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MAKING YOUR LIFE MATTER IN AN URGENT DAY

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The Stupidity of Inerrancy and a Long Winter

The words jumped off the test page. In answering a question related to the inerrancy of Scripture, one of my students wrote, "it's a stupid word, and a stupid idea."

Stupid? What makes it seem so stupid? And why is this student not alone? If you haven't noticed, increasing numbers of young evangelicals are distancing themselves from one of evangelicalism's bedrock ideas.

As my friend David Dockery has written, inerrancy is "the idea that when all the facts are known, the Bible (in its autographs, that is, the original documents), properly interpreted in light of the culture and the means of communication that had developed by the time of its composition, is completely true in all that it affirms, to the degree of precision intended by the author's purpose, in all matters relating to God and His creation." *Something* along these lines needs to flow from the idea of "inspiration."

So what's not to like?

Some don't like the qualifications definitions like this contain, and would prefer simply saying it's inspired. But today's pluralistic milieu demands a carefully nuanced and explained presentation of what we mean by inspiration, and if true, what we mean by the Bible being true. Else we fall into the hands of those who continue to caricature Bible believers as those who "take it literally" and then caricature "taking it literally" as reading the game of tennis into the sentence, "Joseph served in Pharaoh's court."

Others dismiss inerrancy on the grounds of the postmodern dismissal of all things Enlightenment, suggesting that the question of the nature of truth is no longer relevant. Mistaken as I think this dismissal would be, I think we're getting warmer - but I don't think that's the heart of the matter.

My own sense is that young evangelicals have breathed in deeply the air of our culture, and specifically caught a cold from the sneezes of the media, which has long equated fundamentalism with intolerance, evangelicals with fundamentalism, and inerrancy with evangelicals. In a day when young Christians seem desperate to have their faith find a foothold in cultural acceptance, finding more security and self-esteem aligning with Bono over Bonhoeffer, there is a conscious distancing from anything - including key doctrinal ideas - that culture may have successfully caricatured.

If this thesis is true, it is a profound dynamic to consider, and inerrancy will not be the last doctrine to fall. Indeed, in light of the National Study of Youth and Religion, conducted from 2001 to 2005 and perhaps the largest research project on the religious and spiritual lives of American adolescents, it will only be the beginning. While the vast majority of U.S. teenagers identified themselves as Christian, the “language, and therefore experience, of Trinity, holiness, sin, grace, justification, sanctification, church, Eucharist, and heaven and hell appear, among most Christian teenagers in the United States..., to be supplanted by the language of happiness, niceness, and an earned heavenly reward.” Principal investigator Christian Smith writes, “It is not so much that U.S. Christianity is being secularized. Rather more subtly, Christianity is either degenerating into a pathetic version of itself or, more significantly, Christianity is actively being colonized and displaced by a quite different religious faith.”

And what is lost? Orthodoxy, many of us would argue. Not to mention impact. As Carl F.H. Henry once wrote, no “movement can dramatically affect the course of the world while its own leaders undermine the integrity of its charter documents.” But I also sense another loss, one that many of these young men and women may not sense. To borrow from C.S. Lewis, people are left with a faith where it is always winter, but never Christmas. While it may seem helpful to speak of such epistemologically anchorless exercises as “journey” and “dialogue,” we must never fall prey to having such endeavors be an end to themselves. As G.K. Chesterton once famously reminded H.G. Wells, “the object of opening the mind, as of opening the mouth, is to shut it again on something solid.”

As I interact with men and women in their teens and twenties, I sense this void more than ever. They sense it, too, but aren't aware of its source. There is an ironic longing for absolutes in a day of relativism; a desire for certainty – for true truth, to use Francis Schaeffer's terms – in an atmosphere of skepticism and doubt.

So is inerrancy a “stupid word, and a stupid idea”?

It depends on how long you like your winters.

James Emery White

Sources

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C.S. Lewis, *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*.

See also James Emery White, *What is Truth?* (an older book, newly re-published by Wipf and Stock).

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