



The Heresy of Infallibility

Can you imagine Jesus as a boy cutting his hand in his father's carpentry shop? Or did Jesus' divine nature protect him from all such human frailty? Just how "infallible" was he? The pre-Raphaelite painter John Everett Millais (1829–1896) could imagine Jesus in just such a predicament. Millais's painting *Christ in the House of His Parents* (or *Christ in the Carpenter's Shop*) portrays the boy Jesus in the shop, including all its dangerous tools, holding up his bleeding hand while being tended to by his solicitous mother. A young John the Baptist hurries up with a basin of water to bathe the wound.¹ Critics are no doubt right who speak of John's basin and Jesus' injury as prefiguring baptism and crucifixion, but putting the scene in the shop still calls our attention to Jesus' true humanity, susceptible to the kind of human error or accident that awaits us all.

The point is that for Jesus to be truly human, he had to be fallible (while not sinful). Not all of his corners were square; not all of his hammers struck true. To claim otherwise would be to fall prey to the gnostic heresy of docetism—that Jesus only *seemed* to be fully human. The church is and has been clear about this throughout the ages.

And what then about Scripture? Shall we have a "higher" doctrine of Scripture than we have of Christ, accepting the human fallibility of Jesus but not of Holy Scripture? That would seem remarkably odd, and would, of course, partake of the same docetic heresy: Scripture only *seems* to have a human element, that is, human authors subject to human limitations; it (unlike Jesus!) is solely divine.

Many would like just such a Bible. And many religions provide it—a Qur'an transmitted literally from God by way of the angel Gabriel; the Book of Mormon, hidden on metal plates and magically translated by Joseph Smith. But the Bible is no such book. And make no mistake: this is not a *fault* of Christian faith, not a sad but true failing. This *is* Christian faith; this is the heart of the matter—that God comes to us in the flesh, that God was in Christ, that to see Jesus is to see the Father, that the Creator of all things takes on true humanity, including the suffering, uncertainties, and human fallibility that come with that incredible divine risk. Paul's point is not that "we have this treasure in clay jars," but, oh, would that it were otherwise! No, this is the gospel itself, given in this way so that we are "always carrying

¹See the image at <http://www.rossettiarchive.org/docs/op36.rap.html> (accessed 4 August 2006).

in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be made visible in our bodies” (2 Cor 4:7–10).

We could ask for a different Bible, but to do so would be to ask for a different god—the untouched god of the philosophers or the distant god of much human religion. True, we confess that the Bible unerringly points us to God and Christ, and that is what it is for. But if it were to do this “inhumanly,” that is, without true humanness, without being an earthen vessel, the God to whom it would point would not be the God of the Bible, the One fully committed to participation in this world. To say that the Bible unerringly points us to Christ is not to say that it does so magically, inevitably, mechanically (*ex opere operato*), but rather to say that, faithfully proclaimed, the Bible bears Christ to us and for us—God in Christ—to be received in the mystery of faith through the power of the Spirit.

The gospel is not something we “get right” in infallible words; it is a living word that comes to us always anew, always as surprise. Martin Luther, discussing “how the kingdom of Christ is carried on by the office of preaching,” notes that the gospel, though promised in the writings of the Old Testament,

was not preached orally and publicly until Christ came and sent out his apostles. Therefore the church is a mouth-house, not a pen-house....It is the way of the Gospel and of the New Testament that it is to be preached and discussed orally with a living voice....Thus the apostles were not sent out until Christ came to his mouth-house, that is, until the time had come to preach orally and to bring the Gospel from dead writing and pen-work to the living voice and mouth.²

A living word is more precarious than “dead writing,” but only the former conveys the gospel. To want to nail Scripture down with a doctrine of infallibility will finally fail to appreciate fully the nails that cut the boy Jesus in Millais’s painting or the nails that cut the man Jesus on that terrible Good Friday.

In short, to assert an infallible Scripture is to commit the heresy of docetism. So, make no apology for teaching the wonder of a truly human (and truly divine) Bible. Such teaching is not less faithful, as is often claimed, for the alternative precisely removes the element of faith, offering a misplaced certainty instead. It seeks to walk by sight, and thus misses the very heart of Christian faith.

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²Martin Luther, “First Sunday in Advent” (Church Postil, 1522), in *Sermons of Martin Luther*, vol. 1, ed. John Nicholas Lenker (1905; reprint, Grand Rapids: Baker, 1988) 44 (for the original, see WA 10/1/2, page 48).



Christ in the House of his Parents [Christ in the Carpenter's Shop], John Everett Millais, 1849-1850, oil on canvas, 34x55", currently in the Tate Gallery, London. (<http://www.rossettiarchive.org/docs/op36.rap.html>)



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