

# Critics against the inerrancy of Scripture from Early Church until the Reformation

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Observing the course of the centuries-old history of the church, one can distinctly note that the doctrine of the Bible as the most authoritative, inspired God's Word for mankind is not a "dogmatic invention" of the Post-Reformation period, but a clear theological position of the church throughout the almost 2000 years of its history. This historical reality is not taken to challenge even those liberal biblical scholars who frankly do not believe in its full inspiration, nor in its immutable authority. However, looking at the state of modern Christianity and its "disfigured" attitude towards the Bible, I want to ask a logical question: "Why did the theoretical, doctrinal statements of the church in the inspiration and authority of Scripture over many centuries degenerate into a liberal attitude toward Scripture interpretation, or everything happened spontaneously, without any significant prerequisites?"

History is a strong "teacher". Despite the fact that its facts are forever in the past, its lessons have been heard to the present day. Using the lessons of church history, it is important not only to theoretically profess that the Bible is an authoritative and inspired Word, but also to practice the written Word of God as the sole and unshakable authoritative source of God's revelation and knowledge of God. Analyzing the centuries-old history of the church, you can see a direct relationship between the belief in inspiration and the authority of the Bible and the application of this belief in practice and in action. This relationship, as a rule, manifests itself in the following regularity: if, along with the theoretical (doctrinal) confession, the practical application of the inspiration and authoritativeness of Scripture begins to "blunt", then in due course this will necessarily affect the purity of the doctrinal confession itself.

Turning to the consideration of the proposed topic, it is necessary to divide the course of the history of the church until the Reformation into three main periods in order to distinguish what, theoretically and practically, was the relation to the written Word of God in each of the periods mentioned.

## THE APOSTOLIC PERIOD

(From Pentecost to the end of the 1-st century)

This is the period of birth, and also spiritual and quantitative increase in the Christ Church on Earth. Despite its specifics, when the books of the New Testament were

still in the process of writing, and their official recognition of canonicity was to begin not earlier than the middle of the 2-nd century AD., it is known that even then the first church openly acknowledged the inspiration of the Scriptures available to it. Here we are talking, of course, about Old Testament. This was manifested not only dogmatically, but also practically, when the authority of the written Word of God was above any other authority and was of key importance for believers in the church. First, this can be judged on the basis that the Scripture was the "cornerstone" of the sermon. In his very first sermon, the Apostle Peter, beginning to fulfill the great commission of the Lord (Matthew 28: 19-20, Wed Acts 1: 8), takes the Scripture as the foundation. Everything that Peter preaches under the guidance of the Holy Spirit is based on the written Word (Acts 2: 17-21, Ps 15: 8-11, Psalm 110: 1).

It should be noted about the wonderful result of this sermon - three thousand people on one day believed in Christ and joined the young Jerusalem church (Acts 2:41).

Secondly, the New Testament writers who wrote spiritual instructions for the local churches of the first century clearly and unambiguously pointed to the divine origin of Scripture and its immutable Divine authority (2 Timothy 3:16, 2 Peter 1: 19-21). This attitude to Scripture was not a new phenomenon, but it was inherited by the Apostles and the whole church from the Lord Christ Himself (Matthew 5: 17-19).

Thirdly, on the basis of the narrative of the NT, it is important to note that it was the Scripture (in written form) that was theoretically and practically regarded as the most authoritative source and the only "judge" of truth for the church.

The First Apostolic period is unique not only because the church was established, but also because of the blessed quantitative spread of the local churches. In fact, in just a few decades, the Gospel message spread throughout the Roman Empire, and the number of local churches increased at an incredible rate. Of course, all this service was accomplished by the power of God the Holy Spirit. But the fast progress in the qualitative and quantitative growth of the church was directly dependent on the fact that the written Word of God was the main authority in the church.

In general, it can be said that the Apostolic period is a unique example of dogmatic and practical faithfulness to the written Word of God, where there is no doubt about the inspiration and authority of Scripture, and where exactly the written Word is the sole, authoritative basis for ministry.

## Period of Early Church Fathers

(end of 1-st - beginning of the 5th century)

This is a period of serious trials of the church, in which the written Word continues to be used as the sole inspirational authority. There is no evidence that there were any doubts about this in the early church, both in the Western and Eastern parts of it. On the contrary, like the Apostles and New Testament writers who recognized the

inspiration and authority of the OT, the Fathers of the Church, along with all the books of the OT, also recognized the inspiration, inerrancy and authority of NT books.

Reading the writings of the Fathers of the Church, it is impossible not to notice that they had full confidence in the inerrancy of Scripture, as it was written by biblical authors in God's, supernatural inspiration. One who speaks first about this is Clement of Rome. In his Epistle to the Corinthians (Rev. 95-97), speaking in general of all the Scriptures, he reverently points out: "You have examined the Scripture, which is the truth that was given by the Holy Spirit ...". Immediately, with reference to the First Epistle of the Ap. Paul to the Corinthians, he says: "Take the message of the blessed Paul the Apostle. What did he write to you in the "beginning of the gospel"? Truly he wrote to you in the Spirit. "

It is very noticeable how this dogmatic position persisted among apostolic disciples. Thus, two disciples of the Apostle John, Ignatius of Antioch (d. 108) and Polycarp (d. 155), in their written works reverently use quotations from the whole Scripture, especially from the books of the NT. Polycarp in his Epistle to the Philippians (Rev. 110-135) has the manner to call the New Testament "Scripture." The follower of Polycarp, Irenaeus of Lyons (130-202), in his work Against Heresies, quoting the Scripture no less than 1,200 times, openly declares: "We must believe God who has given us the right understanding, for the Holy Scriptures are perfect, because they are uttered by the Word of God and the Spirit of God. " This belief was unshakably characteristic for practically all Fathers, synchronously reflected in the proclamation that Scripture is the only source of Christian teaching. After a while, the disciple of Irenaeus, Hippolytus (170-236), referring to the topic of the profound importance, authority and inerrancy of Scripture in the Trilogy of Christ and the Antichrist, declares that it is unacceptable to make "any change in one way or another" in the written Word of God, but it is necessary "to bring the Scripture publicly as it is written and read it for those who can truly believe." Other Church Fathers, like Clement of Alexandria, Origen, Athanasius, John Chrysostom and Augustine, unanimously agreed with this.

During this period, Scripture was perceived by the church as the only true doctrinal standard. This is a distinctly expressed doctrinal conviction. However, it was also during the Early Church period when the minor, and later significant, errors in the practical attitude to Scripture were admitted.

The first mistake was the emergence of the practice of the allegorical method of interpretation of the Scriptures, when, in addition to the literal meaning, the interpreters searched for a "God-inspiredly coded" moral and spiritual meaning. The second practical mistake is the veneration of the "oral tradition". Thus, step by step, the first seeds of the "wheels" - the church traditions - were thrown into the clear

field of inspired Scripture. Of course, none of the Church Fathers intended to put the Scriptures under the authority of the oral tradition. Nevertheless, beginning from the III century, such a seemingly harmless practical attitude has produced a lot of difficulties and often unreversible consequences. In addition, later Fathers of the church, falling under the influence of Gnosticism, began to tend more and more less base themselves on Scripture, but start to search for the truth more and more in the writings of the Fathers of the Early Church. Already in times of the Clement of Alexandria and Origen, the practical attitude towards the Scriptures was noticeably different from the doctrinal attitude of the Apostles and Fathers of the early church. Gradually, not only Holy Scripture, but also the sacred tradition began to serve as the basis for dogma and church practice. By the time of the Reformation, this situation gradually moved authority and strong belief into inerrancy of Scripture to the background of church life, laying the destructive effect of an logical and feeling rooted attitude to the Bible. Subsequently, this led to a spiritual weakening, and later to spiritual necrosis both in the Western and Eastern part of the Church.

## THE PERIOD OF THE MIDDLE AGES

(V-XIV centuries)

This is a period of tangible spiritual decline of the Christian churches, which for the most part matured and came into effect through a misconception about the authority of Scripture. What was sown unnoticed in the Early Church period, after a few centuries, sprouted and brought many bitter fruits for all following periods of church history. In the first half of the Medieval Church period, these fruits were not yet strongly seen. Contemporary church historians note that at the same time, along with the doctrine of inspiration, the doctrine of the full authority, inerrancy of Scripture and its superiority over all other intracerical sources was also openly proclaimed. In a special way it is necessary to single out the statement of the authoritative theologian of the Western Church of Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274) about the process of forming the correct theology in the church:

Theology is properly built on the authority of the canonical Scriptures both on indisputable evidence and on the authority of the teachers of the church ... The foundation of our faith is based on the revelation given through the apostles and prophets who wrote the canonical books, and not on revelations (if any) , data through other teachers.

However, in the late Middle Ages the position of the "Universal Church" was already significantly different from the position of previous periods. The first thing to note is that although theoretically Scripture was recognized as inspired and authoritative, along with this, synchronously and in parallel, the authority of the "sacred tradition", derived from the so-called "oral apostolic traditions" and "post-apostolic divine revelations", which were identified with the writings of the various Fathers of the Church. The official church passed that historical rubicon, when the authority of the

church ceased to be perceived below the authority of the Scriptures, and the authority of the Scripture itself was placed under the authority of the Universal Church.

Secondly, the institution of the Papacy was officially established. The Pope was recognized as the "representative of God on earth", and, as the highest authority, obtained the right of final interpretation of the Scriptures. The authority of the Pope and the authority of the "sacred tradition" by the chain reaction brought many non-biblical and sometimes even pagan innovations and rituals to the doctrine and practice of the traditional church, which for the following centuries was only more rooted in the dominant authority of the "sacred tradition".

While thinking about these things, introduced in the middle ages, Luther on the Inferior Authority of the Church was writing in his "Lectures on Galatians," :

But though we, or an angel from heaven, preach any other gospel unto you than that which we have preached unto you, let him be accursed. As we said before, so say I now again, If any man preach any other gospel unto you than that ye have received, let him be accursed. (Galatians 1:8-9)

It is an accursed lie that the pope is the arbiter of Scripture or that the church has authority over Scripture. This is what the canonists and commentators on the Sentences have wickedly declared, on the following basis: "The church has approved only four gospels, and therefore there are only four. For if it had approved more, there would have been more. Since the church has the right to accept and approve as many gospels as it wishes, it follows that the church is superior to the gospels." What a splendid argument! I approve Scripture. Therefore I am superior to Scripture. John the Baptist acknowledges and confesses Christ. He points to Him with his finger. Therefore he is superior to Christ. The church approves Christian faith and doctrine. Therefore the church is superior to them. To refute this wicked and blasphemous doctrine of theirs you have here a clear text and a thunderbolt. Here Paul subordinates himself, an angel from heaven, teachers on earth, and any other masters at all to Sacred Scripture. This queen must rule, and everyone must obey, and be subject to her. The pope, Luther, Augustine, Paul, an angel from heaven — these should not be masters, judges or arbiters, but only witnesses, disciples, and confessors of Scripture. Nor should any doctrine be taught or heard in the church except the pure Word of God. Otherwise, let the teachers and the hearers be accursed along with their doctrine. (Luther, "Lectures on Galatians," in Luther's Works, vol. 26)

The consequence of this is a deep spiritual fall of all traditional churches in the West and in the East.

It is very important to note here that the primary reason for the spiritual fall of churches in the Middle Ages is precisely the practical attitude to the inspiration, authority and inerrancy of the Bible, which, in the end, has also distorted its dogmatic attitude. One of the obvious results of this is the established dogmatic views on Holy

Scripture and the practical attitude to its authority in the most common traditional Christian denominations - the Catholic Church and the Orthodox Church.

## PERIOD OF REFORMATION

(XV - XVII centuries).

Hermann Sasse in his "Luther and the Inerrancy of the Scriptures" points out to us:

"The Confessions of the 16th Century, including the Reformed Confessions and the decisions of the Council of Trent, do not contain any express statement on the inerrancy of the Scriptures. The same applies to the Orthodox dogmatists. Even though it was of vital concern to them that the Scriptures should be without error, they did not deal with this inerrancy in a special section on the *affectiones sacrae scripturae*; rather, they considered it in connection with the Inspiration and Authority of the Scriptures. In other words, the inerrancy of the Bible was not yet a problem in the 16th Century. It was looked upon as a logical consequence of inspiration and as an indisputable presupposition for the authority of the Scriptures. Actually it was only in the 17th Century that it became a fundamental problem in theology, and indeed a burning question for the *Weltanschauung* of the whole Occident. This was due to the revolutionary discoveries in the field of the natural sciences and to the great advances made in the research of world history; the Churches were not able to by-pass all this and as a result they were confronted with the problem whether, or to what extent, the Bible is inerrant."

This shows us, that still close to the reformation times even churches, that had a wrong idea on the interpretation of the Bible still saw it as an inerrant Word of God.

Reformation became the period of spiritual revival of many local churches that have freed themselves from the influence of the dominant traditional church. The correct dogmatic and practical attitude to the Bible is one of the main reasons that became the leitmotif for the rapid development of the Reformation. This period is traditionally identified with the personality of Martin Luther (1483-1546 gg.). However, there were other personalities in the pre-reform period who openly declared the full authority of Scripture. Here it is necessary to recall Jan Hus, John Wycliffe. It was interesting, that they all were trying to bring back the highest authority of the Scriptures into the church life, but at the same time many of those reformers were doing the same mistake they were fighting against – they were putting the authority of man, reason, logic, goodness over the Scriptures. This is why in many cases their dialog with the Catholic or Orthodox churches was in vain: the other side did not understand why the authority of the tradition and church fathers has to be substituted by authority of the reason or feelings. In both cases Scripture was put in the position "under something" and not above.

But it was not the case with Luther. On the contrary to the traditionally established teachings of the Catholic Church, Luther openly proclaimed one of the key principles

of the Reformation –“ sola Scriptura”. This principle called for the return of Holy Scripture to that authoritative place that rightfully belong to it by God's ordinance, as it was during the first centuries of the Early Church. Pronouncing the dominance of the Divine Word, Luther in his teaching placed a strong emphasis on the doctrinal and practical authority of the Bible, which, due to Divine inspiration, possesses the highest Divine authority.

It also must be said that the principle of Sola Scriptura was not at all an invention of the Reformation. In fact, this is the same principle that the church held in the Early Apostolic period and the Church Fathers period, until the authority of Scripture was removed by the "authority of tradition" during the Middle Ages. The reformers simply returned to the origins of the evangelical faith and even more clearly articulated their dogmatic principles, translating these dogmatic principles into the practice of ministry.

Does the principle "Sola Scriptura" mean that Christians should not read any other books other than the Bible? Does it deny the need for preaching and explaining Scripture in the church? Does the principle " Sola Scriptura " require the rejection of all traditions and the authoritative role of the ministers of the church? These and many other similar questions are constantly arising from those who are trying to understand the significance of this basic principle of the Reformation. Critics of the " Sola Scriptura " principle use such questions to prove its collapse. In fact, " Sola Scriptura " does not mean anything of this sort of things.

First of all, the inevitable question arises about the inerrancy of Scripture. This is the summary conclusion of many who called themselves christian: people are mistaken, so people's participation in writing Bible books makes mistakes unavoidable. In order to have divine infallibility, the divine component in the Scriptures must completely suppress and control the human. But in this case, human authors are transformed simply into mediums, mechanically issuing information invested in them in a supernatural way. It is known that the Bible was not written like this. The books of the Bible were written by people who lived in real historical and cultural conditions, which is clearly seen from the character of the biblical text (see Luke 1: 1-4, 1 John 1: 1-3, etc.). This leads to the assertion that the truth of Scripture must be understood only in a general or indirect sense. A literal understanding of the infallibility of Scripture is recognized as unscientific and fanatical.

Most liberal theologians inherited this position and stick to it, such as Schleiermacher, Bultmann and many others. Some of them stated about the need to demythologize the Bible, that is, to determine what is true in it, and what it is necessary to perceive only as a myth, which conveys a certain truth in a certain way. Later, Carl Barth, trying to save the authority of the Scriptures, proposed an "unorthodox" idea that Scripture should be perceived only as an imperfect instrument designed to lead us to a relationship with Christ, which is the true revelation of God. On this attempts to discredit the inerrancy of the Scriptures did not end. As the influence of postmodernism expands, they become more and more frequent.

On the contrary to such views, Luther taught in the Large Catechism, “I and my neighbor and, in short, all people may err and deceive. But God’s Word cannot err. (Cat. Maj. IV: 57).”

For Luther the inerrancy of Scripture was an axioma. Even if human reason says something else, we should believe God’s Word, he said, because “it is not man’s word, which could lie and be wrong; it is the Word of God, who is the eternal truth” (LW 23:95). In his commentary to Psalm 112 he writes: “The Scriptures cannot lie” (LW 13:393). The Lutheran Confessions also teach the inerrancy of Scripture. In the exposition on the first commandment in the Large Catechism it says: “These words must stand and prove to be true since God cannot lie or deceive” (Cat. Maj. I:46).

Luther knew that the Bible might appear to contradict itself. But why does it appear that way? Who should be blamed for it? Luther wrote:

“The Holy Spirit has been blamed for not speaking correctly. He speaks like a drunkard or a fool. He so mixes things up and uses wild, queer words and statements. But it is our fault, who have not understood the language nor known the manner of the prophets. For it cannot be otherwise; the Holy Ghost is wise and makes the prophets also wise. A wise man may be able to speak correctly; that holds true without fail. “

Two things were closely tied for reformers – the inspiration of the Bible and its inerrancy. One cannot stay strong without the other. Inspiration proves the inerrancy and inerrancy proves the inspiration.

John F. Brug in his “The Battle to Preserve the Doctrines of the Inspiration and Inerrancy of Scripture in American Lutheranism” also writes:

“Inspiration” is the miraculous process by which God the Holy Spirit called the writers of the Bible to write and supplied them with the exact thoughts and words which they were to record. The term “inerrancy” confesses that since the content of the Bible was provided by God himself, the Bible contains no errors, even though it was given through human beings.