

## A Challenge To The Faith: Does The Bible Err?

The debate over biblical authority and the concomitant questions concerning the nature of revelation, the inspiration and inerrancy of Scripture, represent a fundamental area of disagreement among contemporary conservative Christians. The debate issues forth in ontological and epistemological implications that not only cause divisions among Christians, but challenge the very foundations of the Christian belief system itself. At the center of this debate is the question of the truthfulness of Scripture—does it err? This reflects upon the nature of God, the nature of inspiration, and the trustworthiness of the Bible. Consequently, this is more than an academic debate. Carl Henry suggests that those who espouse biblical authority and inspiration while denying biblical inerrancy cannot avoid certain consequences:

*...inspiration ceases to be a guarantee of the truth of what the Bible teaches; the authority of Scripture must somehow be divorced from its content. The problem with such alternatives is that they destroy the objective truth of the Christian religion, trivialize theology, and lead finally to skepticism.<sup>1</sup>*

J. I. Packer characterizes such a denial as “a kind of impenitence; any view that subjects the written word of God to the opinions and pronouncements of men involves unbelief and disloyalty towards Christ.”<sup>2</sup> However, Article XIX of *The Chicago Statement On Biblical Inerrancy* (1978)—which has become the standard expression on inerrancy for most conservative evangelical Christians—denies that a confession of biblical inerrancy “is essential for salvation,” but it cannot be rejected “without grave consequences, both to the individual and to the church.”<sup>3</sup>

Perhaps Packer's words are a little overcharged, but they demonstrate how seriously some see the debate. I am in sympathy with the inerrantist position, and see no need, at this time, to extend the discussion beyond the debate as it exists between conservative evangelical Christians.

*Conservatives feel instinctively that their faith rests upon the authoritative information and instruction the Book yields, and it must therefore be totally trustworthy and not unreliable in any respect, down to the smallest detail. God's own reputation is often thought to be at stake in the matter.<sup>4</sup>*

Those on the “left” of the Christian spectrum have few such concerns. To them, the Bible is strictly a human book; thus, error is a given and of little concern. However, some conservatives have opted for what is called “limited inerrancy,”<sup>5</sup> which (in my opinion) is a capitulation to non-Christian influences that diminishes the person and power of God.

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<sup>1</sup>Carl F. H. Henry, *God, Revelation And Authority*, vol. 4, *God Who Speaks And Shows* (Waco, Texas: Word Books Publisher, 1979), 192 -193.

<sup>2</sup>J. I. Packer, *“Fundamentalism” And The Word Of God* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1958), 21.

<sup>3</sup>The Chicago Statement is available in numerous publications. See *Inerrancy*, ed. Norman L. Geisler (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1980), 493 - 502.

<sup>4</sup>Clark H. Pinnock, *The Scripture Principle* (San Francisco: Harper And Row, Publishers, 1984), 127.

<sup>5</sup>Other terms less frequently surface—“partial...focused...relative inerrancy,” but relate essentially the same idea: Scripture errs only in non-salvific matters (science, history), or in “secular” as opposed to “spiritual” matters.

## DEFINING INERRANCY<sup>6</sup>

The doctrine of biblical inerrancy can simply be defined with the proposition “the Bible is free from error.” This does **not** mean there are no erroneous statements in the Bible, but that the Bible recorded erroneous statements without error.<sup>7</sup> It does not mean that the rhetorical license enjoyed by the various genres of literature and speech could not be included.<sup>8</sup> Neither are figures of speech, paraphrases, approximations, *etc.*, considered “error,” just as they are not considered so in ordinary communication.<sup>9</sup> So-called “grammatical errors” are not “errors” at all; grammar is a function of usage, not prescription.<sup>10</sup> These assertions neither qualify the doctrine of inerrancy to death,<sup>11</sup> nor provide a refuge “for liberal inerrantists to flee to.”<sup>12</sup> In short, they are in harmony with a Bible free of error.<sup>13</sup>

For some, the apparent lack of consensus over a precise definition has become a stumbling block.<sup>14</sup> However, I tend to think this is a red herring used by errantists to distract from the difficulties of their own position. Errantists themselves contribute to the confusion of definition by using the word “infallible” for their own position.<sup>15</sup> Etymologically the terms “inerrant” and “infallible” are nearly synonymous, but errantists use the latter to refer to the over-all trustworthiness of the Bible “for the purposes for which God inspired it.”<sup>16</sup> The Chicago Statement makes the following distinction:

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<sup>6</sup>The definition of the *word* “inerrancy” (“free from error”) is not the concern, but rather the definition of the *doctrine of biblical inerrancy*.

<sup>7</sup>For example, the Pharisees **did** say Jesus cast out demons by the authority of Beelzebul (Matt 12:24), but they were in error.

<sup>8</sup>For example, people can “sprout wings like eagles” in poetry (Isa 40:31), and “the sun rises” (Matt 5:45) in phenomenological speech.

<sup>9</sup>For example, the sportscaster said 75,000 attended the Super Bowl game; in actuality, 76,643 attended.

<sup>10</sup>If a sentence articulates meaning, it is grammatically adequate. See Gordon L. Lewis, *Evangelicals And Inerrancy*, ed. Ronald Youngblood (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1984), 45 – 46, although Lewis is not discussing “proper” grammar per se.

<sup>11</sup>I. Howard Marshall (among others) thinks it does, *Biblical Inspiration* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1982), 72.

<sup>12</sup>Clark H. Pinnock, *The Proceedings of the Conference on Biblical Inerrancy 1987* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1987), 97. Pinnock seems to think that Article XIX of the *Chicago Statement On Biblical Inerrancy* (which addresses these same points) does this very thing. The framers of the Statement certainly did not believe so.

<sup>13</sup>Millard Erickson calls this the “full inerrancy” conception, as distinct from the “absolute inerrancy” conception, the latter demanding scientific precision in every detail, *Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1985), 222. A proponent of the “absolute” position is Harold Lindsell, *The Battle For The Bible* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1976). Actually, both of these positions deny that the Bible contains any error. Erickson also summarizes the various “errantist” conceptions.

<sup>14</sup>Pinnock, *Proceedings*, 97 – 98.

<sup>15</sup>The term “indefectibility” surfaces occasionally (especially among Roman Catholic scholars), which actually allows errors in the Bible, and concerns itself only with the over-all *reliability* of the unified truth in Scripture. See Richard Coleman, *Evangelicals And Inerrancy*, ed. R. Youngblood, 166 – 167. However, E. J. Young uses the term to define an inerrant Bible. *Thy Word Is Truth* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1957), 113.

<sup>16</sup>Marshall, *Biblical Inspiration*, 53, 66, 72. See also Donald G. Bloesch, *Essentials Of Evangelical Theology*, vol. 1, *God, Authority, And Salvation* (San Francisco: Harper Collins Publishers, 1978), 64 – 70.

***Infallible** signifies the quality of neither misleading nor being misled and so safeguards in categorical terms the truth that Holy Scripture is a sure, safe, and reliable rule and guide in all matters.*

*Similarly, **inerrant**, signifies the quality of being free from all falsehood or mistake and so safeguards the truth that Holy Scripture is entirely true and trustworthy in all its assertions.<sup>17</sup>*

Article XI categorically denies “that it is possible for the Bible to be at the same time infallible and errant in its assertions. Infallibility and inerrancy may be distinguished, but not separated.”<sup>18</sup> The use of the term “infallible” by conservative errantists is an illusory refuge from the implications of their doctrine of “limited inerrancy” (which is likewise a euphemistic refuge for “limited errancy,” not unlike “near miss” used in aviation vernacular). Ryrie is correct:

*If there is any difference in the shade of meaning it is simply this: infallible includes the resultant idea of trustworthiness while inerrant emphasizes principally the truthfulness of the Scriptures.<sup>19</sup>*

In a helpful essay (although it could confuse the above discussion), Gordon Lewis discusses the fact that inerrancy is a quality of *meanings* and not *words* per se. He suggests the use of “inerrancy” with only the propositional content of the Bible and “infallibility” with its verbal expressions. Thus, the formal (“You are saved by grace”) and empirical (“He is risen”) cognitive meanings alone, which are realities independent of the speaker, are subject to verification and therefore true or false. Non-cognitive meanings merely express something about the speaker (“Woe is me”), a command, exhortation, etc., which are not subject to verification, yet the words are infallibly recorded.<sup>20</sup> In summary, neither God nor the human authors committed any errors in writing the Bible.

### THE VOICES OF HISTORY

As with any other doctrine, the voices of history are not authoritative. They do, however, offer insight and should cause sober reflection by Christians today if their view is far out of harmony with the past. Recently, the view of the Protestant tradition<sup>21</sup> has come under closer scrutiny as a result of the extensive work by Rogers and McKim, who claim that the church historically did **not** view the Scriptures as inerrant.<sup>22</sup> Both authors are evangelical errantists, and their approach is clearly polemical. Essentially their

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<sup>17</sup>*Inerrancy*, ed. Geisler, 500. The “Exposition” section (in which these definitions are included) was essentially written by J. I. Packer. The “Articles Of Affirmation And Denial” were drafted by R. C. Sproul, but amended throughout the October, 1978 inerrancy summit; see Donald Tinder, “Proinerrancy Forces Draft Their Platform,” *Christianity Today* 23 (November 17, 1978): 248 – 249.

<sup>18</sup>*Ibid.*, 496.

<sup>19</sup>Charles C. Ryrie, “The Importance Of Inerrancy,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 120 (April, 1963): 137.

<sup>20</sup>Gordon L. Lewis, *Evangelicals And Inerrancy*, ed. Youngblood, 36 – 45.

<sup>21</sup>In the Roman Catholic tradition Vatican II (1963 – 1965) made the transition from inerrancy to “limited inerrancy” official church doctrine. See *The Documents Of Vatican II*, ed. Walker M. Abbot, S. J., trans. Joseph Gallagher (New York: Guild Press, 1966), 119. See also Hans Küng’s discussion in *Infallible? An Inquiry* (Garden City, New York: Image Books, 1970), 188 – 193.

<sup>22</sup>Jack B. Rogers and Donald M. McKim, *The Authority And Interpretation Of The Bible: An Historical Approach* (San Francisco: Harper And Row Publishers, 1979).

contention is that the modern doctrine of Biblical inerrancy evolved out of the rationalistic scholasticism at Princeton Seminary in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In contrast to the reformers, who rested the authority of Scripture in its *function* (bringing the lost to salvation in Christ), the Princetonians based its authority on its *form* (inerrant words). Rogers and McKim are accommodationists holding that the Bible is a product of humans and thus participates in the weaknesses of humanity, including error. They seek to demonstrate that their position is the historical position, but that the Princetonians prevailed in an atmosphere of overreaction to subjective liberalism.

Rogers and McKim have not gone unanswered. Two major responses have come from John Woodbridge<sup>23</sup> and The International Council On Biblical Inerrancy.<sup>24</sup> The critical readers of these materials must decide which side has offered the best evidence, but at least some leading conservative errantists disagree with the Rogers/McKim proposal. Clark Pinnock states unequivocally that Woodbridge “effectively refutes the view (of Rogers/McKim) that the classical theologians limited the inerrancy of the Bible to matters of faith and practice.”<sup>25</sup> In a review of Woodbridge's book, Pinnock also states:

*However difficult it may be to modern Bible scholars, the Scripture principle as it developed after Marcion located divine authority in the words of the Bible and attributed to the text a very complete infallibility and inerrancy...It is not easy to attribute to an Augustine or a Calvin the sort of view...Rogers/McKim want to defend in the modern situation...they climbed so far out on a limb only to have it cut off behind them,...Woodbridge dealt their narrow thesis a deadly blow...(he) is a very reliable guide through the historical material.<sup>26</sup>*

These are telling and honest words coming from one who cannot profit for his own position (like that of Rogers/McKim) by the results of accurate historical study.

### THE PHILOSOPHICAL FACTORS

The Rogers/McKim proposal suggests that inerrantists give priority to reason over faith, in that their trust in Scripture is contingent upon an errorless *form* (words).<sup>27</sup> The early reformers, however, trusted the infallibility of the text in its *function* (the salvific message), in spite of historical and scientific errors. The shift in emphasis from function to form was influenced late in the seventeenth century by Lockean empiricism (revelation had to conform to reason) and Newtonian precision (the words had to correspond exactly to reality).<sup>28</sup>

However, this conflicts with the basic Rogers/McKim thesis that the doctrine of inerrancy was born out of Roman Catholic and Protestant scholasticism that actually preceded Lockean and Newtonian categories. In a reactionary apologetic, Francis Turretin adopted an Aristotelian inductive methodology to counter Roman Catholic

<sup>23</sup>John D. Woodbridge, *Biblical Authority: A Critique of the Rogers and McKim Proposal* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1982).

<sup>24</sup>*Inerrancy and the Church*, ed. John D. Hannah (Chicago: Moody Press, 1984).

<sup>25</sup>Pinnock, *Scripture Principle*, 227.

<sup>26</sup>Clark H. Pinnock, Book Reviews, *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 27 (June, 1984): 231.

<sup>27</sup>Might not one argue that errantists give priority to reason because they must depend on reason to determine what is erroneous? Surely the Scripture itself does not point out its own errors!

<sup>28</sup>Rogers and McKim, *Authority and Interpretation*, 235.

apologetics with their own weapon.<sup>29</sup> At Princeton in the nineteenth century, the theology of Turretin and the philosophy of Scottish (“common sense”) realism—the most formative force against Humean skepticism—established the Baconian inductive method extolling the basic reliability of the human senses and the rational deductions from them. This hermeneutic essentially reduced all the Biblical data to equal facts. As such, there could be no errors; one error (however minor) would make it impossible to demonstrate which data were not errors.<sup>30</sup> This was essentially the hermeneutic employed by those in the Restoration movement.<sup>31</sup>

Rogers and McKim assert that when the inductive method was challenged by critical science (mid-nineteenth century), Princeton (under B. B. Warfield) shifted from inductive investigation to deductive apologetics based upon preestablished doctrine. Inerrancy thus became established deductively “from premises peculiar to Princeton theology rather than the ‘facts’ and phenomena of Scripture.”<sup>32</sup> If my summary reconstruction of the Rogers/McKim thesis is correct, it represents what I believe to be a historical revisionist’s view of the philosophical roots of inerrancy.

If, as the majority of historical scholars believe, the traditional view of Scripture was one of inerrancy in all matters (even to the point of using Scripture as a source for natural scientific knowledge<sup>33</sup>), what are the philosophical factors that result in a “limited inerrancy” view among Christians? Geisler gives the following brief overview:

*Beginning with Francis Bacon’s inductivism and preceding through Hobbes’ materialism, Spinoza’s rationalism, Hume’s skeptical empiricism, the authority of Scripture was progressively undermined. With Kant’s agnosticism and Kierkegaard’s existentialism the major philosophical presuppositions leading to the denial of the inerrancy of Scripture were firmly implanted in western theological thought.*<sup>34</sup>

The universal authority of the Bible was systematically undermined in the seventeenth century with the newly found autonomy enjoyed by the disciplines of science, history, and philosophy. Discoveries in science (Copernicus, Kepler, Newton, Galileo) exalted the scientific method and human reason above the plain teaching of Scripture. The Bible was to be understood in the light of science. Although Bacon himself did not claim that there were errors in Scripture, he insisted that all truth was inductively discovered and when the data of Scripture conflicts with reason and experience it should be accepted by faith anyway; this brings even more honor to its Author.<sup>35</sup> The obvious weakness of this view became manifest as the chasm between science and Scripture grew.

Descartes’ rationalism raised doubt to a universal principle; nothing, including religious tradition, was to be accepted without being measured against the criterion of

<sup>29</sup>Ibid., 172 – 178.

<sup>30</sup>Ibid., 268 – 298.

<sup>31</sup>Russ Dudrey, “Restoration Hermeneutics among the Churches of Christ: Why Are We at an Impasse?” *Restoration Quarterly* 30 (1988): 17 – 42.

<sup>32</sup>Rogers and McKim, *Authority and Interpretation*, 344 (–348).

<sup>33</sup>John D. Woodbridge, *Hermeneutics, Authority, and Canon*, eds. D. A. Carson and J. D. Woodbridge (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1986), 257 – 264. See also Edgar Krenz, *The Historical Critical Method* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1975), 11, “At the beginning of the Seventeenth century the Bible was the universal authority in all fields of knowledge, but by the end of the century that authority was eroded.”

<sup>34</sup>Norman L. Geisler, *Inerrancy*, ed. Norman L. Geisler, 306.

<sup>35</sup>Fredrick Copleston, S. J., *A History of Philosophy*, bk. 1, vol. 3, *Ockham to Suarez* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday And Company, Inc., 1953), 299.

human reason. Matters of faith in Scripture were exempt from reason's purview, but it was only in this area the Bible was to maintain authority. Later, more radical Cartesians would allow no such separation between faith and reason, and they subjected all biblical claims to reason.<sup>36</sup> Likewise, the strict deductive rationalism of Spinoza developed into a higher criticism of the Scripture. The separation of "sacred" and "profane" was to be determined by *usage*, even with the Bible:

*Words gain their meaning solely from their usage, and if they are arranged according to their accepted signification so as to move those who read them to devotion, they will become sacred, and the book so written will be sacred also.*<sup>37</sup>

Without usage, or with corrupt usage, the Bible ceases to be "sacred." It is basically a human book and "can only be called the Word of God in so far as it affects religion," and as such "is neither faulty, tampered with, nor corrupt....I here mean written so incorrectly that the meaning cannot be arrived at by a study of the language, nor from the authority of Scripture."<sup>38</sup> Spinoza anticipates a form of "limited inerrancy" that focuses on *meaning* (function or purpose), and accepts error in Scripture, but "no error sufficient to vitiate it."<sup>39</sup> Error can be found in details, history, prophecy, miracles, and speculative matters, whatever may be used as a "pretext of Divine authority. But such matters have little to do with salvation."<sup>40</sup> Spinoza was a pantheist and antisupernaturalist,<sup>41</sup> and goes well beyond conservative errantists, but still remains to the right of many contemporary theologians.

Other philosophies have had a tremendous impact on western thought and the erosion of Biblical authority. Humean skeptical empiricism dealt a severe, but not fatal, blow to miracles by challenging the credibility of the witnesses and reliability of the New Testament.<sup>42</sup> For Hume, Scripture was "nothing but sophistry and illusion," and fit only for the flames.<sup>43</sup>

The Kantian synthesis of rationalism and empiricism argued against the possibility of knowledge outside the phenomenal world. Against rationalism, reason cannot cross over into the "noumenal" realm to know God as he actually is. But neither can the senses, which function only in the phenomenal realm, know reality (the noumenal). Thus, no claim to revelation is *verifiable*. Inerrancy is meaningless in such a context.<sup>44</sup>

Along similar lines, Kierkegaard distanced God from human reason; God is "wholly other." Even revelation itself can only point to God, but it cannot provide objective cognitive truth about him. This does not mean there is no objective truth about God, but that which is essential is that which is *believed*; it is the subjective encounter with God, realized by a "leap of faith," which is the substance of Christianity.

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<sup>36</sup>Krenz, *Historical Critical Method*, 13 – 14.

<sup>37</sup>Benedict De Spinoza, *A Theologico-Political Treatise* (trans. R. H. M. Elwes in *The Chief Works of Benedict De Spinoza* [New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1951]) 1:167.

<sup>38</sup>*Ibid.*, 171 – 172.

<sup>39</sup>*Ibid.*, 172.

<sup>40</sup>*Ibid.*, 173 – 174.

<sup>41</sup>*Ibid.*, 81 – 97.

<sup>42</sup>David Hume, *On Human Nature and the Understanding*, ed. Antony Flew (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., Inc., 1962), 115 – 136. See Colin Brown, *Miracles And The Critical Mind* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1984), 79 – 100.

<sup>43</sup>*Ibid.*, 163.

<sup>44</sup>W. David Beck, *Biblical Errancy: An Analysis of its Philosophical Roots*, ed. Norman L. Geisler (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1981), 52 – 78.

Although, Kierkegaard believed in the inspiration of Scripture and the objective truth of Christianity, neither were necessary; that they are *believed* is what matters. Thus, the Christian faith becomes unfalsifiable. It is this emphasis on subjectivism and antipathy to reason that underlies the rise of neo-orthodoxy, existentialism, and relativism in Christianity. In each of these systems, inerrancy of Scripture is categorically denied.<sup>45</sup>

### CONTEMPORARY CHRISTIAN VIEWS

For this discussion, it is easiest (although oversimplified) to divide Christendom into two streams of thought, modernist theology on the left and conservative theology on the right.<sup>46</sup> Those on the left categorically deny the inerrancy of Scripture, while those on the right divide into two basic groups, “inerrantists” and “limited inerrantists.”<sup>47</sup> The theologies on the left are essentially shaped by modern thought and are frequently set off against one another (e.g., neo-orthodoxy and liberalism) to a greater degree than those on the right. Although there is theological diversity on the right, there is a much higher concern for the authority of Scripture.

Two books offer good overviews of the various theologies and their views on Scripture. *Challenges To Inerrancy: A Theological Response* is a collection of essays sponsored by the International Council On Biblical Inerrancy, and looks primarily at those theologies on the left.<sup>48</sup> *What Christians Believe About The Bible* is written by a conservative errantist and looks at theologies on both the left and right sides of the spectrum.<sup>49</sup> I am primarily indebted to these two volumes for the following summary.

#### *The View From The Left*

Errancy, even in the religious and theological content of Scripture, is a given in these theologies. The Bible is seldom viewed as anything other than a human book. In most cases it is not considered revelation (the word of God), but (at best) a witness to revelation (the written witness of those who encountered God). The philosophical factors discussed above are the building blocks of modern thought and play a greater role than the Scriptures do in shaping these theologies. Most on the left deny the absolute authority of the Bible, while human reason, feelings, experience, need, etc., are the controls to which Scripture must conform or be abandoned.

In response to the cold rigidity of rationalism, *romanticism* meets the emotional and aesthetic desires of the believer. The Bible is not simply a set of propositions to respond to, but it is literature to *move*, not *save* the reader. For *liberalism*, true Christian freedom is a break with the Bible, which is unable to keep pace with the modern world. The goal for liberalism is to achieve a synthesis between Scripture and modern culture, rather than force the Christian to conform to a dead ancient letter. The *neo-orthodox* theologians brought a focus back on Scripture in response to liberalism, but only as a witness of the faithful authors to their revelatory encounters with God. Even so, the Bible has no authority in itself, but only as God speaks through it by the Spirit to the individual. For neo-orthodoxy, it seems the inevitable result is that there is no way to distinguish truth from error in the Bible.

<sup>45</sup>E. Herbert Nygren, *Biblical Errancy*, ed. Norman L. Geisler, 116 – 129.

<sup>46</sup>Denominational lines offer little help. For example, Roman Catholic liberation theology is on the left, but Catholic orthodoxy is on the right.

<sup>47</sup>This could be refined even more; see n. 13.

<sup>48</sup>*Challenges to Inerrancy: A Theological Response*, eds. Gordon Lewis and Bruce Demarest (Chicago: Moody Press, 1984).

<sup>49</sup>Donald M. McKim, *What Christians Believe about the Bible* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1985).

The theology of *existentialism* is really anthropology. Revelation is human encounter with its own being. God is understood as acting in this encounter, but only in enabling humanity to find its ground of being, freeing it from the anxiety of meaninglessness. The *liberation* theologies also use Scripture as a mean of fulfilling their freedom agendas, whether it is the poor in oppressive societies, females under male domination, or blacks from white supremacy.

Other theologies on this side of the spectrum (Relativism, Process, Story, *etc.*) essentially share a fundamental disrespect for Scripture as final authority, have little concern for the truthfulness or trustworthiness of Scripture, and allow their hermeneutic to be shaped by their own agendas.

### *The View From The Right*

In contrast to the left, the right maintains a high regard for the Bible's authority, truthfulness and trustworthiness, and attempts to shape its hermeneutic by Scripture alone. Certainly the right is also influenced by the philosophical factors above, but there is a sense of maintaining a biblically based theology and a close connection with orthodox tradition. There is at least some sense in which Scripture is viewed as "inerrant" (although the term is sometimes used suspiciously).

For "full inerrantists" (I use this phrase to include "absolute inerrantists" also, see n. 13), whatever Scripture affirms is trustworthy. Although there are varying perspectives as to what constitutes "error," all in this camp would agree that the Bible is without error; the Bible **is** the word of God (it does not just contain it). Theologies generally associated with "full inerrancy" are fundamentalism, scholasticism, and neo-evangelicalism, although there are no clear lines of demarcation between them. In fact, it is methodology that generally distinguishes them. For example, both evidentialists (R. C. Sproul, J. W. Montgomery, J. Gerstner) and presuppositionalists (C. Van Til, G. Clark, C. F. H. Henry) would agree Scripture is without error,<sup>50</sup> but **how** that is determined (see "Methodology" below) distinguishes them. Probably the two most vocal organizational voices in the inerrancy camp are the International Council on Biblical Inerrancy and the Evangelical Theological Society.

"Limited inerrantists" ascribe to the overall trustworthiness of the Bible, but limit inerrancy to the Bible's intention or salvific purpose; it is inerrant in matters of faith and practice, but contains errors in matters of history and science. This is the official position of the Roman Catholic church (see n. 21) and seems to be the growing consensus in mainline Protestant scholarship. Numbered among "limited inerrantists" associated with evangelicalism are C. Pinnock, F. F. Bruce, D. Bloesch, B. Ramm, B. Metzger, I. H. Marshall, G. E. Ladd, R. Coleman, J. Rogers, D. McKim, P. Jewett, and L. Smedes.

## THE VIEW FROM SCRIPTURE

True Christian theology begins with Scripture. But is it legitimate to expect Scripture to address the question of its own inerrancy? Would not most documents assume their own truthfulness without having the need to announce it? The very nature of Scripture's witness implies inerrancy, certainly (at least) in its intention and salvific message. However, if it is the case in this area, why not all areas Scripture addresses?

Clearly the case for Scripture's testimony of itself as the word of God has been adequately made. To do an exegesis of, or even list, all the relevant passages is prohibited by space and unnecessary. Warfield established the classic case for inerrancy

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<sup>50</sup>Obviously, not all evidentialists (*e.g.*, C. Pinnock) or presuppositionalists (*e.g.*, J. Daane) ascribe to the full inerrancy view.



nearly a century ago,<sup>51</sup> and many others have built upon his foundational study. I merely summarize below from some of the main points made by three recent scholars (page references in parentheses).<sup>52</sup>

1. The primary argument is Jesus' testimony concerning Scripture. The classic passages are Matt 5:18, Luke 24:25 – 27, 44 –46, and John 10:35. Also, four main views of Jesus toward Scripture imply its total trustworthiness: (1) his references to Scripture as God speaking through human prophets, fulfillment of prophecy, and the interchangeability of “Scripture” and “God” (Wenham, 16 – 22); (2) his appeal to Scripture as final authority (Wenham, 10 – 14); (3) his numerous references to historical events and people in the Old Testament without a hint that he did not believe they corresponded to reality (Wenham, 6 – 10); and (4) his promise that his disciples would likewise be guided in all truth by God's Spirit (John 14:25 – 26; 16:12 –13).<sup>53</sup>

2. The testimony of Jesus' writing disciples demonstrates they held the same view of Scripture. Three classic passages are 3 Tim 3: 15 – 17,<sup>54</sup> 2 Pet 1:19 – 21, and Gal 3:16 (Blum, 44 – 51). Additionally, Jesus' four main views were held by the disciples: (1) their references to Scripture as God speaking through human prophets, prophecy fulfilled, “oracles of God,” the interchange of “Scripture” and “God,” etc. (Grudem, 37 – 41), (2) they viewed Scripture as authoritative (Blum, 42 – 44), (3) they made references to historical events and people as fact (Grudem, 41 – 44), and (4) they viewed their own writings as the true word of God (Grudem, 45 – 49; Blum, 51 – 53).

3. The testimony of the Old Testament itself: (1) it reports of prophetic speech, as God's words *spoken* through men and women, as authoritative and true (Grudem, 20 – 25), (2) it reports of God's words being *written* as authoritative and true (Grudem, 25 – 27), and (3) it specifically considers the nature and character of God's words as authoritative and true (Grudem, 27 – 36).

How does the “limited inerrantist” respond to this Scriptural evidence? Clark Pinnock (a former “full inerrantist”) is representative of conservative evangelicals denying full inerrancy. Following is a summary of his basic arguments from *Scripture Principle* (see n. 4), with page references in parentheses.

1. Not all books of the Bible claim or are characterized by inspiration; some are strictly human compositions. Even some writings of prophets are shaped by anonymous uninspired scribes (32 – 33, 40). The difficulty with this argument is that neither Christ (Luke 24:44 –45) nor his disciples (2 Tim 3:15 – 17) show such selectiveness. The whole question of canon is beyond the scope of this study, but neither the Jews nor the early Christians knew of such distinctions. Should Pinnock's point be correct, the interpreter would be hopelessly engulfed in a morass of guesswork as to what actually constituted Scripture; a whole new “canon” would have to be developed. Indeed, those who have abandoned canon authority altogether can be perceived as exercising more sense and consistency than Pinnock.

2. Jesus and his writing disciples were concerned only with the *purpose* of the message, not the *words* per se (37 – 40, 55, 69 – 70, 225).<sup>55</sup> If only the purpose is

<sup>51</sup>B. B. Warfield, *The Inspiration And Authority Of The Bible* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1948), 131 – 166, 245 – 296.

<sup>52</sup>Wayne A Grudem, *Scripture and Truth*, eds. D. A. Carson and J. D. Woodbridge (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1992), 19 –59, and John W. Wenham and Edwin A. Blum, *Inerrancy*, ed. N. L. Geisler, 2 – 53.

<sup>53</sup>Pinnock, *Scripture Principle*, 46 – 47.

<sup>54</sup>See Edward W. Goodrick, "Let's Put 2 Timothy 3:16 Back in the Bible," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 25/4 (December, 1982): 479 – 487.

<sup>55</sup>See also Richard J. Coleman, *Evangelicals And Inerrancy*, ed. Youngblood, 161 – 169. Coleman is answered in the same volume by J. Barton Payne (170 – 175) and Vern S. Poythress (175 – 185).

inspired, and inspiration does not imply inerrancy (57 – 60, 231 nn. 30, 32), how can the reader be certain of the purpose? How can an inspired theological purpose be distinguished from an un-inspired secular error? Can theology be separated from history and science? If so, what does one do with the resurrection of Jesus (1 Cor 15)? Who is to say that any given author (or God) excluded from his purpose the accurate reporting of history or science? Did any of them “purpose” to report untruthfully? This false dichotomy (of which Scripture itself offers no evidence) between “sacred” and “secular” leaves the “sacred” unverifiable and meaningless. There is no way of knowing the truth-value of the sacred; it becomes purely subjective. By what standard is one to measure the truthfulness of the secular? Is there a source that is in some respect more free from error that it must be trusted more than the Bible? For example, it is argued that Luke erred (Acts 5:33 – 37) by stating that Judas followed Theudas chronologically because Josephus (Ant. XX, 5, 1 – 2) appears to reverse the order.<sup>56</sup> Could not Josephus have erred? Or perhaps Luke faithfully recorded what Gamaliel said in error. To suggest that inspiration is only concerned with purpose, in light of 2 Tim 3:16, is to misuse a summary statement. This passage states that “all Scripture (is) inspired **and** profitable...” not “all Scripture is inspired in what it profits...”

3. Jesus (and his disciples) spoke by *accommodation*, “according to the accepted conventions and not to refute some piece of higher critical guesswork.” Although Pinnock rejects the so-called Second Isaiah theory, he reveals an affinity with modern scholarship over the simple statements of Scripture: “The literary composition of Isaiah is an issue to be settled by Old Testament scholars weighing the evidence, not by a spurious appeal to Jesus” (39, 95 – 100). Thus, if “scholarship” concludes there was a multiplicity of authors for the Pentateuch, for example, Jesus’ “error” in believing it was written by Moses was a matter of accommodating the (ignorance) tradition of his time. However, we argue, if Jesus knowingly accommodated untruth, there is a moral dilemma. If he unknowingly did it, there is a Christological dilemma. In either case, Jesus’ trustworthiness and Lordship are jeopardized. Accommodation implies God chose **not** to correct untruths and allowed the people to be deceived. This is contrary to his character.

4. Pinnock (correctly) emphasizes the human element in inspiration, from which he (incorrectly) implies the inevitability of error in the text, although he never uses the adage “to err is human.” He is wrong to suggest the only other option to an errant text is one inspired by dictation (85 – 105). Pinnock recognizes the weakness of this argument.<sup>57</sup> Error is not essential to the nature of humanity. At any given time a person could theoretically write an errorless book (e.g., a math textbook). Inspiration could involve not only revelation, but protection against error. This neither demands dictation nor the sacrifice of the writer’s free will.<sup>58</sup> Not only is error a matter of ignorance and not the will, but one could freely choose correction given by inspiration. For example, a senatorial speech writer constructs a speech around the senator’s (not his own) philosophy, and corrects it, if necessary, under the senator’s direction. This

<sup>56</sup>Ernst Haenchen, *The Acts of the Apostles: A Commentary* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1971), 252 – 253.

<sup>57</sup>Clark Pinnock, *Biblical Revelation* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1971), 176. Roman Catholic scholar Bruce Vawter states: “A human literature containing no error would indeed be a contradiction in terms, since nothing is more human than to err.” *Biblical Interpretation* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1972), 169, cited in Woodbridge, *Hermeneutics, Authority, and Canon*, eds. Carson and Woodbridge, 419.

<sup>58</sup>Randal and David Basinger, “Inerrancy, Dictation, and the Free Will Defense,” *The Evangelical Quarterly* 55/3 (1983): 177 – 180, and “Inerrancy and Free Will: Some Further Thoughts” *EQ* 58/4 (1986): 351 – 354. See also the reply articles by Norman L. Geisler, “Inerrancy and free Will: A Reply To The Brothers Basinger,” *EQ* 57/4 (1985): 349 – 353 and “Is Inerrancy Incompatible with the Free Will Defense?” *EQ* 62/2 (1990): 175 – 178.

requires neither dictation nor the sacrifice of the writer's free will and style, but the speech can be said to be the senator's. Also, it is quite conceivable that a compiler of documents (Luke 1:1 – 4) could so be inspired as to choose the proper documents and correct them if necessary.

If error is inevitable in humans, must we conclude Jesus communicated untruths? If not, why not? If so, what are they?

Unless it is demonstrated that inspiration does not imply inerrancy, and all who believe in inspiration believe it does so in at least some matters, the "limited inerrantist" has conceded all that is necessary for a totally inerrant Scripture.

## METHODOLOGY

Pinnock argues that "evangelicals have difficulty following inductive, and avoiding deductive, thinking on the subject of inspiration,"<sup>59</sup> as if a deductively determined doctrine is ipso facto invalid. Pinnock is an evidentialist, though less demonstrative than some.<sup>60</sup> Greg Bahnsen's essay "Inductivism, Inerrancy, And Presuppositionalism" attempts to vindicate Cornelius Van Til against the charge of fideism. In the process he argues convincingly against inductivism and empirical methodologies (like Pinnock's) that claim presuppositionless and neutral commitments.<sup>61</sup> Ostensibly without an agenda, Pinnock argues that considering "the actual biblical evidence today, I have to conclude the case for total inerrancy just isn't there."<sup>62</sup> Other evidentialists believe the evidence is there—from history, archeology, prophecy, science, logic, psychology, philosophy, biblical appeal, moral influence, Christology, and Scripture itself.<sup>63</sup> However, the accumulation of inconclusive data does not bring a conclusive result. R. C. Sproul, in a more inclusive approach, begins with "a basically reliable and trustworthy" Bible (from the evidence) and concludes with an "utterly trustworthy, *i.e.*, infallible" Bible.<sup>64</sup> There appears to be an illogical leap in this process.

The case for inerrancy has been constructed inductively, deductively, and fideistically,<sup>65</sup> but none absolutely convincingly (if such is possible). The most convincing case is constructed by a combination of induction and deduction, which is essentially what most do, who use deduction at all. Two essays are particularly helpful in this approach.<sup>66</sup> For those who rightfully fear the elevation of reason over faith, there may be an aversion to the inclusion of deductive arguments for any belief. But the deductive argument for the inerrancy of Scripture is established by premises based on

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<sup>59</sup>Pinnock, *Scripture Principle*, 58.

<sup>60</sup>R. C. Sproul, J. Gerstner, and A. Lindsley, *Classical Apologetics: A Rational Defense of the Christian Faith and a Critique of Presuppositional Apologetics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1984), 126, 129.

<sup>61</sup>Greg L. Bahnsen, *Evangelicals and Inerrancy*, ed. Youngblood, 199 – 216.

<sup>62</sup>Pinnock, *Scripture Principle*, 58.

<sup>63</sup>Stanley E. Anderson, *Evangelicals and Inerrancy*, ed. Youngblood, 13 – 21.

<sup>64</sup>R. C. Sproul, *God's Inerrant Word: An International Symposium on the Trustworthiness of Scripture*, ed. John Warwick Montgomery (Minneapolis: Bethany Fellowship, Inc., 1974), 248 – 261.

<sup>65</sup>*Ibid.*, 242 – 261. See also Paul Helm, *Scripture and Truth*, eds. Carson and Woodbridge, 303 – 320.

<sup>66</sup>Arthur F. Holmes, "Ordinary Language Analysis and Theological Method." *Evangelicals and Inerrancy*, ed. Youngblood, 129 – 136 (see also the follow-up essays in the same volume by Geisler and Holmes, 137 – 146) and Paul D. Feinberg, "The Meaning of Inerrancy," *Inerrancy*, ed. Norman Geisler, 267 – 304.

faith that could not be argued apart from Scripture to begin with.<sup>67</sup> The premises of the deductive argument are arrived at inductively from Scripture:

- God always communicates truthfully,
- Scripture is God's communication,
- Therefore, Scripture always communicates truthfully.

"Limited inerrantists" accept the first premise. However, they cannot do so with certainty because they deny the second premise—they hold that *some* Scripture is God's communication. Thus, they cannot know with certainty whether or not the Bible is in error when it claims that God always communicates truthfully. Theoretically, a strictly inductive approach cannot declare for or against inerrancy until all the data has been examined (inerrantly). Of course, such an investigation is theoretically possible (there is a finite set of data), but it is practically impossible; an external examination of the data as it corresponds to reality is beyond reach.

Everything hangs on the second premise: "The Bible is God's communication." If this is not true, and the "limited inerrantist" is correct, Christians are left with a meaningless belief in something that is of low probability and cannot even be identified. However, based on all the evidence available, both premises are *probable* and therefore the conclusion is *probable*. Unless either premise can be proven false (which would require perfect induction), the deduction is valid. Apparent contradictions or errors can be given the benefit of the doubt, but only if deduction is included in the methodology. This is not fideism; it is based on faith, evidence, and reason. It is not strictly presuppositionalistic; inerrancy is not one of the premises. But its presuppositions are admitted: God exists, he has revealed himself, and the Bible is the record of that revelation.

### CONCLUSION

Either the Bible has errors in it or it does not. No amount of linguistic gymnastics can avoid that reality. In the end, an inspired Bible that contains error is as meaningless as one that is uninspired. I agree with Feinberg; there are really only two choices:

*...either the theologian will trust the word of an omnipotent, omniscient God, who says that He controlled human agents, making it necessary for the theologian to admit his fallibility as a critic, or in some sense he will declare that the afore-mentioned control is restricted and will affirm at least his own relative and finite omniscience as a critic.*<sup>68</sup>

Karl Rahner (an errantist) recognizes that an errant Scripture cannot serve as the only authority in the church:

*...one cannot abandon the principle of an absolute, verbal inspiration of scripture, as in fact has happened, and still maintain the principle of scripture alone.... One cannot do this without contradicting oneself, or without simply making the single principle of faith not scripture alone, but rather man's ultimate, inescapable and existential experience of the Spirit.*<sup>69</sup>

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<sup>67</sup>Obviously this is not a defense of the Christian revelation claim, but the nature of inspiration. Thus, using the Bible as a starting point is legitimate.

<sup>68</sup>Feinberg, *Inerrancy*, ed. Norman Geisler, 295.

<sup>69</sup>Karl Rahner, *Foundations Of Christian Faith*, trans., William V. Dych, (New York: The Seabury Press, 1978), 362.

Rahner rejects existential experience as authoritative however, and committed to his tradition, submits to the infallible authority of the Roman Catholic church.<sup>70</sup>

We are really left with two choices: (1) the self-proclaimed divinely inspired inerrant authority of Scripture, or (2) the self-proclaimed humanly inspired errant authority of reason, existential experience, or some ecclesiastical hierarchy. But with the Psalmist the faithful should pray with certainty:

*All your words are true; all your righteous laws are eternal* (119:160).

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<sup>70</sup>Ibid., 362 – 365.