bible we prefer, we benefit from the practice of *word-spacing* as well

“whatisthatintheroadahead” to say “what is that in the road ahead?” or another might separate it to say “what is that in the road, a head?” Some scholars believe that there are more variations in the translated manuscripts than there are words in the New Testament.

So it's all very well and good to say that all Scripture is "God-breathed," but how is it inspired, and what changes have been made to the Bibles we read?

Fervor and Zeal About the Bible

Sadly, there is much strife and controversy about the nature of the Bible, and it seems that many human religious authorities have manipulated their adherents into these heated debates.

As pitched battles are fought about a book and the words it contains, many completely miss the Word of God who is the theme and purpose of that book. As Jesus said to the religious leaders of his day—those who carefully studied the words of their Bible, the Old Testament—"You study the Scriptures diligently because you think that in them you have eternal life. These are the very Scriptures that testify about me, yet you refuse to come to me to have life" (John 5:39-40).

Jesus alone is the divine, infallible and inerrant Word of God. Jesus is the infallible and inerrant message and theme of the Bible. Those who demand an infallible religious book do not necessarily have the high ground when it comes to serving our Lord Jesus Christ, regardless of the volume and intensity of their rather shaky theology.

We must resist flattening all texts of the Bible so that every word and every passage are given equal authority to the Word who is Jesus. We insist that a Christ-centered interpretation of Scripture is the highest goal, for Jesus is in fact the central theme and core message of all Scripture.

We contend that the Bible must be read according to the

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genre in which each passage was written and inspired, and that all interpretations begin with what that passage meant to the original audience.

To leapfrog over the meaning intended for the original audience is to jump to huge conclusions that will (and have) put many people in a theological ditch, often, ironically, aligned against Jesus and the gospel.

Shifting from the Bible as our inerrant authority to Christ as our final Word can be disorienting at first. But such an experience is par for the course:

check out the many cases in the Gospels when the teachings of Jesus confused and upset people, turning their spiritual apple carts upside down.

Disorientation can be the starting point of spiritual growth. All who are in Christ, and all in whom he lives his risen life, grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior.

As our Master, he is teaching us and leading us into all truth, gently and mercifully. I am not insisting that everyone who may read or hear what we teach here at CWR/PTM should fall into lockstep compliance—we are simply asking for people

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to examine their faith, for indeed such a request is biblical (see 2 Corinthians 13:5).

There is one and only one Word of God—his name is Jesus. The biblical revelation, itself a message inspired by God, is not infallible, inerrant or perfect—it is a written revelation of the Eternal Word, who alone is perfect, holy, inerrant and infallible.

We worship Jesus and Jesus alone—the Bible is not on the throne, but rather Jesus alone is King, he alone is Lord. I suggest that some have transferred the fervor and zeal that belongs to Jesus to a book. Jesus is the Word of God. □

For more information on this topic, see RPO39 The Bible: What It Is & What It Isn't on our website, www.ptm.org.