

Newbigin's and Warfield's Doctrine of Inerrancy

by

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As Christians what we put our confidence in (whether we put our confidence in our own knowledge or in God), how we view the accuracy of the Bible, and what we believe about verbal inerrancy are all important issues. We must all make a decision concerning what we believe about these issues.

However, our culture can influence what we choose to believe, while the Bible calls us to believe something else. These are some of the issues which Leslie Newbigin discusses in "Proper Confidence." Newbigin gives a caricature of inerrancy that Benjamin Warfield answers. Despite their differences, Newbigin and Warfield both agree on fundamental issues regarding the doctrine of Scripture.

Newbigin presents the doctrine of inerrancy as a commitment to Enlightenment rationalism. He argues that the Protestant fundamentalist and liberal both share in common a view of the Bible that has been shaped by the Enlightenment. The Protestant fundamentalist view has tried to insist on the authority of the Bible due to the new situation created by modernity. As an alternative to this view Newbigin proposes that the gospel should change the way we think rather than being fit into our preexisting system. The Bible was given as a story and we need to understand scripture in terms of a story rather than timeless eternal truths. We come to knowledge of God through this story. We are to understand Jesus and His acts through this story. Therefore, since our knowledge of God comes from this story rather than timeless truths we should put our confidence in God who is faithful instead of the confidence of our knowing through logical analysis.

Newbigin uses his view of obtaining knowledge through the story of the Bible to deny verbal inerrancy. According to him, Jesus does not make the Father known in infallible statements. Instead, he argues that Jesus shared life with his disciples and left them to be His witnesses. Since, Jesus has revealed Himself in this way, we know very few of His words and deeds with the kind of certainty that Descartes wanted

for reliable knowledge. From these considerations, Newbigin draws the conclusion that, “The doctrine of verbal inerrancy is a direct denial of the way in which God has chosen to make himself known to us as the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.”¹

Newbigin sees the Bible as authoritative. He comments that it is an accurate telling of God’s acts and of His character. He is sympathetic with the Evangelical that responds to Liberalism because it denies any real authority to the Bible. However, though He is sympathetic, He believes that Evangelicals takes a wrong method in the way they seek to affirm Scriptural authority that arises from their view that is shaped by the Enlightenment.

In contrast to Newbigin, who treats inerrancy as the result of Enlightenment rationalism, B.B. Warfield approaches the doctrine of inerrancy differently. He discusses how Scripture has come from God. According to Warfield, the Bible is the divine product that is breathed out by God and produced through men as His instruments in the creation of the Bible. The writers of the Bible did not see Scripture as being a human product that God breathed into by the Holy Spirit. According to him, the word used for “God-breathed, *theopneustos*, is active rather than passive which is one proof to believe that God is breathing out the words of scripture.”²

Like Newbigin, Warfield sees the Bible as being authoritative. He states that believers are to come to Scripture with the presupposition that it is true. According to him, we are to believe that the Bible is accurate and trustworthy in its teachings. He believes, like Newbigin, that faith in Christ is not a matter of rational investigation. Warfield would also agree with Newbigin’s assertion that we do not put our

¹ Leslie Newbigin, *Proper Confidence*, 89.

² Sinclair Ferguson, *How Does the Bible Look at Itself?*, 56.

confidence in our knowing, but in Christ who is known. They both believe that Christianity is not a matter of logically demonstrating certainties. Warfield implies this when he says that we cannot wait until all difficulties in the Bible are explained before we put our confidence in the authority of scripture.

Warfield and Newbigin both agree that the Bible is accurate. Newbigin states that He believes that the Bible is a true rendering of God's acts and of His character. Warfield also affirms this when he states that we should come to the Bible with a presumption that what it says is true. However, they disagree regarding how the Bible is accurate. Warfield denies Newbigin's statement that verbal inerrancy is a direct denial of the way that God has revealed himself. Instead, Warfield's view that the Bible is breathed-out by God and that the Holy Spirit's influence extends to the word choice of authors asserts that the converse is true. God reveals Himself to us by the Bible through the Holy Spirit's supernatural influence, which includes verbal inerrancy. Therefore, God reveals Himself in infallible statements. However, Warfield is careful in qualifying how God reveals Himself in statements. He says that, we must distinguish between the exactness (the precise details) of the Bible's statements and accuracy (which is the statement of correct facts or principles which are intended to be affirmed).³

The most significant place where Warfield and Newbigin might continue to disagree with one another is the issue of verbal inerrancy. Newbigin's caricature of the evangelical's understanding of scripture led him to deny what Warfield affirmed. Warfield may agree that the evangelical's idea of inerrancy has been shaped by the Enlightenment. However, Warfield would not take that to the conclusion that Newbigin does.

³ B.B. Warfield, quoted in Michael Williams, *The Doctrine of Scripture*, 12.

