

# Inerrancy, Dictation and The Free Will Defence

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*It is unusual for us to publish articles with dual authorship, especially when the two authors are brothers. However, the team has already proved its worth elsewhere, and we are grateful for this brief study of an important aspect of the doctrine of biblical inspiration. Randall Basinger teaches in Tabor College, Hillsbro, Kansas, and David Basinger in Roberts Wesleyan College, Rochester, New York.*

One of the stock arguments employed by the challenger to the inerrancy position is that inerrancy implies a dictation theory of inspiration. That is, it is often claimed that if the scripture is indeed God's inerrant communication, the human authors must be reduced to impersonal instruments, e.g., typewriters.

That this is the case is emphatically denied by contemporary proponents of inerrancy. J. I. Packer, for example, argues that "This "dictation theory" is a man of straw. It is safe to say that no Protestant theologian, from the reformation till now, has ever held it; and certainly modern evangelicals do not hold it."<sup>1</sup> Harold Lindsell agrees: "Let it be said succinctly that I do not know any scholar who believes in biblical inerrancy who holds that the Scriptures were received by dictation."<sup>2</sup>

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Of course, to come to grips with these issues, we must go beyond the factual issue of whether proponents of inerrancy have held or now hold to a dictation theory of inspiration. The real issue (and the actual thrust of the challenger's claim) is whether there actually is a logical connection between inerrancy and dictation.

Norman Geisler quite clearly presents the basic argument for the inerrancy position:

- (1) Whatever God utters is errorless (inerrant).
- (2) The words of the Bible are God's utterances.
- (3) Therefore, the words of the Bible are errorless (inerrant).<sup>3</sup>

However, this argument alone does not totally reflect the essence of the inerrancy position in that proponents of inerrancy do not claim that the words of the Bible are *only* God's utterances. They also claim that God gave us his words through human authors. Geisler, for example, tells us that "the words of the Bible are truly God's, yet distinctly man's ... The prophets were free moral agents actively contributing their own personal and literary ability to the record."<sup>4</sup> Packer maintains a similar position:

<sup>1</sup> J. I. Packer, "Fundamentalism" and the Word of God (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1958), 79.

<sup>2</sup> Harold Lindsell, *The Battle for the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1976), 32-33.

<sup>3</sup> Norman Geisler and William Nix, *A General Introduction to the Bible* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1968), 53.

<sup>4</sup> Geisler, *A General Introduction to the Bible*, 44.

'We are to think of the Spirit's inspiring activity ... as *concurrent*; that is, as exercised in, through and by means of the writers' own activity, in such a way that their thinking and writings was *both* free and spontaneous on their part *and* divinely elicited and controlled, and what they wrote was not only their own work but also God's work.'<sup>5</sup>

Not surprisingly, it is in relation to this aspect of the inerrancy position that the basic conflict between the challenger and the proponent of inerrancy arises. While it might be admitted that inerrancy follows non-problematically from divine authorship alone, the challenger argues, it is quite questionable whether inerrancy can also be deduced from the fact that scripture has human, in addition to divine, authorship.

To respond to this challenge, it would appear that the proponent of inerrancy must necessarily amend the basic argument for inerrancy to read as follows:

- (4) The words of the Bible are the product of free human activity (are human utterances).
- (5) Human activities (such as penning a book) can be totally controlled by God without violating human freedom.
- (6) God totally controlled what human authors did in fact write.
- (2) Therefore, the words of the Bible are God's utterances.
- (1) Whatever God utters is errorless (inerrant);
- (3) Therefore, the words of the Bible are errorless (inerrant).

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We are now in a position to see the actual point of contention between the proponent of inerrancy and those that argue that inerrancy implies dictation. It centers on premise (5). Those who argue that inerrancy implies dictation maintain that to be free is to be *self-determined* or *self-controlled* and thus see the concept of total divine control over free humans — *i. e.*, premise (5) — as self-contradictory. Accordingly, it consistently follows for such individuals that the only way God could have totally controlled (infallibly guaranteed) what human authors did in fact write would have been to take away their freedom — *i. e.*, turn them into some sort of impersonal instruments. The proponent of inerrancy, on the other hand, has no choice. In order both to deny that the human authors of scripture were mere robots and yet maintain that the words of the Bible are God's utterances, the proponent of inerrancy must affirm premise (5).

Now it is, of course, highly debatable whether (5) can in fact be consistently affirmed. But as our present intent is not primarily to resolve the inerrancy/dictation question, we will not be directly discussing the self-

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<sup>5</sup> Packer, "Fundamentalism", 80.

consistency of (5). Rather, it is our intent to analyze the seemingly problematic relationship between (5) and other aspects of conservative theology (and thereby hopefully throw light on any attempted resolutions). Specifically, we are most interested in discussing the relationship between (5) and the problem of evil.

One of the most popular ways of defending the goodness of God in the fact of moral evil in the world has been through the employment of the free will defence. The object of this 'defence' is to absolve God of the responsibility for moral evil by arguing that moral evil is the result of free human choices and hence the responsibility of humans rather than God. God, by the act of creating free creatures, is responsible for the possibility of evil, but the actuality of each given instance of moral evil in the world is due to the free will of humans.

The assumption behind this argument is the belief that God *cannot* both create free moral creatures and still bring it about (infallibly guarantee) that they will perform the specific actions he desires. For once it is assumed that God *can* control the actions of free creatures, it follows immediately that God could have created a world containing free moral agents but absolutely no moral evil — *i.e.*, God could have brought it about that every individual would always freely choose in every situation to perform the exact action God desired. But if God could have brought it about that every instance of moral evil was freely not performed, then we must conclude that God is directly responsible for each instance of moral evil in the world and the free will defence fails. In short, the free will defence can only work — *i.e.*, divine responsibility for the actuality of moral evil in the world can only be absolved — by denying that God can totally control free creatures, that is, by denying premise (5).

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The relevance of this fact to the inerrancy/dictation discussion is obvious. Any person wanting to *both* use the free will defence in his theodicy *and*, at the same time, defend inerrancy against dictation is attempting the impossible. To defend inerrancy against dictation involves arguing that God can control free human actions — *i.e.*, involves the affirmation of premise (5). To employ the free will defence means arguing that God cannot control free creatures — *i.e.*, involves the denial of premise (5). One cannot have it both ways.

In conclusion, our argument can be summarized as follows. Proponents of inerrancy are faced with a dilemma. On the one hand, they can argue that divine control of free creatures is possible.<sup>6</sup> This move will

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<sup>6</sup> There are at least three ways this position can be defended. (1) One can reject the libertarian notion of freedom assumed in the free will defence and adopt a compatibilist (soft-determinist) notion of human freedom. (2) One can retain the libertarian notion of freedom and argue that how God controls free creatures is beyond

allow them to affirm that the biblical writers were free moral agents yet totally controlled by God. Thus the Bible can be seen as totally human and totally divine (errorless), and at the same time the charge of dictation is avoided. However, such a move can only be made by placing direct responsibility on God for each instance of moral evil in the world in that God could have infallibly guaranteed that each free human would do no evil.

On the other hand, the proponents of inerrancy, in an attempt to avoid placing direct responsibility on God for evil, can employ the free will defence. This of course absolves God of the responsibility for evil by making each instance of moral evil the result of free human choice. However, to use the free will defence is to commit oneself to the belief that God cannot infallibly control free creatures. The proponent of inerrancy is then left with the seemingly impossible task of showing how God could perfectly control what the biblical writers uttered without removing their freedom. In short, if the free will defence is used, some form of divine dictation theory logically follows.

The proponent of inerrancy, it appears, must make a choice.

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human comprehension and hence must be accepted as one of the antinomies (paradoxes) of the faith. (3) One can retain a libertarian notion of freedom and argue that God remains sovereign through his prevision (or timeless vision) of free human choices. For a further development of these alternatives see Basinger and Basinger, "In the Image of Man Create They God," *The Scottish Journal of Theology* 34 (1981): 97-107.