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Question 44 - How did the church fathers view the doctrine of inspiration and inerrancy?

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101 MOST ASKED QUESTIONS ABOUT THE BIBLE

44. How did the church fathers view the doctrine of inspiration and inerrancy?

The charge has been made that belief in inspiration and inerrancy is a very recent one, probably instituted by the great Presbyterian theologian (1851-1921) in the latter part of the 19th century.

The facts however totally refute this claim. To the contrary, practically every important church leader throughout the centuries has voiced his strong commitment to these precious doctrines. The following quotations bear testimony of this belief. They have been gleaned from various church history books. I have placed them in alphabetical order:

A. Athanasius (293-373) – Bishop of Alexandria.

“The Holy Scripture is mightier than all synods . . . The Bible is a book wholly inspired by God from beginning to end . . . each Psalm has been spoken and composed by the Holy Spirit . . . Let no man add to these (66 books), neither let him take aught from these.”

B. Augustine (354-430) – Bishop of Hippo.

“I have learned to . . . respect and honor only . . . the canonical books of Scripture: of these alone do I most firmly believe that the authors were completely free from error. And if in these writings I am perplexed by anything which appears to me opposed to the truth, I do not hesitate to suppose that either the manuscript is faulty, or the translator has not caught the meaning of what was said, or I myself have failed to understand it.

“I have learned to hold the Scriptures alone inerrant.

“Do not follow my writings as Holy Scripture. When you find in Holy Scripture anything you did not believe before, believe it without doubt: but in my writings, you should hold nothing for certain.

“Let us give in and yield our assent to the authority of Holy Scripture which knows not how either to be deceived or to deceive.

“It seems to me that the most disastrous consequences must follow upon our believing that anything false is found in the sacred books: that is to say that the men by whom the Scripture has been given to us and committed to writing, did put down in these anything false. If you once admit into such a high sanctuary of authority one false statement, there will not be left a single sentence of those books, which, if appearing to anyone difficult in practice or hard to believe, may

not by the same fatal rule be explained away as a statement, in which, intentionally, the author declared what was not true.”

- C. **Calvin, John** (1509-1564) – Greatest theologian among the reformers, and religious leader in Geneva.

“This is a principle which distinguishes our religion from all others, that we know that God has spoken to us, and are fully convinced that the prophets did not speak at their own suggestion, but that, being organs of the Holy Spirit, they only uttered what they had been commissioned from heaven to declare. Whoever then wishes to profit in the Scriptures, let him, first of all, lay down this as a settled point, that the Law and the Prophets are not a doctrine delivered according to the will and pleasure of men, but dictated by the Holy Spirit. . . We owe to the Scripture the same reverence which we owe to God: because it has proceeded from him alone, and has nothing belonging to man mixed with it.

“For if we consider how slippery is the human mind . . . how prone to all kinds of error . . . we can perceive how necessary is such a repository of heavenly doctrine, that it will neither perish by forgetfulness, nor vanish in error, nor be corrupted by the audacity of men.

“The Scriptures is the school of the Holy Spirit, in which, as nothing necessary and useful to be known is omitted, so nothing is taught which is not beneficial to know.”

- D. **Chrysostom, John** (345-407) – Greatest preacher in the Eastern church and Archbishop of Constantinople.

“The Bible presents us true history and unless . . . this principle be honestly recognized, it is useless to teach doctrinal and spiritual lessons as contained in the words, for that is to build a superstructure on a precarious and crazy foundation.”

- E. **Clement of Alexandria** (150-215) – Scholar who developed one of the most prominent religious schools in Egypt of his time.

“From my infancy I had been taught to reverence every letter of the Greek Bible.”

- F. **Cyprian** (200-258) – Distinguished teacher and Bishop of Carthage.

“The names given for the Scriptures testify to them:

- Divine scriptures
- Precepts of the Gospel
- Divine commands
- Sacred scriptures
- Scriptures from heaven
- Precepts of the Divine Law
- Wells of divine fullness
- Voices of the Lord.”

- G. Gregory of Nazianzus (325-389)** – Father in the Eastern Church and patriarch of Constantinople.

“Nothing is without design in scripture. Every stroke and every letter has its special significance. We trace the accuracy of the Spirit in detail to each separate stroke and letter; for it is blasphemous to suppose that exact pains were bestowed by the compilers of the Books, or even the smallest letters, without design . . . no single syllable of the sacred writings is to be neglected. Every word or action must be accepted on the testimony of inspired Scripture.”

- H. Irenaeus (142-200)** – Pupil of Polycarp, great apologist who wrote against the religious heresies of his day.

“We should be most properly assured that the Scriptures are indeed perfect, since they were spoken by the Word of God and His Spirit.

“If, however, we cannot discover explanations of all those things in Scripture which are made the subject of investigation, let us not on that account seek after any other God besides Him who really exists. For this is the very greatest impiety. We should leave things of that nature to God who created us, being most properly assured that the Scriptures are indeed perfect, since they were spoken by the word of God and His Spirit; but we, inasmuch as we are inferior to, and later in existence than, the Word of God and His Spirit, are on that very account destitute of the knowledge of His mysteries.”

- I. Jerome (340-420)** – Translator of the Latin Vulgate.

“In the Holy Scripture even the order of the words has a sacred meaning . . . they are written and edited by the Holy Spirit.”

- J. Justin Martyr (100-165)** – One of the earliest and most able defenders of the faith.

“The writers received from God the knowledge which they taught. This knowledge was too great to have been acquired otherwise than by the Divine Gift which descended on men, whose sole function was ‘to present themselves pure to the energy of the Divine Spirit . . .’

“When you hear the words of the prophets spoken as though in their own persons, you are not to think that they are uttered by the inspired men themselves, but by the Divine Word who moves them.”

- K. Luther, Martin ((1483-1546)** – Former Roman Catholic Priest whose key verse after his salvation (“the just shall live by faith,” Rom. 1:18) helped launch the Protestant Reformation.

Certainly no other theologian in church history spoke with greater persistence or passion on the subject of biblical inerrancy than did Luther, giving testimony to it on over 1000 instances in his writings! Below are but a few examples:

“We must make a great difference between God’s Word and the word of man. A man’s word is a little sound, that flies into the air, and soon vanishes; but the Word of God is greater than heaven and earth . . . for it forms part of the power of God, and endures everlastingly; we should, therefore, diligently study God’s Word, and know and assuredly believe that God himself speaks unto us.

“Over against all the statements of the fathers and of all men, yes, over against words of angels and devils, I place the Scriptures. I have learned to ascribe the honor of infallibility only to those books that are accepted as canonical. I am profoundly convinced that none of these writers have erred.

“The Scriptures, although they also were written by men, are not of men nor from men, but from God.

“I beg and faithfully warn every pious Christian not to stumble at the simplicity of the language and stories that will often meet him there. He should not doubt that, however simple they may seem, these are the very words, works, judgments, and deeds of the high majesty, power, and wisdom of God.

“It is certain that Scripture cannot disagree with itself . . . It is impossible that Scripture should contradict itself, only that it so appears to the senseless and obstinate hypocrites . . . One little point of doctrine means more than heaven and earth, and therefore we cannot suffer to have the least jot thereof violated, for it is established by God’s Word that God does not lie, nor does His Word lie.

“The Scriptures are divine; in them God speaks, and they are His Word. To hear or to read the scriptures is nothing else than to hear God.”

L. Polycarp (69-156) – A disciple of the Apostle John and Bishop of Smyrna

“The Scriptures are the oracles of the Lord and whoever perverts them are the first born of Satan.”

M. Wesley, John (1703-1791) – Founder of the Methodist church.

“Nay, if there be any mistakes in the Bible there may as well be a thousand. If there be one falsehood in that Book it did not come from the God of truth.

“The Bible must be the invention either of good men or angels, bad men or devils, or of God. Thus:

1. It could not be the invention of good men or angels; for they neither would or could make a book, and tell lies all the time they were writing it, saying ‘*Thus saith the Lord,*’ when it was their own invention.
2. It could not be the invention of bad men or devils; for they would not make a book which commands all duty, forbids all sin, and condemns their souls to hell to all eternity.

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3. Therefore, I draw this conclusion: that the Bible must be given by divine inspiration."