



## The Heresy of Infallibility, Revisited

Since the publication of my editorial “The Heresy of Infallibility,”<sup>1</sup> some have objected that to make my point I should have spoken instead of the heresy of “inerrancy,” especially given the reference in the “Preface to the Book of Concord” to “the pure, infallible, and unchangeable Word of God.”<sup>2</sup> They could be right, but—at the risk of sounding like a waffling politician—it all depends on what “infallible” means.

I think it should be clear that my editorial rejected “infallible” for the way it has come to be used in modern controversies over the Bible—that is, “infallible,” in the sense of “incapable of human error,” even in matters of history and science as these are understood in an Enlightenment world. But is this what the Confessions meant by “infallible”? Hardly. They simply didn’t live in that modern world, nor were they contesting the same issues with regard to the Bible.

The German text of the “Preface” reads “nach dem reinen, unfehlbaren and unwandelbaren Wort Gottes,”<sup>3</sup> which, as we have seen, recent English versions of *The Book of Concord* have rendered: “in accordance with the pure, infallible, and unchangeable Word of God” (Kolb/Wengert) or “the pure, infallible, and unalterable Word of God” (Tappert).<sup>4</sup> But friends who teach the Lutheran Confessions are quite right in saying that the German “unfehlbar” in a document of the sixteenth century should be translated “unfailing” rather than “infallible.”<sup>5</sup> This is precisely what I meant in the earlier editorial when I said that “the Bible unerringly points us to God and Christ, and that is what it is for.”<sup>6</sup> Lutheran theologian William Weiblen pointed to the same thing when he wrote in 1964: “The infallibility of the

<sup>1</sup>Frederick J. Gaiser, “The Heresy of Infallibility,” *Word & World* 26/4 (2006) 355–356.

<sup>2</sup>*The Book of Concord*, ed. Robert Kolb and Timothy Wengert (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000) 10.

<sup>3</sup>*Die Bekenntnisschriften der evangelisch-lutherischen Kirche*, 10th ed. (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1986) 9.

<sup>4</sup>*The Book of Concord*, ed. Theodore G. Tappert (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg, 1959) 8.

<sup>5</sup>This is not to say that Tappert, Kolb, and Wengert are inexcusably wrong in using “infallible.” It remains a perfectly viable translation of “unfehlbar,” as modern German-English dictionaries make clear. Still, according to the *Deutsches Wörterbuch* of the Brothers Grimm (sort of the German equivalent of the *OED*), “unfehlbar” in the sixteenth century took up the meanings of the earlier “unfehlig” or “unfehlend” (i.e., “unfailing”); the connection to the dogmatic “infallibilis” (infallible) is seen only later in the seventeenth century: Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm, *Deutsches Wörterbuch* (Leipzig: S. Hirzel, 1936; Munich: Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag, 1999) 24:532.

<sup>6</sup>Gaiser, “The Heresy of Infallibility,” 356.

Scriptures is the infallibility of Jesus Christ and not the infallibility of the written text.”<sup>7</sup>

The lack of interest by the Reformers in the modern understanding of “infallibility” becomes surprisingly clear when we recognize that their Latin version of the “Preface” doesn’t use the term “infallibilis” at all (despite the “infallible” or “unfailing” in the German text), referring instead to arguments made “post sinceram et immotam verbi Dei” (“after the genuine [sincere] and unchangeable Word of God”).<sup>8</sup>

“Pure,” “genuine,” “unchangeable,” “unfailing”—these terms properly describe the Confessions’ view of Scripture; “infallible” (in its modern sense) does not, to say nothing of “inerrant.”

Interestingly, a Scottish Reformed theologian—a self-described “evangelical”—has recently made a similar point. An “inerrantist view” of Scripture, argues A. T. B. McGowan, is not biblical, but is rather a rationalist perspective that has not served the evangelical community well.<sup>9</sup> McGowan prefers an “infallibilist view,”<sup>10</sup> but he uses “infallibilist” here in a way similar to the Lutheran Confessions’ use of “unfailing.” To be “infallible,” for him, means that Scripture “is as God intended it to be”—which is precisely not “inerrant,” but rather that “God is perfectly able to use these Scriptures to accomplish his purposes.”<sup>11</sup>

Of particular interest to my argument that Scripture, as the written word of God, shares with Jesus, the incarnate word of God, both divine and human characteristics is McGowan’s explicit dismissal of this “incarnational model.”<sup>12</sup> The model fails, says McGowan, because “only God is divine and therefore only God can have a divine nature.” McGowan quotes in support a line by John Webster: “But the Word made flesh and the scriptural word are in no way equivalent realities.”<sup>13</sup>

No way equivalent? Bonhoeffer quite explicitly disagrees: “The incarnate Word continues to exist for us in the Scripture. Through the Holy Spirit, the incarnate Word comes to us from the Scripture in the sermon. And it is one and the

<sup>7</sup>William H. Weiblen, “The Bible and Interpretation,” in *The Bible: Book of Faith*, by the Theological Professors of The American Lutheran Church (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1964) 148.

<sup>8</sup>*Bekennnisschriften*, 9. Interestingly, the recent version of the *Book of Concord* from Concordia Publishing House (Lutheran Church–Missouri Synod) seems also to prefer this Latin rendering; it reads “after the pure and unchangeable truth of God’s Word”: *Concordia: The Lutheran Confessions*, based on the translation by William Hermann Theodore Dau and Gerhard Friedrich Bente, rev. by Paul McCain et al. (Saint Louis: Concordia, 2005) 33.

<sup>9</sup>A. T. B. McGowan, *The Divine Authenticity of Scripture: Retrieving an Evangelical Heritage* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Academic, 2007) 113–119.

<sup>10</sup>*Ibid.*, 123–164, esp. 123–124.

<sup>11</sup>*Ibid.*, 124. Later, McGowan will equate his understanding of “infallibility” with “authenticity” (164). Despite these similarities, McGowan may well have a somewhat different understanding of what God “intended” through Scripture than Luther’s *was Christum treibet* (that is, Scripture’s purpose is to “inculcate” Christ), but McGowan opens a genuine opportunity for dialogue here.

<sup>12</sup>*Ibid.*, 119–121.

<sup>13</sup>John Webster, *Holy Scripture: A Dogmatic Sketch* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003) 22–23; cited by McGowan, *Divine Authenticity*, 121.

same Word: the Word of creation, the Word of the incarnation, the Word of the Holy Scripture, the Word of the sermon.”<sup>14</sup>

The difference, I think, between Webster and Bonhoeffer is twofold: first, Bonhoeffer’s understanding of the Bible as the active giver of the living Word of God, rather than the Bible as a container of the once-for-all word of truth, and, similarly, Bonhoeffer’s Lutheran notion that the finite (Word, words, bread, wine, human flesh) is truly capable of bearing the infinite (God)—a position that the Reformed tradition has classically denied.

In my editorial, I understood the Bible in this Lutheran sense: the source of the living word. Then, and only then, can it be said to share, with Christ himself, the divine nature—even as, like Christ himself, it is a truly human reality. This is the wonder of it all, and the reason for our deep and abiding respect and reverence for the Holy Scriptures.

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<sup>14</sup>Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Worldly Preaching: Bonhoeffer’s Lectures on Homiletics*, ed. and trans. Clyde E. Fant, rev. ed. (New York: Crossroad, 1991) 103. Fant’s translation is based on Bonhoeffer’s *Finkenwalder Homiletik* (1935–1939) in vol. 4 of Bonhoeffer’s *Gesammelte Schriften*, ed. Eberhard Bethge (Munich: Chr. Kaiser, 1961) 237–289. The English translation of the newer version of these lectures in *Illegale Theologen-Ausbildung: Finkenwalde 1935–1937*, vol. 14 of *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Werke* (Gütersloh: Chr. Kaiser, 1996) 478–530, is not yet available. The newer German version often differs considerably from the older one used by Fant, because the lectures themselves are based on handouts and student notes rather than on a firm manuscript (though Bonhoeffer’s argument remains the same). For more on Bonhoeffer’s understanding of the word of God in preaching, see Fant’s introduction and commentary to *Wordly Preaching*, 3–88.