

The Word of God: a Dialogue

between

Omar Ortiz

and

Philosophy Student

Editors Note: The following Article was composed as an assignment in Prof. John Frame's Apologetics course at RTS Orlando in the Fall of 2002. Subsequently, Prof. Frame decided it was worthy to receive the prestigious "Hall of Fame" award for excellence in writing.

This is an e-mail dialogue between Mark Grove* and me. I was lead to e-mail him by his roommate's sister. He began the dialogue. [*name changed]

Mark:

Hey Omar! This is Mark Grove, Daniel's roommate. Sorry it has been so complicated trying to figure this out. I just have had this project explained to me by about three different people in three different ways...so I am going to give it my best shot. I'm currently taking two philosophy classes, one taught by an atheist and the other a Presbyterian graduate of Calvin College. While the one tends to encourage my Christian beliefs, the atheist seems to have made it his sole purpose to tear away at the very fabric of my belief system. My dad is a minister in Miami; in fact I think you may know him. So I have been calling him about every day trying to detoxify from my class. It kills me to see my fellow Christians in the class just sponging off of this professor's intellectual rants on our faith.

Omar:

I remember being in a philosophy class at Miami-Dade Community College and the professor was railing against the authority of the Bible based on the Creation narratives. I tried standing up to him, and he ate my lunch. Sadly after seeing me go down in flames all of the other Christians in the class kept their mouths shut. It is hard to be a Christian in secular universities these days. But don't worry; I don't think you have to check your faith at the door. Shoot me your first question.

Mark:

The first thing I want to address with you is the issue of scriptural inerrancy. I'm coming to the place where I am forced to question this inerrancy and therefore infallibility and then, logically, divine inspiration (to a degree that would override human error/partiality/subjectivity, etc.). Although it is possible to believe that the author's wrote in the Spirit (as I would argue someone like Billy Graham does), it seems far more of a stretch to believe that God whispered his divine words into their ear or somehow guided their human hands away from error or contradiction. While a man, like Billy

Graham, may write in the spirit...we do not call him infallible. And then for a council to disregard the multitude of other gospel accounts, on the grounds that they *weren't* divinely inspired (i.e. Gospel of Thomas) and therefore not canonical, seems at least thought provoking and worthy of investigation. If you could somehow explain this problem away...I would be most grateful. Yet, I have not, as of yet, figured a way to do so. I appreciate whatever insight you may have.

Omar:

Wow! You have asked three hard questions. To address this issue the first thing I would have to do is define the terms we are using here. Without proper definitions it would be hard to move very far. When we speak of the inerrancy of the Bible what we are saying is that it is free from error. When we speak of the infallibility of the Bible we mean that it is incapable of erring. I am giving you these definitions so that you will know where it is that I am coming from in my following statements. Allow me to address this first question you posed then I will go on to how the authors of the Bible were inspired and the role that the councils played in determining what was "Scripture."

"Error" is a slippery word and like in all speech it is dependent upon its context. If you asked your teacher how many pages were in one of your text books he might respond 300, but in truth there may be only 293 pages in the text. Would you say that he made an error at this point? Of course not, our language allows for rounding off and approximations. Giving the gist of something is an absolutely valid way to communicate. But in another context that same question and response could be an error. If I was a publisher and needed to know exactly how many pages there were in a textbook about to be published I would expect the answer 293, not 300. In the first example the professor made no claim that the number was precise. So one could not hold him accountable for that. In the same way the Bible never claims to be precise in what it communicates. (Keep in mind that I can be truthful without being precise.) In fact not only does the Bible never claim precision, but as my systematic theology professor has said, "It contains many phenomena which would be incompatible with such a claim." Such as round numbers, unrefined grammar, and pre-scientific descriptions of events (i.e. the Bible says that the sun rose, well that is not scientifically correct but that was they way they communicated, and in fact that is still a valid way to communicate today, like when your girlfriend says "My, what a beautiful sunrise.") You may not be aware of this but often times when the Scriptures are attacked they are being attacked by modern criteria. Today we are sticklers for precise quotations and refined grammar, which was not expected when the Bible was written. Keep in mind that God was speaking to a people in space and time. He needed to communicate with them by their conventions. What would Israel have done with a holy floppy disk? The purpose of Scripture was not to be a precise scientific treatise; it was written to motivate us toward faith in Christ. In order for it to accomplish that goal, it had to speak in everyday language so that it would be well received.

As for inspiration I would define it as God's using of the writers and their faculties (background, skills, concerns, personalities, etc.) to produce Scripture. I would not say

that Billy Graham writes in the Spirit in the same way that Isaiah or Paul wrote in the Spirit. The reason for that is because what Isaiah and Paul wrote is infallible and what Billy Graham writes is not. If they were writing in the Spirit in the same sense then either they are all infallible or they are all fallible we cannot have it both ways. You see God is in control of everything that happens to us. So he was in control of Paul's heredity, environment, education, concerns, etc. This is how God can produce conformity between his mind and Paul's mind. While there certainly are examples of God dictating to the authors of the Bible (Rev.2:1; Ex. 34:27f.), He is not bound to that. Luke for example says that he researched his account (Luke 1:1-4). So you see that inspiration is not some sort of mystical experience where the authors were in some trance as they wrote. It was simply their writing down words on parchment, just like I am typing these words on my computer. The difference is that God had determined before hand to keep them from making any errors as they wrote.

The third factor you mentioned was the role that the councils of the early church played in determining what was in fact canonical. It may surprise you to know that the four Gospels were accepted as canonical very early on. In fact one biblical scholar (F.F. Bruce) suggests that as early as 90/95 AD the four Gospels were brought together in Ephesus. Now saying that the early church agreed that all the four Gospels were canonical doesn't mean that they all had their own copies but we see that there was a growing consensus in the church. You mentioned the Gospel of Thomas as one that was rejected by the early church, but what you may not be aware of is that this particular Gospel was written from a Gnostic perspective, an early Christian heresy. Its very presuppositions contradicted the other Gospels. Acts was quickly accepted because of its connection to Luke's Gospel, and the account of Paul's missionary work in Acts lead to the quick acceptance of several of Paul's letters. This is not to say that it was all easy. Hebrews, James, the Pastoral letters of Paul, and Peter's Epistles all had a difficult time being accepted, but they finally were. One of the most intriguing facts of this period is that there were three separate lists, geographically spread out, that said which books were canonical. Every one of our present NT books was on one of those lists. There were others, however, such as Didache and Shepherd of Hermas, which were included on those lists and later rejected. The first time that all 27 books were put together on one list that claimed canonicity was in 367 AD (Athanasius' Easter Letter). But please don't think that there was no process on how this was done. There were certain criteria that all the books had to have in order to be accepted into the canon. First they had to be written by an Apostle. If this first criterion was not met then the books had to be written by someone who was associated with the Apostles. It is important for you to know that the traditional Protestant stance is that the church merely recognized the preexistent canon; we did not pick it out. This is in contrast to the Catholic Church, which says that the books were actually determined as canonical by the church. I am afraid that I must admit to you that there is an element of subjectivity here. We are relying on the goodness of God to keep us from error on this point. Still, you can be very confident that the books you have in you Bible comprise the Word of God.

Mark:

The core of the issue here is Jesus' sending out of the twelve, as accounted in Mark 6, Matthew 10, and Luke 9 (or even his sending of the "seventy" in Luke 10). In Mark the disciples are given strict instruction to "take nothing for their journey EXCEPT A STAFF; no bread, no bag, no money in their belts; but to WEAR SANDALS and not put on two tunics." Then Matthew and Luke, accounting the SAME EVENT, command "take nothing for your journey, NO STAFF, nor bag, nor bread, nor money, and do not have two tunics. And similarly, "Take . . . no bags for your journey, nor two tunics, NOR SANDALS, NOR a STAFF." The issue here is the proper appearance of a disciple of Christ. Did he command them to take on the appearance of poverty? Or did he allow them shoes and staffs? Were they to humble themselves to such a degree that they go into the world appearing almost as beggars, shoeless and staffless, or were they given reign to hold their head up high and walk as proud followers of Christ (supported by a staff, so as to not grow weary, and with sandals, so as to not tear at their feet). The problem here is BLATANT contradiction. I see no way around it and therefore find myself once again questioning inerrancy and infallibility. Although his may be a small example, ONE small example suffices to chuck divine inerrancy and open the floodgates to human error and subjectivity.

Another problem with the "sending of the twelve," is the issue of WHERE did he send the twelve. He had to send them somewhere. Was it to the whole world, or to the "house of Israel." To the Gentile AND the Jew, or just the Jew? According to Luke 10, he sent them to go ANYWHERE and to eat and drink "whatever they provide," and again "eat what is before you." He appointed them to "every town and place where he himself was about to come." (Jesus ministered to Gentiles too...i.e. the Samaritan woman). Yet according to Matthew, he sent the twelve with the instruction to "Go nowhere among the Gentiles, and enter no town of the Samaritans, but go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." I find this most confusing. Not only do we have contradictory accounts of how the disciples were to present themselves when they went. But we also have contradiction of WHERE THEY WERE SUPPOSED TO GO!!

Omar:

I would disagree with you that this is a small example of difficulties in Scripture. Often times when people pose these types of questions they pick passages that are relatively easy to solve, but this is one of the harder issues that we must face in the Gospels. Second, let me again apologize for the length of this answer, but you have asked some hard questions and they deserve good answers. Let me remind you again that we must be careful to not impose our standards of precision on the Bible. Our laws on copyrights and quotations are vastly different from those of Jesus' culture. The question we must ask is if the writer is communicating the intent of what Jesus was saying, accuracy is not to be determined by word for word quotations.

To answer your question let me begin by saying that Jesus is a man just like we are, and he communicated in the same way that you and I do. Jesus used rhetorical tools in communicating with his audiences. One of those tools would have been exaggeration. Look for example at Matthew 6:3. Here Jesus says, "... when you give to the needy, do

not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing.” That is impossible. Jesus is exaggerating in order to get a point across. This is just one of several examples I could give you of Jesus using rhetoric to communicate. It seems that when we come to these passages we need to ask ourselves if Jesus is in fact exaggerating. We only have Jesus words, we do not have his inflection, his emphasis of certain words, or his body language. But his disciples did have those things and they would have been able to see quite easily that Jesus was in fact exaggerating. The speculation is that one of the Gospel writers was communicating with the exaggeration, while another was simply giving the basic content of what Jesus was saying. But all of the Gospel writers are communicating the intent of Jesus words, the urgency of proclaiming the Gospel, and I think we would both agree that these passages are showing that sense of urgency. You might be hesitant at this point, but allow me to give you a simple example of what I mean. In the Gospels you see repeatedly the phrases “Kingdom of God” and “Kingdom of Heaven.” Both of these phrases have the same Aramaic expression underlying them. It is simply the emphasis that the authors wanted to bring out. In the Ancient Near East this was an acceptable means of communication.

You also brought up the issue of where they were to go on their journey. You mentioned that Jesus would not let them to not go to the Gentiles, but only to the Israelites, in the Gospel of Matthew. In Luke, however, he told them to go everywhere that he went. I have two answers for this question. First, Jesus never went to Samaria to hold an evangelistic meeting. He did ministry along the way. When he was in Samaria he would do things, but he never went full out to the Samaritans. Second, the emphasis Luke is trying to get across is different than that of Matthew. Matthew is concerned to show Israelites that Jesus is indeed the promised Messiah, but Luke wants to show Gentiles that the promise is for them as well. Let me remind you once again that all history is selective. You can't say everything that happened. So Luke and Matthew each bring out different emphases in order to convey the message that they wanted to.

Mark:

I will write more later but quickly wanted to respond to one issue while it is on my mind. In the last paragraph of your answer you pointed out the varied emphasis of the gospels. I understand varied emphasis...yet this case seems to go beyond emphasis into contradiction. Who did Christ send the disciples to? One says Jew and Gentile the other says Jew only. What then are we to think?

Omar:

I went back and looked at the passages once more, and I can clearly see where Jesus forbids the disciples from going to the Gentiles in Matthew, but I am afraid that I don't see where he sends them to the Gentiles and the Jews. I looked in the NKJ and the NIV and neither seemed to make that distinction. Could you give me the reference that you are referring to?

Mark:

You're right. I just looked at it and realized it is in Luke 10, the sending of the 70, that he makes the distinction and says, "eat whatever is put before you." He does not do so with Luke 12. I have some more things we can discuss if you would like. Where do we get the idea of infallibility from? If I am not mistaken...it is the church – the same people who compiled the New Testament. Do the scriptures ever mention inerrancy or infallibility? Or is that a man derived assumption? Where did the church get the idea that the letters were errorless and inspired directly by God?

Omar:

I think it is important for me to start off by saying that the church did not arbitrarily decide which books were or were not part of the New Testament. Some of these books actually testify to one another. For example in 1 Cor. 15:1-8 Paul calls the stories of Jesus (i.e. the Gospels), Scripture. In 2 Peter 3: 14-16 Peter puts Paul's words on the level of Scripture. In fact Paul even holds his own writings with a certain level of authority. He commands Timothy his protégé to keep what he has heard from Paul as a pattern of sound teaching (1 Tim. 1: 13). So you see that there was a certain level of attestation within the NT itself as to what was and what was not canonical. The second thing to mention before I answer your question is that there was not only internal testimony but external testimony as well. Certainly, there were some books that were held as canonical at one point but for good reasons were later put aside. Two examples would be the Gospel of Thomas, which was a Gnostic writing, and the Epistle of Barnabas, which was written too late to be penned by the Barnabas of Scripture. That is not to say that the church did not use these books, they just did not hold that they were the inspired word of God. Let us also reaffirm our own faith here. God is sovereign over all. Does it fit within the character of God to let his bride be lead astray with what books are or are not part of the Bible? Can't he control that as well as feed the birds of the field (Matt. 6: 25ff.)?

As for your question as to whether or not the Bible ever mentions inerrancy or infallibility, the answer is no it does not. Still we need to be careful here. The Bible nowhere mentions the word "Trinity," but no self-respecting Christian would deny that this is a Biblical concept, one for which Christians have suffered much to defend. We have the responsibility to use words like inerrancy and Trinity as theological shorthand. Could you imagine having to explain the concept of the Trinity every time you wanted to talk about it because you did not have some sort of theological shorthand for it? I mention this only to show you that using "non-biblical" words in theology is perfectly acceptable. Still, while the words may never be there, the concept of inerrancy is found with Scripture. First we know that God does not lie (Titus 1:2; Num. 23:19). We also know that he is not ignorant (Heb. 4:13). This means that there is nothing that he is not aware of when he speaks. Third, we know that the Bible is the Word of God (2 Tim 3:16). So if all of these points are true, and they are, then the Bible has to be inerrant and infallible. But keep in mind how it is that I defined inerrancy and infallibility before. Inerrancy means that the Bible is free from error. Infallibility means that the Bible is not capable of erring.