

Biblical Inerrancy—Part 3

by Dr. John Ankerberg and Dr. John Weldon

How do evangelical errantists defend their views? Those who reject inerrancy often claim they are actively preserving true evangelicalism. As Harold Lindsell writes of those errantists who work in Christian institutions that accept inerrancy:

Many who hold that the Bible is fallible are deeply convinced that those who think it infallible are wrong. Rightly or wrongly, they think they are doing the Christian faith a service by staying where they are and working to delete any commitment to an infallible Bible from the creeds and confessions.... They wish to deliver those who believe in it from their error. The decision to remain where they are and to work for this change is based on the conviction that to do so is more important than the ethical dilemma of signing statements of faith they do not actually believe.¹

Others argue the entire issue is blown out of proportion. Is there really a difference between an inerrantist who believes no present translation is 100 percent inerrant yet treats the Scripture as inerrant and a limited inerrantist who rejects inerrancy but treats the Scripture infallibly in matters of faith and practice, especially when neither would reject any cardinal Christian doctrine? After all, no evangelical errantist believes the Bible is “full of errors,” and some would probably be reluctant even to claim a single demonstrable error. Are the two positions all that divergent? What if the errantist (in good conscience) truly does *not* believe the Bible claims its own inerrancy? And what if he staunchly defends the inerrancy of Scripture in matters relating to salvation? What if he simply does not believe that biblical inerrancy is necessary for God to achieve all the purposes God intended to in revealing His Word? In the end, what is the crucial difference when the inerrantist believes in something he cannot finally prove (inerrancy can't be proven without the autographs) and the errantist who also believes in something he cannot prove (errancy)? Do not both positions result in the same practical end: the infallibility of Scripture for all of God's *intended* purposes, i.e., for revealing the one true God, His plan of salvation, and everything necessary for the Christian's spiritual health?

To answer that question, we must understand that the issue surrounding inerrancy is not merely the ability of Scripture to accomplish God's purposes, but to establish God's character. All Christians agree God is a God of truth, omnipotent and sovereign. If God did inspire or permit errors in the autographs, aren't there implications for His character and nature? Further, how can we know where the errors are? In the end, we would not know if God *or* His word be trusted? And how can we be truly certain the Scripture will provide all that Christians need for spiritual health if Christians themselves are not certain what parts to believe or trust or attempt to decide the issue subjectively?

The issue is more important than the limited inerrantist supposes. Can a fallible Scripture, which demands individual uncertainty over the location of truth really accomplish the will of God? As Dr. Archer points out, the doctrine of inerrancy and the doctrine of salvation are more closely tied than some Christians think:

God's written revelation came in inerrant form, free from discrepancies or contradictions, and this inerrancy contributes to its achieving its saving purpose. If there were genuine mistakes of any sort in the original manuscripts, it would mean, obviously, that the Bible contains error along with truth. As such it would become subject to human judgment, just like any other religious document. The validity of such judgment, of course, depends on the judge's own knowledge and wisdom. If he rejects the truth of the scriptural record simply because it seems to him to be unlikely or improbable, then he is in danger of eternal loss. The charge of scriptural self-contradiction or factual error is to be taken quite seriously; it cannot be brushed off as a matter of minor consequence. At stake is the credibility and reliability of the Bible as authentic revelation from God.... For this reason there is no such thing as an inconsequential scriptural error. If any part of the Bible can be proved to be in error, then any other part of it—including the doctrinal, theological parts—may also be in error.²

Further, inerrancy has implications for how we treat Scripture. The words of men must be perceived differently from the words of *God*. One we examine critically, one we bow before. If our finite minds must be the rational judge of what is Scripture, where does such a process end? After all, does even the central salvation truth of Scripture seem probable or reasonable—that God became a Man to die on a cross to freely forgive the sin of the world two millennia ago?

On the surface, the idea seems difficult, if not foolish (1 Cor. 1:23). Indeed, is this something our reasonable minds would normally accept? And what about the rational or theological problems inherent in biblical revelation on the Trinity, the hypostatic union, the Virgin Birth (an absolutely key doctrine for Christology and soteriology [salvation]), the method of inspiration, the imputation of sin, the means of atonement, eternal punishment, etc. If we are competent to judge the truth or error of biblical *history* on rational grounds, are we not, then, at least competent to *question* the legitimacy of biblical *theology* on rational grounds?

The issue is not the practical “closeness” of the two evangelical camps, it is the theological implications and demonstrable negative results that flow from a position of errancy. For example, consider the historic Arian controversy of the fourth century where one letter in a word (one “*iota*,” the Greek “*i*”) made a crucial difference for subsequent historical theology and accurate Christology. Dr. Harold O.J. Brown illustrates the importance and implications of the matter:

Is this [inerrancy controversy] not another example of the sort of issue that separated the orthodox, *homoousian* party from the moderate Arian *homoiousians* in the fourth century; nothing more than an *iota*? Indeed, the inerrancy controversy is similar to the Arian controversy in that the difference between the positions appears to be small but in reality is of tremendous significance. To have abandoned the Nicene definition of the Son as *homoousios to patri*, of one substance with the Father, for *homoiousios to patri*, of similar substance with the Father, would have undermined the basic structure of trinitarian faith with its fundamental confession that the Son *is* God, identical in nature to the Father although distinct in His personhood from Him. In addition, to abandon the term *homoousios* would have been to confess that the whole church, for decades, had been fundamentally mistaken as to the true nature of Jesus the Messiah. The parallel with the inerrancy controversy is this: to abandon the definition “inerrant autographs, virtually inerrant copies” would also be a step of tremendous magnitude; it would undermine the basic structure of Biblical authority with its principle that the Scripture *is* the Word of God. In addition, to abandon the definition would be to confess that the whole church has been mistaken about inerrancy for seventeen and more centuries. It is important to see precisely where the conflict lies in order to understand the crucial significance of the inerrancy debate and of its ultimate outcome for conservative Protestantism, indeed, for Christianity as a whole....

We must frankly acknowledge the apparent practical similarity between our views and those of the opposing party. To see the similarity and not to realize that it is only apparent would be very dangerous, for this reason we must point it out, even though initially it might appear to make our position excessively pedantic and a trifle ridiculous to those whose attention it has not yet caught. No one would mistake the poisonous rattlesnake for a harmless variety, because the rattle proclaims his deadly difference. Unfortunately the even more poisonous coral snake closely resembles harmless snakes and is frequently mistaken for them with grave consequences.³

Dr. Brown's point is well taken. The beautiful mountain king snake is harmless: the equally beautiful coral snake is deadly. Both have great surface similarities but the beauty of one is a terrible deception for the unwary. Many things in life that seem innocent or inconsequential are actually anything but.

Inerrancy and Historic Watersheds

The history of Christianity reveals that in every age the Church has dealt with one or more key theological issues that are integrally related to its own health and vitality. Such issues typically developed as a result of the attacks by critics, heretics or enemies of Christianity and led to greater precision of doctrinal formulation. In the early era of the Church (first through the fourth century) key issues that were decided involved the extent of the New Testament canon (the 27 books of the New Testament vs. false claimants), the tri-personal nature of the Godhead (three persons versus one person, as in the heresy of modalistic monarchianism) and the divine nature of the Trinity (the deity of Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit, versus Arianism which rejected their deity). In the Middle Ages (fifth through fourteenth century) the atonement became a watershed issue. In the Reformation era (sixteenth through seventeenth century) the nature of justification (by faith alone, not faith and works) and the proper place of church tradition were vitally reaffirmed. In the modern era (eighteenth through twentieth century) the question of biblical authority (which had not seriously and widely been questioned until then) became the prominent issue.

Although biblical authority had seen the beginnings of challenge in the Renaissance period, skepticism fully blossomed in the era of the Enlightenment, a period which left in its wake a cancerous theological liberalism that wasted the church from within. As a result, for over a century, liberals and conservatives have opposed one another over the issue of biblical inspiration and authority. However, not until the 1960s did the issue of inerrancy come to the forefront for conservatives, largely as a result of the increasingly perceived influence of the liberal methodology upon evangelicalism itself. That is, the impact of liberal higher criticism and its hermeneutical presuppositions were increasingly being felt within the ranks of evangelicalism and negatively affecting its view of Scripture.

The debate over inerrancy represents a stand for the absolute authority and trustworthiness of Scripture. Again, perhaps no single issue is more important to the Christian Church today. How the individual and the Church views the Bible influences how the individual and the Church views almost everything else. And if "everything else" is not viewed biblically, through God's eyes, it can only be viewed humanistically, to one degree or another, through man's eyes. Of all the major issues the Church has decided, this is clearly the watershed issue for our age.

With our rather lengthy preface complete, we are now ready to begin our analysis of this critical topic. We will begin by noting the boundaries involved in the proper definition of inerrancy.

Definition and Explanation of Inerrancy

The doctrine of inerrancy claims:

1. *To constitute an absolutely errorless original text.*

Inerrancy means that what the Bible teaches is true without a single error in the original manuscripts. Dr. Paul Feinberg defines inerrancy as follows:

Inerrancy means that when all facts are known, the Scriptures in their original autographs and properly interpreted will be shown to be wholly true in everything that they affirm, whether that has to do with doctrine or morality or with the social, physical, or life sciences.⁴

A more concise definition would be, “What Scripture says, God says—through human agents and without error.”⁵

2. *To apply equally to all parts of Scripture.*

Inerrancy must apply equally to all parts of Scripture as it was originally written. Again, a belief in limited inerrancy demands the impossible—that a fallible exegete becomes an infallible discernor and interpreter of the “Word of God” within the Scriptures. This only opens the door for confusion and uncertainty undergirded by either subjectivism or personal bias.

3. *To be limited to the proper application of hermeneutics.*

Higher critical interpretive methods first assume errors in the Bible and then have little trouble finding them (e.g., form, source and redaction criticism). However, the proper way to interpret the Bible involves a respect for the text as given until proven otherwise. In other words, due attention is given to claims for biblical authority. Also, interpretation must involve an objective and impartial methodology.⁶ The need for such an approach is obvious. If one does not first determine the authority of Scripture and second the *correct meaning* of a text, one is incapable of saying whether or not it is true or false. Here, we must also understand that inerrancy is related to the *intent* of Scripture. For example, when the intent of the writer is to *record* a lie or error by someone (e.g., a false prophet or the Devil), the fact of a lie or error can hardly deny inerrancy, for inerrancy only affirms that what is recorded is recorded accurately. What the Bible *records* must be distinguished from what the Bible approves.

The doctrine of inerrancy does not claim:

1. *To be absolutely proven.*

The doctrine of inerrancy cannot guarantee the final solution to every alleged problem passage. Given the present limited state of human knowledge, no one can logically expect proof when the means of proof are absent. Proof of inerrancy is thus limited by our present state of knowledge. Nevertheless, such realities in no way deny or disprove inerrancy, especially when the weight of the evidence so strongly supports inerrancy. The fact that so many opportunities exist within the biblical record to disprove inerrancy and yet it remains capable of rational defense after all these years is certainly impressive. The fact that historically, alleged errors are routinely proven later to be truths when more knowledge becomes available is equally impressive.

2. *To manuscript copies or translations.*

Copies and translations may be considered inerrant only to the degree they reproduce the originals. For obvious reasons, none of them do this 100 percent. Nevertheless, an accurate translation, based as it is upon a 99+ percent original text, virtually reproduces the originals and the remaining 1 percent is present in the variant readings. Thus we may say without being proven wrong that we have “inerrant originals and virtually inerrant copies.”

3. *Absolute precision.*

Approximations are not errors. To illustrate, no one would argue it was an error to say the following:

- I earned \$20,000 last year (it was really \$20,200).
- In 1978 I received my B.A. degree (it was June of 1978).
- In Montgomery's book, it states.... (Montgomery is the dominant author and editor).
- What a lovely sunset (the earth's rotation appears as the sun setting).
- Look! There just ain't no free lunch! (breaking the rules of grammar to emphasize a point).
- Steve went to the store (he also stopped by the pool on the way back).

In the interest of improved communication we often use approximations, or are technically incorrect in grammar, number, science, history, etc. This is also true of the biblical writers: their purpose was to communicate, not to write in technicalities.

Thus, inerrancy does not demand the Bible be written in the technical language or knowledge of modern twentieth century science, which would certainly keep it a book closed to all but the specialist. Regardless, such scientific precision would still, technically, not make the Bible correct to the last degree. For which centuries' scientific precision do we speak of—first, twentieth, or thirtieth? Also, precision may become so precise as to be awkward or useless. To speak of a setting sun is not error in spite of its scientific imprecision. Jesus called the mustard seed the smallest of all seeds (Mt. 13:32) and this was perfectly true for His hearers: it was the smallest of all the seeds they planted. I (John Weldon) can still remember a Bible professor I spoke with years ago terribly concerned because Jesus was “in error on this point.” But science has still probably not discovered the smallest of all created seeds. What if Jesus had named *this* still undiscovered seed, or named the smallest seed *currently* known to twentieth century botany? In either case, it would leave him doubted and misunderstood by His hearers. If Jesus were to name the still undiscovered seed, by what name would He call it? He would be technically inerrant, but considered errant based on current knowledge.

For similar reasons, inerrancy does not require strict grammatic, semantic, numeric, or historic precision, e.g., September 14, 15, or 16 is still, properly, the middle of the month. Inerrancy also does not exclude the use of non-literal, figurative language (e.g., allegory, personification, hyperbole) or various literary genre (apocalyptic, drama, poetry, parable). Indeed to exclude these would rob Scripture of much of its richness and universal appeal.

Inerrancy does not demand verbatim exactness when the New Testament quotes the Old. A New Testament author has the right to give the basic idea or summarize for purpose of brevity. Only if a New Testament quotation denied or contradicted an Old Testament Scripture would there be an error—but this never occurs.

In a similar fashion, inerrancy does not demand that any given biblical event or account be exhaustively reported. As Dr. Charles Ryrie points out: “[T]he inerrancy of the Bible means simply that the Bible tells the truth. Truth can and does include approximations, free quotations, language of appearances, and different accounts of the same event as long as those do not contradict.”⁷

To illustrate, let's say that two police officers are called into a bar to break up a fist fight. Recalling the incident to a friend three weeks later, one of the combatants says, “I would have won that fight but this cop came in and broke it up.” Is his statement an error because he failed to mention the presence of the second policeman? Obviously not. A newspaper account of the

event read: “Two policemen end brawl in local bar.” What if the “other” policeman was actually a woman? Is this an error? What if it really was an English pub? Is this an error? Again, no. Let’s say we had both statements in the same newspaper story. Would we assume one statement was in error or that the reporter was lying? No, of course not, because we could see from the context both statements were true.

In a similar fashion, it is good to remember that looking back at biblical events we do not always have access to the entire context or story—only the summarized reporting. Why should we assume there is an error or contradiction without the information necessary to prove there really is one?

We have now properly defined inerrancy and noted what the doctrine does and does not involve. In the following material we will briefly address the subject of the process by which we received an inerrant Bible.

Inerrancy and Inspiration

In the clearest of terms the Bible declares it is the inspired Word of God: “All Scripture is God-breathed [*theopneustos*]...” (2 Tim. 3:16). In what sense is the Bible inspired? Biblical inspiration is 1) **verbal** (extending to the very words, not just the ideas, of Scripture), 2) **plenary** (extending equally to every part of Scripture), and 3) what is termed **perspicuous**—sufficiently clear for the average person to understand it and be spiritually nourished without recourse to scholarly or technical insight.

Non-biblical theories of inspiration include 1) *verbal dictation*, which undercuts the uniquely *human* input in recording Scripture, 2) *limited or partial inspiration*, which undercuts the *authority* of Scripture (and the basis for any objective hermeneutic), and 3) merely *human inspiration* which undercuts the very concept of revealed Scripture, since it is not *divine* inspiration to begin with. If the Bible is no more than human “religious genius” it could hardly be accorded greater authority than other works of human inspiration or religious genius.

Biblically speaking, the mere fact of verbal, plenary, divine inspiration virtually demands belief in inerrancy. To separate inspiration from inerrancy is to “separate” God from His attributes.⁸ For example, is it credible to believe that a *holy* God who identifies Himself as “the God of truth” would inspire error? Or that an *omnipotent* God would not safeguard His own words from corruption during the process of inspiring human agents? Is it reasonable to believe that a just, merciful and loving God engages in limited inspiration and then leaves it to His sinful and imperfect children to attempt to discover where the truth is—knowing in advance the hopelessness of the task, and the subjectivity and unbelief it would foster? What would be the point of inspiration?

The only logical option is to maintain that whatever God speaks is truth and only truth, for, as Scripture declares, God “does not lie” (Titus 1:2) because “it is impossible for God to lie” (Heb. 6:18). As Dr. Lindsell observes;

The very nature of inspiration renders the Bible infallible, which means that it cannot deceive us. It is inerrant in that it is not false, mistaken, or defective.... Inspiration involved infallibility from start to finish. God the Holy Spirit by nature cannot lie or be the author of untruth. If the Scripture is inspired at all it must be infallible. If any part of it is not infallible, then that part cannot be inspired. If inspiration allows for the possibility of error, then inspiration ceases to be inspiration.⁹

Again, if the process of inspiration cannot be trusted, of what value is inspiration? Inspiration has no value, let alone credibility, if “all it does is guarantee us the Bible has in it both truth and

error.”¹⁰ Defective or deceptive inspiration could certainly be expected in something like New Age channeling and other forms of spiritism, but to ascribe it to an infinitely perfect God is hardly worthy of His perfection.

If we assume the truth of a limited inspiration, or limited inerrancy view, shouldn't we begin correcting Scripture accordingly so that its teachings are consistent with the “facts” as we know them? To cite an example of one Scripture that surely would need revision, consider 2 Timothy 3:16:

Most all Scripture is (partially) God-breathed and profitable (usually) for teaching (except where wrong) rebuking (assuming you are certain you have the authority) correcting (when you find the inerrant parts) and training in righteousness (unless it concerns sexist and culturally prejudiced moralizing) so that the man of God may (possibly) be thoroughly equipped (?) for every good (?) work.

If the Bible is merely a humanly inspired document, then it should be treated as such, for it would just as certainly be subject to human correction as it would contain human error. However, if it is truly inspired by God, then it must *not* be assumed errant without sufficient evidence, lest we impugn the character and majesty of the infinite God who so graciously gave it to us. It is after all, *His* word. The notion of an infinite God speaking through men is far, far different than the notion of men speaking by themselves. As E. J. Young states in *Thy Word is Truth*:

If the Bible is the Word of God we certainly may not approach it believing that we are capable of subjecting it to the test of our own unaided reason. If we think that we can employ theories and hypotheses which conflict with the express statements of the Bible, we deceive only ourselves, and the reason why we deceive ourselves is that we are thus setting up the human mind above God.... Nor in our study, may we advance theories which conflict with what the Bible itself says. How then must we approach the Bible? There is only one way; it is the way of humility. We are coming unto the message which the Creator of heaven and earth has given. Ours must be the receptive attitude. We are to pattern all our thought upon what God has said. We shall never understand the Bible aright until we accept it for what it claims to be, the infallible Word of the ever-living and true God.¹¹

Inspiration guarantees the truth of what is stated but it does not mean everything inspired is necessarily of equal importance. To cite an obvious example, the theological content of Romans chapters 3-8 is more important to us than the census data of the Israelite tribes recorded in Leviticus chapters 1-4. Both are equally inspired and neither is unimportant (it was crucial to the Israelites) but both are not equally important for us today spiritually. All Scripture is truth but some of its truth is more central (e.g., the atonement) and some is more peripheral (e.g., the number of men slain in a given war):

...inspiration means that the record of what is said and done is correct. It does not mean that everything that God did and said is recorded. It does not mean that everything recorded is of equal importance, but every part of it is necessary to the purpose of the record, and no part is unimportant. One part is no more inspired than any other part.¹²

Again, no Scripture is unimportant, however mundane. As any good quality commentary will show, some of the greatest treasures can be found in Leviticus, what some consider one of the most “boring” books in the Bible. It should also be remembered that even when a particular Scripture's commandments are not directed to a later generation, such as the Old Testament sacrificial regulations, they will nevertheless still possess special spiritual *significance* to or necessary practical *instruction* for them: “For everything that was written in the past was written to teach us...” (Rom. 15:4)¹³

Inerrancy is a genuinely important topic in the church today and in light of church history, it

represents one among several truly watershed issues. Thus, the debate that exists should not be surprising (Eph. 6:12). Thus, the debate that exists should not be surprising. We have shown what biblical inerrancy means and the importance of the relationship of biblical inspiration to the doctrine of inerrancy.

Next time we will cite some of the evidence for inerrancy.

Notes:

- ¹ Harold Lindsell, *The Battle for the Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishers, 1977), p. 23.
- ² Gleason Archer, "Alleged Errors and Discrepancies in the Original Manuscripts of the Bible" in Norman Geisler (ed.), *Inerrancy* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1980), p. 59.
- ³ Harold O.J. Brown, "The Arian Connection: Presuppositions of Errancy" in Gordon Lewis and Bruce Demarest, *Challenges to Inerrancy: A Theological Response* (Chicago: Moody, 1984), pp. 386-387.
- ⁴ Paul Feinberg, "The Meaning of Inerrancy" in Norman Geisler (ed.), *Inerrancy* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1980), p. 294.
- ⁵ James M. Boice, *Does Inerrancy Matter?* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 1980), p. 15.
- ⁶ See Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., "Legitimate Hermeneutics" in Norman Geisler, ed., *Inerrancy*, pp. 116-141.
- ⁷ Charles Ryrie, *What You Should Know About Inerrancy* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1980), p. 30.
- ⁸ See our *The Facts on the King James Only Controversy*.
- ⁹ Lindsell, *The Battle for the Bible*, p. 31.
- ¹⁰ Harold Lindsell, *The Bible in the Balance* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1979), p. 31.
- ¹¹ Edward J. Young, *Thy Word Is Truth* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1970), pp. 206-207.
- ¹² Lindsell, *The Bible in the Balance*, p. 133.
- ¹³ Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., "Legitimate Hermeneutics" in Geisler (ed.), *Inerrancy*, pp. 140-141, cf. pp. 460 n. 46. See Heb. 6:13-18, citing Gen. 12, 15, 17, 22 and 1 Cor. 9:8-10 citing Dt. 25:4 and Rom. 4:23; Mt. 23:31-32; 1 Cor. 10:11; Heb. 10:15.