

THIRD EDITION

# ACROSS THE SPECTRUM

UNDERSTANDING ISSUES  
IN EVANGELICAL THEOLOGY

GREGORY A. BOYD  
AND PAUL RHODES EDDY

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# PREFACE TO THE THIRD EDITION

We are grateful for the many students, professors, pastors, and other readers who have made use of our book over the years, a number of whom provided feedback and suggestions for this third edition. The primary changes in this new edition include

- significantly revising chapter 9, “The Sanctification Debate”;
- lengthening chapter 17, “The Hell Debate,” from two to four views;
- adding two new topics to the appendix: (1) “Were Adam and Eve Historical Persons?” and (2) “What Is the Meaning of ‘Justification?’”; and
- updating the “Further Reading” sections at the end of each chapter and appendix topic.

It is our hope that this third edition will continue to serve our readers as we all, within the body of Christ, seek to live out that ancient piece of Christian wisdom: “In the essential things, unity. In the nonessential things, liberty. And in all things, charity.”

# INTRODUCTION

While this book will appeal to all people interested in the diversity of theological views that make up evangelical Christianity, we have written it specifically for college students. Its purpose is to introduce various disputed topics and the range of positions taken by people identifying as evangelical Christians. Each position is argued from the perspective of one defending the position and is therefore presented as persuasively as possible (given the introductory nature and space limitations of this book).

This book clearly assumes a distinctly liberal arts approach to the study of theology. It presupposes that the goal of teaching is not for a teacher simply to persuade students of his or her own perspective. Rather, the goal is to broaden students' minds by helping them empathetically understand a variety of perspectives while training them to think critically for themselves. The goal is not indoctrination, in other words, but the development of people who are able to arrive at their own convictions in a prayerful, critically informed manner—whether they agree with the teacher or not.

This approach does not imply that teachers cannot or should not be passionately committed to particular theological views, nor that they should altogether refrain from trying to persuade students of their views. But a liberal arts approach to theology does require that all views be presented in as fair and compelling a manner as possible. Students must be allowed to appreciate *why* sincere, godly, biblically oriented people assume differing positions on various topics. They must be encouraged and empowered to develop a respect and appreciation even for positions with which they and/or their teachers strongly disagree. The purpose of this book is to facilitate teachers in achieving these objectives.

The nature and **presuppositions** of this work are as follows.

1. The goal of this book is not to present a balanced overview of Christian doctrine. Doctrines are not considered in terms of their historic or existential importance to the evangelical faith but strictly in terms of the differing interpretations contemporary evangelicals have of these doctrines. For courses in theology that offer a well-rounded overview of basic Christian doctrine, we recommend supplementing this book with a standard introductory survey of Christian doctrine.

2. This book only considers perspectives that are discussed, debated, and embraced *within evangelical Christianity*. There is, of course, no universally accepted definition of “evangelicalism.” Evangelicals themselves express strong disagreements over this matter. We want to emphasize that, throughout this book, we use the term “evangelical” in a theological sense—not a political sense. There is, of course, an unavoidable element of subjectivity in our decisions as to (1) which theological issues and positions fall within the parameters of evangelicalism, and (2) which issues require more attention (found in the body of the text) and which require less (found in the appendix or omitted altogether). Our perspective is that for all of the diversity among evangelical Christians, they are nonetheless united in their commitment to the core beliefs of historic, orthodox Christianity as expressed in the **ecumenical** creeds and to the primacy of Scripture in all matters of **faith** and practice. Hence, positions that are distinctly Roman Catholic (e.g., **transubstantiation**) and positions that are distinctly “liberal” (e.g., revisioning God as Gaia) are not included in this work.

Some readers will undoubtedly feel that we have drawn the circle of what constitutes an “evangelical” theological option too large; others may feel we have drawn the circle too small. We make no claim that our particular delineation of the parameters of evangelicalism is *the* correct one. Still less do we claim that our assessment of what issues warrant fuller attention is infallible. In fact, our decisions on these matters have evolved over the course of the three editions of this book. For example, in the first two editions, we did not include **universalism** as a perspective in the chapter on hell. In this third edition, we have added it. The reason for this is that—like it or not—an increasing number of self-identified evangelicals now defend a biblically based universalism. We take some consolation in the awareness that disagreement over these matters would arise no matter where we drew the parameters and how we assessed the topics. We can only encourage teachers to make these issues part of classroom discussions as they deem appropriate.

3. This is an *introductory* book on different positions within evangelicalism. We hope to present to students with no prior background in theology the theological positions evangelicals take on various issues and to do so in a clear and compelling manner. For this reason, as well as space limitations, the essays in

this book are intentionally basic and general in nature. We have at points omitted more technical academic discussions that could perhaps help nuance and sometimes strengthen various positions. Such omissions were deemed necessary to keep this work accessible to students with no prior background in theology, as well as to keep the size manageable and the price affordable. We encourage teachers to consider the essays in this book as springboards from which they can facilitate lively discussions and/or deeper, more nuanced presentations of various views.

4. The theological criteria assumed in these essays are those suggested by John Wesley's quadrilateral: Scripture, tradition, reason, and experience. However, because this book is designed for an evangelical audience, which in principle holds that Scripture is the final arbiter of theological truth (*sola scriptura*), and because these essays are brief and introductory in nature, the emphasis in most essays is on defending each position biblically. We encourage teachers and students to integrate more thoroughly considerations of tradition, reason, and experience as they critically evaluate various positions.

5. Each chapter follows a basic outline: First, a brief section introduces each topic. The section entitled "Posing the Question" helps students appreciate the real-life relevance of the topic. "The Center and Its Contrasts" follows, which outlines the common ground evangelicals share on the topic over against non-evangelical and/or non-Christian perspectives. Each introduction concludes with a brief survey of the different views evangelicals embrace concerning the topic. Next, these perspectives are presented and defended. The biblical case is presented first, followed by arguments from tradition, reason, and experience when appropriate. Each essay concludes by refuting objections to the position under discussion. A further reading list ends each chapter and helps interested students explore the various positions more thoroughly and/or facilitates research assignments as the teacher sees fit. A glossary of terms that may be unfamiliar to students is found at the end of the book. Terms found in this glossary are in boldface type the first time they appear in the text. Finally, an appendix containing fifteen other issues complements this book.

Our hope and prayer is that this textbook will aid students in arriving at their own informed theological convictions and in developing an understanding of and appreciation for the views of those with whom they disagree.

# 1

## THE INERRANCY DEBATE

**Without Error of Any Kind (The Inerrantist View)**

**Infallible in Matters of Faith and Practice (The Infallibilist View)**

### Posing the Question

Rachel, a sophomore social work major at a state university, has been building a relationship with her roommate, Molly. As the relationship has developed, she has found opportunities to share her faith in Jesus. Molly, a history major, has been showing interest in spiritual things. One day, things take a challenging turn. After listening to a lecture on ancient historiography, in which the New Testament Gospels were used as an example, Molly returned to their room and posed a series of troubling questions to Rachel. Why is the Fourth Gospel's record of Jesus's words and deeds so unlike that of the other three? Why do the various Gospel accounts of Jesus's resurrection differ in some of their details? Is the Bible really historically reliable? Historic Christianity has always claimed that the Bible is the trustworthy written Word of God, but how can we be sure of this?

### The Center and Its Contrasts

One of the core distinctives of evangelical theology is the conviction that the Bible is the inspired Word of God. With the apostle Paul, evangelicals affirm

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that “all scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, so that everyone who belongs to God may be proficient, equipped for every good work” (2 Tim. 3:16–17; see also 2 Pet. 1:20–21). Following from this conviction of biblical *inspiration* is the equally important and universally shared evangelical claim of the *authority* of the Bible—that is, the Bible is recognized as the final authority on all matters of Christian faith and practice. Thus, with the Protestant Reformers, evangelicals hold to the principle of *sola scriptura*, that “Scripture alone” is the final authority on religious matters.

The evangelical position stands in contrast to a number of other stances people have adopted toward the Bible. Many non-Christians regard portions of the Bible as “inspiring,” but they do not believe the Bible was “inspired by God” (literally, “breathed by God”). Some non-Christians and even some non-evangelical Christians believe the Bible was in some sense divinely inspired, but they do not believe it is unique in this regard. Other religious writings may be equally inspired. Some liberal Christians, for example, suggest that the **Qur’an** or **Bhagavad Gita** were divinely inspired (even though they embody teachings that contradict the Bible). Mormons affirm that the Bible was inspired by God, but they believe the same is true of the **Book of Mormon** and other religious writings. They deny the principle of *sola scriptura*. Catholics deny the principle of *sola scriptura* as well, for they also regard the pope and church tradition as sources of religious authority.

In addition, non-evangelical theologians have proposed a number of views regarding biblical inspiration. For example, Karl Barth, founder of **neoorthodoxy**, maintained that the Bible *becomes* the Word of God when God sovereignly chooses to make it so, but we cannot claim that this book is inspired in and of itself. Others who follow the *Heilsgeschichte* (“salvation history”) school of theology argue that God’s revelation is found in events, not writings. The Bible thus witnesses to the revelatory events of God in history but cannot itself be regarded as a divinely inspired book.

Against all such perspectives, evangelicals affirm that the Bible, and the Bible alone, is inspired by God and is the final authority on matters of faith and practice. At the same time, there is some disagreement among evangelicals concerning the question of factual errors in parts of the Bible that touch on things other than Christian faith and practice.

In the 1970s, what has come to be known as the “**inerrancy debate**” erupted in evangelical circles. The gauntlet was thrown down by the more conservative evangelical perspective with the publication of Harold Lindsell’s *The Battle for the Bible* (1976). He maintained that evangelicals have always held that the Bible is absolutely inerrant on all matters that it affirms. Jack Rogers and Donald

McKim responded in a work entitled *The Authority and Interpretation of the Bible* (1979). They defended the view that, while the Bible is **infallible** in that it does not fail believers when trusted to do what God inspired it to do, believers need not and should not claim that it is absolutely *inerrant* in all matters it affirms. More specifically, believers should not claim that the Bible is inerrant in some of its tangential scientific and historical statements.

In more recent years, many who hold to the “inerrancy” view have distanced themselves from Lindsell’s approach (and more simplistic “Fundamentalist” approaches), and have offered much more sophisticated, nuanced, and hermeneutically sensitive articulations of the inerrancy of the Bible. From the 1978 *Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy* to more recent expressions grounded in “speech act” theory, many evangelicals today acknowledge the complex realities of the biblical texts, while still affirming that, in its original form, the Bible is entirely without error in all of the various matters that it affirms.

The two essays that follow will provide defenses of each of these two perspectives—first, a more nuanced expression of the inerrantist view, followed by an articulation of the infallibilist view.

### Without Error of Any Kind (The Inerrantist View)

While the technical term “inerrancy” is of recent origin, the conviction that the Bible is “without error” is not. One cannot find a Christian theologian before the modern period (seventeenth century) who claimed that the Bible makes mistakes (assuming its meaning is properly understood). This is evidence that Christians throughout history have assumed the Bible is without error of any kind. It is “inerrant.”

According to the inerrantist view, the Bible is not simply without error in matters of faith and practice, as some evangelicals today teach. It is without error in all matters it affirms, including history and even science. The health, vibrancy, and stability of the church is greatly affected by whether or not this traditional perspective is affirmed.

Having said this, it is important to note several qualifications. First, inerrantists do not claim that the Bible is without any *apparent* errors, only that it is without any *real* errors. They readily admit that there are things about the Bible our finite minds cannot explain. It is incorrect and arrogant, however, to locate the problem in the Bible itself rather than in our limited understanding of the Bible.

Second, the inerrancy of the Bible applies only to the original manuscripts (see **autographs** in the glossary), not to later copies of these manuscripts. **Textual criticism** has revealed that many minor errors crept into later copies of the biblical documents. The scribes were not divinely inspired in making their copies, so we have no reason to expect their copies to be without error. The Bible we possess today is very close to the originals—the Bible is, in fact, the best attested work in all of history—but it is not identical to the originals.

Third, the inerrancy of the Bible relates to the authors' original intent, not necessarily to our interpretation of a passage. Moreover, the inerrancy of an author's writing must be understood in accordance with the genre of literature the author was using and the culture the author was writing within. For example, we cannot say that an ancient author was incorrect in what he said just because he did not employ the same standard of precision we employ in our culture. Nor can we charge an author with error for using expressions that are not literally true unless their intention was to communicate literal truth. When David speaks of God riding on clouds, blowing smoke out of his nostrils, and throwing thunderbolts (Ps. 18:8–15), for example, he is using metaphors to communicate God's majesty. The expressions are not literally true, of course, but they nevertheless communicate profound truth.

## The Biblical Argument

Since all evangelical Christians affirm that the Bible is the inspired foundation of all we believe, we must consult it to determine what we should believe about its nature. The Bible clearly teaches that it is without error. For example, throughout the Bible we learn the truth that God cannot lie or deceive (Num. 23:19; 1 Sam. 15:29; Titus 1:2). When God promises something, it *must* come to pass (e.g., Isa. 46:8–10). When he speaks, it must be true. If someone speaks in the name of God and what he or she said fails to come to pass, this is proof that the person was not a true prophet of God (Deut. 13:1–5; 18:20–22). The assumption, obviously, is that God cannot err, and all who are inspired to speak on his behalf cannot err. In the words of the psalmist, God's "word is firmly fixed in heaven" (Ps. 119:89). And again, God's "word is truth" and "every one of [his] righteous **ordinances** endures forever" (Ps. 119:160).

Jesus held this view. In fact, it is impossible to overemphasize Jesus's trust in Scripture. He customarily used the phrases "Scripture says" and "God says" interchangeably. He taught that "until heaven and earth pass away, not one letter, not one stroke of a letter, will pass from the law until all is accomplished" (Matt. 5:18). He reiterated the point in even stronger terms when he claimed

that “it is easier for heaven and earth to pass away, than for one stroke of a letter in the law to be dropped” (Luke 16:17). In simplest terms, Jesus believed that “scripture cannot be annulled” (John 10:35). When people were in error regarding theological matters, Jesus believed it was most fundamentally because they did not know Scripture well enough (Matt. 22:29). He assumed that if a person knew Scripture properly, that person would know truth. Scripture is true, through and through. It is impossible to imagine a stronger affirmation of the inerrancy of Scripture than that which Jesus gave. If we conclude that Scripture contains errors, we must also conclude that Jesus, the Son of God, was in error.

This same view is found throughout the New Testament. Paul taught that “all scripture is inspired by God” (2 Tim. 3:16). The term “inspired” literally means “God-breathed.” For Paul, as well as for Jesus and other New Testament authors, the words of the Bible came directly from the mouth of God. It would be as inconceivable to them that Scripture could err as it would that God could err. If it is indeed “impossible that God would prove false” (Heb. 6:18), it is impossible that Scripture would prove false. This level of confidence extends to the smallest details of Scripture. For example, Jesus wagers an entire argument on the single word “God” found in Psalms (John 10:34–36; cf. Ps. 82:6). And Paul bases an entire argument on the singular form of one word in Genesis (Gal. 3:16; cf. Gen. 13:16).

The only reasonable conclusion is that the Word of God itself supports the inerrantist view.

## Supporting Arguments

1. *Church tradition.* As noted earlier, theologians throughout history have assumed that the Bible is without error. Augustine reflected the universal conviction when he wrote, “Only to those books which are called canonical have I learned to give honor so that I believe most firmly that no author in these books made any error in writing.”<sup>1</sup> Similarly, Martin Luther insisted that “Scripture cannot err,”<sup>2</sup> and John Calvin referred to the Bible as “the inerring standard.”<sup>3</sup>

2. *A logical argument.* Consider the following argument:

- a. God is perfect and thus cannot err.
- b. Scripture is God-breathed (inspired).
- c. What God breathes retains his perfect character.
- d. Scripture cannot err.

The argument is logically sound. The question is, are all the premises valid? With few exceptions, evangelicals generally embrace a and b. Some do not

embrace c, however. Yes, Scripture is “inspired,” they say, but this does not mean it is inerrant. Consider how paradoxical this position is, however. It is like saying that a certain person never lies but that this characteristic does not necessarily apply to what he says! What is the force of claiming that God cannot err if this does not apply to what comes out of his mouth? Premise c should be accepted, therefore, and this leads directly to the conclusion that Scripture cannot err.

3. *An argument from epistemology.* If we do not accept the view that the Bible is inerrant, then we must accept that the decision as to when the Bible is and is not speaking correctly is in our court. But this means that we have authority over the Bible instead of the other way around. When the Bible agrees with us, we accept its authority. When it does not, we don’t. This is an impotent authority.

Some may respond that we may assume the Bible is inerrant in all matters of faith and practice but not in so-called irrelevant matters of history or science. There are two problems with this suggestion, however.

First, what inerrant authority did we use to develop this criterion of what is and is not inerrant in the Bible? There is no such authority. This is simply a convenient thing to believe, so some choose to believe it. As shown, it certainly is not rooted in Scripture, tradition, or the teaching of Jesus.

Second, how are we to decide what is and is not irrelevant? For example, what is to prevent someone from concluding that Paul was simply reflecting an irrelevant aspect of his historically conditioned culture when he denounced fornication or homosexuality (Rom. 1:21–32; 1 Cor. 6:9–10)? Indeed, how are we to decide what is “history” as opposed to a “matter of faith”? Does the story of the flood belong in the category of inerrant teaching relevant to faith or in the category of irrelevant history?

The point is that if we do not have an unassailable foundation for our faith, everything is in principle up for grabs.

4. *A historical argument.* The Bible tells us that the heart is desperately wicked (Jer. 17:9). There is a side of fallen humanity that consistently wants to run away from God. This is why it is so dangerous to deny the inerrancy of Scripture. We cannot trust our own fallen hearts and minds to decide what is true. Invariably, our perception is skewed. As fallen rebels, we will always be inclined to conclude that those aspects of Scripture we do not like are in error, while those aspects we do like are true.

An honest assessment of the recent history of the church in the West bears this out. While it is true that heretical groups have at times affirmed the inerrancy of Scripture (e.g., the early Unitarians, Jehovah’s Witnesses), it is also true that the denial of inerrancy has almost always led to some form of heresy if not total unbelief. To illustrate, consider that until the twentieth century the

majority of college campuses in America were founded as evangelical Christian institutions. Today, there is no distinctive Christian presence at an institutional level in the vast majority of them. The major shift toward secularism occurred toward the end of the nineteenth century, when professors of theology began to accept **higher biblical criticism** and deny the inerrancy of Scripture. It is with good reason that many evangelical leaders today worry about evangelical teachers and institutions that are equivocating in regard to this foundational Christian doctrine.

5. *Insights from speech act theory.* One contemporary philosophical theory can greatly enhance the doctrine of inerrancy. It's called speech act theory.<sup>4</sup> Its central idea is this: language *does* many things. Normally people think the main task of language is to *say* things (to describe). But according to speech act theory, the purpose of language is broader: its purpose is to *do* things. Saying things (describing the world) is *one* thing that language does, but it's not the *only* valid thing language does.

Take an example: "Abraham Lincoln was our sixteenth president." This sentence describes a part of reality. And so it can be either true or false. But language can rightly do other things besides describe. Take another example: a teenager yells "Yeeow" as he rides the world's wildest roller coaster. This utterance doesn't say something about the world. (It doesn't describe.) So it can't be true or false. But it does communicate; it's a normal communicative act. Speech act says we should view language as doing many things, including both saying true things about the world and expressing someone's feelings.

What else does language do? (1) Statements tell people what is true. (2) Commands try to get people to do things. (3) Promises commit the speaker to doing certain things. (4) Exclamations express feelings or attitudes. (5) Performatives create new realities. Only the first is descriptive, but all five are proper linguistic acts.

How can we apply this insight to inerrancy? Some perfectly proper speech acts in the Bible don't describe the world, so they aren't true or false. But they are legitimate linguistic speech acts. Utterances that don't describe can't be true (inerrant) or false (errant). But the purpose of these utterances is not to describe; it wouldn't make sense to ask whether they're inerrant or errant. Now that shouldn't trouble us. They're still important and meaningful linguistic acts. They're just doing something other than telling us truths about the world.

The Bible is a vehicle not just for stating truths but also for creating spiritual connection and growth. The words of Scripture inform the mind and create spiritual response. They create proper feelings that lead us to God. The Psalms, for instance, aren't merely truthful statements. They express deep emotions and love commitments, and they invite us personally to enter into similar emotions

and commitments to God. God inspired the Psalms so that they would draw out certain kinds of beliefs, passions, commitments, attitudes, experiences, and actions. The Psalms use many linguistic features to create these responses. So God intended that the Bible go beyond *truthful information* to achieve *spiritual transformation*. God's purpose in the Bible is that we not only connect with *ideas* about him but also *connect with him*. This means that *some* of Scripture's utterances are descriptive. Inerrancy says these descriptions are true. And that's extremely important. But *some* of the Bible's purposes go beyond description. In these instances, asking the inerrancy question simply isn't relevant.

The truth-telling role of the Bible and the other functions of Scripture support one another. On the one hand, true information without spiritual transformation is dead. On the other hand, radical transformation without true information is rudderless. The *informational* assertions of the Bible that tell us about God the Father, the work of Christ, and the presence of the Spirit are proper and *true!* The *formational* utterances that ignite passionate worship, spiritual growth, inner healing, godly community, and sacrificial service are proper and good. So inerrancy is important because it declares that the Bible is true. But speech act theory enhances inerrancy because it shows how God intends for the truths of the Bible not only to describe the world and inform our minds but also to grow us spiritually, personally, and communally.

## Responding to Objections

1. *Dealing with alleged errors.* The major objection to the inerrantist view is that it does not square with the facts. Whatever theory we hold about inspiration must square with the facts, and the fact is that the Bible contains errors that cannot be explained away. In reply, while it may be true that certain apparent errors cannot be explained away, they do not constitute sufficient grounds for overturning the belief in biblical inerrancy. Several observations support this response.

First, it is extremely important to pay attention to our starting point as we discuss the nature of Scripture. Do we start with the alleged errors in the Bible and then draw broad conclusions about the errant nature of the Bible? Or do we start with the teaching about the inerrant nature of the Bible found in the Bible itself and then try to explain the alleged errors? Faith must assume the second starting point. This was the posture of both Jesus and the early church.

In this light, whether we can adequately explain any particular alleged error in the Bible is actually of little consequence. Given the limitations of human

rationality, knowledge, and experience, we should expect anomalies, regardless of what we believe. Indeed, every well-established scientific theory conflicts with the relevant data at certain points. When this happens, scientists typically do not simply abandon these theories. Rather, they patiently wait for further research and insight into the anomalous data. This is precisely the inerrantist posture toward the alleged errors in the Bible.

Nonetheless, inerrantists agree that we should try to account for alleged errors in Scripture. Most can be adequately accounted for in one of four ways.

First, we can explain some errors by supposing that they crept into the text as it was transmitted by scribes throughout history. Most apparent contradictions regarding numbers in the Bible can be explained in this way. In some instances, more significant discrepancies can be explained in this way as well.

For example, Mark and Luke say that Jesus sent demons into swine at Gerasa, while Matthew says it was in Gadara (Mark 5:1; Luke 8:26; Matt. 8:28). Not only is there a discrepancy between the places, but the town of Gerasa was not near the Sea of Galilee, where this episode is said to have taken place. One plausible explanation of this apparent contradiction is that the original town was an obscure village named Khersa. This town, known today only through archaeology, was in the province of Gadara and was located on the Sea of Galilee. Perhaps later manuscript copiers who did not have firsthand knowledge of the geography of this region mistook the obscure village of Khersa for the better-known village of Gerasa.

Second, we can account for some alleged errors by noting that the language of Scripture is often *phenomenological* (see **phenomenology**). For example, the Bible is not erroneous in saying that the sun stood still when Joshua prayed (Josh. 10:12–14), for it is describing *how things appeared* from Joshua’s perspective. While scientifically inaccurate at a technical level, this language cannot be labeled erroneous. No one accuses anyone today of scientific error simply because he or she talks about the “rising” or “setting” of the sun.

Third, some alleged errors can be explained by considering the standard of accuracy of the culture in which the author was writing. For example, people frequently point out that the words of Jesus are often slightly different from one Gospel to the next. Indeed, the style of Jesus’s language in the Gospel of John is significantly different from his style in the other three Gospels. These differences might be troublesome if they occurred in four modern biographies concerning someone who lived in the recent past. Our standard of accuracy has increased because of modern technology (e.g., audio and video recording) and lawsuits. Ancient people were much looser about such matters. As long as the gist of what a person said was accurately conveyed, no one usually worried about exact wording and minute details. We must judge the Gospel

authors by the standards of their time, not by the standards of the twenty-first century.

Fourth, we can explain some alleged errors by developing scenarios that harmonize the apparently discrepant data. For example, at first glance the Gospel resurrection narratives seem to contradict each other on several accounts. However, scholars have demonstrated that the accounts can be harmonized as long as we see the individual Gospel accounts as *part* of a story, not the entire story itself. While some object to this process, believing it contrived, historians, detectives, and reporters do the same thing all the time. Rarely do witnesses of the same event agree on every detail. Consider, for example, the conflicting reports of the sinking of the *Titanic* or John F. Kennedy's assassination.

Finally, we must remember that the biblical texts were primarily written for the purpose of theological revelation. This means that what can appear to be a scientific or historical error is actually an intentional literary device serving a distinctly theological purpose. For example, many critics claim that the creation accounts in Genesis 1–2 are not scientifically accurate. What they fail to recognize is that the author of Genesis intentionally used Temple-related language and imagery to describe the creation of the cosmos in order to emphasize that God designed the entire creation to function as his cosmic Temple.

Again, inerrantists do not pretend to have solved every alleged error in the Bible. Enough errors have been solved, however, to give confidence that more will be solved in the future. In the meantime, people are not irrational for accepting the inerrancy of Scripture on the authority of Scripture, church tradition, and Jesus himself.

2. *The inerrancy of the original manuscripts.* A second objection is that belief in the inerrancy of Scripture is irrelevant if not meaningless because Scripture's inerrancy relates only to the original manuscripts. Unfortunately, these manuscripts no longer exist. We have only copies of the originals. So, some argue, what is the point of this debate? We are arguing about the nature of a nonexistent book!

In response, the claim that the original documents alone are inerrant, not the copies, is no more problematic than the claim, made by all evangelicals, that the original documents alone are inspired, not the copies. If the former is meaningless and irrelevant, so is the latter. In truth, however, neither view is problematic. Through textual criticism we are able to discern what was part of the original Word of God with a remarkably high degree of accuracy. As a result, the fact that we do not possess the original manuscripts is completely irrelevant in regard to the inspiration and/or inerrancy of the Bible.

## Infallible in Matters of Faith and Practice (The Infallibilist View)

This essay defends the view that the Bible can and should be trusted as unfailing (infallible) in all matters that pertain to Christian faith and living. It cannot be considered inerrant, however, especially in regard to minor matters of history or science.

### The Biblical Argument

Throughout the Gospels, Jesus expressed an unqualified confidence that Scripture infallibly communicates the will of God (Luke 16:17; John 10:35). He consistently referred to it when deciding matters related to faith. This attitude of trust was adopted by Jesus's disciples and has characterized the church throughout history (2 Pet. 1:20–21).

Two points regarding this attitude of trust need to be made. First, as it is found in Jesus and the earliest disciples, this unswerving attitude of trust in Scripture always relates to what Christians are to believe and how they are to live. Paul expressed the general attitude well when he argued that because Scripture is “inspired,” it is “useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness.” The ultimate goal of Scripture and the teaching that arises from it is to make “everyone who belongs to God . . . proficient, equipped for every good work” (2 Tim. 3:16–17). The focus of inspiration is exclusively on faith and practice. Neither Paul nor any other biblical author was concerned with resolving whether the Bible represents history or the cosmos in a way that would qualify as “inerrant” by modern standards. This was not their concern, and we misuse their expressions of trust in Scripture when we try to make them address these concerns.

Second, it is important to realize that this attitude of trust toward Scripture is not a *theory* about *how* God inspired Scripture. God simply has not given us an inspired theory of inspiration. Scripture goes so far as to tell us that God moved humans to communicate his Word (2 Pet. 1:21). But it does not resolve many of the questions we may have about this teaching—questions that a theory of inspiration would presumably be designed to answer. For example, nowhere do scriptural authors demonstrate any concern with the issue of how much control God exerted over the authors he used and how much of their limited, culturally bound perspectives he left intact.

To address this issue we would have to do more than simply cite the attitude of trust demonstrated by people in the Bible toward the Bible. This is the mistake

many who advocate an inerrantist view of the Bible make. Rather, to surmise how much limited and fallible humanity God left intact in the people he used to write the Bible, we must take a comprehensive and honest look at the Bible itself. An honest examination of Scripture leads to the conclusion that the Bible is thoroughly inspired but also *thoroughly human*. The human element in Scripture reflects the limitations and fallibility that are a part of all human perspectives and all human thinking. This human element can be clearly seen in at least three areas of Scripture.

First, without exception, biblical authors presupposed a premodern view of the world. To illustrate, as with all people in the ancient Near East, the Hebrews believed that the sky was “hard as a molten mirror” (Job 37:18). It had to be hard, in their view, for it was a “dome” that “separated the waters that were under the dome from the waters that were above the dome” (Gen. 1:7). This dome rested on “pillars,” as did the earth as it sat upon the “waters” that encircled it (Pss. 75:3; 104:2–3, 5–6; cf. Job 9:6; 26:11). “Windows” in the solid dome were opened when Yahweh wanted it to rain, allowing the waters “above the dome” to fall to the ground (Gen. 7:11). The sun, moon, and stars were all “lights in the dome” that were placed there to function as “signs and for seasons and for days and years” (Gen. 1:14). The Lord, along with other heavenly beings, sat in a chamber above the dome. From this location God threw lightning bolts (Ps. 18:12–14), shook the pillars (earthquakes? Job 9:6), and caused the wind to blow (Ps. 107:25). We modern people routinely assume this language is merely poetic, but at the time it was the way people really understood the world.

It is completely understandable that God would leave the primitive worldview of ancient authors intact as he used ancient authors to communicate his Word. How else could he effectively communicate to the people of the time? Had God attempted to communicate a scientifically accurate view of the world, the theological truth he wanted to convey would not have been communicated. At the same time, we must frankly admit that given what we know about the world today, the view of the cosmos presupposed in the Bible is inaccurate. The earth does not rest on pillars, and the sky is not hard! The Bible’s theological message is unailing though its view of the cosmos is scientifically incorrect.

A second and closely related culturally bound aspect of Scripture concerns the primordial belief that the earth was engulfed by cosmic forces and surrounded by cosmic monsters. At times the people of the ancient Near East (as well as other primordial people) depicted the mythological waters that surrounded the earth as hostile to the intention of various good gods who were in charge of preserving order in the world. According to these ancient views, humans needed the good gods to keep these hostile waters in check.

Old Testament authors accepted this view but insisted that it was Yahweh, not any other deity, who kept the rebel waters in check. For example, the psalmist declares that it is Yahweh's "rebuke," no one else's, that causes the hostile waters to "flee." It is "at the sound of [his] thunder" that "they take to flight" (Ps. 104:7). Indeed, these hostile waters take flight at the very sight of Yahweh (Ps. 77:16). Moreover, it is the Lord who assigns these rebel waters a "boundary that they may not pass" (Ps. 104:9; cf. Job 38:6–11; Prov. 8:27–29). It is the Lord and none other who defeats these enemies, who tramples on the sea with his warring horses (Hab. 3:15), and who sits enthroned above "the mighty waters" (Ps. 29:3–4, 10; cf. Nah. 1:4; Hab. 3:12–13).

Old Testament authors also accepted the ancient Near Eastern view that the earth was surrounded by threatening cosmic monsters. The two most frequently mentioned cosmic beasts in the Old Testament are **Leviathan** and **Rahab**. As in the mythology of other ancient Near Eastern people, Leviathan is depicted in Scripture as a ferocious, twisting serpent of the sea, encircling the earth (his name means "coiling one"). He had (on some accounts) many heads (Ps. 74:14) and could blow smoke out of his nose(s) and fire out of his mouth(s) (Job 41:18–21). Human weapons were useless against a creature of such ferocious might. Indeed, this monster could eat iron like straw and crush bronze as if it were decayed timber (Job 41:26–27)! Only God could subdue such a creature (cf. Isa. 27:1).

Rahab is portrayed in similar terms. This cosmic creature, which inhabited the waters that encircled the earth, was a threat to the entire earth. He was no match for Yahweh, however. When Yahweh expressed his wrath against evil, "the helpers of Rahab bowed beneath him" (Job 9:13). In the primordial past, Yahweh's power "stilled the Sea," his understanding "struck down Rahab," and his hand "pierced the fleeing serpent" (Job 26:12–13). The psalmist also celebrated Yahweh's sovereignty over "the raging sea" by announcing that he had "crushed Rahab like a carcass" and "scattered [his] enemies with [his] mighty arm" (Ps. 89:9–10). In similar fashion, Isaiah reassured himself that Yahweh would "awake" to deliver Israel by remembering that in the primordial past he had "cut Rahab to pieces" and "pierced the dragon" (Isa. 51:9; cf. Ps. 87:4; Isa. 30:7; Jer. 51:34; Ezek. 29:3; 32:2).

Again, we can readily understand why God would leave intact this mythological view of hostile waters and cosmic monsters when he inspired ancient people to communicate his Word. This mythology communicated the reality of spiritual warfare to ancient people in vivid terms they could readily understand. At the same time, we must frankly admit that this view of the world is scientifically inaccurate. Though the ancient biblical authors believed otherwise, there are in fact no hostile waters or cosmic sea dragons threatening the earth.

These illustrations teach an infallible spiritual truth about spiritual warfare, even though their view of the cosmos is scientifically erroneous.

Yet a third way in which we see the fallible humanity of biblical authors is found in the way they contradict each other on minor matters. Space allows for just one example. Compare the following Synoptic (see **Synoptic Gospels**) accounts of Jesus's commands to his disciples.

- “Take . . . no bag for your journey, or two tunics, or sandals, or a staff; for laborers deserve their food” (Matt. 10:9–10).
- “He ordered them to take nothing for their journey except a staff; no bread, no bag, no money in their belts; but to wear sandals and not to put on two tunics” (Mark 6:8–9).
- “Take nothing for your journey, no staff, nor bag, nor bread, nor money—not even an extra tunic” (Luke 9:3).

The three accounts obviously do not completely agree. Did Jesus say to take a staff, as Mark reports, or not to take a staff, as Matthew and Luke report? Did Jesus say to wear sandals, as Mark's account says, or not to wear sandals, as Matthew's account suggests? Such disagreements clearly do not affect the basic teaching all three accounts seek to relay—namely, that disciples were to trust God the Father, not their own provisions, as they carried out the work of expanding God's kingdom. But just as clearly, the three accounts do disagree and thus cannot in any literal sense be labeled “inerrant.”

As a matter of fact, minor inconsistencies such as these occur throughout the Bible. Sometimes they can be explained away; other times they cannot. Even when they cannot be explained, however, they never affect anything important. Minor contradictions in the Bible become a concern only when someone embraces a theory of inspiration that stipulates that such contradictions should not occur—namely, that the Bible is inerrant. If we focus our attention on the infallible teaching of Scripture on matters of faith and practice, however, rather than on whether the Bible is meticulously accurate and consistent in matters of history or science, we are free to see that these inconsistencies and scientific or historical inaccuracies are irrelevant to our faith.

## Supporting Arguments

1. *Church history.* Inerrantists routinely assume that church tradition is unequivocally on their side in this debate. As noted earlier, theologians throughout history have assumed Jesus's attitude of complete trust in Scripture on matters of faith and practice. But it must also be noted that throughout church history,

going back at least to Augustine in the fifth century, many theologians insisted that the Bible should not be used to settle “scientific” disputes. This point was driven home in the sixteenth century when the church embarrassed itself by locking horns with the scientific establishment over whether the earth or the sun was the center of the solar system. To avoid further embarrassment, the evangelical church should reaffirm the view that the Bible is infallible in matters of faith and practice but that it never claimed to be free from errors in regard to scientific matters.

2. *Apologetic and evangelistic advantages.* If the Bible must be inerrant in order to be inspired, as inerrantists teach, then the credibility of the Bible hangs on one’s ability to resolve every error in the Bible. This is an unfortunate posture to assume, especially in our post-Christian age, for most people readily see that the contradictions and premodern aspects of the Bible are difficult, if not impossible, to account for adequately. This inerrantist view of inspiration thus hinders effective apologetics and evangelism.

Indeed, beyond making it difficult to win believers, the inerrantist theory of inspiration sometimes makes it difficult to keep believers. More than a few college students have abandoned the faith because they had been taught that believing in the Bible meant believing it is inerrant in every respect. When confronted in college classrooms with indisputable evidence that the Bible is not inerrant in this way, their faith in the inspiration of the Bible and (for some) Christianity as a whole is undermined. Those who embrace infallibility rather than inerrancy are not faced with this unfortunate and unnecessary dilemma.

3. *Bibliolatry.* The inerrancy theory tends to shift the focus of faith away from Jesus Christ and toward the accuracy of the Bible. This is bibliolatry. According to the Bible itself, faith should rest on Jesus Christ, not on one’s opinion about the degree of accuracy of the Bible.

## Responding to Objections

1. *The epistemological objection.* One of the strongest driving forces behind the theory of inerrancy is the worry that if we admit that the Bible can be mistaken on any point, then we cannot be certain of the Bible on any point. If we must judge what is and is not true in Scripture, then we are *its* authority rather than it being *our* authority. Three things may be said in response to this objection.

First, even if this objection were valid, it would not address the issue of whether the Bible is inerrant. A person cannot reject facts simply because they place the person in an epistemologically awkward situation. So, too, a person cannot legitimately argue that the Bible must be inerrant on the grounds that

it would cause epistemological difficulties for his or her theology if it were not so. The issue of whether the Bible is inerrant must be settled by an honest investigation into whether the Bible in fact contains any errors. The above investigation suggests that it does.

Second, if this objection were valid, it would adversely affect the inerrantist position as much as the infallibilist position, for, in the light of textual criticism, the inerrantist admits that the Bible we possess today contains errors. Despite some acknowledged textual errors, however, they continue to be confident that they possess an *adequately accurate* version of the Bible. If they were consistent with the logic of their objection, however, they should conclude that we cannot trust *any* passage in the Bible unless we can trust *every* passage in the Bible. The argument regarding how one can trust the Bible despite its occasional scientific or historical errors directly parallels the inerrantist's ability to trust the Bible despite its occasional textual errors. Inerrantists cannot object to this stance unless they are willing to apply their objection to their own position.

Third, having said all this, we must now insist that the objection is simply not valid. On what basis can we demand that a source be without error *in all respects* before we give it credence *in some respects*? We customarily accept a source to the extent that we have reasons for accepting it, and we reject it to the extent that we have reasons for rejecting it. This essay has supplied good reasons for rejecting some of what the Bible says about the natural world and history. At the same time, though they cannot be addressed in this essay, there are good reasons for accepting what the Bible says about faith and practice. Among other things, all the historical and personal reasons to accept Jesus as the Son of God are reasons to accept that the Bible is infallible on the matters he himself trusted it for. Thankfully, this does not require that we pretend that the errors in the Bible are not there.

2. *This view creates an implicit contradiction.* Some argue that there is a contradiction involved in admitting that God cannot err while denying that what he inspires cannot err. This argument does not work on at least two counts.

First, we do not know enough about divine inspiration to stipulate in an *a priori* fashion what it does and does not logically entail. The only way we can learn what divine inspiration entails is by observing how God in fact divinely inspires a work. In other words, we must examine the phenomenon of the Bible. What we learn when we do is that divine inspiration does not logically imply inerrancy, for, as a matter of fact, the Bible contains errors. Divine inspiration requires only that the Bible is unailing in all that God intends to use it for.

Second, evangelicals often refer to preachers as inspired when they give certain messages. Whether or not minor mistakes about incidental matters were made during the delivery is inconsequential to this assessment. We routinely

understand that the “inspiration” concerns the power of the central point(s) the preacher intended to make, not to the message’s meticulous accuracy. This is enough to show that the concept of “inspiration” does not entail inerrancy. Though Scripture is more perfectly inspired than any preacher, if it is not contradictory to claim that the message of an inspired preacher could contain incidental errors, it cannot be contradictory to claim that a divinely inspired collection of writings could contain incidental errors.

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