

Concerning the Bible's Inerrancy

Hermann Sasse

The question of the inspiration and inerrancy of the Holy Scripture is in our days one of the most important problems of all churches who still know themselves bound to the authority of the Bible. Modern Protestantism imagined that the ancient dogma about the Scripture's inspiration had been refuted or at least shown to be inadequate by historical research. But the theological task of our time does not consist in replacing this dogma with something else but in understanding it anew in the light of Scripture and the Confessions.

The church testifies to its faith in the inspiration of the Scripture in the words of the Nicene Creed concerning the Holy Spirit, "who spake by the prophets." The biblical basis for this is not only the often cited passages 2 Timothy 3 and 2 Peter 1, but rather the witness of the Scripture in its entirety and especially the manner in which Jesus Christ himself and his apostles cite the Old Testament as the Scripture in which the Holy Spirit speaks.

Concerning the "How" of inspiration the Holy Scripture makes no statements. The theories of the synagogue and of the church fathers about this are sheer theological opinions. This applies also to the theories, which Augustine, Jerome, and Gregory the Great maintained and which played such a great role throughout the Middle Ages, the Reformation Era, and the Age of Orthodoxy. These theories come from a time in which the fathers were not yet capable of applying the biblical doctrine of the Holy Spirit to the problem. They were attempts at understanding the problem of inspiration [with the aid] of a psychology. But when we are dealing with the Holy Spirit, we must realize that his works and activities are inscrutable to every psychology. Just as we are unable to understand the work of the Holy Spirit in the means of grace (Word and Sacrament), so no human reason can grasp *how* the Holy Spirit used the human word spoken and written by men, in order to let the Word of God be spoken or written. We can only say, "I believe in the Holy Spirit, ... who spake by the prophets."

The article of faith concerning the inspiration of the Holy Spirit must be explicated in dogmatics from the starting point of what the Scripture teaches about the work of the Holy Spirit. In this connection one must take into consideration the fact that the most important work of the Spirit is the witness unto Christ (John 14-16). It is from this angle that Luther's insight must be understood that the entire Scripture is witness unto Christ and that Christ is the Lord and Interpreter of the Scripture (Lk 24:25ff., 24:44f.).

The doctrine of the inerrancy of the Scripture has traditionally been considered a conclusion drawn from the fact of inspiration and has been maintained as such by the church. The church did not try to cite a proof passage (e.g., Jn 10:35) until most recent times. People drew the conclusion from God's credibility (*Wahrhaftigkeit*), since he cannot lie, that his Word must be credible (*wahr*) and cannot deceive us or tell us lies. In this sense the word "*inerrantia*" (inerrancy) was used in the doctrine of Scripture since the nineteenth century. There is no reason why we should not use this word or replace it with another one. But the church must be clear as to what it means by this word "inerrancy".

The doctrine of the inerrancy of the Holy Scripture is an article of faith, just as inspiration is an article of faith. It cannot be proven that the Bible is free from what appears to our human reason to be a contradiction or an inaccurate reference or even a "mistake" or "error," which we imagine we are to criticize pedantically with a red pencil or even to harmonize into nonexistence. All such artificial attempts at harmonization and such apologetic masterpieces, as have again and again circulated in

the church from the days of Augustine's harmonization of the gospels to the present, make of the Bible a book which corresponds to our human ideals of a perfect book. They ignore, however, what the Scripture itself claims to be: God's Word in the guise (*Verhüllung*) of human words. It has pleased God the Holy Spirit to give us his Word in the form in which men of an ancient time and of an ancient culture wrote history, giving us several accounts of the same event without bothering about the differences; employing citations which are not word-for-word (*wörtlich*) according to our standards; numbers which do not want to be taken word-for-word in the sense of statistical historiography; events which lie beyond human experience like the protological (primeval, *urgeschichtlich*) and eschatological (end-time) statements of the Scripture, making its presentation in pictures rather than in rational statements. It is only by receiving the Bible from God's hand at his Word, as it is, and not by trying to make it what our reason expects of a divine book that we will be in a position to believe and understand it as the book of eternal truth.

As the Word of God, as his revelation, the Bible partakes of the manner in which God reveals himself whenever he comes to us. Just as Christ's divine nature is hidden deep under his human nature – just as his body and blood are in, with, and under the bread and wine of the Sacrament, even so God's written and oral Word is always hidden under the human word. Just as monophysitism and docetism with their denial of the genuine humanity of our Lord lost the Savior of Sinners and spread without change into Islam, even so docetism and monophysitism in viewing the Bible must likewise miss the essence (*Wesen*) of the Scripture as the true, saving word of God and must end in sectarianism, as we see it in the Fundamentalism of the English-speaking world. Is it mere coincidence that precisely the worst American sects which no longer know the Saviour of Sinners (Jehovah's Witnesses, Christadelphians, etc.) base themselves on the Bible as a purely divine book?

The task of the Lutheran Church is to understand the Bible, as Luther did, as Jesus Christ's book, because it is the book of the Holy Spirit, who in the entire Bible, from first to last page, bears witness to Christ. In saying this we know well that, just as Christ's human nature has its *hypostasis* (personal existence) in the divine nature, even so in the Bible the human side of the Scripture also has meaning and essence (*Wesen*) only by virtue of the fact that in it the pure Word of God is given to us.