

Response to “Inerrancy Debate: Dave Van Bebber and Phil Kalberg

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Practiced apologists, Dave Van Bebber and Phil Kalberg in their recent inerrancy debate defined their terms and laid out the boundaries of their arguments in a reasoned way. At one point in a civil exchange, Dave asked Phil, “How can one know what is true?” Some back and forth chuckling and gesturing occurred about the time needed to answer the question. At a later point, Phil urged the importance of not confusing ontology (what is truth) and epistemology (knowing truth).

As it turns out, both statements reveal pivotal perspectives in the debate. Dave presents and defends a traditionalist view of total or unlimited inerrancy of inspired and revealed Scripture while Phil presents a limited inerrancy perspective and a methodology for reading culturally influenced literary texts. “Inerrancy” comes packaged with a history of underlying theological and doctrinal issues.

Both Van Bebber and Kalberg believe the ontology/theology of truth begins with God and God’s inspired and authoritative Word and work in redemptive purpose; their disagreement lies within how to defend their interpretations of the Bible concerning “inerrancy.”

In the exchange, Dave leans heavily upon his belief in a sovereign God, inspired Scripture, Church tradition, later theologians, and an “all or nothing” view of truth in the Bible. Phil, on the other hand, talks about imprecision in language, the broad nature of inerrancy, meaning, and interpretation. Dave uses the Bible to support his belief that God’s inspired Word exists without error in part or whole; Phil makes the point that the Bible exists in the form of culturally conditioned literature and fallible human texts.

At one point in the debate, Phil states that language today has become much more precise than in the time and culture when the biblical texts were written. This hints at both the standard and direction of Phil’s position. Phil examines the Bible through the lens of a critical, historical approach (empirical and scientific objectivity). He talks about how languages and the meaning of words shift within cultures; meaning changes with context and intention, becoming broader than what is literal and factual, or “accurate.” When the meaning of words shifts in context and intention, the meaning of words must be defined precisely; how a text is read becomes an issue of interpretation. “Inerrancy” also has a broad interpretation.” In some contexts, inerrancy refers to assuredness and objective certainty about the “truth” of God’s inspired, infallible Word; other contexts extend “inerrancy” into historical records and use it to mean freedom from error. “Error,” too, becomes broad: does it refer to logic,

textual transmission, internal consistency, historical and factual events, style, grammar, typography?

Traditional faith believes God exists as absolute truth; reasoning about God builds on real metaphysical objectivity revealed through God's historical self-disclosure. That God is truth becomes a major premise for such reasoning; deductively, God's Word is truth, and the conclusion follows that God's Word in the form of the Bible is true. What it means for the Bible to be "true," however, has shifted from a foundation in metaphysical objectivity and trust in an inspired, authoritative Word to what in the Bible can be verified by historical fact. With this shift in objective standard from ideal and absolute reality to empirical reality, the Bible becomes subject to investigation and evidentiary claims. Inerrancy becomes technical while retaining overtones connected to the truth in its absolute form. An absolute God is omnipotent, omniscient, and omnipresent; God is also perfection and infinity. An absolute God has been defined into existence. From an absolute God, it becomes possible to read God's Word as inspired, perhaps even directly authored by God, and to understand it as also perfect and infallible, without mistakes; God's Word is accurate and inerrant.

Even given a view that the Bible is true, inspired, and inerrant, do these descriptors refer to the intended message or the reader's interpretation of a text? The message of God's Word has largely been entrusted to and evolved through the Church; just as the Church discerned what books/texts were to belong in the canon, it also acted authoritatively as the reader to interpret and pass on the creeds and doctrines contained in the message of the Bible. That message has been God's revelation and redemptive work in history about which creeds and doctrines evolve, including a doctrinal view of inerrancy. This set of interpretations about message and text has created a long history of traditions.

Scripture, tradition, and reason have long been regarded as the cornerstones of faith and its sources of authority. Cultural shifts have brought changes in the way each of these is viewed. A shift in the standard of objectivity for reasoning has impacted how Scripture is read and interpreted. Another shift has located the authority for reading not in the Church nor necessarily within Church tradition but more narrowly within the common reader. Sixteenth-century Reformist "Scripture alone" or "only Scripture" authority has brought its own set of interpretive traditions that have replaced older creeds and confessions with a set of newer statements that guide common readers and with which the church tradition expects people to agree. Along with these shifts, methods of reading have evolved. Hermeneutics concerns itself theoretically with how readers interpret the Bible and the processes and methods they use; interpretation involves the explanation itself. When readers come to a text subjectively, they tend to find meaning(s) in their response to the text; another approach sets out to discover what the text means or meant in accordance with

grammar, context, setting, and the author's intention; it involves conclusions arrived at through exposition and explanation using critical analysis.

In the debate on inerrancy, Dave's traditional defense relies heavily upon a belief in revealed Scripture and what Scripture says about Scripture; he follows a tradition of reading the revealed Bible to interpret itself, believing that when the Bible speaks, God speaks. The Bible is true because it says it is true. The presupposition that the Bible is true builds on the prior presupposition that God is truth followed by reasoning from this point. Dave begins more from a doctrinal position than he does from a factual theory; reasoning from a theoretical standpoint, Phil points out a circularity in logic: an assumption that the Bible is true is read into the presupposition that the Bible is true. No evidence other than an assumption is given for the Bible's truthfulness when the Bible is used to interpret itself. Moreover, the verses used to support the presupposition that the Bible is true must also be interpreted, this succeeding only in moving interpretation to a more detailed level.

Traditions and doctrines used in defense of faith threaten the common reader's authority; they can be used to confirm what the church teaches and contribute to a conviction rather than intellectual rigor in understanding and defending the faith commitment and responsible interpretation of the Bible. The traditions become a trusted contextual and secondary source that must also be interpreted. A danger exists that only a select few within the traditions have properly read, interpreted, and applied Scripture.

"What is truth?" is really a question about objectivity and whether or at what level it exists. Traditional faith reasoning begins with statements about God's existence and the nature of metaphysical truth before moving to historical truth and evidence. With the shift to empirical reasoning, priority is given to using factual evidence for defending the faith, much of this beginning with historical records. A historical-grammatical approach to interpreting the Bible leans heavily in the direction of empirical reasoning. It takes a commonsense approach to reading the Bible. It begins with historical books, the meaning of words in context, grammar, genre, and exegesis.

Exegesis can easily shift from the text and its meaning to the text and its message. The message becomes that of the historical author or, in faith statements, the ontologically existing objective reality and God as the author. When exegesis purports to arrive at the author's intended meaning, it shifts from the objectively existing, autonomous text to a psychological state however justified by context. A similar confusion occurs when a shift from text to reader response occurs.

The Enlightenment challenged traditional faith for its unscientific nature in holding to a view of the Bible as supernaturally authored. The emerging new science limited its

investigations to the natural, physical world. This was accompanied by a preference for empirical reasoning. One religious response to the challenge involved a shift in the meaning of “revelation.” Traditional biblical or supernatural revelation gave way to general, indirect or natural revelation discovered through observation and reasoning. With this shift from the Supernatural to the natural, the Bible gradually came to be regarded as a human artifact authored by historical authors within historical contexts; the critical study of the Bible evolved into a study of historical texts and authors. Biblical studies also shifted from interpretation and practice within a faith community to an academic discipline investigating what authors meant within a historical and cultural setting.

As thinking shifted from rational, absolute objectivity, it found its new anchor in an empirically limited, relative objectivity and a new understanding of “universality.” Whereas universal had previously referred to an external discharged from all limits, unchanged, and valid or true for all times, the new universal limits itself to evidence gleaned from the senses and customary conceptions and judgments. While science has referred to some natural laws such as gravitation as universal, such laws have ultimately demonstrated dependency upon space and time. What has happened is that two approaches to thinking have seemingly reached an impasse: the traditional and classical reaches for the necessary truths of reason, eternal and universal, whereas science and history confine themselves to the accidental truths of history.

Centuries of wrestling about Truth and whether it exists materially in externality have largely given way to honest admissions about the complexity and ambiguity of language and cultural biases and prejudices. Dave and Phil begin with faith positions then move to reason to support their positions on the inerrancy of the Bible. Both make clear statements about their faith positions: they believe in the incarnation and resurrection, considering these real, historical events. They believe the existing, material Bible unveils the absolute God of history in history: God exists (faith and assumption of reason or leap from empirical demonstrations); the Bible is God’s Word or message; the Word of God must be without error either literally or in its message of salvation. Dave holds to a more literal view of the Bible while Phil seems to advance its overall message of salvation.

Beyond the complications of a metaphysical universal, the matter of how to interpret the Bible comes into a discussion of methods and methodologies for interpreting the existing book (s). Such questions of interpretation involve the book (s), author(s), reader(s), these hinged upon versions of reality (s) and notions of correspondence between realities. The Bible’s truth/meaning/message corresponds to some author’s intended meaning in context or to God’s universal truth (T)/meaning (M),/message (M) revealed through His divine and inspired Word.

Dave and Phil's debate on the inerrancy of the Bible brings to head existing tensions between traditional faith studies and practical application and the favored historical studies disciplines of modernity. Whereas continuing traditional practice allows, if not demands, that the Bible be understood as a coherent and unified text, the discipline of historical studies unveils its layers of redaction and historical dependencies. God as the author takes a background to human authors and editors and their cultural indebtedness. As biblical studies has taken on the complexities of critical historical and literary studies, attention has shifted from the static text and its meaning to its history of composition and to what the author (s) meant. As an academic discipline, biblical studies no longer stems from any necessary religious commitment but, rather, thrives on a separation between private belief and intellectual practice.

Epistemology and ontological arguments cannot easily be separated, and confusion arises when they intertwine. Metaphysical and epistemic grounds for possibility must be kept separated as well as a priori and a posteriori logical structures. Epistemology has favored logical and empirical knowledge bolstered by authority and pragmatic practice; traditional reasoning has a preference for a priori, deductive thinking. Setting aside both metaphysical and empirical proofs for objectivity, another approach has been an experiential Revelation, intuition, and beliefs, faith, and feelings.

The contentious issue underlying debates on inerrancy concerns when the Bible should be read as literal and historical narrative. Contextualists bring a broad understanding of culture, author, intention, and genre into the interpretation of a biblical/literary text. They explain the possibility of variation in the transmission of narratives which originated in oral cultures that used mnemonic devices to aid memory in the transition of stories; they note the different genre expectations present in earlier cultures; they try to reconstruct textual traditions and to determine authors and their intended purpose. Traditionalists agree that the Bible demands close and critical examination, but they object to contextualization when it threatens what the Bible actually says. An extremely literal interpretation restricts the meaning of a biblical text to its actual words; a somewhat loosened literalism more broadly encourages grammar, history, and the author's intention. When Phil states that modern language has become more precise, he seems to have in mind the more analytical and linguistic demands for exactness expected in the modern world. When the Bible is remarked to have inconsistencies and contradictions in texts, this is taken to mean error in a limited and exacting way.

In the debate about inerrancy, the more precise definition of error comes to head in passages in the Bible which can be interpreted as both literal and historical. This becomes problematic for contextualists who wish to consider, for example, the authorship and sources of the creation story. It comes to head in the treatment of historical passages such as God's speaking creation into being in seven days. The

problem of how to read and how to interpret continues, however, into the Wisdom books where a metaphorical reading seems to fit a poetic context. History becomes an issue again in the Gospel accounts with their several variations.

Two points should be made: God ultimately is not reducible to theory and factual test; God and truth do not belong to the factual order. The Bible clearly states: “For my thoughts are not your thoughts,/ neither are your ways my ways,”/declares the Lord./“As the heavens are higher than the earth,/ so are my ways higher than your ways/ and my thoughts than your thoughts Isa. 55:8-9, NIV). Science limits itself to empirical observations and the limits of human ability. The second point: attitude matters when it comes to reading the Bible. Dave and Phil both hold the Bible with sacred regard; neither comes to the reading and interpretation of the Bible with skeptical agendas. Phil, representing a position of limited inerrancy and inductive logic, honestly looks at biblical texts as containing multiple possibilities for literal and figurative interpretation and as subject to variations in narrative accounts and a non-scientific presentation of facts. Dave, speaking for proponents of unlimited inerrancy, seeks to defend the Bible from mistakes and inconsistencies in its presentation of God’s truth. The positions become in simple language “some error” or “no error” in the Bible followed by qualifications of “in its message of salvation” or “in everything it addresses” including history and science. A better approach would be to keep ontology and epistemology separate: the first addresses the nature of reality (natural or self-contained and independent); the latter directs itself to the methodologies of knowing.

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