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Why I Am "Comfortable" with Inerrancy



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From the very start of the Evangelical Theological Society, the inerrancy of Scripture was asserted in our confession of faith. "The Bible alone, and the Bible in its entirety, is the Word of God written and is therefore inerrant in the autographs." This concept and this wording have been declared objectionable by many, some of whom have been advocates of the supreme authority of Scripture. Dr. John Stott, for instance, has written "The word *inerrancy* makes me uncomfortable" [emphasis mine].¹ Earlier, Dr. Ramsey Michaels, while not denying inerrancy, indicated a preference for the language of "verbal inspiration."²

The following objections have been leveled against that term.

1) Inerrancy, it is claimed, is not asserted in the ancient creeds nor in the confessions of faith of the Reformation.

Yet the Formula of Concord asserts that the Scripture is "the only rule and norm according to which all dogmas and all doctrines ought to be esteemed and judged."³

The First Helvetic Confession calls the "Canonical Scripture . . . the most perfect and ancient teaching. . . ." The Second Helvetic Confession calls it "the true Word of God . . . by which he spoke and speaks."

The French Confession states "The Word contained in these books has proceeded from God."

The Belgic Confession calls it "the infallible rule."

The Westminster Confession speaks of "infallible truth and divine authority" of Scripture (I, V) and states, "By faith a Christian believeth to be true whatsoever is revealed in the Word, for the authority of God himself speaking therein" (XIV, II).

These statements, when carefully analyzed, affirm divine authorship and imply resulting inerrancy.

2) The members of the Westminster Assembly, allegedly, did not believe in the inerrancy of Scripture.

This was the claim of Dr. Charles A. Briggs of Union Theological Seminary in New York, and he adduced eight quotations to substantiate it.⁴ B. B. Warfield took up the gauntlet in his extensive article on "The Doctrine of Inspiration in the Westminster Divines."⁵ Warfield showed Briggs' quotations related not to the original form of Scripture but to the copies and translations thereof, and that some of the authors quoted actually endorsed inerrancy. In one case Briggs had mistaken Rutherford's quotations of his opponent for his own view! Then Warfield proceeded to demonstrate by more than 350 quotations from various Westminster divines who endorsed overwhelmingly the same doctrine of biblical inerrancy as the orthodox continental theologians.

3) The freedom from error in Scripture, some say, is limited to faith and life, and does not extend beyond these areas.

It is true that the purpose of the Bible is spiritual, as a rule of faith and life (Westminster Confession, I:1) rather than for the purpose of instruction on secular subjects. Yet this does not imply that it is otherwise in conflict with truth. The four areas in which the Scripture is declared to be useful in 2 Timothy 3:16 are not meant to be limiting concepts. Divine authorship implies truthfulness in everything that is asserted.

4) **There are many things in Scripture, it is urged, which cannot be investigated under the categories of "true and false" (Stott, Michaels), such as poetry, parables, apocalypics, etc.**

To the extent that truth or falsehood are inapplicable concepts, these forms of presentation cannot be called erroneous. The fact that the criterion of inerrancy is inapplicable here does not make it objectionable where it rightly applies. All that inerrancy indicates is that because God is the Bible's primary author, there is no place where it is legitimate to say "there is an error here in the autographs." It does not imply that the test, "error or no error," applies to every word.

5) **The word "error," it is urged, is understood in a variety of ways by different people. Inerrancy as a result is claimed to be an ambiguous concept, and if specifications are stated "it dies the death of a thousand qualifications."⁶**

The objection might have some validity if inerrantists presumed to define by themselves some criteria of truthfulness that God would then be "obliged" to observe. Rather the very idea of truth comes to us from God and the way in which he functions with it is to be derived from Scripture itself as his Word. The qualifications are to be formulated with a proper consideration of the biblical performance or phenomena. Consistent evangelicals have done this repeatedly and achieved a fair degree of agreement in this. See the *Chicago Statement on Inerrancy*, Article 13: "We . . . deny that inerrancy is negated by Biblical phenomena such as lack of modern technical precision, irregularities of grammar or spelling, observational descriptions of nature, the reporting of falsehoods, the use of hyperbole and round numbers, the topical arrangement of material, variant selections of material in parallel accounts, or the use of free citations."⁷

6) **The concept of inerrancy, it is urged, sends people scurrying to find errors in the Bible instead of concentrating their attention on its saving truth (Stott).**

People who want to disprove inerrancy naturally enough

will search for errors in the Bible, but this is not the attitude that generally prevails among those who are eager to know God's truth. The church has consistently affirmed Christ's sinlessness but this has apparently not encouraged a wholesale search for evidence of sin in his life.

7) **Numerous cases of error have been alleged in the Scripture that tend to make the claim of inerrancy implausible.**

When such errors are alleged, it is obviously incumbent on believers in inerrancy to examine the evidence and to provide, if possible, a solution to the difficulty. The doctrine of inerrancy is not hostage to the ability of its supporters to provide an answer to every difficulty encountered. What would be needed to overturn such a doctrine, grounded as it is in the conviction that the Bible is the Word of God, would be the presentation of a problem to which no possible resolution could be conceived.⁸

Meanwhile, it is a matter of manifest record that numerous alleged contradictions and errors have demonstrably received appropriate explanations, confuting those who caviled. Actually there are good volumes designed to exhibit such resolutions (Haley, Tuck, Archer, and others). Commentators have also regularly addressed the issues with notable success.

The fact that so many able students of the Word have earnestly sought to resolve apparent discrepancies throughout the centuries of the existence of the church is clear evidence that they were confident that no error or contradiction could be found in Scripture. If they had not believed in inerrancy, they would never have had recourse to explanations that may now impress us as implausible. In fact, the more flimsy the solution, the more it evidences on the part of the one who advances it, his conviction that nothing in the sacred book could be mistaken. Surely, it is better to leave a matter pending than to offer artificial explanations that may raise questions about the sincerity of the defendant. Yet we ought not to think of harmonization as a "dirty word."

8) It is unwise apologetically to suspend the belief in the authority of the Bible as God's Word on the discovery of one well-authenticated error.⁹

Surely the presence of one absolutely indisputable error would indicate that God could not be the author of such a blunder. This would spell the demise not only of inerrancy, but of verbal inspiration, and of the propriety of the many Scriptures, including Jesus' statements to the effect that the Bible is the Word of God.

Meanwhile, the evangelical believer does not fret in a fearful expectation that somehow the ground might collapse under foot. With confidence in the multiple scriptural affirmations of the divine authorship one rests assured the facts will justify faith.

Here again the case is analogous to that of the sinlessness of Christ. One thoroughly authenticated sin on Christ's part would disprove his deity and contradict the Scriptures that affirm his impeccable course (John 8:46; 14:30; 2 Corinthians 5:21; Hebrews 4:15; 9:14; 1 Peter 2:22; 1 John 3:5). Yet the Christian does not live in a perpetual apprehension that somehow a sin might be detected. In full confidence in the sinlessness of Christ and the reliability of the Scriptures that assert it, we confidently trust him as the rock of our salvation.

9) Inerrancy, it is urged, is an unfavorable word because it contains a double negation: *in-* and *error* (Stott).

This appears a very trifling objection. The English language (as well as other tongues) has a tremendous abundance of such words: Think of all the words formed with the prefixes *ab-*, *contra-*, *contre-*, *dis-*, *in-*, *non-*, *un-* (there are 913 defined words and 1865 additional ones in the margin beginning with this suffix in the Random House Webster's College Dictionary of 1991) and with the suffix—*less*! The examples include *sinless*, *infinite*, *nevertheless*, *immaculate*, *faultless*, *disrupt*, *indisputable*, *unavoidable*, and more. Double negatives are imbedded in French and Afrikaans. At Chalcedon the mystery of Christ's two natures in one Person was expressed

through four double negative adverbs, translated: "Without division, without separation, without change, without confusion." In mathematical multiplication and division, two negatives produce one positive!

10) Inerrancy, it is urged, is a hindrance to biblical criticism, and therefore incompatible with the proper scholarly approach to the Scripture.

This certainly cannot be claimed with respect to textual criticism, the science that seeks to determine what the autographic text may well have been in view of the various forms in which it is now extant. It is precisely because we believe that there was a text originally inspired by God that it so important to make every effort to ascertain what it was. The verbal inspiration of the text is the strongest encouragement to textual criticism, so called.

As to historical criticism, when it is designed to achieve a proper understanding of the Scripture by an increasing knowledge of the historical background of the various parts of the Bible, their human authors and those to whom they were destined, there is no difficulty that it encounters in inerrancy, unless it presumes to overturn the whole structure of Scripture and to make bold assertions contrary to the express statements of the Bible.

An example of such inordinate use of criticism could be the assertion of F. Wellhausen that Moses could not write Hebrew because in 1500 B.C. there was no Hebrew writing. This is in direct opposition to the statement of Jesus when he said in John 5:46, "Moses wrote about me." All that Biblical criticism could properly say in Wellhausen's time, was "We have so far no other evidence than Moses' books for Hebrew writing at that time." The discovery of the Tel-el-Amarna tablets proved that Wellhausen was wrong, for they contain indisputable evidence of Hebrew writing at, and even before, that time.

Historical criticism needs to be itself subject to criticism when it insists on viewing the various parts of the Bible as merely human documents to be rearranged according to an evolutionary view of history.

11) It is impossible, it is urged, to prove the inerrancy of the Bible, because we cannot anticipate every allegation of error that may be forthcoming.

The latter part of this statement is certainly true, and indeed wise holders of inerrancy will gladly acknowledge that their view is not the result of an exhaustive study of the Bible that has failed to discover anything erroneous in it. Even if that were true it would not establish that it is God's Word! There may well be certain pages of the telephone directory that are free of error, but this does not authenticate a divine origin.

The proper process is precisely the reverse. We find that the Bible repeatedly represents itself or parts of it as God's Word. The implication is that if it is God's Word, it cannot err, for God cannot err. The belief in inerrancy is therefore an ineluctable corollary of the claim that this is the Word of God. It is this *faith* that generates the conviction that therefore the Bible is inerrant. As the statement of the Evangelical Theological Society asserts: "The Bible alone and the Bible in its entirety, is the Word of God written and therefore is inerrant in the autographs."

James Orr had written, "Inerrancy can never be demonstrated with a cogency that entitles it to rank as the foundation of a belief in inspiration."¹⁰ Yet he also wrote a few pages later: "The Bible, impartially judged and interpreted, is free from demonstrable error in its statements and harmonious in its teachings to a degree that of itself creates an irresistible impression of a supernatural factor in its origin."¹¹

12) Inerrancy, it is sometimes claimed, is a novel doctrine recently invented by some overzealous people and not to be found in the early church nor in the seminal teachers of the Protestant Reformation. The rather large volume by Jack Rogers and Donald McKim, *The Authority and Inspiration of the Bible*,¹² was largely devoted to supporting such a view.

This objection, however, manifests such an abysmal ignorance or misinterpretation of the facts as to raise serious doubts about the competence of the objectors. To imagine

that inerrancy was first advocated by the Protestant scholastics of the seventeenth century or, even more outrageously, by the Princeton School of Hodge and Warfield flies in the face of evidence carefully documented, for example, by Christian Pesch in *De Inspiratione Sacrae Scripturae*.¹³

Precise affirmations from Justin Martyr, Irenaeus, Hippolytus, Origen, Eusebius of Caesarea, Ambrose, Methodius, Theodoret, Chrysostom, Jerome, Augustine are quoted:

Justin Martyr, who died in 165, had written, "I am entirely convinced that no Scripture contradicts another. I shall admit rather that I do not understand what is recorded."¹⁴

Augustine (354-430) wrote to Jerome:

I have learned to yield this respect and honor to the canonical books of Scripture: of these alone do I most firmly believe that the authors were completely free from error. And if in these writings I am perplexed by anything which appears to me opposed to the truth, I do not hesitate to suppose that either the manuscript is faulty, or the translator has not caught the meaning of what was said, or I myself have failed to understand it.¹⁵

When Rogers and McKim interpret error to refer here to grievous ethical fault,¹⁶ this is wholly arbitrary and inappropriate to this text, since this kind of problem would hardly arise by virtue of a transmissional or translational slip.

This is the same Augustine who so pithily expressed his view of inspiration ". . . what . . . Scripture says, God says."¹⁷

In 1893 Pope Leo XIII, in his encyclical *Providentissimus Deus*, stated, "Now it is utterly impossible that divine inspiration could contain any error; it not only by its nature excludes and rejects it with the same necessity, as it is impossible that God, the highest truth, be the author of any error whatsoever."¹⁸

None of these, to my knowledge, ever studied at Princeton!

If you want a fair representation of the historic process in the doctrine of the inspiration of Scripture, you should have recourse to the previously mentioned masterpiece of Christian

Pesch or to either of two dictionary articles.¹⁹

Concerning Luther and Calvin, it may be sufficient here to note the careful presentation made in both John W. Walvoord²⁰ and in J. W. Montgomery.²¹ On Calvin, I venture to refer to my own presentation to the Evangelical Theological Society, "John Calvin and Inerrancy."²²

13) The fundamentalists, it is urged, who hold to inerrancy are ornery people and we need to avoid this defect.

Of course, it must be observed that fundamentalists, even though at times have deserved this reproach, do not possess a corner on ornerness. Some people who accuse the Bible of error have also at times been "disagreeable customers."

Meanwhile the fact that this objection has been raised, should serve as a warning to us that we need to retain a gracious attitude at all times. Second Timothy 2:24-25, states it so beautifully: "The Lord's servant must not quarrel, instead, he must be kind to everyone, able to teach, not resentful. Those who oppose him he must gently instruct in the hope that God will grant them repentance leading to a knowledge of the truth."

Having disposed of thirteen objections sometimes advanced against inerrancy, it remains to consider briefly some positive factors that can, and should, be invoked in favor of it.

1) The doctrine of inerrancy is truly that of Scripture itself.

Psalm 19:7 "The law of the Lord is perfect."

Psalm 119:30 "I have chosen the way of truth. I have set my heart on your laws."

Psalm 119:43 "The word of truth . . ."

Psalm 119:96 "To all perfection I see a limit; but your commandments are boundless."

Psalm 119:137 "Your laws are right."

Psalm 119:142 "Your law is true."

Psalm 119:151 "All your commands are true."

Psalm 119:160 "All your righteous laws are eternal."

Matthew 5:18 "Not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen will be any means disappear."

John 10:35 "The Scripture cannot be broken."

John 17:17 "Thy Word is truth."

2) Inerrancy is implied in the divine authorship of Scripture, presented in more than 1,900 passages of Scripture.²³

Matthew 15:6; Mark 7:8, 13; John 17:17; 1 Corinthians 2:13, 14; 1 Thessalonians 2:13; 2 Timothy 3:16; Hebrews 1:1; Revelation 2:1, 7, etc.

To accuse the Bible of error is to accuse God of it.

3) Inerrancy has been the view of the church up to and including the Reformation and seventeenth-century orthodoxy.

4) Biblical authority (and by implication) inerrancy has been central to every evangelical movement.²⁴

5) Inerrancy by combining the primacy of the divine authorship and the reality of the human authorship of the Bible is peculiarly suitable for Reformed believers since it asserts without explaining the mystery of conjoining the divine factor with the reality of human decision and action. This parallels their view of predestination and the reality of responsible decision of rational agents.

6) Inerrancy was the view of those who prepared the Westminster standards, as powerfully argued by B. B. Warfield, and contrary to the flimsy disclaimers of C. A. Briggs and Jack Rogers.

7) Inerrancy was deeply imbedded in the Westminster Standards. Infallible means "it cannot err." Inerrant means "it does not err." If it cannot, surely it does not!

8) A denial of inerrancy reflects unfavorably on the truthfulness of God (Leo XIII).

- 9) Some who have started with questioning inerrancy have given us the sorry spectacle of spiritual decline and sometimes of total shipwreck of faith: the Socinians, C. H. Toy, Edmund Scherer.
- 10) The case that many exegetical scholars have bestowed in considering apparent discrepancies and manifesting the appropriate character of both terms that seemed contradictory indicates on their part a conviction that somehow what the Bible affirms is true.

In some cases an explanation given may impress us as artificial and therefore invalid, but the more far-fetched the explanation, the more strongly it evidences the reluctance of the expositor to accept a contradiction.

Inversely, some critics have shown themselves ready to pounce on some possible difficulties and then arguing a multiplicity of sources and authorship. They thus presuppose that the redactor who incorporated these conflicting elements was so undiscerning as to overlook the problem!

- 11) It is important to define error as a violation of objective truth and not merely a failure to follow certain human conventions presently in force for most serious modern authors.
- 12) The great number of difficulties that have disappeared when a more mature explanation was given or when additional data not previously known were discovered, surely encourages us to hold that difficulties are not inherent in the text. They are due to the fact that "we know in part."
- 13) It must be acknowledged that some people who use the language of inerrancy do prove in practice that they are not sound evangelicals. This is true of many Roman Catholic scholars who per force speak of "inerrancy" since it is the consecrated language of their church, nevertheless widely engage in what evangelicals would call "destructive Biblical criticism."

Yet inerrancy has raised such a tempest of recriminations

of the part of those who do not concur with authentic evangelicals on their view of Scripture, that is appears a useful form of expression to articulate the difference.

An historical analogy might be found in the Nicene use of *homöousios*, which the Arians felt compelled to oppose, after other forms of affirmation of the true deity of Christ had failed to corner the difference. This term crystallized the orthodox view and the Arian deviation, even though in the past it had been advanced in a wrong direction by Modalists. In the same way "inerrancy" has seemed in most cases to epitomize the watershed line at which the fundamental difference starts.²⁵

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Notes

1. *Evangelical Truth* (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1999), 61.
2. Roger Nicole and Ramsey Michaels, editors, "Inerrancy or Verbal Inspiration," in *Inerrancy and Common Sense* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1980), 70.
3. Formula of Concord, Epitome 1, paragraph 7.
4. C.A. Briggs, *Whither* (New York: Scribner, 1889), 66-71.
5. First published in *The Presbyterian Quarterly*, 8:1 (1894), 19-76 and republished in *The Westminster Assembly and Its Work*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1931).
6. "Inerrancy or Verbal Inspiration," 66.
7. Roger Nicole, "The Nature of Inerrancy" in *Inerrancy and Common Sense*. Edited by Roger Nicole and Ramsey Michaels (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1980), 71-95.
8. B. B. Warfield, "The Doctrine of Inspiration in the Westminster Divines," in *The Westminster Assembly and Its Work*, 127f, 215f, 219f, 225, and 439; "The Nature of Inerrancy," 89-92.
9. (Orr, Michaels, 65-66).

10. James Orr, *Revelation and Inspiration*. (London: Duckwork, 1910), 199.
11. *Revelation and Inspiration*, 216.
12. Jack Rogers and Donald McKim, *The Authority and Inspiration of the Bible* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1979), xxiv, 484 pp.
13. Freiburg i/B: Herder, 1906, 38-125, 491, 2.
14. *Dialogue with Trypho 65, AnteNicene Fathers I*, 230.
15. *Letter 82:3 NPNF I/I*, 350.
16. *The Authority and Inspiration of the Bible*, 30-31).
17. *Confessions XIII:44 NPNF I:I*, p. 205.
18. T. Neuner and J. Dupius, editors, *The Christian Faith*, Revised edition (New York: Alba House, 1982), 78-79.)
19. E. Mangenot, "Inspiration de l'Écriture" in A. Vacant, et. al. ,eds. *Dictionnaire de Théologie Catholique*. (Paris: Letouzey et Ané, 1923), VII, 2068-2266; [G. Courtade], "Inspiration et Inerrance." In L. Pirot, ed. *Supplément au Dictionnaire de la Bible*. (Paris: Letouzey et Ané, 1949), IV, 482-559.
20. John W. Walvoord, editor, *Inspiration and Interpretation 1* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1957)
21. J. W. Montgomery, *God's Inerrant Word* (Minneapolis: Bethany, 1973).
22. *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society*, 25:4 (December, 1982), 425-442.
23. See P. Kretzmann, *The Foundations Must Stand*. (St. Louis, Concordia, 1936), 109-123.
24. *Evangelical Truth*. (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1999), 23-25.
25. This is said with a due recognition of the fact that notable evangelicals like John Stott have expressed some incidental objections while holding a basically sound evangelical view of the authority of Scripture.

"O Breath of Life"

O Breath of Life, come sweeping thru us,
Revive thy church with life and power;
O Breath of Life, come, cleanse, renew us,
And fit thy church to meet this hour.

O Word of God, come bend us, break us,
Till humbly we confess our need;
Then in thy tenderness remake us,
Revive, restore, for this we plead.

O Breath of Love, come breathe within us,
Renewing thought and will and heart;
Come love of Christ, afresh to win us,
Revive thy church in every part.

O Heart of Christ, once broken for us,
'Tis there we find our strength and rest;
Our broken, contrite hearts now solace,
And let thy waiting church be blest.

Revive us, Lord! Is zeal abating,
While harvest fields are vast and white?
Revive us, Lord, the world is waiting,
Equip thy church to spread the light.

BESSIE PORTER HEAD